

# Should legislatures invest in foresight work? Assessing parliamentary future institutions<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

Global challenges from climate change to COVID-19 pandemic have raised legitimate questions about the ability of decision-makers to prepare for such crises. Gradually individual countries throughout the world have established various foresight mechanisms. Most of these operate under the executive branch, but increasingly also within legislatures. At the turn of the millennium only the Finnish Eduskunta had a specific ‘future committee’, but in 2022 parliamentary foresight units are found also in Austria, Brazil, Chile, Estonia, Iceland, Lithuania, the Philippines, South Korea, and Uruguay. The paper compares the performance of these different types of parliamentary foresight institutions, arguing that their impact is strongest when the government is required to submit specific future-related reports to the legislature. Turning legislatures into more forward-thinking institutions is challenging, and as illustrated by cases where foresight institutions failed to take hold (Israel, Hungary), our analysis underlines the importance of creating ownership among MPs in future-oriented issues.

## Introduction

Legislatures are stable institutions. Parliamentary work tends to revolve around government bills and other topical issues which are processed by sectoral committees and party groups. New MPs are quickly socialized into the existing organizational culture and institutional change can be difficult to achieve as reforms of the standing orders often require absolute or qualified majorities. Exogeneous factors may trigger parliamentary reforms, but their adoption and survival depend ultimately on support among MPs. For example, in response to broader societal changes legislatures have introduced new committees on sustainable development, human rights, and intelligence and security, or they have altered the rules of question time and plenary debates. However, while such reforms essentially always weaken or empower certain actors, they seldom refashion the basic division of labour inside parliaments (Müller & Sieberer 2014; Sieberer et al. 2016).

This is where our topic of inquiry, ‘future committees’, comes in. Since the 1990s legislatures across the world have established ten such parliamentary foresight institutions, while in three

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cases they proved short-lived. The purpose of these future committees is to provide long-term planning and scenarios to parliamentary work and their emergence is related to increasing awareness of societal megatrends and crisis such as digitalization, climate change, or virus pandemics among politicians, non-governmental organizations (NGO), and academics. Except for case studies particularly on the Committee for the Future of the Finnish Eduskunta (Arter 2000; Boston 2017; Koskimaa & Raunio 2020), and a comparative survey of the Commonwealth countries (Boston et al. 2019), these committees have so far escaped scholarly attention. There are, however, many good reasons to pay more attention to them.

Parliamentary foresight committees are still somewhat unusual and novel bodies, but their recent emergence in different parts of the world indicates that MPs are investing more resources into anticipatory governance. Like other institutional reforms, in time the future committees are likely to influence the general operating of legislatures. Their central purpose – to lengthen political time perspectives beyond electoral terms – strikes at the very heart of parliamentary politics, so at least theoretically future committees could exert significant impact on how parliaments and MPs work. In the relatively stable environment of established parliaments the emergence of such future-oriented institutions can be considered a major transformation.

Motivated by these gaps and considerations, our paper is guided by three interconnected research questions: 1) which factors facilitate the incorporation of anticipatory governance practices into parliamentary work, 2) what are the general features (organization, tasks, responsibilities) of future committees, and 3) how their emergence might impact parliaments? Our paper has both theoretical and empirical objectives. Theoretically, we contribute to debates on how the ideals and practices of anticipatory governance can become embedded in parliamentary institutions. While previous literature has suggested various solutions for making parliaments more aware of the interests of future generations, it has not discussed the challenges involved in adjoining future-oriented policymaking with the standard mode of legislative decision-making. Empirically, we both identify parliamentary foresight institutions and provide an exploratory comparison of their performance. As the empirical analysis shows, the research questions are strongly related: combining a future-oriented approach with normal parliamentary business is no easy task, and how the future committees operate can be crucial in consolidating their position in the legislatures. The concluding discussion reflects on the findings and discusses the challenges involved in turning legislatures into more future-oriented institutions.

### **Bringing together standard legislative work and anticipatory governance**

Most of the foresight work has been carried out by executives. Progress is uneven, but such mechanisms can now be found on all continents (Tönurist & Hanson 2020; SOIF 2021). The organisational innovations include ombudsmen for future generations, foresight departments in the executive branch, designated centers for futures research, and indeed special parliamentary future committees (Boston 2017, 2021; Caney 2016; MacKenzie 2021; González-Ricoy & Gosseries 2016; Jacobs 2016; Rose 2018; Linehan & Lawrence 2021).

We argue that genuinely sustainable future-regarding policymaking demands ownership among MPs. Even if the actual foresight work is conducted by the government, effective oversight is only possible when MPs possess sufficient expertise on those issues. Here the logic is the same as with parliamentary committees: through their committee work MPs develop expertise which facilitates more informed scrutiny of the respective ministries (Siefken & Rommetvedt 2022). In addition, regular participation in foresight work can influence the mind-set of MPs, making them more alert to the long-term effects of policies (Caney 2016). And, even if only a small share of legislators is at any given time involved in such work, their influence can nonetheless extend to the whole parliament – that is, MPs engaged in future-oriented business will bring their insights into debates in party groups, committees, and the plenary. Yet, the contrast between normal parliamentary routines and anticipatory governance creates formidable challenges for the establishment and institutionalization of parliamentary future committees.

It is essential to understand how much the two approaches to politics differ. Parliamentary work revolves around political parties and government bills that are scrutinized in committees and debated and voted upon in the plenary. Anticipatory governance in turn is perhaps best characterized as a looser, less structured, and deliberative policy process. Agenda items are primarily chosen by MPs, timetables are flexible, and instead of ‘decisions’ the output consists mainly of longer, semi-academic reports. Table 1 summarizes the two models of governance.

Table 1. Standard mode of legislative politics vs anticipatory governance.

	Standard mode of legislative politics	Anticipatory governance
Agenda-setting	government bills	own projects
Types of issues	legislation, sectoral	non-legislative, cross-sectoral
Time frame	short-term	long-term
Role of political parties	government-opposition cleavage, party discipline	independent deliberation
External stakeholders	hearings with lobbyists, interest groups	dialogue with academics, NGOs, and the government
Focus of meetings	scrutiny of bills	deliberation, scenario-building
Outputs	committee statements, plenary votes	studies, reports

Starting with agenda-setting, the agendas of legislatures are dominated by bill proposals and non-legislative items such as reports from the executive. To the extent that time allows, parliaments can handle other matters, including those originating in the legislature itself. In anticipatory governance, on the other hand, the agenda would primarily be determined by MPs themselves. Apart from reacting to potential documents from the executive or international organizations, such as ‘future reports’ (see below), the agenda would consist of non-legislative ‘own projects’ – that is, MPs would decide which issues deserve attention, with the selection of agenda items ideally driven by the interests of the future generations.

It may be unfair to claim that MPs would not consider future generations, but the clear majority of items processed by legislatures deal with more short-term problems. Laws can stay in force for decades and often have long-term implications (e.g., decisions about energy sources), but they are nonetheless usually designed to address current challenges (Pollitt 2008). Most laws are sectoral, prepared in a single ministry or executive department, with a particular committee having the main responsibility for the draft bill inside the legislature. In anticipatory governance the timespan is long, with the time horizon of the issues extending several decades or even hundreds of years into the future. Most issues are also cross-sectoral, as future-looking politics views societal problems as multidimensional and complex, overlapping the boundaries of individual policy domains. MPs might even fear this cross-sectoral aspect. In Germany “the idea of creating a future oriented full committee has been considered [twice] in the Bundestag and twice formally rejected ... In both cases, established committees prevailed over future-oriented proposals because they feared that any such body would become a “supercommittee” capable of overriding their “leading” role in their traditionally defined area of competence.” (Kinski & Whiteside 2022: 14-15)

Turning to how politics is conducted in the legislature, normally an issue is dispatched to a committee(s) with the final plenary vote preceded by a debate. The extent to which debates occur inside the committees or in the plenary depends on the salience of the items. The government has an incentive to ensure the smooth passage of its proposals, with various coalition management mechanisms designed to ensure that MPs toe the party line (Bergman et al. 2021). In parliamentary regimes party discipline is strong and MPs are expected not to speak against their party. Typical exceptions are certain issues of conscience, but in general party control is strong both in the committees and in the plenary (Bäck et al. 2021). Committees focus on scrutiny of the bills, hearing evidence from various sectoral interest groups – mainly corporatist actors, businesses, and NGOs (Siefken & Rommetvedt 2022). These powerful organized interests often have significant resources to defend the status quo.

In anticipatory governance the operating culture is very different. Government-opposition dynamics is less relevant, and party control is weaker. However, obviously much would depend on whether the items handled by the future committee were linked to more short-term or tangible interests of the parties. Ideally, though, MPs should deliberate freely on large-scale questions without expectations of party unity or supporting or opposing the government. As the agenda consists of non-legislative ‘own projects’, the schedules would be looser, and the main form of output would be reports based on independent research and often authored by or together with various experts. Foresight work revolves around scenario-building and horizon scanning: the parliamentary foresight unit would outline various future scenarios in dialogue with external stakeholders – research institutes, think-tanks, NGOs – which would then be debated by MPs. Overall, anticipatory governance therefore emphasizes unconstrained deliberation, with the ‘committee culture’ resembling more an academic seminar instead of a party-political meeting.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Acosta et al. (2022: 21) found that horizon scanning was utilized by select parliamentary advisory bodies and concluded that “foresight and horizons scanning seem to be upcoming novel methodologies being implemented in legislatures for participatory future-forward

Foresight work is fundamentally different from how modern parliaments operate. This implies that for anticipatory governance to take hold inside a legislature, it would need to co-exist with the dominant mode of partisan politics. As stated above, achieving institutional change inside parliaments is often challenging, and MPs can have logical reasons for objecting to the establishment of parliamentary foresight institutions. Anticipatory governance practices should thus bring added value to the MPs and legislatures. Support among MPs is crucial both for the establishment and the survival of the foresight unit. In our opinion at least equally important is the existence of a ‘foresight ecosystem’, which refers to the socio-cultural and political context of the country encompassing the key institutions, notably the executive branch, as well as the stakeholders and academia (SOIF 2021). If the foresight network is large, the parliamentary future committee has more partners it interacts with. These partners are essential, as foresight work and the scenario-building approach rely on expert information from stakeholders.

Ideally, at the head of the foresight ecosystem should be the government coordinating national foresight activities. We consider it particularly important that there is a regular procedure where the government producing reports on future challenges, but to have the ownership effect among MPs a minimum criterion is that the legislature produces a response to the report and debates it in the committees and the plenary, giving it more public exposure and connecting it more explicitly to the accountability of elected officials (Caney 2016, 2019).

### Identifying the parliamentary future institutions

Based on earlier literature, official documents, and a global survey of parliaments, we identified ten parliamentary future institutions (Table 1). Eight are parliamentary committees, and two are research institutes operating under the legislature. Five are in Europe (Austria, Estonia, Finland, Iceland, Lithuania), three in South America (Brazil, Chile, Uruguay), and two in Asia (Philippines, South Korea). The Finnish Committee for the Future was established in 1993, while all the others were founded since 2012.

Table 1. Parliamentary foresight institutions (2022).

Country / chamber	Foresight institution and year of establishment	Main features
Finland / Eduskunta	Committee for the Future (1993)	Parliamentary committee consisting of MPs
Chile / Senate	Comision de Desafíos del Futuro, Ciencia, Tecnología e Innovación (2012)	Parliamentary committee consisting of MPs
Brazil / Senate	Comissão Senado do Futuro (2013)	Parliamentary committee consisting of MPs

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thinking advisory and to set long-term priorities in agenda.” However, it is not known whether such methods are employed by parliamentary committees or party groups.

Austria / Bundesrat	Ausschuss für Innovation, Technologie und Zukunft (2015)	Parliamentary committee consisting of MPs
Estonia / Riigikogu	Foresight Centre (2017)	Research institute under the Riigikogu, consists of scientific experts
South Korea / National Assembly	National Assembly Futures Institute (2018)	Research institute under the National Assembly, consists of scientific experts
Iceland / Althingi	Prime Minister’s Committee for the Future (2018) / Future Committee (2021)	Parliamentary committee consisting of MPs
Philippines / Senate	Committee on Sustainable Development Goals, Innovation and Futures Thinking (2019)	Parliamentary committee consisting of MPs
Lithuania / Seimas	Committee for the Future (2020)	Parliamentary committee consisting of MPs
Uruguay	Comisión de Futuro (2021)	Parliamentary committee consisting of MPs

The key criterion for inclusion was that the institutions should have the specific remit of assessing long-term societal challenges. This meant that we have excluded parliamentary organs with a narrower focus, such as committees and other units that deal with sustainable development, often related to the United Nations (UN) 2030 Agenda (see Breuer & Leininger 2021), and/or technological development, science, and innovations, as their agendas are quite constrained and only indirectly deal with long-term policies. We omitted technology assessment (TA) units and various parliamentary research services and advisory bodies: they utilize scientific evidence and even foresight methods and can involve MPs in their work (Ganzevles et al. 2014; Acosta et al. 2022), but their main function is providing advice and information to legislators. Finally, we left out sub-national parliaments, as there is huge variation in the competencies and roles of such regional assemblies. For example, the Scottish parliament has a Futures Forum attached to it.<sup>3</sup> We acknowledge that we might have overlooked some relevant mechanisms. Individual committees or parliaments may well have routine procedures for evaluating the long-term effects of policies, legislatures can set up

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<sup>3</sup> Established in 2005 and bringing together both MPs and external experts, the Scotland Futures Forum works on a non-party basis, with the aim of looking “beyond the electoral cycle to stimulate debate on the long-term challenges and opportunities that Scotland faces.” It was very much inspired by the Finnish Committee for the Future (Groombridge 2006; Boston et al. 2019: 121-125). For more information, see <http://scotlandfutureforum.org/>.

temporary ad hoc committees or occasionally produce reports on future challenges, or MPs can establish informal cross-party groups dedicated to the interests of future generations.<sup>4</sup>

Having identified the foresight institutions, we used interviews and official documents for examining the following questions: the establishment of the institution; its membership, role and functions; accountability mechanisms; outputs (reports, hearings etc.); and the working culture of the institution. The semi-structured interviews were carried out between summer of 2021 and late spring of 2022. Altogether, we interviewed ten parliamentary civil servants and MPs that have extensive knowledge of the relevant foresight organs.

### **Empirical analysis**

The first part of the empirical section investigates the three short-lived experiments since their ‘failure’ provides important lessons about the survival of parliamentary foresight units. The second part compares the ten foresight institutions listed in Table 1. For reasons of space, the analysis focuses deliberately on identifying those features that are relevant in terms of our research questions.

#### ***Short-lived experiments: Israel, Hungary, and Argentina<sup>5</sup>***

The Knesset Commission for Future Generations was established in 2001 and lasted until 2006. It was headed by a Commissioner, Justice Shlomo Shoham, who was appointed for a five-year term. After that no new Commissioner was appointed and in 2010 the Knesset officially abolished the Commission. The Commission had been founded to protect the interests of future generations by ensuring that MPs were aware of the long-term effects of policies. The Commissioner could comment on all matters except those relating to defence and foreign policy and enjoyed a wide range of powers, including the option of attending committee meetings and the right to recommend laws and policies that take into account future generations, and to delay laws if they did not. The Commissioner was responsible to the Knesset, had a small staff and was assisted by a Public Council which consisted of scientists and prominent citizens. Some of the Commissioner’s recommendations for legislation were rejected, and there were disputes with senior MPs, many of whom questioned the Commissioner’s broad powers. Shoham’s active approach and interventions were also bound to please some parties more than others. Importantly, the Commissioner lacked support among the Israeli political-administrative elite and the civil society. There was no broad party-political consensus behind the position to begin with. The Commission was largely initiated

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<sup>4</sup> For example, in Britain the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Future Generations brings together MPs and members of the House of Lords and “aims to create space for cross-party dialogue on combating short-termism and to identify ways to internalise concern for future generations into today’s policy making.” See <https://www.appgfuturegenerations.com/>.

<sup>5</sup> We have been unable to find information about Comisión Especial de prospectiva para la definición del futuro de México, a special commission in the Chamber of Deputies of Mexico that was established in 2004, renewed in 2006, but subsequently discontinued.

by a single politician, Joseph (Tommy) Lapid, the chair of the Shinui party, whose retirement from politics in 2006 coincided with the termination of the Commission's work. (Shoham 2010; Boston 2017: 324–331; Rose 2018: 242-250)

In Hungary the NGO 'Protect the Future' had campaigned since the 1990s for an institution looking after the interests of the future generations. According to an interviewee, a central figure in the project was Marcel Szabó, a public official that had formerly worked at the UN where he had managed to create a foresight office that also funded the meetings of European parliamentary foresight activists. In 2008 an Ombudsman for Future Generations (officially the Parliamentary Commissioner for Future Generations) was established, with the task of ensuring the protection of the fundamental right to a healthy environment. As in Israel, the Commissioner enjoyed broad powers from monitoring policy developments and legislative proposals to submitting opinions to MPs and carrying out investigations and potentially delaying policymaking with veto-type powers. Despite active dialogue with civil society, in 2012 the Ombudsman for Future Generations was subsumed into the office of the Commissioner for Fundamental Rights. The Ombudsman is still elected by the parliament, but the position is much weaker than previously. Clearly the actions of the Ombudsman, Sandor Fülöp, divided opinions among MPs, especially in terms of their economic impact. The Ombudsman failed to generate needed legitimacy among the decision-makers, and the party-political environment turned less supportive of the position following the landslide victory of Fidesz in the 2010 elections. (Tóth Ambrusné 2010; Anderson 2018; Rose 2018: 233-242)

In Argentina there was interest to develop foresight capacity already in the 1970s. Nevertheless, it took until mid-2019, following mainly the example from Chile, that Argentine Senate decided to create a Future Commission. It was a consultative organ, designed to contribute to legislation through foresight work, interacting with the executive branch and stakeholders and debating and publishing reports on future trends. Its first assignment was to study the future of work in Argentina. Some of the scheduled meetings with the working groups were held, but the final report was never issued, and upon the change of government in December the Commission was discontinued (Universidad Austral 2021: 24).

### ***Comparing the future committees***

#### **The Finnish Eduskunta: The Committee for the Future (1993)**

The Finnish national foresight model has often been considered as a forerunner to be emulated (e.g., Fernandes & Heflich 2022). It is a strongly interconnected multi-level structure connecting the government, ministries and the parliament, as well as NGOs, research institutes, and regional authorities, into a coordinated process for producing foresight information (Novaky & Monda 2015; Boston 2017). The system's centerpiece is the Committee for the Future, a permanent parliamentary standing committee with the exclusive task to study the future.

The origins of the committee can be traced to two MPs elected to the Eduskunta in the 1980s, Martti Tiuri and Eero Paloheimo, both with an academic background and a keen interest in fighting short-termism in politics. They campaigned successfully, winning cross-party support for the committee despite fierce opposition from leading public officials and politicians, who

claimed that such an institution was unnecessary, as existing committees could also do foresight, and the institution would not contribute to Eduskunta's basic legislative work. Others were concerned that its cross-sectoral focus could jeopardize the work of other committees. The 'founding fathers' were convinced that to institutionalize the system, it had to be based on an official government document which does not step on the toes of existing parliamentary organs. The first government future report was issued in 1993 and to provide Eduskunta's formal reply, the Committee for the Future was established that same year as a temporary organ and achieved the status of a permanent committee in 2000. The establishment of the parliamentary foresight unit was thus a markedly MP-driven process.

The Committee for the Future has 17 MPs, the normal size for an Eduskunta committee. It defines its mission as generating dialogue with the government on major future problems and opportunities. It prepares the Eduskunta's response to the Government's Report on the Future, issues statements to the other committees, analyses research and methodology looking at future, and serves as the parliamentary body responsible for assessing technological development and its societal consequences. However, as the committee proclaims on its website, "the most important efforts are devoted to [the] Committee's own issues, its own projects. The power [to] decide its own agenda is one of the pillars of the strength of the Committee. 17 parliamentarians themselves stake out policy lines for the future. The time perspective is long and the scale of issues broad."

Over the years the Committee for the Future has consolidated its role and developed distinct tasks, working practices and incentives that provide internal cohesion and external legitimacy. The 'future dialogue' has become strongly institutionalized within Eduskunta and its governmental counterpart, the prime minister's office, and is the formal-institutional 'backbone' of the Committee for the Future. The committee operates along non-partisan lines and utilizes open seminars, crowdsourcing, workshops, expert hearings, and consultations with stakeholders and the wider public to scrutinize various topics. It publishes reports on a very diverse range of themes, and in April 2021 it even interacted with artificial intelligence, inviting Muskie and Saara, two characters created by the GPT-3 artificial intelligence system, to its meeting to discuss the UN 2030 Agenda (Fotsilis 2021). The committee's publications and other activities have gradually increased, a development partly explained by the strong networks it has created with various stakeholders, not least academics. It lies quite low in committee hierarchy but brings positive international reputation for the Eduskunta. Mostly, its impact is indirect and conditional: MPs seated in the Committee for the Future take their knowledge to debates in the other sectoral committees, plenary, and party groups, while external stakeholders and especially the government can adopt insights from its outputs. It remains rather detached from normal legislative business, and this 'harmless' or outsider position has probably contributed to its longevity. (Arter 2000; Boston 2017: 401-415; Koskimaa & Raunio 2020)

#### Chilean Senate: Comision de Desafíos del Futuro, Ciencia, Tecnología e Innovación (2012)

Chile is clearly among those countries that has consistently invested resources into economic and societal innovations and long-term decision-making (e.g., OECD/UN 2018; Aceituno Olivares 2020) The Committee on Challenges of Future, Science, Technology, and Innovation

in the Chilean Senate was established in April 2012. On the occasion the chair of the Finnish Committee for the Future, Päivi Lipponen, was invited to give a presentation in the Senate, and the Chilean committee was strongly inspired by the equivalent committee in Finland. It is a permanent committee with five senators, the normal size in the Senate. The committee operates in a more non-partisan and participatory mode than other committees and investigates long-term scientific and societal challenges, with particular attention to development models and the impact of technology. It regularly hears various academics and stakeholders, including politicians and experts from abroad. Examples of matters receiving attention include the future of lithium industry, national space policy, food safety, neurotechnology, and education. The committee organizes annually with the government and the Chilean Academy of Sciences the Congress of the Future ('Congreso Futuro'). Compared to Finland's comprehensive foresight system, the institution stands on a relatively narrow base. However, the long and ongoing development of the system suggests that it has created ownership among a broader group of actors. The committee was also behind the establishment in 2018 of the ministry on science, technology, information, and innovations (Ministerio de Ciencia, Tecnología, Conocimiento e Innovación).

#### Brazilian Senate: Comissão Senado do Futuro (2013)

In Brazil, the Committee for the Future in the Senate was established a year later in 2013. As in Chile, the main source of inspiration was the Finnish pacesetter committee, but there was also broader interest in foresight work. For example, the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars organized from 2011 to 2013 annual trips for Brazilian MPs to the United States and Europe to study policies and practices related to innovations (Wilson Center 2013). It is a permanent committee with 11 senators, normal size in the Senate, with the mandate of facilitating debates on important societal issues and the future of the country. It interacts widely with various stakeholders and publishes reports and shorter bulletins on a range of issues such as sustainable urban development, participatory and fair education, and information technology in future legislative processes. Dialogue with the government occurs mainly via committee hearings. It also holds public hearings on future issues, such as in May 2021 on the democratization of access to digital tools in Brazil.

#### Austrian Bundesrat: Ausschuss für Innovation, Technologie und Zukunft (2015)

In Austria more encompassing TA, including foresight work, has been carried out since the 1980s involving the executive branch, academia, and various stakeholders. The Institute of Technology Assessment at the Austrian Academy of Sciences gives advice and carries out research for the parliament, with the links to the legislature becoming more regular since the 2010s. Of the two chambers, only the Bundesrat has a committee dealing specifically with the future – the Committee for Innovation, Technology and Future, while the respective committee in the Nationalrat focuses on Research, Innovation, and Digitalisation. The Bundesrat committee was established in 2015 and has 16 members. It consults external stakeholders and experts, produces reports, and, reflecting the name of the committee, clearly the emphasis is on technology and innovations, with broader societal issues addressed more infrequently in the committee outputs.

### Estonia: Foresight Centre (2017)

Taking cues from neighbouring Finland, first foresight institutions were established in Estonia around the turn of the century. The Riigikogu Foresight Centre became operational in 2017. The act establishing the Centre originated in Riigikogu itself. The government did want to house a foresight institute, but amongst MPs were a few eager advocates of foresight work who managed to get enough support for the idea in the parliament. Situated within the structure of the Chancellery of Riigikogu, the tasks of the Centre are analysing long-term developments in society, identifying new trends, and drafting development scenarios. Each research area (annually three to four) has its own group of domestic and foreign experts and a 'lead' committee which includes MPs and high-level policymakers and meets 4-5 times per year. The output consists of reports and shorter documents, and the Centre is expected to communicate actively with the broader society and to organize public events. It also contributes to the Estonian government's long-term strategies. Recent items of research have covered global forces, impact of COVID-19, future health care, shipping and maritime economy, future of mobility, future-proof tax structure, and future of long-term care, while previously also governance and labour market issues have been on the agenda.

Roughly 1/3 of MPs are involved in the Centre's work through the lead committees, but otherwise the Centre is essentially a scientific think-tank attached to the legislature. According to the Centre "the interest of the Riigikogu in foresight has also increased: in 2019, the foresight results were introduced in the committees and factions of the Riigikogu on 15 occasions" (Foresight Centre 2020: 7). However, only around 10 % of MPs are actively interested in what the Centre does, and hence the challenge is to maintain or increase that share whilst also broadening the foresight network in Estonia. The Centre thus organizes various seminars and practical training courses, and the international foresight community, including OECD and other organisations, is highly valuable given the Centre's modest resources.

### South Korea: National Assembly Futures Institute (2018)

At least since the late 1990s South Korea has been one of the most active developers of state foresight capacity. Reports by OECD and other international networks have clearly influenced public policies and organizations, with also high investment in research and development. Korean government had a Ministry of Science, ICT and Future Planning (2013-2017), but long-term planning posed serious challenges. The National Assembly established a Futures Institute (NAFI) against a backdrop of frequent governmental changes, camp politics, and short-sighted legislative culture. In this context, in the 2010s two consecutive Speakers of the Assembly had argued in favour of establishing a parliamentary future committee. They both visited Finland during their terms as the Speaker, and also the examples of Israel and Scotland were examined in the legislative process leading to the National Assembly Futures Institute Act. However, a research institute instead of a parliamentary committee was introduced due to opposition from MPs and the Ministry of Finance.

Operational since spring 2018, the objective of NAFI is to strengthen parliamentary policy capacity and national development through predicting and analyzing long-term changes and

to draw up the national long-term development strategy. The Speaker of National Assembly can influence NAFI through appointment of its president, research agenda selection, approval of the annual budget and work plan, and monitoring its operation. While NAFI must report its research results to the House Steering Committee of the Assembly, communication between the committee and NAFI seems not that regular. Other parliamentary committees can request NAFI to submit findings related to their policy fields, but NAFI has no formal mandate to submit statements to Assembly's committees. NAFI staff consists exclusively of senior-level researchers. The research at NAFI is organized under three categories: innovation growth, quality of life, and governance. Reflecting this wide agenda, the themes covered in reports, often written in collaboration with external experts, include the future of Korean peninsula, surveys of future values among Korean youth, measuring happiness, quality of life, governance reforms, labour market, and innovative growth. NAFI cooperates with academia and with the government and its research institutes, but there is no requirement of the government to produce future reports to the Assembly.

#### Iceland: Prime Minister's Committee for the Future (2018) / Future Committee (2021)

Before 2018, foresight work in Iceland had been sporadic and 'under the radar', but since then there is more concerted effort to raise the profile of strategic foresight in the executive branch and the country as a whole. However, resources are limited and the number of domestic NGOs and other stakeholders small, and hence links with international foresight actors are important.<sup>6</sup> In June 2018, the Icelandic prime minister appointed, in line with the government programme, a Committee for the Future. Icelandic proponents of foresight work had studied the Finnish system closely. Initially, the idea was to establish a parliamentary committee like in Finland, but as that would have required changes to legislation it was decided to locate the committee in the prime minister's office. The Future Committee had 11 MPs to accommodate all parties and the chair was from the opposition.

Its agenda was broad, ranging from technology and economy to major social aspects affecting Icelandic society in the future, especially environmental matters and demographic changes. The committee did not review legislative proposals, but Althingi's committees could ask for its opinions. Involved MPs appreciated the vibrant, informal and creative committee atmosphere, which differed from the culture of normal parliamentary committees. Clearly this attitude prevailed also more widely in the legislature, as following necessary changes to legislation, the committee moved from the prime minister's office to Althingi after the September 2021 elections. Not a standing committee, the Future Committee has 11 MPs and will operate until the end of the electoral period. A minimum of five MPs shall come from the from opposition and MPs from the ranks of government and opposition parties shall hold the chair and vice-chair alternately for one year at a time. Its mandate reflects that of its predecessor, and while parliamentary matters shall not be referred to the committee, other

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<sup>6</sup> For example, OECD organized a workshop with the Committee for the Future, educating MPs about foresight work and methods. Ready for the Future: Strengthening Foresight Capacity in the Government of Iceland, Report on Foresight Workshops held in Reykjavik, Iceland on 15 and 16 November 2018 by the Strategic Foresight Unit of the OECD.

committees may request its opinions. The government does not produce ‘future reports’ but is investing more in foresight work. The committee culture is less party-political than in normal committees.

#### Philippines: Senate Committee on Sustainable Development Goals, Innovation and Futures Thinking (2019)

In 2012 the Philippine Center for Foresight Education and Innovation Research (PhilForesight) was established to advance futures studies and strategic foresight in the country. The idea was conceived at a UNESCO Laoag futures literacy knowledge lab forum-workshop. Building on this evolving foresight work, the Philippines’ Senate established in 2019 a Committee on Sustainable Development Goals, Innovation and Futures Thinking. A temporary committee, it brings together 15 senators to examine “all matters relating to the United Nations 2030 agenda for sustainable development”. In addition, the committee pays special attention to solving problems impacting the next generation of Filipinos – hence the ‘Futures Thinking’ added to the name of the committee. It functions mainly on a more non-partisan basis. Interaction particularly with researchers and international organizations has the goal of broadening the ‘futures’ community in the Philippines and of making it a more permanent part of the political system. Much of this activity is driven by the chair of the committee, Senator Pilar Juliana “Pia” S. Cayetano and her ‘Futures Thinking’ initiative.

#### Lithuania: Committee for the Future (2020)

The Committee for the Future in the Lithuanian Seimas was established in late 2020. It has 19 members and the rationale behind the committee was to instill a more strategic foresight culture into Lithuanian decision-making and to coordinate the process of preparing Lithuania's long-term vision. The formation of the committee was influenced by good practices in the legislatures of other countries, Finland included. The competence of the committee covers all policy areas, and it can submit to the Seimas various conclusions and proposals. The Seimas standing orders obligate the committee to focus on future development of society and the state and its modelling; innovation and technological progress; emigration, migration and demographic processes; and modernisation of the state/state governance system. It will also prepare the strategy Lietuva2050 (Lithuania2050) in cooperation with the government and is committed to holding wide-ranging consultation with the public and external stakeholders in that process.

The agendas of committee meetings from the first half of 2021 certainly indicate that the committee has adopted a broad agenda: items debated included the European Green Deal, future of Lithuanian science, the future of agriculture, strategic management and budget, digitalization, and transport development. The election of professor Raimundas Lopata, with a background in history and political science, as its first chair suggests that the committee might lean towards a more non-partisan mode of operation than other Seimas committees. The committee also hosts the online discussion platform of the informal Future Forum “Intellectual Independence of Lithuania”, where Lithuanian academics, stakeholders, and political actors exchange ideas about the long-term vision of Lithuania. The committee aims

at making the other committees and the whole Seimas more aware of long-term challenges. Inside the executive branch, the main partner is the prime minister's office.

#### Uruguay: Comisión Especial de Futuros (2021)

The most recent parliamentary foresight unit is in Uruguay, where the General Assembly established a bicameral Special Committee for the Future in 2021. Uruguayan government had initially invested into foresight work in the 1960s, but more systematic efforts began in the 2010s, with a central government foresight agency 'Planning Direction' under the Office of Budget and Planning (Pittaluga 2016). Uruguay is among the countries that have exhibited a prolonged effort to create a parliamentary foresight unit, with interest from MPs across the political spectrum. Inspired particularly by the Finnish model, the committee brings together 15 MPs, the majority from the Chamber of Representatives. Its mandate is to construct scenarios and identify trends and societal problems, and it should interact with universities, think-tanks, and other stakeholders, not least through a 'permanent advisory group' that joins these actors with the Committee on a monthly basis. An annual "Day of the Future" is held on the last Monday of September of each year, and on this occasion, the General Assembly will deliver an annual "Report on the Future", in both chambers, that will focus on areas such as environmental sustainability, renewable energies, democracy, innovation, technological development, education and demographics. The plan is that the Committee members will choose the topics deserving attention, and the main agenda item for 2022 is "The Future of Work and the Work of the Future".<sup>7</sup>

#### **Concluding reflections**

This paper has shown that legislatures are becoming increasingly aware of long-term challenges. So far eight parliaments have established future committees while another two have foresight centres attached to the legislature. These committees are found around the world, proving that they are not just the luxury of wealthier countries.

We have argued that it is important not to leave foresight work to the executive or academics. The case studies explored in this paper illustrate how ownership of 'future' among MPs can create positive spill-over effects: legislators need expertise from NGOs and scientists and thereby parliamentary investment in future-oriented decision-making contributes to the emergence of a 'foresight ecosystem'. In terms of policy influence, even more important are links with the executive branch. As the future committees have a broad remit, their natural counterpart is often the prime minister's office. However, only in Finland the executive produces a regular 'future' report to the parliament. Measuring the impact of these parliamentary future committees is inherently difficult, but it is clearly stronger when the government has the obligation to report to the legislature about future challenges. Another spill-over mechanism occurs inside the parliament, with MPs seated in the future committees

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<sup>7</sup> La Comisión Especial de Futuros presentó su agenda 2022, <https://www.uy.undp.org/content/uruguay/es/home/presscenter/articles/2022/04/-la-comision-especial-de-futuros-presento-su-agenda-2022-.html>.

taking their knowledge and more long-term visions into debates in their party groups, plenary and sectoral committees. Again, we acknowledge the difficulties involved in estimating the extent to which such diffusion of forward-oriented thinking takes place and whether it matters in parliamentary decision-making characterized by party-political conflicts. Overall, a 'foresight ecosystem' and the parliamentary future committee can facilitate a policymaking culture that values scientific inquiry and more deliberative debates.

This paper has contributed to theory-building through contrasting normal parliamentary politics with anticipatory governance. We have argued that it is by no means easy to combine future-oriented methods with standard models of legislative work. The differences are fundamental and concern practically every aspect of how parliaments function. The future committees operate much more consensually, almost like academic seminars, than typical parliamentary organs. This reflective, less conflictual approach is natural in foresight exactly as votes and disagreements are the norm in plenary debates. In addition to the future committees examined in this paper, also the Parliamentary Advisory Council on Sustainable Development in the Bundestag operates consensually (Kinski & Whiteside 2022: 10). The downside is that because of their unusual working culture, future committees can remain in the margins of parliamentary business and are not taken that seriously by MPs. Yet these unique features at the same time benefit the future committees: they pose no threat to normal legislative work and can thus co-exist with sectoral committees (Koskimaa & Raunio 2020).

The future committees enjoy independent agenda-setting rights, but the danger is that MPs will avoid more conflictual themes and thereby undermine their own relevance. Thus, it is question of finding a balance between more concrete themes and those that have less relevance for current decision-making. For example, the agenda of the Lithuanian committee seems promising in this respect. In Austria and the Philippines, 'future' is just one aspect of the committees' jurisdiction, with the result that the committees have mainly focused on sustainable development or technological change. From a procedural perspective, the opinions of the future committee should be sufficiently integrated into standard parliamentary processes. This is a challenge also facing foresight departments in the executive, as they are often sidelined from government policymaking. Here the research institute model is particularly disadvantaged, as the staff consists of experts, not MPs. The Estonian institute has managed to integrate MPs into its work, while the South Korean NAFI has remained more distant from the legislature.

Support among MPs is crucial for the emergence and survival of the future committees. Here we come back to the 'foresight ecosystem': internal legitimacy within parliament matters, but so does the existence of an external foresight network linking the executive branch, NGOs, and various research institutes. The short-lived cases of Israel and Hungary in turn indicate the challenges involved in an ombudsman or commissioner mechanism. A single individual is bound to divide opinions, especially in a partisan environment such as parliaments. In both countries the individuals were perhaps too willing to intervene in current redistributive issues,

thereby revealing trade-offs between short-term economic gains and long-term considerations.<sup>8</sup>

With the exception of the Finnish parliamentary future committee, all examined foresight units were established since 2012. This means we need to be cautious in evaluating their 'success', both in terms of influence and durability. But the demand is there: awareness of societal megatrends and crises will no doubt create further foresight institutions. Legislatures learn from each other, and foresight work is gradually spreading to parliaments. As Boston (2021: 11) argues, it is a matter of small wins and a change towards politics where the future "must not be viewed as a marginal, optional or residual consideration."

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<sup>8</sup> The Hungarian and Argentine cases also suggest that the rise of populist parties works against more future-looking institutions, with such parties often attempting to delegitimize 'experts'.

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