



PHOTO: Parliament



# History of the Finnish Parliament

For nearly a century, MPs elected to Parliament have represented the will of the Finnish people. In the 20th century, parliamentary procedures and practices were adapted to the needs of a changing society through various reforms. The new Constitution of Finland has strengthened Parliament's role as the supreme organ of state.

## **The Diet during the Swedish and Russian periods**

The Finnish Parliament's roots stretch back for centuries. In 1362 Finland got the right to send representatives to the election of the Swedish king. On the basis of the Swedish constitution of 1634 and the first Diet Act, Finland's four estates – nobles, clergy, burghers and peasants – were also entitled to send representatives to the Diet in Stockholm.

When Russia wrested control of Finland from Sweden in 1809, Czar Alexander I invited the Estates to a Diet in Porvoo. Finland was given the status of an autonomous grand duchy and was guaranteed the right to have its own constitution and to keep its own legislation, social system

and Lutheran religion. The next Diet was not convened until 1863, however. In 1869 a new Diet Act, adapted to Finland's autonomous status, was issued.

## **Parliamentary reform gives women the vote**

The Parliament Act that came into force on 1 October 1906 was a monumental reform. It replaced the old Diet dating back to the 17th century with a 200-seat unicameral Parliament.

The new Parliament Act introduced universal suffrage. No longer was the right to vote dependent on social status or gender. The reform increased the electorate tenfold. The minimum age for voting and standing for election was set at 24.



*PREVIOUS PAGE* | Plenary sessions of Parliament were held in the Heimola building from 1911 to 1930. The building, located in what is now Yliopistonkatu, was torn down in 1969.

PHOTO: Parliament

*LEFT* | Finnish women were the first in the world to exercise full political rights. Women MPs from different parties in November 1918.

PHOTO: Atelier Apollo / Parliament

When parliamentary elections were held in the spring of 1907, Finnish women became the first in the world to exercise full political rights, including the right to stand for election. Nineteen women were returned as MPs. The unicameral Parliament held its first session on 23 May 1907.

The new Parliament Act called for Members of Parliament to be elected directly and by secret ballot according to a proportional system based on districts. Parliament began meeting annually, placing legislative work on a regular and permanent basis.

### **The early years of Finnish independence**

Following the Russian Revolution, on 6 December 1917 Parliament approved the declaration of independence proposed by the Senate, which was headed by *P.E. Svinhufvud*. The republican constitution that was adopted in the summer of 1919 characterized Finland's parliamentary system as follows: "*Sovereign power in Finland belongs to the people, who are represented by Parliament.*" The electoral period was originally three years.

The 1928 Parliament Act brought the 1906 Parliament Act in line with independent Finland's new circumstances. Constitutional laws pertaining to Parliament remained more or less unchanged up to the mid 1980s.

In the early days of independence, the forms of political decision-making had still to evolve. Bitter memories of the 1918 civil war cast their shadow over the period. Internal problems dating from the period of autonomy, such as the issue of land ownership in rural areas, undeveloped labour legislation and insufficient democracy in local government, were remedied.

The period was marked by great economic changes: fast growth after World War I and then the global depression in the 1930s. Like other parts of Europe, Finland experienced a wave of right-wing radicalism, but it never attracted a large following.

The moderate left quickly began to participate fully in the process of building Finnish society. In 1926 a Social Democratic minority Government was appointed, with *Väinö Tanner* as Prime Minister. *Miina Sillanpää* became Finland's first female minister in this Government.

The Agrarian Party and the Social Democratic Party entered their first coalition Government in 1937, under *A.K. Cajander*. The average life span of Governments before World War II was one year.

### **Wartime Parliament**

The Parliament that was elected in 1939 continued to serve until 1945. During the Winter War, from December 1939 to February 1940, Parliament was evacuated and met in the town of Kauhajoki.

Finland is the only belligerent country in Europe where Parliament continued to meet without interruption during the Second World War.

The first post-war elections were held in March 1945. The Parliament Act had been amended the year before to lower the minimum age for voting and standing for election to 21. Young veterans returning from the war were thus able to vote. In 1954 the electoral period was extended to four years.

Parliament and the Government faced great challenges after the war. This included paying war reparations, resettling

SPEAKER

YEARS

<b>P.E. Svinhufvud</b> N	1907–12
<b>Oskari Tokoi</b> SD	1913
<b>K.J. Ståhlberg</b> N	1914
<b>Kullervo Manner</b> SD	1917/I
<b>Johannes Lundson</b> N	1917/II
<b>Lauri Ingman</b> S	1918 ylim., 1918
<b>Ernst Nevanlinna</b> S	1918
<b>Paavo Virkkunen</b> S, KOK	1918, 1923, 1926, 1928, 1929/II–1930/I
<b>Lauri Kr. Relander</b> M	1919–20
<b>Kyösti Kallio</b> M	1920, 1922, 1924–25, 1927, 1929/I–II, 1930/II–1936
<b>Wäinö Wuolijoki</b> SD	1921, 1922, 1925
<b>J. E. Sunila</b> M	1930/I
<b>Väinö Hakkila</b> SD	1936–44
<b>K.-A. Fagerholm</b> SD	1945–47, 1950–56, 1957, 1958–61, 1965
<b>Urho Kekkonen</b> M	1948–50
<b>V. J. Sukselainen</b> M, KESK	1956–57, 1958, 1968–69, 1972–75/II
<b>Kauno Kleemola</b> M	1962–65
<b>Rafael Paasio</b> SD	1966, 1970–72
<b>Johannes Virolainen</b> KESK	1966–68, 1979–82
<b>Veikko Helle</b> SD	1976–77
<b>Ahti Pekkala</b> KESK	1978–79
<b>Erkki Pystynen</b> KOK	1983–86
<b>Ilkka Suominen</b> KOK	1987, 1991–93
<b>Matti Ahde</b> SD	1987–88
<b>Kalevi Sorsa</b> SD	1989–90
<b>Esko Aho</b> KESK	1991
<b>Jukka Mikkola</b> SD	1999
<b>Riitta Uosukainen</b> KOK	1994, 1995–1998, 1999–2002
<b>Anneli Jäätteenmäki</b> KESK	2003
<b>Paavo Lipponen</b> SD	1995, 2003–2006
<b>Sauli Niinistö</b> KOK	2007–

N	Young Finns
SD	Social Democrats
S	Finnish Party
M	Agrarian Party
KESK	Centre Party
KOK	National Coalition Party

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One hundred years of Finnish democracy.

On 1 June 2006 Parliament celebrated the 100th anniversary of the approval of the Parliament Act and Election Act by the old Diet. The first general election after the reform was held on 15–16 March 1907 and Parliament held its first plenary session on 23 May.



ABOVE | During the Winter War of 1939–1940 Parliament met in the town of Kauhajoki. Secretary of Parliament E.H.I. Tammio (left) and Clerk Aku Kostia worked in a converted schoolroom that served as the parliamentary office.

PHOTO: Kauhajoki Parliament Museum / Vilho Heinämies / Parliament



ABOVE | Pehr Evind Svinhufvud was the first Speaker of Parliament in 1907–1912. Here he is getting ready to go rabbit shooting in Luumäki.

PHOTO: SKOY

Karelian refugees and war veterans and modernizing production machinery exhausted during the war.

Coalition Governments formed by the three largest parties – the Social Democratic Party, the Agrarian (later Centre) Party and the People’s Democratic League – led the nation in the post-war years.

The 1966 parliamentary elections led to a renewal of cooperation among the big three. The National Coalition Party was left in the opposition up to 1987.

### **From child allowances to the information society**

After the war, Finland was rapidly transformed from an agrarian to an industrial and urban society. Growing prosperity allowed the development of social security and welfare through the reform of existing legislation and the enactment of new laws. Parliament approved a child allowance system in 1948, the National Pension Act in 1956, the Health Insurance Act in 1963, legislation concerning unemployment benefits in 1967, the Comprehensive School Act in 1968 and the Primary Health Care Act in 1971.

Parliament continued to develop Finland’s welfare society in the following decades. Environmental matters began to receive more attention. To improve competitiveness the economy was deregulated and taxation was reformed. Individuals’ legal security was improved. New challenges for legislative work were presented by the economic slump of the early 1990s, internationalization, membership of the EU and the development of technology and the information society.

In the late 1960s and the 1970s the minimum age for voting and standing for election was lowered to 20 and then 18.

### **Changes in parliamentary work**

In 1983 parliamentary committees’ term was extended to the entire electoral period. The committees were reformed in the early 1990s so that they mainly correspond to ministries’ administrative sectors. The President’s power to dissolve Parliament was limited so that this is only possible on the reasoned initiative of the Prime Minister. The legislative process was streamlined by making it more difficult to leave matters in abeyance and by eliminating special procedures for tax acts. The possibility to leave matters in abeyance was finally eliminated, in connection with the civil rights reform in 1995.

Changes in the international operating environment were also reflected in Parliament’s tasks and position. Finland joined the European Union at the beginning of 1995, thereby becoming a member of a legislative community in which some regulations are issued at the Union level. The Grand Committee became Parliament’s EU committee, but



*ABOVE | Riitta Uosukainen, who served as Speaker from 1994 to 2002, signs Parliament’s response to the Government after Parliament has approved the new Constitution. Secretary General Seppo Tiitinen looks on.*

PHOTO: Vesa Lindqvist / Parliament

Union matters are also handled by other committees. Compared with many other member states the Finnish Parliament has a strong role in deciding on Union matters.

### **New Constitution in 2000**

The first complete reform of Finland’s Constitution came into force on 1 March 2000. The new Constitution of Finland replaced the old Constitution Act, the Parliament Act and several other acts. The new Constitution makes it easier to understand Finland’s political system and different actors’ powers and mutual relations.

Finland’s political system has been developed in a more parliamentary direction by strengthening the role of Parliament and the Government in relation to the President of the Republic. For example, the Prime Minister is elected by Parliament. As a result of the new Constitution, Parliament has an even stronger position as the supreme organ of state.