INTRODUCTION

The Standing Committee for the Future in the Finnish Parliament has a motto: “It is the duty of parliament to observe the changing world, analyse it, and take a view in good time on how Finnish society and its political actors should respond to the challenges of the future. Democracy cannot be realised simply by accepting changes that have already taken place.” Indeed, parliaments have a role in e-governance all over the world, and this role will be discussed briefly in this article with a reference to the case of the Parliament of Finland.

BACKGROUND

Why are parliaments important? The information society and e-governance are on agendas all over the world. Every nation tries to jump into the knowledge-based society as quickly and as deeply as possible.

In November 2004, the World Bank organised a seminar on “e-Governance: From Successful Pilot to Sustainable Implementation” in India (Bangalore). One hot topic, especially in the debate in the press, was the effectiveness of this new and promising development aid called e-governance. Evaluation of development aid is not easy, but it seems that e-government initiatives in developing and transitional countries have not been particularly successful. It has even been calculated that 35% are total failures, 50% are partial failures, and only 15% are successes. There is no actual evidence that e-government failure rates in developing countries should be any lower than those in industrialised countries. But there are plenty of practical reasons to support the idea that e-government failure rates in those countries might be much higher.

One basic mistake has been that politicians, as decision makers and opinion leaders, have not been really committed to e-governance. For them, it has been just one issue of technology among others in line, not really their business at all. Still, e-governance, as with any other part of governance (Tiihonen, 2004), is not a task for experts—it is a matter of common interest, together building a better future for people.

What kinds of models concerning building e-government or e-governance, are in the world for the active use of politicians? Not many, but Finland—and, in this case especially, the Committee for the Future in the Finnish Parliament—offers one of these. The role of parliaments is the same all over the world: to reactively handle proposals for legislation and annual budgets given by governments. But, can a parliament be a forerunner and an active player for a new society? Yes. This can happen in Finland, where, in 1906, women were the first in the world to get full voting and candidature rights, which can be an explanation for why, after 100 years of this kind of great social innovation, the same Finnish Parliament was the first country in the world to decide that our common future is so important that politicians also have to take real responsibility for it.

The Committee for the Future was established at the beginning of the 1990s and functioned on a temporary basis from 1993 until 2000. Then, on December 17, 1999, in conjunction with adoption of the new constitution, Parliament decided to grant the Committee for the Future permanent status (http://www.parliament.fi/FutureCommittee).

The Committee for the Future in the Finnish Parliament has the same status as the other standing committees. Each of the standing committees has its corresponding ministry, and in the case of the Committee for the Future this is the Prime Minister’s Office. From the very beginning, all 17 members of the Committee have been parliamentarians. Its current tasks are defined to be I) to prepare material to be submitted to the Finnish parliament, such as government reports on the future, II) to make submissions on future-related long-term issues to other standing committees, III) to debate issues relating to future development factors and development models, IV) to undertake analyses pertaining to future-related research and IT methodology, and V) to function as a parliamentary body for assessing technological development and its consequences for society (Arter, 2000).

POLITICS: FOR OR AGAINST NEW TECHNOLOGY, NEW THINGS?

Politics in this context is about values, attitudes, atmosphere and opinion building, and, not forgetting the most important, opinion leading. Normally, politics is against new technology and generally against change. It is said