



*Matti Vanhanen rushes to a crisis meeting to address the widespread condemnation of his proposal to raise the general retirement age to 65.*

A Wave of opinion seems to be building to the effect that the Finnish political system lags behind those of most European counterparts and some others. In a Helsingin Sanomat article on 1 March Anna-Stina Nykänen suggests that as a democracy Finland is still only a “developing country”. Journalists Katja Boxberg and Taneli Heikka make the same point in a recent pamphlet, Lumedemokratia (Skin-deep Democracy).

For those familiar with the country's recent history, Boxberg's and Heikka's judgement that Finland is an authoritarian democracy might ring a bell – or even hit a nerve. Urho Kaleva Kekkonen presided over the country for over three decades, first as Prime Minister (1950-56) and then as president (1956-1982). The term “Kekkoslovakia” proved prophetic, remarkably so considering it was coined already in the late 1940s before the Kekkonen era really began, by lawyer, publisher and politician Ernesti Hentunen. The label's implied contrast between a Soviet-style rigid hierarchy and an open society remains timely.

Debate about the distribution of power remains haunted by the memory of the “Finnish Machiavelli”, whose time at the helm was unprecedentedly long for a parliamentary democracy. But the authors of Lumedemokratia claim this is no normal democracy. For them, what makes Finland the black sheep among Western democracies is the tight-lipped authoritarianism of the country's dominant values, its political culture and economic structure.

These are broad claims, but Finnish politicians provide plenty of occasions for thinking they might be justified. A case in point is a comment by Member of Parliament Kimmo Sasi (Coalition) in the Swedish-language daily Hufvudstadsbladet on 7 March. Sasi considers it irresponsible of the labour unions to threaten strikes in protest at government proposals to raise the retirement age. In a milder version of George W. Bush's infamous "either you're with us or against us" strong-arming, Sasi claims that with the country in economic crisis and jobs on the line "one should not play power and prestige games".

Although aimed at the opposition, Sasi's advice seems tailor made for Prime Minister Matti Vanhanen (Centre). The proposal in question is Vanhanen's brainchild, having dawned on him a few weeks ago while skiing in Northern Finland. Vanhanen reported this himself on the Ykkösaamu morning television programme, and holds firmly to his flash of inspiration. Whether intended or not, Vanhanen's skiing brainwave has a naive symbolism to it. In a bid to dispel his dull image he may simply be trying to fit in the shoes, or rather skis, of the charismatic Kekkonen, who was as fond of running the country from the Lappish slopes as from the seats of government in Helsinki.

Seeing his plan being rubbished from almost every direction seems to only strengthen Vanhanen's resolve to push it through. As he admitted to Ykkösaamu, it is such a principled issue for him that there was no question of risking dissent by presenting the idea to the labour unions before announcing it as the government's "act of will". In the view of Åbo Akademi Professor of Political Science Göran Djup-sund however, commenting in Hufvudstadsbladet on 6 March, "any sensible person would back down" from such an "incurably stupid" proposal.

It may be no surprise that in 2007 civil rights group Electronic Frontier Finland gave Vanhanen the Big Brother Award, primarily for his infamous statement late that year that it was government policy not to discuss matters that have not yet been decided on.

Retirement age reform is only one of many recent issues that in light of how they have been handled have raised serious concerns about the state of Finnish democracy. Though it is a purely polemical call to arms rather than a serious analysis, Lumedemokratia at least makes explicit what many seem to feel. Even a whiff of national crisis tempts political representatives to play the well-worn there-is-no-alternative card, but perhaps this time enough Finns will reach consensus about whether the national preoccupation with "blowing on the same coal" has gone too far. As for the elected representatives, they might do a better job if they were to get back on the negotiating track and stay off the ski track.

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