



Inclusive Foresight for Finland

**By Ulla Rosenström *and*
Nicolas Balcom Raleigh**

ABSTRACT: In this paper, adapted from a recent interview, Dr. Ulla Rosenström discusses key foresight projects and focus areas of the Prime Minister's Office in Finland. She describes what other countries can learn from Finland's foresight efforts, what the futures community can expect from new Prime Minister Juha Sipilä's government in terms of foresight efforts, lessons learned from previous participatory foresight projects, and the importance of stakeholder engagement in the foresight process as a way to have more actionable results.

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Connecting Foresight Work

The Prime Minister's Office of Finland has recently launched an altogether new approach to foresight. We realized about two years ago that we have a lot of foresight knowledge and practitioners and researchers in Finland—both in the public sector, such as universities, and in the private sector. But these practitioners are not connected. We have a lot of dispersed foresight knowledge that never meets. In a small country like Finland, we cannot afford that. We should cooperate more. We should share more of what we have. And that is something we wanted to tackle.

We also wanted to improve the quality of foresight produced by these practitioners—at least support the foresight work that is done, especially in the public sector. By “public sector,” I'm not thinking only of the Helsinki area, but really the whole of Finland. This is because the regional areas are where we really need good foresight work to see what kind of jobs are going to be there, for instance, and what kind of education we will need. And all that education—training, schools, university—all that planning is done on the regional level.

So these are the kinds of things we wanted to make better.

The new foresight approach was actually initiated through the last government futures

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report process. That is a process we do in Finland for every government four-year period. The prime minister states a theme for a foresight report that the government makes, and then this report is submitted to the parliament, where the Committee for the Future makes a comment on it, and the members of parliament then discuss it in one of their sessions. The most recent report on sustainable growth and well-being was discussed for four hours in the parliament. So that is a really great way of bringing this

Foresight Programs in Finland

- **The Parliament of Finland:** The Committee for the Future deliberates parliamentary documents referred to it and, when requested to do so, makes submissions to other committees on futures-related matters within their spheres of responsibility. The Committee conducts research associated with futures studies, including their methodology. The Committee also functions as a parliamentary body that conducts assessments of technological development and the effects on society of technology. In 2013 the Committee published the Black Swans book, which gathered citizen essays about possible black swans for Finland. It can be downloaded as PDF at <http://tinyurl.com/BlackSwansFiCE>. *Details:* <http://www.eduskunta.fi/EN/lakiensaataaminen/valiokunnat/tulevaisuusvaliokunta/Pages/default.aspx>
- **National Foresight Network** is a network of Finnish foresight experts or people interested in foresight. The aim of the National Foresight Network is to raise awareness of Finland's new challenges and opportunities so they can be discussed, studied, and considered in decision making. The National Foresight Network is organized by the Prime Minister's Office and Sitra (the Finnish Innovation Fund). *Details:* <http://www.foresight.fi/info-in-english/>
- **The Finnish Society for Futures Studies** was established in 1980 with a membership now comprising more than two dozen Finnish institutions of higher education and over 700 individuals. Its goal is to influence the long-term development of Finnish society by advancing futures research and its utilization. The Society unifies futures-related research and researchers across a broad range of academic disciplines. The Society conducts a major annual seminar in the summer and other meetings, and it publishes the quarterly journal *Futura*, which includes feature articles, research reports, and seminar presentations and functions as a forum for the exchange of information and opinion. *Details:* <http://www.tutuseura.fi/english/>
- **Finland Futures Research Center** (FFRC), a department at the Turku School of Economics, University of Turku, is a multidisciplinary academic research, training, and development organization. FFRC coordinates the **Finland Futures Academy** (FFA), a network of 10 Finnish universities established to promote and coordinate academic futures education in Finland. FFA also coordinates the Helsinki node of The Millennium Project. *Details:* <http://www.utu.fi/en/units/ffrc/Pages/home.aspx>

future thinking to the politicians more widely than just that committee. New jobs and work is one of the main themes that came out of that discussion this year.

So, this whole new approach of sharing and bringing practitioners—foresight people—together is a big thing that has been going on in the prime minister’s office for the past year. We also have made new concepts in communication—and we are still working on them—to better communicate with the government.

Lessons for Leading National Foresight

Many things are relatively easy to do in Finland because we are such a small country. For instance, it has never been a problem to get in touch with a parliamentarian and ask for a meeting—not even when I was a 25-year-old researcher, and not now. One can go and talk with them, interview them, find out what kind of information they use or what they are interested in. It is very natural. In that way, I don’t know if it is as informal in other countries. I find it easy to talk and communicate with them.

So when we talk about politicians, this Parliament [Committee for the Future](http://www.eduskunta.fi/EN/lakiensaaminen/valiokunnat/tulevaisuusvaliokunta/Pages/default.aspx) [www.eduskunta.fi/EN/lakiensaaminen/valiokunnat/tulevaisuusvaliokunta/Pages/default.aspx] is an interesting case. As it happens, one of our previous prime ministers, Jyrki Katainen, and our current prime minister, Juha Sipilä, were on that committee when they were just ordinary members of the parliament. Our recent prime ministers actually are quite future-oriented, I suppose, because these committees have really been doing great work.

Our current prime minister, Sipilä, had done a vision for the parliament committee in the last term. When he entered the committee, he asked, “What is this committee? What do we do? What is this future all about?” and then he made a vision that at the end of four years we should have done this and that and that.

One goal was for the media to take future issues more seriously; the chair of the future committee, Päivi Lipponen, even said that happened, but I know they were struggling, in some ways, in getting media attention. This committee publishes quite a lot of reports and books that do not get the attention of the other committees who do legislative work.

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Ulla Rosenström

A lot of political figures from other countries come to Finland to see this committee, asking, “Should we have one of those?” I know there are many countries who are planning to have a committee like that. On the other hand, for example, Sweden came here to look at it, then decided that it’s still better that *all* parliament committees talk about future. So they decided to have a special function in the parliament—a kind of a data service—where they then foster this thinking in all committees. That sounded really good to me as well. So, futures thinking in government is quite country specific.

Crowdsourcing the Future

Although I was not part of the [2030 Project](http://www.2030.fi/) [http://www.2030.fi/] or the [Black Swans](http://tinyurl.com/BlackSwansFiCF) book published in 2013 by the Committee for the Future [tinyurl.com/BlackSwansFiCF], I believe their approach actually worked quite well. We got some critical feedback on the 2030 project, suggesting that the whole government future report wasn’t really crowdsourcing, but rather a participatory process that critics said wasn’t genuine. They said we involved a lot of people in several meetings, but then what the people there actually said wasn’t seen in the end result. It was as though we said, “Thank you for coming,” and “Here is the final result.” But the discussion really didn’t go on long enough, and that’s why the first Foresight Friday that we organized this spring tackled the question of participation directly.

Our theme thus was “How can we make public participation or crowdsourcing more genuine?” and explored the possibilities and the importance of this genuine participation. I very strongly made the point that when we do our next government foresight report, we have got to think very carefully whether we want to have participation. What will the participation be like? Do we really need it? Of course we do need it, but we must use it where it’s really needed so it can make an impact, and not just use it because it’s the way to do it. The process costs money; it costs the time of those people. They must feel that they were needed and that their contribution was heard.

Inspiring Leadership for the Future

Within the Prime Minister’s Office, the national foresight group is led by the State Secretary, who is actually my highest boss—it’s up to her how she employs or uses the staff that she has at the prime minister’s office. [Ed. note: Shortly after this interview took place, Paula Lehtomäki was appointed Finland’s new state secretary to the prime minister and began serving in this role on July 1, 2015. See <http://valtioneuvosto.fi/en/sipila/state-secretaries-to-the-ministers>.] We have a network structure, which is the 300 people who have connected to our Yammer website, but then we also have this Foresight Lead Group. For example, Markku Wilenius, a professor of futures studies at

FFRC, University of Turku, is part of that group, and there are nine other “inspirational people.”

These participants are not necessarily foresight practitioners, but they are people I consider to be inspirational—they are an inspiration to the others, to the foresight practitioners, researchers, policy planners, and so on. Inspirational people are those who can say, “OK, these are the important things; this is what I see in the future.” And this group will never make reports or commission something. They offer advice and a little bit of steering, but it’s not really a steering committee. This group of 10 people is chaired by our state secretary.

From there, we then get the directions of what the new prime minister wants. Because he has been a member in the committee for the future, it’s already promising. It is also very promising if you look at our government program. They started by forming a common idea of what is the state where Finland is, and they made a vision of Finland 2050. It’s not very long, but it really means that they have actually been thinking. What do they want? What should Finland become like? What are our goals in 10 years?

Note that they’re not looking at the next four years. They’re looking at 10 years. There are a lot of international researchers who have recently been in contact with me, for example, to tell me about their research on this “long-term-ism” —and that’s what they call it in the U.K., “long-term-ism.” They are asking, “Why are politicians just looking from election to election and not any longer?” I at least have a feeling that our current prime minister is thinking further ahead.

Strategic Objectives for Government Foresight

We are going to focus our foresight on the five strategic objectives of the government program. The five themes of the 2015 government program are

- Employment and Competitiveness
- Skills and Education
- Well-Being and Health
- Bioeconomy and Clean Solutions
- Digitalization, Experimentation, and Regulation

The government program that Prime Minister Sipilä presented to parliament may be found at valtioneuvosto.fi/en/sipila/government-programme. These five goals are something we can now actually connect with our foresight work, because I think it will resonate much better with the politicians if we say, “OK, we are making foresight on these five areas for you.” We will present our results—what we are doing, what we are collecting, what people are sharing—according to that framework. Of course, we will

always say that there are other things, too, and these things are approaching and maybe you're not prepared for them.

What we're also going to do is organize these retreats where the government ministers get together but don't have to make decisions. We just present them with the research data—indicators, high-level ideas of where we are, where we're going. We involve foresight thinking here, and then the ministers discuss this with each other without a need to make any decisions. It's a more relaxed situation, somewhere a little bit out of town, like we were at an island. We have actually done this three times already with the previous government, so it's a concept that we have tried and I think will be welcomed again.

Having information is not enough. Marketing and communicating information out on the Web and Twitter is not enough. You have to organize the situations where science meets policy. If the people don't change their thinking, if they don't feel that they are part of it and that their needs are heard, then they are never going to read the report or take anything seriously. That's what I've learned in my past 20 years.

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