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Representative democracy from inside. Characteristics of the Finnish veteran MPs' oral history interviews

The Library of Finnish Parliament has, since 1988, produced over 380 interviews with the veteran parliamentarians who were politically active in the post-war era. Every fourth of the 1496 MPs that have been elected to the parliament since 1945 has been interviewed. The main criteria of the selection of the interviewees has been the parliamentary age of the former MP (years at the parliament) and the special significance of the MP's political career (member of government, MEP etc.). Since the collection is supposed to reflect the relative strength of the parties at the Finnish parliament, political as well as regional representativeness has been taken care of. The share of the interviewed female MPs, 109 / 380 (29 %) illustrates rather well the growing significance of women at the Finnish parliament. Today, 83 out of the 200 Finnish MPs are females (42 %).

The collection of interviews has recently been digitalized, and it covers approximately 2 200 hours of recorded interviews and 60,000 pages of transcriptions. On an international scale, the collection is markedly comprehensive, and has been systematically compiled and vigilantly maintained. The contents of the interviews are comparable with each other, since there has been a joint questionnaire for the interviews. The questionnaire can be described as semi-structured with emphasis on life history approach, starting from the family and childhood, school, education and professional life towards activism in political parties. Though the interviews concentrate on the interviewees' years at the parliament their later career after the retirement is also updated until the present. The average length of these interviews is almost six hours. During the latest years, 12–15 new interviews have been conducted annually. Though the interviews are not public they can be used for scientific purposes.

The representative democracy of Finland was established in 1907 as the parliament became unicameral.

Representative democracy has survived without major breaks through the gaining of independence 1917, the civil war 1918 and three wars connected to the Second World War. Finland is one of the few European countries with such an uninterrupted tradition of representative democracy. Oral history has been considered a useful method for studying change. Though there are not dramatic changes in the history of post-war Finland the interviews with the

Finnish veteran MPs shed light on the development of established democracy, the Finnish political culture and the networks of power.

Purpose of the former MPs' oral history collection

The objective of the oral history project of the veteran MPs is to produce an archive collection of audio tapes that serves interests of serious research as well as purposes of the parliament. We aspire to reach the diverse individual substance of being a MP that would not survive without a conscious effort to save it.¹

In the early 1980s, the Finnish history community was following the current academic trends by debating the value of oral history as a source of historical research. Originally, the idea of collecting oral history knowledge from the former Finnish MPs was formulated at a history seminar at the University of Helsinki. The seminar group was working with the oral history papers that had been presented at the XV Congress of the ICHS in Bucharest 1980. The teacher of the seminar group Marjatta Hietala, now the president of the ICHS, has been contributing to the development of the interview collection ever since. The idea of collecting oral history from the Ex-MPs was introduced at the Library of the Finnish Parliament that carried out a pilot project with 21 most experienced parliamentarians in 1984–1985. The results were promising enough for the launching of a three-year-project with one full-time researcher. It was carried on in the early 1990s and finally established permanent in 1995. Until today, altogether 18 specialists of contemporary history and parliament issues have worked as interviewers of the long-term project.²

The publicly funded history projects have been valuable employees for the young scholars in Finland. In the collecting of the Ex-MPs' oral history, the interests of the scientific community coincided with the Finnish parliament during an era of economic growth and developing welfare. The arguments for maintaining and completing the Ex-MPs oral history collection have, even throughout the more difficult times, been formulated as follows:

- there were no systematical oral history collections in Finland, especially of the political decision-makers
- voices of the most experienced politicians should be “rescued” and saved for the future MPs and citizens
- oral history collection will serve studies of parliamentary history as research material
- research method of oral history produces “tacit knowledge” that cannot be covered with other means
- the MPs' key position in between the political elites and the people is fruitful for analyzing the representative democracy³

These arguments stress the scientific value of the interviews as well as the perpetuating, institutional motive for collecting the oral history of the former MPs. To legitimise and establish the oral history project, the support of the

¹ Graae – Hietala 1994, 4.

² Graae – Hietala 1994, 98–105.

³ Graae – Hietala 2006, 350–353.

academic community has naturally been enlisted. Referring to scientific purposes is a typical strategy to justify the collection of the oral history of the political elite.⁴

Once introduced, the interview project of the Finnish Ex-MPs, has been guided through difficult times by the culturally oriented sitting MPs that have respected oral history. The historians and political scientists have supported the continuation of the interview collection whenever their evaluation has been asked, but their role has been more or less advisory, at least during the latest years. The crucial decisions are made inside the parliament that allocates the resources for maintaining and completing the collection.

There have been suggestions to add the preservation of the oral testimonies of the former MPs to the core tasks of the parliament, which was a part of the early strategy to justify continuity for the oral history project:

“It is worth asking whether the storage of the MPs’ wealth of experiences and personal observation during their parliamentary career will belong nothing less than the task of the parliament, because the interviews to be done will be useful not only for the purposes of research but the future generations of the MPs as well.”⁵

There have been occasions when the future of the oral history work at the Finnish parliament was at stake. At the midst of the 1990s’ recession of Finnish national economy, there was a severe suggestion to suspend the project due to the resource savings focused on the Library of Parliament. After the active lobbying against the suggestion, the sitting MPs themselves formulated the decisive report at the Education and Culture Committee: “Committee states that the Oral History Project of the Veteran MPs’ is extremely important for the basic research of both contemporary political history and cultural history.” Another critical moment was followed in 2009 after the retirement of the researcher that had coordinated the oral history work at the Library of Parliament for 20 years. After a year’s brake of the interview production, the Education and Culture Committee regarded the continuation of the collection of the interviews “important for the storage of the history of democracy”.⁶ A new researcher was recruited, and the collection of interviews has continued for the present.

It is evident that all the Finnish MPs do not share the appreciation of the interview project though only few of them have refused to be interviewed themselves. In defending their own oral history project, the Finnish MPs use power that has been given to them by the electors. They themselves decide that their voice is worth saving for the future generations. At least some of the interviewees have doubted the meaning of the resources given to the project:

“Probably it will give joy to some researcher of politics when they go through these [interview] papers. In this respect certainly a very valuable and expensive work, because [project] of that kind costs awfully lot when you first interview and then you have to transcribe.”⁷

In public, no one of the MPs has dared to question the meaning of the long-time project. On the contrary, the published feedback has been very positive.⁸ The MP colleagues’ critical attitude towards the collection would

⁴ Seldon & Pappworth 1983, 62–63; Mykkänen 2001, 112–114; Abrams 2010, 162.

⁵ Graae – Hietala 1994, 86.

⁶ The Finnish parliamentary documents: Annual report of the Library of Parliament 1992, Report of the Education and Cultural Committee 1993, SiVM 10; Report of the Education Committee commenting the 2010 Annual Report of the Library of Parliament, SiVM 2/2011.

⁷ Interview of a female Ex-MP, born in 1952, 2010. The Veteran MPs’ Oral History Archive, Library of Finnish Parliament.

easily be understood as contempt for the Finnish MPs' shared history and even for Finnish democracy. Can't we afford to save our parliamentary history?

On a more general level, the collection of ex-MPs oral history has a perpetuating function that is institutionally controlled. The parliament institution stores the experiences of its former members for the future generations. For the time being, the reminiscences have not been used for presenting and popularizing the history of parliament.⁹ It is evident, however, that their use cannot be forever narrowly restricted to research purposes. The future perspective influences some of the ex-MPs giving their interview similarly with the decision-maker that is writing his or hers diary. Sooner or later in the future, both the interviews and the personal diaries are supposed to be read, maybe even published. It depends on the person that is being interviewed to what audience he or she is actually speaking. The memoirs that are told to the interviewer may actually be directed to the MP colleagues, to the parliament institution or to the future generations.

The parliament institution affects the interview process in many ways. Most of the former MPs agree easily when the interview request that is supported by the parliament institution is sent to them. In fact, some of them feel a kind of a duty of giving the interview that is asked by their former employer. An interview that covers the interviewee's whole life can be interpreted as an institutional support service for the identity work of the retired MP. For some of the former MPs, a retrospective remembering helps to orientate in the new situation of life that is not anymore filled with politics. Another institutional support service for the retired politicians is the Veteran MPs' Association with its regular meetings where solidarity between the former colleagues is maintained. Consequently, the individual interview speech of the former MPs is socially and institutionally regulated. And the other way round, the former MPs' "presentation of the past and its meaning make stories one of the primary means for proposing and negotiating identity, both individual and collective identities".¹⁰

Are the MPs, then, using history and controlling our impressions of the history of representative democracy in Finland? In my opinion, every interviewee is given an opportunity to formulate his or hers own personal political history which, however, is only a marginal contribution to the history of post-war Finnish democracy. As long as the use of the interviews is restricted for scientific purposes the final gatekeepers that draw the conclusions of the narrated pasts are the scholars that use these oral history materials for their studies.

The promise of the interviews as research material

Considering the public resources allocated to the parliament's oral history collection and its huge potential as research material, usage of these interviews has been rather low. Usually the scholars have used the Ex-MPs' interviews as complementary research material for biographical studies or histories of political parties. These studies have been based on traditional written source materials to which the interviews have added some personal details. In the centennial of the Finnish parliament, there are a couple of descriptive articles of the MPs' everyday

⁸ Graae – Hietala 1994, 159–167.

⁹ Compare e.g. the oral history project of Museum of Australian Democracy: <http://moadoph.gov.au/collection/oral-history/>

¹⁰ Linde 2009, 221. See also Krekola – Latvala 2014, 44–45.

life and of parliament as a working community whose writers have used the interviews as their main source. These articles could not have been written without the “tacit knowledge” produced at the oral history interviews.¹¹ At the same time, the oral history collection was seldom used as a source for the other forty articles of the centennial series with 12 volumes.

The reasons for the scholars’ limited interest in the Veteran MPs’ Oral History Archive can be traced to its restricted access, low publicity and difficult usability. Originally, in the late 1980s, the decision to limit the use of the interview materials to the post-gradual level was not difficult to make but a common practice. Besides, the interviewees could themselves decide temporary restrictions to their own interviews. With the limited access, the interviewees wanted to confirm that their delicate revelations would not end up to the hands of the journalists. The collectors of oral history, for their part, believed that non-publicity and the restriction of the material for scientific use would increase rapport during the interviews and produce more valuable interview statements. During the past 25 years, the ideals of freedom and transparency of information have grown stronger and this kind of old-fashioned secrecy is more difficult to argument for. The interviews with the former MPs of the British Parliament since 2010, for example, are available for the public at the British Library.¹² For the present, the rules for the use of the Finnish collection remain strict though gradual opening of the earliest interviews could be foreseen in the future.

During the latest years, access to the collection of the former Finnish MPs’ interviews has been widened to cover the students that prepare their master’s thesis on the parliamentary history. The transcriptions of the interviews can be sent to the researchers with the research permit via a protected e-mail-connection, which improves the usability of the interviews considerably. Until this reform in last year, the use of the interviews was allowed only at the Library of Parliament during its opening hours. It is too early to say whether these improvements to the collection’s usability will increase its scholarly use.

The relatively low use of the interviews of the former MPs can be interpreted as a sign of the historians’ lacking confidence on the oral sources. The Finnish community of historians has traditionally been a rather conservative one. The historians simply have not overcome the ancient question of the reliability of the oral sources.¹³ Though different types of source materials have gradually been accepted the community of scholars is not large enough for the development of different schools of approach. Another sign of Finnish historians’ lacking interest is that the few theoretical articles considering oral history have not been written by historians but rather ethnologists and cultural scientists.¹⁴

The establishing of the former MPs’ oral history collection at the 1980s was a relatively radical move. The prevailing practice of history research overestimated objectivism guaranteed by the written sources. Oral history was gaining ground as an empowering method of the minorities whose histories were not necessarily preserved in written form. The former MPs were a small minority whose actions at the parliament were, on the contrary,

¹¹ Biographies, see e.g. Niinistö 1998, Nummivuori 2009; party histories, see Iivari 2007, Isohookana-Asunmaa 2006. Articles by Honka-Hallila (2006) and Ollila (2007) in Parliament of Finland Centennial.

¹² <http://www.historyofparliamentonline.org/about/latest-research/oral-history-project>

¹³ Seldon – Pappworth 1983, 15–26.

¹⁴ See especially Fingerroos – Haanpää – Heimo – Peltonen 2006.

exceptionally well documented in the parliamentary proceedings and memoirs of the MPs.¹⁵ However, the diversity of the sources that a member of elite leaves behind during his or hers lifetime should not be regarded a counter-argument for oral history, quite the opposite. The bias of the written sources that the decision-makers themselves traditionally produce may be challenged by reflective oral history approach.¹⁶

The interest of the scholars partly depends on the nature of the oral history knowledge that the interview project has produced since the late 1980s. Since it could not be foreseen what the future scholars would consider relevant research questions to study the questionnaires of the Ex-MPs oral history interviews' have been constructed as wide and all-encompassing as possible.¹⁷ Without accurate research questions, there is a risk of producing too general and superficial oral history knowledge. The researchers seeking for detailed knowledge of a certain political process may be disappointed because many interesting themes are passed or the comments remain too general. On the other hand, the interviews often include surprising details that the later generations are not aware of. From the future perspective the particular details may even be incomprehensible.

The former MPs' interview collection offer unique source materials for the studies that are able to utilize the amount, comparativeness and confidential nature of the interviews. In total, 380 interviews are already a representative sample of the former MPs' views in Finland. By comparing the oral history statements and grasping their repetitive and typical expressions, it is possible to approach abstract phenomena that are challenging to study, such as political culture and its change or networks of power.¹⁸ The fact that the interviewees are *former* MPs increases, at best, reliability of their interview statements because after retiring the politicians are free to speak out their personal experiences, opinions and emotions in retrospect and without expectations from the constituency or the media. On the other hand, the time passed since the active years in politics naturally diminishes accuracy of the memoirs. They are the most reliable source of the interviewee's thinking at the moment the interview is conducted, not actually of what has happened in the past. The veteran parliamentarians are given a possibility to tell their own truth of their personal history. Whether it is whitewashed or not is a problem of source criticism that the researcher of the interview has to confront. As we all know, remembering wrong or whitewashing may be a fruitful starting point for an oral history analysis. What is the significance of the former MP's remembering in a certain way?¹⁹

The massive amount of the interviews may also cause problems to the scholars that are interested in the long-term changes of the Finnish democracy. How can you methodologically manage with nearly 60 000 transcribed pages or with 2 200 hours of audio files? Though a table of content is compiled for every interview the traditional method of reading and making notes of the interviews may, depending on the research question, simply be too time-consuming. The latest trends of digital humanities might offer new solutions to the challenging amount of source material. In a recent research project, the oral history material of the former MPs is planned to be moulded into a uniform textual corpus that will be compared with the other open data collections that deal with Finnish democracy. The project brings together experts of history and specialists of semantic textual analysis with computer scientists.

¹⁵ Luukkanen 1988, 272–276. Abrams 2010, 153–161.

¹⁶ Waldemarsson, 10.

¹⁷ Seldon – Pappworth 1983, 12, 215–216.

¹⁸ Ollila 2007, 16. Waldemarsson 2007, 16–19.

¹⁹ Kalela 1999, 140–141.

Analysis by historians alone is unable to go through the wealth of material and its potential connections, whereas automated analysis is unable to achieve an adequate understanding of the semantic meanings within the discussions. After the suggested project, the corpus of oral history materials will serve any scholars at the Library of Parliament.

Considering oral history by the former MPs important, it is worth asking, why the other European parliaments have not paid as much attention to the MPs' oral history as the Finns. There are some comparable projects that have usually been relative short-lived. The British project has been going on since 2010, the Swedish with long breaks since 1998 and the Norwegian with focus on all the national elites has already ceased. The United States and Australia have much stronger tradition of collecting oral history, especially at the local level, and attention to politicians' interviews have been paid as well.²⁰ Comparison between these materials would be interesting though there are differences in the electoral and the political systems of these countries. However, the MPs of every representative democracy remain in a key role as the people's will is transposed into politics.

To conclude, the former Finnish MPs' interviews are a valuable and fruitful research material whose potential has not yet been utilized to its full extent. Perhaps, the value of the systematic interview production is understood better in the future when enough time has passed of the era that the interviews cover.

MPs between political elite and people

Though the interviews of the former MPs would usually be described as elite oral history a closer look to their methodological particularity and contents suggests another interpretation. The methodological guides of elite oral history concentrate on the challenges of conducting interviews with the active decision-makers of politics, business or science that are supposed to be difficult to access and cooperate with. Time is money, so the interviews of the busy politicians are either conducted for the purposes of daily media or carried out as survey-interviews with standard questions.²¹ The former MPs that have retired from the politics usually allow enough time for an in-depth interview whose views does not anymore affect daily politics. The nature of interviews being conducted with the former MPs differs radically from the tens or hundreds of interviews they have given during their political career. Importance of trust is underlined, and the interviewer is present to discuss and to find out the true opinions of the interviewee. The interview is a result of a dialogical interaction between two persons. The interviewer is an active listener that facilitates the remembering with questions that have been prepared to reflect the career of the interviewee.²²

Though finding sufficient time for the interview might not be a problem the interview might still suffer from status imbalance between the former MP and the interviewer. The interviewers are usually younger than the former MPs and they lack the experience of being a politician. These shortcomings may be compensated with historical

²⁰ Graae – Hietala 1994, 37–48; Nilsson 2009; <http://www.arkivverket.no/arkivverket/Privatarkiv/Samtidshistorie/Om-FoSAM> ; <http://www.historyofparliamentonline.org/about/latest-research/oral-history-project> ; <http://www.senate.gov/history/oralhistory.htm> .

²¹ Seldon – Pappworth 1983, 62–67; Mykkänen 2001; Goldstein 2002.

²² Graae – Hietala 2006, 352.

expertise of the interviewer and his or hers familiarizing for the interviewee's career. On the other hand, differences of status always rest on power relations of the interview situation. The difficulties with the elites may often be overemphasized.²³ I have faced my greatest problems in conducting interviews with the former Finnish communist that had studied in the USSR. Compared to them, the former MPs have been cooperative interviewees to deal with. Politicians are professionals in giving interviews that concern daily politics. The challenge of the veteran politician's interview is not how to provoke memoirs; the former MPs are often very talkative, but rather how to avoid their former formal style of "speaking politics" and get deeper into personal reminiscences.

The value of the interviews with the former MPs resides in the position of the MPs between the political elite and the people. According to the statistics covering last two decades, roughly a quarter of the current MPs have been estimated to belong to the national political elite in Finland.²⁴ Actually, a part of the MPs in the parliament does not even attempt to achieve powerful positions. These backbenchers prefer "serving the people" as well as they can with a humble attitude.²⁵ On the other hand, when the experienced parliamentarians afterwards recall their political career they tend to explain why they did not reach the powerful position they were after. Many of them become frustrated after noticing that the MP's possibilities to influence the decisions being made are often very limited. A good example of this disappointment is the interview with a former MP that had been a minister for four years before being elected to the parliament. He lost all the power he had been given as a minister, which caused a frustration that he could not hide as a MP. That was one of the reasons why he was not re-elected to continue at the parliament.²⁶

In the Finnish electoral system of the parliament, the person of the candidate is emphasized. Therefore, the MPs personify the will of the people in the Finnish democracy. The MPs carry in public the weight of making the decisions in representative democracy. National politics takes place in the parliament though power may hide somewhere else in society or cross the national borders. When the de-facto decision-makers of the deep recession era in the 1990s' Finland were interviewed only 13 of the 71 persons were elected to their powerful position. They were, in addition to the President of the Republic, ministers and chairmen of the parliamentary groups.²⁷ The interview statements of those former MPs who have succeeded in reaching the powerful positions inside the parliament shed light on the vital question how the political capital is accumulated and used effectively. Instead of labelling the interviews with the former MPs as elite oral history, it would be more useful to utilize them for clarifying the concept of political elite and of analysis of gaining the political power. The visualizing of the contradictory role of the MPs could be used as potential of change. It is worth asking where the power lies when it is not in the hands of the MPs that are representing the people.

Ordinarily people's appreciation on politics and on MPs particularly has declined dramatically during the latest decades in Finland. The defence of representative democracy can be done by letting the MPs voice be heard. They themselves know the weaknesses and strengths of the current system. The stereotypes of the MPs roles that are

²³ Puwal 1997; Smith 2006; Abrams 2010, 161–162.

²⁴ Ruostetsaari 2014, 67–68.

²⁵ Ollila 2007, 154.

²⁶ Interview of a male Ex-MP, born in 1941, 2013. The Veteran MPs' Oral History Archive, Library of Finnish Parliament.

²⁷ Kalela 2003, Kantola 2002, 68–73.

created by the media can be challenged as the information that has been gathered from the former MPs' interviews is put together. The interviewees' variety of social background, education or lack of it, length of professional careers before entering politics and the difficulties in being re-elected deconstruct the popular impression of MPs as members of political elite. Every route to the parliament is different, and every life history of a former MP can be considered as valuable as a single MP is for representative democracy.

Finally, though a part of the Finnish MPs can always be counted in the members of political elite every MP is depended of the votes of the people every fourth year. In every parliamentary election, a couple of MPs that belong to the political elite surprisingly lose their seats. The members of financial, administrative or cultural elites seldom lose their positions overnight.

Conclusion

The collection of interviews with the former Finnish MPs does not fulfil the criterion that is usually given to oral history projects. It does not represent history from below, neither has it given voice to the groups that are silenced or neglected in history. However, as has been pointed out, the former MPs interviews should not be called elite oral history from above as its purest form either. A voice is given to the former key figures of representative democracy whose viewpoints are worth listening, since they are based on inside experiences of everyday practices of democracy. Some of the interviewees have during their political careers reached powerful positions and belonged to the inner circles where the important decisions are made. Others have understood their role as parliamentarians differently and preferred goals that might satisfy better their own constituency at the district. There is not a right or wrong way to represent the people, but the MPs' impressions of their own role matter in democracy.

The parliament institution becomes stronger by collecting oral history from its former members. The sitting MPs of Finland have for over 25 years supported the collecting of their former colleagues' personal and shared memories. However, the resources allocated to the Ex-MPs oral history collection are valuable only if the interviews are used. Some day in the future, the MPs' voices from the past may be publicly shared. Today, the usage of the collection is limited to the researchers. The scholars should be encouraged to widen our understanding of the parliament and the parliamentarians. Democracy needs critical challenging to become better.

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WWW-sites of oral history projects with parliamentarians:

Australia: Museum of Australian Democracy – Oral History Project: <http://moadoph.gov.au/collection/oral-history/>

Britain: The History of Parliament – Oral History Project <http://www.historyofparliamentonline.org/about/latest-research/oral-history-project>

Finland: The Veteran Members of Parliament Oral History Archive
https://www.eduskunta.fi/EN/tietoaeduskunnasta/kirjasto/palvelut/Arkiston_palvelut/Pages/Veteraanikansanedustajien-muistitietoarkiston-palvelut.aspx

Norway: Forum for Samtidshistorie, intervjuprosjekt
<http://www.arkivverket.no/arkivverket/Privatarkiv/Samtidshistorie/Om-FoSAM> ;

US Senate Oral History Project <http://www.senate.gov/history/oralhistory.htm> .