



Timo Turja, Chief information specialist

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Parliamentary Decision-making and the Politics of Knowledge

Ladies and gentlemen,

My talk today is about how knowledge is used in parliamentary decision-making.

I would like to begin by discussing how research findings and scientific knowledge are used in representative bodies such as parliaments. I am sure we can all agree that political decision-making should be based on information which is objective, accurate and as reliable as possible.

In recent years, there have been increasing demands in the European Union that research findings should be used more in decision-making. For instance, a recently adopted policy document states that European decision-making on education and training policy should be based on scientific evidence.

So it seems obvious that in the future, parliaments will increasingly insist that decisions are grounded on scientific evidence. For those of us working in parliamentary libraries, this is no doubt more than welcome. After all, we are already supplying members of our respective parliaments with the best possible research data. Many of us are engaged in research to support parliamentary decision-making. The requirement of scientific evidence may, in fact, strengthen the position of libraries in national parliaments.

However, my point in this talk is this: Is it possible for parliamentary decision-making to actually be based on scientific evidence and knowledge?

Back in 1931, the Finnish Parliament had an interesting debate concerning the significance of scientific knowledge. The debate was about alcohol legislation, and the Members were required to determine how strong an alcoholic beverage needs to be in order to be considered intoxicating. Several professors were consulted by committees, but no unanimous conclusion was reached. The experts disagreed so widely that eventually Parliament resorted to the empirical method: bottles of mild beer were brought to the committee in question so that the honourable members could try for themselves whether they would get drunk on that beverage. One of the Members of Parliament involved declared that personal experience meant much more to him than any scientist arguing the opposite.

When the matter was put to full debate, one of the Members of Parliament summarised the significance of scientific knowledge in parliamentary decision-making thus:

“We Members of Parliament respect science, but we must remember that we cannot follow the opinions of the scientists without question. If scientists had had their way, no one would today be travelling by train. When the first railway was being planned, the Académie Française was approached for a statement, and at that time scientists considered it impossible for any vehicle to be able to stand such speeds. The scientists were wrong back then, and they may be wrong today, too. If one scientist says that beer is not an intoxicating beverage, another will declare with equal conviction that it is. One’s research says this and another’s research says that, and any research findings of today may be overturned tomorrow.”

This speech demonstrates admirably how difficult it is for politicians to rely on scientific expertise, no matter how distinguished or prominent the experts may be.

Firstly, scientific findings are often contradictory. It is a rare thing indeed for the scientific community to agree unanimously on the outcomes of any research. Disagreements between schools of thought may be so violent that Members of Parliament are simply unable to determine who among these arguing scholars might be right and whose information might be the most reliable. How could they, when even the scientists themselves cannot agree?

Secondly, scientific knowledge is becoming increasingly political. It is all too easy to see how even a natural science like environmental science may become politicised, not to mention disciplines such as social sciences and law, where the interpretations of scholars are always coloured by political attitudes and values. To quote Max Weber, many scientists are actually 'ersatz politicians', engaging in research to promote their own political goals. Members of Parliament understand this well enough and take such research for what it is: political statements rather than objective truths. And so they refuse to admit that such research has any scientific validity.

Thirdly, scientific knowledge about any social activities is always uncertain, because social developments always involve unpredictable, uncontrollable and unique elements. When Finland was debating whether to join the euro back in 1998, the matter was given serious thought by a committee consisting of the finest economists in the country. Yet in the end, these professors were unable to make any confident predictions about how joining the euro would affect Finland's national economy. The situation was a unique one, and it was impossible to model the outcomes of such a decision. The more extensive and unprecedented a decision is, the more uncertain the scientific knowledge behind it is.

Fourthly and finally, scientific knowledge can never resolve conflicts of values, and controlling conflicts of values is what parliamentary decision-making is all about. Applying findings of natural science to society at large requires normative deliberation, which involves looking at a far bigger picture than just the domain of scientific research. For instance, decisions about regulating genetic technology cannot be made on the basis of natural science alone, since there are ethical and moral dimensions involved. Scientific knowledge cannot determine the outcome of the value choices that must be made.

So, what we have learned so far is that the utilisation of scientific knowledge in parliamentary decision-making is imperfect at best. Science and politics simply do not mix. Scientists seek the truth, aim for objectivity and rely on peer review. Politicians, on the other hand, seek power, aim to promote the interests of their voters and question the authority of their opponents. Scientists and politicians have a vastly different view of reality: for scientists, reality is independent and objective; for politicians, it is rhetoric.

It is very typical of the parliamentary decision-making process that even the most rock-solid knowledge becomes uncertain, objective becomes subjective, and exact becomes inexact.

It is important for us library professionals to understand that information plays a different role at different stages of the decision-making process. The sociology of information reveals that decision-making, for instance in the Finnish Parliament, passes through five stages.

At the first stage, new social phenomena are brought up in parliamentary debate. Members of Parliament may refer to recently published books or scientific findings to make the other Members and the general public aware of a particular new social phenomenon. When Finnish Members of Parliament began to talk about globalisation in the early 1990s, for example, they cited scientists such as Manuel Castels, Anthony Giddens, Immanuel Wallerstein and Ulrich Beck.

At the second stage, this social phenomenon becomes politicised, as the political parties take their positions on it. At this point, organisations and lobby groups closely connected with the political parties also weigh in with their opinions. Members of Parliament now need to refine their views so that they are also politically expedient. Political expediency is always a matter of pragmatism, not veracity, as in research.

At the third stage, Parliament begins to establish a consensus and agrees on legislative measures. In practice, this means that the Government has submitted a Bill to Parliament, and this is referred to committee.

Committee work is the most information-intensive work that there is in Parliament. Committee members need to immerse themselves in the matter being discussed, reading scientific studies and hearing experts. However, it is important to note that by the time a particular matter arrives in committee, it has in many cases already become political. Members of Parliament are thus mainly expecting experts and scientists to confirm their political viewpoints, which they have already decided. It is extremely rare for Members of Parliament to change their mind after receiving new information during the processing of a bill in committee.

I myself know of only one case in the entire history of the Finnish Parliament where a Member of Parliament publicly stated that he changed his mind because of receiving new research information in committee. This was in 1975 and the issue was the building of nuclear power plants. One Member of Parliament was converted from an opponent to a supporter of nuclear power after reading studies that convinced him of its safety.

The fourth stage is the actual decision-making, which usually means deciding which way to vote. At this point, a remarkable change occurs in the way a Member of Parliament uses information. Interview studies have revealed that at the moment of decision-making, Members of Parliament are almost never able to quote individual studies or research data that influenced their decision. At the moment of decision, the significance of expert knowledge and scientific evidence fades, and it fades almost to nothing. The views of lobbyists, interest groups and voters have a far greater impact on how Members of Parliament vote than any other information. How they decide to vote is always based on a consideration of all elements involved, weighing the often conflicting opinions of experts against one another and against the views of their voters.

The fifth stage is about evaluating the decisions made. Members of Parliament in Government parties will use information to legitimise decisions made by the Government, while those in the opposition will use information to dispute the legitimacy of those decisions.

So as we can see, the further the decision-making progress goes, the less influence expert knowledge and scientific evidence have.

To summarise, we might say that scientific knowledge is principally of conceptual importance in the decision-making process: Members of Parliament may find new ideas and new ways of looking at the structure of society in the studies they read. It is highly unusual for scientific information to be instrumentally useable; in other words, directly applicable to the solving of a specific social problem.

We at the Library of Parliament are committed to supplying the Members of Parliament with the best possible research data and scientific knowledge. However, as I pointed out earlier, the importance of information in parliamentary decision-making is not necessarily very high, at least not when it is time to vote.

The Finnish Constitution guarantees Members of Parliament complete independence, and they tend to interpret this to include independence from being swayed by experts. They may make decisions that are completely the opposite of what experts and scientists are telling them if their conscience tells them otherwise. One Member of Parliament put it like this:

“A Member of Parliament is obliged to give his/her full attention and recognition to expert opinions, but he/she is also obliged to consider the matter according to his/her own understanding, even if this may seem arrogant when the Member him/herself is not an expert in the matter. If the Member is convinced that the solution proposed by an expert will not achieve the best possible end result, it is the Member’s responsibility to seek a solution different from what the experts have said or written.”

As we well know, experts and scientists can also get it wrong – and this can be used as political ammunition. I am reminded of a particular incident that deeply damaged the credibility of scientific knowledge among Finnish parliamentarians. This incident was the Chernobyl nuclear power plant accident in 1986. When nuclear power had been discussed in Parliament earlier, the majority of experts in their statements had said that nuclear power is

completely safe. Chernobyl provided a spectacular counter-example, and as a result Finnish Members of Parliament lost confidence in experts and in scientific knowledge for a long time.

The political profile and training of Members of Parliament naturally affect how they view and use expert testimony. To simplify somewhat, there are two kinds of Members of Parliament: the practically oriented and the theoretically oriented. As far back as 1921, one Member wrote that there are constant disputes “between men and women of theory on the one hand, and practice on the other”.

The theoretically oriented Members of Parliament swear by scientific expertise and are interested in research findings, books, reading and writing. They see society as a grand abstraction and are interested in developing its structures for the future.

The practically oriented Members of Parliament, on the other hand, focus on the experience of the individual and are interested in fixing social problems here and now. They appeal not to experts or science but to the common sense of ordinary people. In their speeches, they are more likely to quote folk wisdom than scientific research.

This is a gross simplification, of course. Most Members of Parliament display both qualities, in various proportions.

But we should ask ourselves: How well do we, as professionals working in parliamentary libraries, cater to these different types of politicians?

I would like to think that we provide a good service for those Members of Parliament who are interested in research data. But I must admit that we could do much better in reaching out and catering to the more practically oriented ones.

We should remember that politics is not just about information. Members of Parliament can do their jobs perfectly well even if they are not acquainted with the cutting edge of research or the latest literature. One of our best Members of Parliament of all time said in the 1970s that he never had time to read books. Instead, he read “the book of living life”. Politics is not only a question about knowledge, it is also a question about understanding and skill. Members of Parliament can broaden their understanding and political skill through new experiences, observations about society, mingling with citizens and drawing on their social networks.

We should ask ourselves this: Can parliamentary libraries provide services aimed at improving the skill and understanding of Members of Parliament and not just their knowledge? Actually, the Finnish Library of Parliament provides just such a service. Since 1989, the Library of Parliament has been conducting in-depth interviews with former Members of Parliament. To date, this Oral History Archive contains more than 340 interviews, lasting more than six hours each on average. In these interviews, former Members of Parliament describe their backgrounds, experiences and their work in Parliament in considerable detail.

We have not yet found the best possible ways of leveraging this material, for instance in the training of new Members of Parliament. But I am confident that this material could help new Members gain a broader understanding of the special features and practices of parliamentary politics. There is a huge wealth of tacit information and experiential knowledge in this archive. We need to refine this raw material into a form that current Members can use to their benefit.

In conclusion, I would like to raise a question that I have rarely heard anyone address.

Why do parliamentary libraries exist?

The standard answers to this question go something like this: We exist to serve Members of Parliament. To improve the knowledge base of parliamentary decisions. To support democracy. To raise active citizens.

These are all good answers, but there is one important thing that is almost always neglected.

We also exist for the purpose of improving parliamentary rhetoric. As we well know, parliaments are above all for speaking. Even the term 'parliament' is derived from a word meaning 'speaking'. Parliaments still honour the classical rhetorical principle of *in utramque partem*, viewing matters from opposite sides. Parliaments are for speaking in favour of things and against them.

Looking at matters from opposite sides means that every argument presented in a parliament may be examined from the perspective of both theoretical scientific knowledge and practical everyday experiences. Although the information we produce and convey may have little impact on how Members of Parliament vote from day to day, this is not to say that our work is meaningless. The information we convey improves the quality of parliamentary discourse. Political arguments become richer and better because Members of Parliament receive up-to-date information through us.

In parliamentary decision-making, information and knowledge is translated into rhetoric. We should therefore seek to understand the rhetorical meaning of parliamentary libraries and actively seek to improve parliamentary rhetoric.

Although I seem to have come to the conclusion that the information we convey may have very little bearing on actual decision-making, there is no reason to feel discouraged. After all, the very concept of parliamentary democracy is based on the notion that all information is incomplete.

The greatest political mistakes of all time have been made when people were too confident that the information available was completely objective, correct and error-free. A good politician is one who understands that there is no such thing as certain and complete information.

Thank you for your attention!