

Openness of the Library of the Finnish Parliament and its services to support democracy

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Abstract:

As an open library since 1913 the Library of the Finnish Parliament supports the democracy in several ways. In this presentation we will address the measures the library has taken to engage the citizens in the democratic process.

Transparency is the core value of the Finnish Parliament. The basis of the Library of Parliament is the provision of information on Parliament, legislation and society. The overriding principle of operation is openness and transparency. The objective is to ensure and promote free access to information.

The vision of the Library is to support democracy, fulfil the right to public information ensured in the Constitution, promote the access to legal, parliamentary and political information and advance the possibilities for its customers to function as active citizens in the society.

Keywords: parliamentary libraries, openness, democracy

Introduction

The Library of Parliament is one of the few parliamentary libraries that are open to the general public. For more than a hundred years, anyone has been able to visit the library and use its services. The open access to information is a core value cherished by the Library of Parliament. This paper will introduce the measures that the library undertakes to offer all citizens the opportunity to be involved in the democratic process.

The beginning of the open Library of Parliament

Democracy in Finland was the result of a long process. It is an outcome of the evolution of democratic decision making and the development of the freedom of speech and equality. Beginning from the 17th century, Finns sent their representatives to a Diet. When still an autonomous grand-duchy of the Russian Empire, Finland had its own Diet from 1809 until 1906. Since 1907, Finland has had a unicameral parliament. As provided in the Parliament Act of 1906, universal suffrage and eligibility were implemented - the right to vote no longer depended on social status or gender. The reform increased the number of the enfranchised tenfold compared to the assembly of the Estates. In the 1907 general election, Finnish women were the first in the world to exercise their statutory right to vote and stand as candidates in an election. As a result, 19 female MPs were elected to the parliament in the first-ever general election held in Finland.

Since all Finnish citizens now had full political rights, the need to acquire information about politics and society grew. As early as 1908, an initiative was presented among the MPs that the Library of Parliament, which had been first opened as the Library of the Estates in 1872, should serve as a special library in the field of society and politics, and that the public would have open access to it. In 1913, the decision to open the library to the public was eventually passed.

The history of the Library of Parliament is one of gradually increasing transparency. For a hundred years, the Library of the Finnish Parliament has provided the general public with the opportunity to familiarise themselves with parliamentary documentation and work in their own library. From early on, the library collections also included material on the Parliaments of other countries. Opening the library to the public was a way of strengthening citizens' democratic rights.

Providing information on Parliament, law and society as mission

The vision of the Library of Parliament is to support democracy; fulfil the right to public information ensured in the Constitution; promote the access to legal, parliamentary and political information; and advance the possibilities for its customers to function as active citizens in the society.

In short, the Library of Parliament's operations are based on a mission to provide information on Parliament, law and society, while at the same time following its primary principle of openness and transparency. The purpose of the library is to safeguard and promote free access to information.

Public service has long been one of the key roles of the library in addition to providing services to the Parliament itself. As Section 1 of the Act on the Library of Parliament provides: "The Library of Parliament ... serves the Parliament as appropriate for its field, operates as the central archive for the Parliament as well as a public central library disseminating information on law, society and the Parliament."

Services are available to all

MPs together with their assistants and Parliamentary officials are its main customers. Supporting the work of the MPs is at the centre of library services and when selecting

materials. The library acquires literature and other materials in its designated fields to support the work of the Parliament. Fulfilling the information needs of MPs is a significant part of the democratic process.

In addition to MPs, the library's customers include students, researchers, other libraries, public sector agencies, the Council of State, businesses and the general public. Everyone is welcome to the library and anyone can use it. It is directly accessible from the street and materials can be borrowed with a library card - just like any other public library.

Items can be borrowed either directly from the library or through an interlibrary loan. The loan period is four weeks. All the basic services are provided free of charge - one of the fundamental tenets of all Finnish public libraries.

The opening hours are customer-friendly: the library is open every weekday and on Saturdays, a total of 57 hours a week 280 days a year. The number of visitors in 2013 was approximately 70,000 and the number of loans reached 80,000.

Our Information Service assists in the search for legal, social, political and parliamentary information and is happy to conduct more detailed information searches on these subjects when called for. You can submit your queries by visiting the Information Service in person, by phone or e-mail, or by completing a form on the library website. Since 2012, it has also been possible to make an appointment with the information specialists for personal guidance on the use of different information sources.

The library has several customer computers with Internet connections for independent information searches. Several Finnish and international databases as well as electronic publications have been made available.

The library has been recently fully refurbished with the addition of a room where smaller groups can convene; a magnificent new meeting and training room with state-of-the-art equipment; a beautifully restored reading room; more open-plan customer service areas with access to a wider collection than previously; and a quiet researchers' room. We also organise exhibitions related to our fields of operation.

The collection policy of the library is to provide open access to all citizens. The collections cover parliamentary, legal and social and political information. We acquire publications, and purchase user rights to and collate information on online materials with free access to our specialist fields. The library collections include some 525,000 titles. The most important tools for locating materials are the collection database 'Selma', the link database 'Elki' and the library website. Our aim is for our collections to reflect the diversity – and the incongruity – of Finnish society as well as the world at large.

Parliamentary information supports democracy

Customers have access to printed and original documents related to the work of the Parliament. We also offer consultation, training and comprehensive search services in relation to the above. The Library of Parliament also includes all the printed Parliamentary documents as both reference library copies and as loan copies. The more recent documents are available online on the Parliament's website. We have a guide available to help with the use of parliamentary documents.

The library collections also include parliamentary documents from other countries as well as literature and other materials on the Finnish Parliament and its operations, the parliaments of other countries, the history of the parliamentary institution, parliamentarism and representational democracy.

The political and legislative work of the Parliament is primarily discussed in the departments of political studies and constitutional law at different universities. In addition, the Parliament is also the subject of study for many individual academic researchers. There is also international comparative research being carried out regarding the Finnish parliament.

Furthermore, MPs are prolific published writers themselves. These works are included in a separate collection in the library beginning from 1907, when the unicameral parliamentary system was adopted in Finland. The aim of this collection is to serve research and increase the historical understanding of what MPs are like as writers or as readers.

The open Archive of Parliament

The Archive of Parliament is part of the Library of Parliament and its services are similarly at everyone's disposal. The archive preserves all documentation produced in parliamentary work in the original, dating as far back as the Diet of 1863. It also contains the administrative documentation for the Parliament as well as some special collections. A large part of the materials is available on microfilm. The majority of the documents in the Archive of Parliament are public with access to restricted material subject to a special permit.

The Archive of Parliament also includes more than 160,000 photographs associated with the Finnish Parliament and parliamentary work. Photographs are available for loan free of charge from the archive for information purposes only – they may not be used for marketing or advertising – and can be viewed and downloaded via an online service. The photographs provide an additional perspective on the work of the Parliament and MPs.

The archive also includes a unique collection of interviews of former MPs, which have been recorded in the oral history archive. The goal is to document and preserve the memories, insights and views of former MPs, which would be difficult to record and document by any other method. The methodology used in oral history interviews is very different from the routine publicity in politics, to which politicians have become accustomed during their active years.

The collection of oral history from former MPs was launched by the Library of Parliament in 1988. The oral history archive currently consists of more than 360 interviews. Nearly six hours long on average, the interviews cover the political careers of the MPs, with the main focus on their Parliamentary activities. The collection is extensive, systematic and carefully maintained by international standards.

The interviews are only available for research. They have been used mostly in researching individual politicians, the history of political parties and that of the Parliament. By providing an oral history archive of former MPs for the use of researchers, the Library of Parliament supports the study of political history in Finland.

Tools for managing legal information

One of the roles of the Library of Parliament is to serve as the central public library on law. The library stocks extensive collections of official material and jurisprudential literature both in print and in electronic format. The collections include material on Finnish, foreign, EU and international law. Featured are statute drafting materials, statutes, conventions, case law collections and jurisprudential literature. The several databases of the library make it easy to find the right information.

The collections contain an exhaustive selection of Finnish legal literature. EU and international law as well as constitutional and comparative law, philosophy of law and legal policy are also well represented in foreign legal collections. A major part of the materials is formed by the statute drafting materials such as committee reports and working group memorandums, Finnish and foreign statutes and court decisions.

The emphasis on international jurisprudential literature is on constitutional law, EU law, international law, legal policy and comparative law. The collection also includes a topical selection of civil, criminal and procedural law literature. Our specialists have created information packages on our website on electronic legal sources in other countries, which include the constitutions, statutes, law books and statute drafting together with case law literature. Also included are databases, databanks and updated information source guides as well as legal literature housed at the library on a given country. The packages provide a good starting point for anyone looking for legal information on a specific country.

Besides the international information packages, our specialists also provide packages on key legislative initiatives taking place in Finland, known as the 'LATI' packages. The packages have been allocated significant resources since 2011, each covering the period both before and during the parliamentary process, and include news, comparative legal material, literature and research concerning the initiative in question. They also provide information on how individual citizens can contribute to a given initiative. The packages are updated as long as the legislative initiative is in progress. Their purpose is to offer concise information to users on legislative initiatives that we have selected to be followed up.

The initiatives are typically of special interest to the Library of Parliament's users. Examples of completed LATI packages include those on the adoption act, the biobanking act, pre-trial investigation reform and the citizens' initiative act.

The legislative initiative packages offer members of the public the opportunity to follow up on the progress of the initiative, related research and other material as well as public debate. Our hope is that the information packages increase citizens' understanding of the legal system. The packages also support the statute drafting work and serve as channels for citizens' participation.

Social sciences supporting democracy

The Library of Parliament's social sciences collection includes topical and historical information on society and politics. The collection consists of titles on political activity, the historical evolution of states, international relations and various social problems. The collection has a wide selection on information on many different countries in addition to

Finland. It also includes Finland's largest collection of documents published by government officials.

As a public library, it is our task to support members of the public in their search for information on society. The library has a wide selection of books, periodicals and online publications on different aspects of society, including history, education, training, culture, social policy, sociology and economics.

We have also produced an information package on Finland as a state for our new website. The package discusses the state as a concept, its activities and future as well as the development of the Finnish state. In addition, on our new website we will have a package supporting citizens' participation, including information on legislation and participation channels.

The library also includes documents and publications issued by international organisations such as the European Union, OECD, the Council of Europe, and the UN and its specialist organisations. The library receives or acquires these documents either selectively or in their entirety. The library houses, for example, the largest selection of materials produced by or on the UN.

The Library of Parliament has operated since 1974 as a depository library for the EU. This means that the library regularly receives the key documents and publications issued by the EU. The collection includes even older material such as the Official Journal of the European Communities dating back to 1958. In addition to material produced by the EU itself, the EU collection also includes a large amount of other EU-related literature.

Our specialists have collated comprehensive information packages on the European Union and the European economic crisis. The EU package includes the key information sources on the EU. It has both Internet and printed sources, with the emphasis on online materials. The information package helps find information on the European Union in general and in special fields; it also describes the documents produced by different agencies, their content as well as their publication and numbering system. In addition, the package includes a list of the main EU agencies, organisations and databases. The links mostly lead to the EU's own materials and websites and to those of other organisations. All links lead to websites that are public and can be accessed free of charge.

In 2012, the Library of Parliament compiled an information package on the European economic crisis, gathering the key decisions and documents related to the issue. The purpose of this package was to enable the analysis of the processing of EU decisions at the Finnish Parliament. Our website is updated with further information on the topic. Country-specific information packages have been compiled on countries in the bailout programme: Spain, Ireland, Greece, Cyprus and Portugal.

The various information packages available on our website give the general public access to a selection of high-quality information sources selected by our specialists.

Information management training helps find the right information

As the Library of Parliament is at the service of anyone seeking information on the Parliament, the law or society, we are happy to share our expertise not only through customer services, information services or our website but also through training. Each term, we organise information management training, which is open to all, on the use of information sources and databases on the Parliament and law, and those provided by the EU and international organisations. The objective is to give members of the public skills in managing legal, social and political, and parliamentary information.

The open customer training is aimed at all library users and it is given by our own specialists. We also offer tailored training events for specific key user groups. If called for, our specialists are also happy to provide training on site at the customer's premises. Last year alone, our library held 95 different training events. We also organise guided tours for groups.

Public profiles in the social media

As a public service library, the Library of Parliament has social media presence. The Library of Parliament blog was introduced in 2007 - we also joined Facebook in 2009 and Twitter in 2013. Library videos can be viewed on YouTube. We use social media mainly for customer service communications, their advantage being in their interactiveness.

Conclusion

We have introduced the above services which all emphasise the openness of the Library of Parliament. Our library does its very best to improve citizens' knowledge about the Parliament, the law and society. We believe that the awareness of how the Parliament and society functions is a key requisite for citizen participation and active citizenship. By remaining open to all, the library offers an excellent platform for attaining this goal. At the same time, we serve as a link between the public and the Parliament. Through its open activities, the Library of Parliament ultimately supports democracy.

Links

Website: www.parliament.fi/library

OPAC: <https://selma.linneanet.fi>

ELKI Link Database: <http://www.eduskunta.fi/kirjasto/Elki/index.html?kieli=en>

Parliament's Photo Archive:

<http://lib.eduskunta.fi/Resource.phx/library/archive/photoarchive/index.htm>

Facebook: www.facebook.com/Eduskunnankirjasto

Blog: <http://parlamenttikirjasto.blogspot.com>

YouTube: www.youtube.com/user/Eduskunnankirjasto

Twitter: <https://twitter.com/EdariFi>