

Finland's far right: between scandal and mainstream

Mar 27th, 2024 / Tatu Ahponen



The Finns Party presidential candidate Jussi Halla-aho at his election reception in Helsinki on January 28, 2024.

FOTO: IMAGO / LEHTIKUVA

The Finnish government was sent into upheaval almost as soon as it was formed in June last year, as multiple revelations of [racist statements and memes](#) emerged concerning one of the new coalition's two main parties – The Finns, a far-right nationalist anti-immigration party. The crisis almost brought the government down before it had begun, but while the political stain is permanent, it may not be enough to prevent a fusion of the Finns party's ultra-nationalism and the neoliberal agenda being pushed by their centre-right government partners.

[Finland's new government had barely been in power two weeks](#) when the far-right scandals hit. Vilhelm Junnila, the new minister of economic affairs and MP for the radical right-wing Finns Party, was exposed as having a history of sending not-so-subtle signals to the neo-Nazi far-right, including posting swastikas on his social media and making jokes implying support for [Adolf Hitler](#). Despite an initial attempt to ride out the storm of outrage, he was forced to resign in disgrace just days later.

The new Speaker of the Parliament is the Finns Party's former leader and chief ideologue (as well as recent presidential candidate) Jussi Halla-aho, who has previously expressed his hope that [several left-wing and liberal female politicians](#) be raped by foreigners. The party's current leader – and now Finland's Finance Minister – Riikka Purra herself started out in politics in 2008 as a participant [on online discussion boards](#) run by Halla-aho, where she has now been linked to a slew of racist, violent statements about immigrants.

Distraction from government austerity

Not a great start for the new government, which duly issued a perfunctory anti-racist statement, something the Finns Party predictably chose to ignore, but which also let the government get on with [enacting its program](#) – a combination of harsh [austerity](#) policies, [anti-unionism](#), and [a tightening of citizenship rules and immigration legislation](#). Indeed, the media furore over the government's more concrete measures has turned out to be considerably less than that caused by some words written online decades ago. As left-wing politician Anna Kontula [put it](#), the conversation on the Finns Party has focused “too much on the table manners, not enough on the menu”.

Among the initiatives planned or already enacted by the new government are widespread cuts to [health services](#) and a considerable [reduction in unemployment subsidies](#). These anti-social policies immediately aroused widespread public opposition, much of it aimed at the purported role of the Finns Party in pushing such reactionary policy onto the government agenda. But is such criticism based on a full understanding of the party's agenda? A quick look at the party's history gives us a useful insight.

A history of protest

The Finns Party's current participation in government is an important step in its decades-long transition from populist protest vehicle into a smooth tool of right-wing nationalism. Its growth also reflects a rightwards turn in Finnish society, driven by economic factors brought on by the ascendancy of [neoliberalism in Finland](#) and by the constraints imposed by an aging population and economic doldrums. Within this atmosphere, it has been easy for the Finns Party – and the rest of the Finnish right – to accept such a marriage of virulent nationalism and austerity.

The Finns Party's predecessor, the Finnish Rural Party (*Suomen maaseudun puolue*, SMP), was born in the 1960s as a reaction against modernisation among [struggling small farmers](#), in particular those evacuated from areas of Finland conquered by the Soviet Union during World War 2. The party's appeal rested in a critique of Finland's rapid urbanisation policy, whose costs fell hard on the poorer countryside, as well as the country's often pro-Soviet policy of neutrality.

Following a successful policy of [co-opting the Communists](#) into the system in the late 1960s, the same idea of overcoming non-preferred political movements through inclusion – “hugging them to death” – was then applied to the Rural Party in the 1980s. After a spell in government proved the party's populist promises to be little more than mirages, the party's last secretary Timo Soini picked up the remaining pieces of a broken party to form the Finns Party (originally under the name True Finns, *Perussuomalaiset*, PS) in 1995.

In search for a crisis

However, with the fall of the Soviet Union, and urbanisation already completed, it took some time for Soini and his party to hit upon a successful theme. As Soviet trade collapsed, it was replaced by Western trade, but the **depression of the early 1990s** mauled a huge swath of Finnish industries, and the new high-tech fields like Nokia's mobile telephones and various later software enterprises did not employ the same segment of population, leaving Finland with a comparatively high history of structural unemployment.

This economic change was reflected in broader social change, as a nation of largely white, habitually Lutheran, and culturally homogenous Finnish-speakers became increasingly cosmopolitan. The EU was associated – by both supporters and detractors – with this change, and it is unsurprising that the opening Soini eventually seized upon **was the post-2008 Euro crisis**. As the idea of the EU as a fount of wealth turned into complaints about Southern European profligacy, the Finns Party began to soar in polls. The anti-immigration movement – which had consciously associated itself with the party – also experienced a boost.

A rising right

Until this point, Finland's far right had been largely irrelevant since World War 2, their fiercely anti-Russian attitudes incompatible with the desire of Finnish business to benefit from good relations and trade with Soviet Union. In the years after the Soviet collapse, however, a new ultra-nationalist, anti-immigrant organisation called Suomen Sisu sprang up. Jussi Halla-aho was an early member of this group, although he was soon to outgrow it. Formed in 1998, it soon turned its attention to electoral politics, the group deciding it would be most effective to work through an existing party, and the Finns Party seemed the best fit.

While Soini viewed the anti-immigration zealots with some distaste, their cause suited his chosen political style of a populist willing to hear the views of the “forgotten people”, including those views that he thought were just being expressed in “unrefined language”. It was, therefore, relatively easy for a well-organised group of anti-immigration activists to gain influence in the party, particularly as their views were already shared widely, even by those who considered other questions to be more important and immediate.

A radical shift to the right

Even so, when Soini got his party into government in 2015, the anti-immigration faction was mostly sidelined, but as the government struggled to respond to the immigration inflows of 2015-2016, blowback was inevitable. In 2017, Soini stepped down as leader – his reputation darkened by the **compromises made by the Finns Party under his ministry** – and the more radical Halla-aho was able to easily defeat Soini's handpicked candidate for successor and take over the party. The extremists were ascendant.

Indeed, Halla-aho was, at this point, already considered so controversial that the other governmental parties kicked the Finns out of the ruling coalition, and Soini and his faction split off from the party to maintain their ministerial posts. In doing so, they simultaneously destroyed their remaining political influence and confirmed the Halla-aho faction's full dominance of the Finns party.

Spawned in internet forums

A key source of Halla-aho's political success was the internet, where his online guestbook and online forum Homma had quickly eclipsed Suomen Sisu as the basis, and ideological testing-ground, of his movement. Indeed, Halla-aho's method of argumentation remains essentially that of a forums-poster – combative, peppered with dark and sardonic humour, utilising simplistic comparisons and black-and-white statements about his opponents, and presenting himself as a lone rational voice in a sea of irrational leftists and media figures with contradictory liberal views on issues such as Islam and immigration.

While strongly anti-immigration, Halla-aho's views go beyond being simply anti-Islamic. Rather, he has indicated a belief in fundamentally immutable IQ differences between Africans and Europeans and in a hierarchical view of society, where some people are inherently worthier than others. In his own words, **“(t)he only measurable and therefore undebatably existing human value is the instrumental value of an individual. There can be a justified hierarchy of individuals based on how much the removal of their talents or skills would weaken the community”**.

Growing support among the well-off

While the Rural Party arose first among disenfranchised small farmers, Soini had extended its appeal, not only to their descendants in working-class suburbs, but to a newer constituency of wealthier-than-average voters. It was their support that now underpinned Halla-aho's turn even further to the right on economic matters (matching his belief in “natural” hierarchies), while holding on to the party's existing supporters.

This did not turn out to be particularly difficult – topics like immigration, opposition to environmental regulations, and Euroscepticism (nowadays heavily downplayed due to the necessities of centre-right cooperation) appealed to the party's richer and poorer supporters alike. Likewise there exists a psychological appeal to “making the left cry”, shared by both the disaffected working-class right and the combative bourgeoisie. Perhaps for this reason, it seems at times that the Finns Party advocates for austerity and anti-union policies harder than the centre-right, even if this would seemingly hurt their own supporters.

Furthermore, none of the parties on the right-wing side of Finnish politics would portray themselves as opposing the lodestone of Finnish politics: the concept of the **welfare state**, which the neoliberals claim to be saving, rather than dismantling, and which

nationalists wanted to limit to ethnic Finns, to the exclusion of all others.

Liberalism gone sour

Beyond this, however, the party built its appeal on liberalism gone sour: from opposition to the EU as a bureaucratic superstate, and to a view of Islam as being inherently fundamentalist; from an appeal to bodily sovereignty over Covid, and opposition to environmental regulations restricting individual property rights. Countering liberal arguments for immigration to bolster the workforce, the nationalists argued that the costs of immigration – including crime – outweigh the tax benefits.

In the most racially charged narratives, behind the onslaught of arguments about IQ and crime statistics, there lies a deep feeling that liberal values are basically something that only Europeans are truly able to appreciate, and that immigration from outside of Europe must eventually undermine and destroy these values. The conclusion of this tortuous logic: that liberalism must be set aside in order to save it from itself.

Challenges from further right?

While the Finns Party continues to operate within the system, its participation in the government has been of little benefit to other, more radical, far-right parties. A slew of these emerged during the Covid pandemic led by conspiracy theorists who thought the Finns Party **too uncritical** on the topic. Others have gathered around the Finns Party's **former youth organisation**, now separated from the parent party due to its open fascism. As a rule, however, such parties spend most of their energy fighting internally and squabbling with each other, and have little national impact.

More dangerous currents do exist: recently there have been **terror trials** of multiple “accelerationist” Satan-worshipping neo-Nazi cliques around Finland, who have planned attacks against asylum centres and politicians. These radicalised young men often are former Finns Party members, with at least one of them having a long history of blogging on the party's website.

Far-right crossovers

The Finns Party has been at pains to point out that such terrorists no longer belong to the party, but these cases highlight the disconnect between the party's often apocalyptic rhetoric and the reality of its more mundane parliamentary work. The mismatch between the party's extreme nationalism – largely fostered online – and the limitations of working within democratic institutions has served to radicalise some supporters to seek new outlets and pursue forms of direct action, up to and including acts of terror.

This is not a new phenomenon, either: the Finns Party has previously been associated with a number of so-called “Nazi accidents” – such as the time when an **MP posed along with a now-banned neo-Nazi movement** at the grave of historical nationalist activist Eugen Schauman – which the party has tried to present as purely coincidental. Even if we suspend disbelief and take the party at its word – that such incidents are purely “accidental” – they nonetheless illustrate that the crossover between the radical and more “moderate” parts of Finland's nationalist movement remains considerable.

New generation

Following the leaderships of Soini, Halla-aho and now Purra, the Finns party's leadership will likely fall next to the younger generations. Unlike Soini, creating a new party out of the ashes of an existing one, and Halla-aho and Purra, who essentially arrived in Soini's party as interlopers, this younger layer has spent their entire adult lives in a situation where the Finns Party is a known, increasingly accepted, entity on the political stage, and where Halla-aho's dark writings represent a bygone era.

Yet while their chosen media is **Youtube and TikTok**, addressing vast new audiences in the so-called “Zoomer generation”, their tone is much the same – combative, hectoring, sarcastic. The message is the same, too, with opposition to immigration and support for right-wing economics at its heart. Anti-immigrant views that were once radical heresies of liberalism are now something that a generation has been exposed to – online and off – their entire lives. It is no longer the politics of a radical fringe, to be advanced through populist political crusades, but rather the subject of “normal” politics, a march through the institutions, and the strengthening of an ongoing paradigm shift.

A resilient democracy?

Despite the normalisation of such radical politics, the basics of the Finnish democratic system continue to stand. In the recent presidential elections, Halla-aho failed to reach the second-round run-off, despite the media hype which helped him win 19 percent of the vote. Any attempts at permanent, lasting change in Finland will, in the end, face the challenge of Finland's constitution, written in the late 90s as the culmination of the post-war liberal and social democratic order. Unsurprisingly, then, it is here that some of the more pressing attacks are being directed.

Already, the new government's agenda is aimed not only at steadily breaking the power of the unions, but at using Finland's Constitutional Committee to interpret the constitution in a way that permits the advancement of its right-wing agenda. In a full-scale political **struggle between the unions and the government**, or the constitution and the government, there is no guarantee who will come out on the top. On the streets, several large protests have already been held against austerity and the far right in government, and such protests are likely to gain in strength as the government's policies start being implemented.

Building the alternative

On the wider scale, progressive answers to the questions the Finns Party poses must be found. How is it possible to offer basic security to Finnish citizens without junking human rights? How can the welfare state be maintained and developed without economic slumps and ongoing crises seeing it sacrificed on the altar of national competitiveness? And what about the environmental crisis?

No rapid victories are in sight. Hopes – still held by some – that government might fall to its internal tensions become more remote by the day. Concerted campaigns are needed to maintain the fundamental backstops of Finnish democracy, like the unions, the welfare state, and basic rights legislation. These must be connected to a back-to-basics oriented revival for the Finnish left – going to the unions and the wider nation, listening to their problems, offering realistic solutions.

Without such a revival the advance and acclimatisation of the Finns Party can only be predicted to continue – as will radicalisation when their proposed solutions cannot pass muster. At this point, there's no telling where such a scenario might end. Finland is traditionally seen as a prime example of a functioning welfare state with a global footprint far above its size in debates related to rights and equality. A failure to provide a concrete answer posed by the growing nationalist right might have ramifications on a European, or even global, scale.

Tatu Ahponen is a translator and writer who lives in Tampere, Finland.

Quelle: <https://www.rosalux-europa.info/en/article/2361.finland-s-far-right-between-scandal-and-mainstream.html>