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The making of an ‘unhappy marriage’? The 2023 Finnish general election

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ABSTRACT

Rarely, if ever, has a Finnish general election attracted such foreign media interest. Reporters came from across the globe, not to witness Finland become NATO’s thirty-first member-state on 4 April, two days after the general election, but to see if the party-loving Social Democrat prime minister Sanna Marin could secure a second term at the helm.¹ In the event, Marin became only the third prime minister in recent times to increase the party vote, albeit by not quite enough, and she promptly indicated she would stand down as party leader. The election was won by the two main opposition parties, the National Coalition and Finns Party. The National Coalition became the largest parliamentary party for only the second time in its history, whilst the Finns Party gained over one-fifth of the national poll for the first time and became the largest party on the basis of the popular vote in no less than half the 12 mainland constituencies. Despite their deep differences on major policy issues – including immigration, taxation, development aid and climate policy – the National Coalition and Finns Party ultimately formed the core of a centre-right government, although it took almost to midsummer to do so, and it was then characterised by a minor coalition party leader as an ‘unhappy marriage’ made out of necessity.

KEYWORDS Finland; election; centre-right coalition; National Coalition; Finns Party

Background to the election

Prime minister ‘by accident’

Sanna Marin, then the Social Democrat minister of transport and communications, became Finnish prime minister in unforeseen circumstances in December 2019 when the Centre, a member of the five-party, left-centre coalition formed after the April 2019 general election, expressed its lack of confidence in the prime minister Antti Rinne (Social Democrat). Ironically, Rinne had preferred to include the Centre rather than the

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Finns Party in the new coalition, despite the former's disastrous performance (13.8 per cent in 2019) at the polls (Arter 2020). Rinne, who lasted barely six months at the helm, lost the Centre's trust over the handling of a labour-market dispute involving the postal workers and the state-owned mail company, which had spread to the national airline Finnair. Whilst Rinne resigned, the coalition of Social Democrats, Centre, (post-communist) Left Alliance, Greens and the ethno-regionalist Swedish People's Party carried on under Marin, who at 34 became Finland's youngest-ever prime minister. The sequence of events mirrored those before midsummer 2003 when a coalition partner, this time the Social Democrats, forced out the Centre prime minister over what became known as Iraqgate and the Centre defence secretary became prime minister without changes in the partisan composition of the ruling coalition (Arter 2003).

Marin, who was in her second term as an MP, became a controversial figure since her public and private personae became intertwined and her conduct viewed in socially conservative circles as unbecoming that of a prime minister. In December 2021 she was widely criticised for clubbing into the wee small hours without her official phone and, as a consequence, missed a text informing her that she had been in close contact with the foreign minister who had tested positive for the Covid-19 virus. Then, in August 2022, leaked cell phone videos captured Marin dancing and partying wildly with her celebrity friends. For many this was simply not what prime ministers did. Indeed, her progressive, feminist, libertarian views – she participated in a Pride march in Helsinki in July 2022 – meant that Marin became a divisive figure. She was, however, notably outspoken in her criticism of Putin and played an important support role in Finland's application for NATO membership.

NATO – No longer a four-letter word

Until the Russian invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, a clear majority of politicians and the Finnish public were opposed to NATO membership (Arter 2023). The shift in opinion was sudden and seismic. Only four days after the start of Putin's 'special military operation' in Ukraine, a state broadcasting YLE poll showed 53 per cent of Finns in favour of NATO membership. In contrast to Sweden, moreover, where the Greens and Left Party were against (Aylott and Bolin 2023), not a single Finnish party opposed NATO membership. Indeed, the cross-party, pro-NATO consensus meant that security policy was not a campaign issue at the 2023 general election. True, a minority of Left Alliance MPs favoured at best conditional membership of the Alliance, as in Norway and Denmark.

On 1 March 2023 an Eduskunta vote on Finland's NATO accession protocol was forced when two Left Alliance stalwarts sought parliamentary backing for a resolution that under no circumstances would Finland allow nuclear weapons or NATO bases to be stationed on Finnish soil. This was rejected by 184:7 votes with one abstention.

The campaign

The campaign was largely uneventful. Perhaps there was a degree of electoral fatigue, since 2021 had seen municipal elections and in 2022 there were elections to a new tier of regional government – 20 so-called 'welfare areas' (*hyvinvointialueet*). A *cumul des mandats* is an entrenched phenomenon in Finland (Arter and Söderlund 2023) – more so than in Sweden – and of the 170 MPs seeking to renew their parliamentary seat, 48.2 per cent held a triple mandate (that is, representation at all three levels of political representation – local, regional and national). The apparent passivity of the public, however, was a concern. As one Finns Party parliamentarian commented: 'I am worried about Finnish society. We have had a pandemic, there is the war in Ukraine, expensive food, expensive electricity, expensive petrol and yet nothing seems to bite.' The Finns Party sought to turn law, order and personal security into election themes but, unlike Sweden, there were not enough [immigrant-led] street gangs to cause a public outcry. There was an outcry – at least in the media – when in a party leaders' debate, the Finns Party chair claimed that 'culture – [the arts] is a luxury item on which Finland spends too much money'. Eyebrows were also raised when Marin, meeting president Zelensky in Kiev, suggested Finland might contribute its fleet of Hornet fighter jets to the Ukrainian war effort. The outcry was not so much because the Hornets were past their sell-by date as the fact Marin had not consulted the president, Sauli Niinistö, or indeed cabinet colleagues before making the proposal.

The economy – stupid!

It was the economy, however, that dominated the campaign. Voters battled a blizzard of economic figures. Finland's GDP, they were told, grew by just over 2 per cent in 2022 but inflation was the highest in 40 years, the current account deficit was the highest since the 1990s – a by-product of a rise in energy prices and a weakened net export of services – and the national debt was running at about 140 billion euros. According to ministry of finance figures, Finland's post-election government would need to borrow a minimum of 10 billion euros per annum over its

four-year term of office to meet state expenditure, most of this simply to service the interest rate on the state debt. Although it was not stated in these terms, it was clear Finland was trying to run a Rolls Royce on a Mini engine. Put another way, unlike the other Nordic states, Finland's economy was too small relative to the size of the welfare state. According to the *Suomen suunta* ('Finland's Direction') report, commissioned by the minister of labour and hammered out by employers' and trade union leaders, along with top economists, if productivity were to grow at the same rate as in the Nokia heyday at the turn of the new millennium, Finland's economic problems would be significantly eased.

Whilst there was broad cross-party agreement on a diagnosis of the economic malaise, the prescribed medication divided the parties. It was accepted that there were not enough working-age Finns in work relative to the growth in life expectancy and the fall in the birth rate. Employment among persons over 55 years was much lower than in Sweden whilst too many young people lacked the relevant skills. The aim of raising the employment level from its present 74 to 80 per cent was accepted across the board. Labour shortages were acute in the health and social care sectors – there were not enough nurses or staff to provide 24-h care for the elderly. For all the parties except the Finns Party, the answer lay in a substantial increase in work-based immigration. An Economic Research Institute (ETLA) report estimated that if migration continued at its present [insufficient] rate, the working-age population would fall by almost one-fifth by 2070.

For the Finns Party, the present workforce should be employed more efficiently – there was largely unelaborated reference to a 'Japanese model' – and Finland should not allow work-based immigration from outside the European Union unless they were highly educated persons bringing significant value-added with them. In any event, it was held, work-based immigration would not materially boost public finances because most so-called 'new Finns' go into low-paid jobs and require social services in addition to their wages. In the health-care sector, immigrants' lack of Finnish-language skills put patients at serious risk.

The main economic battle line involved how to balance the books and kick-start the economy. For the opposition-based National Coalition, income tax cuts would increase purchasing power whilst a package of savings would steady the ship. A condition of entering government, it was stated, was a commitment to implement the finance ministry's recommendation of 9 billion euros spending cuts over the two forthcoming electoral terms, albeit with education, defence and security exempt from the hit-list. For the Social Democrats and the political left there was a belief that economic growth, investment and selective tax incentives would do the trick. Comprehensive income tax reductions were opposed because they

benefitted the better-off disproportionately. Marin claimed that every worker should be able to buy an electric car.

The liturgical recitation of the economic arguments ‘swamped’ debate about climate change. All the parties, except the Finns Party reasserted their commitment to achieving the existing government target of making Finland carbon-neutral by the year 2035. The Finns Party set the deadline at 2050. The inference was clear: every Finn could buy a diesel-powered car for that much longer.

The result

The main governing party, the Social Democrats, and the two main opposition parties the National Coalition and Finns Party all gained ground and performed better than four years earlier whereas the junior coalition parties, the Centre and Greens, fared disastrously and were the two big losers.

Also on the governing side, the election was a case of the *status quo ante* for the Swedish People’s Party, the organ of the national language minority, whereas the post-communist Left Alliance recorded its worst result since its creation in 1990 and appears in irreversible decline. On the opposition side the Christian Democrats achieved their best result since 2007, albeit well below the 5.3 per cent it gained in 2003. The splinter Movement Now, a personal party formed in 2018 by the maverick former National Coalition MP and businessman Harri Harkimo, fielded 177 candidates but remained a one-man parliamentary band, managing only Harkimo’s re-election. Electoral turnout at 72.6 per cent was very marginally down on four years earlier (Table 1).

The parties that gained ground

This was only the third time since 1966 that a sitting prime minister – Sanna Marin – had increased the party vote and all three have been Social Democrats. Kalevi Sorsa did it in 1983 and Paavo Lipponen in the Iraqgate election twenty years later. None the less, the Social Democrats’ result is perhaps best described as a ‘defensive victory’ (*torjuntavoitto*) – a term frequently used by Finnish politicians seeking to put a positive spin on an otherwise disappointing result. As the leading coalition party, the Social Democrats gained 2.2 per cent of the national vote compared with four years earlier and it was the largest party in three districts – Keski-Suomi, Kaakkois-Suomi and Marin’s native constituency of Pirkanmaa, where she more than doubled her personal vote. The party made particular progress in the capital Helsinki, reducing the Greens to

Table 1. The party vote and seat share at the 2023 and 2019 Finnish general elections.

Party	2023			2019		
	Seats	Votes	Votes %	Seats	Votes	Votes %
National Coalition	48	644,555	20.8	38	523,957	17.0
Finns Party	46	620,981	20.1	39	538,805	17.5
Social Democrats	43	617,552	19.9	40	546,471	17.7
Centre	23	349,640	11.3	31	423,920	13.8
Greens	13	217,795	7.0	20	354,194	11.5
Left Alliance	11	218,430	7.1	16	251,808	8.2
Swedish Peoples's Christian Democrats	9	133,518	4.3	9	139,640	4.5
Christian Democrats	5	130,694	4.2	5	120,144	3.9
Movement Now	1	74,995	2.4	1	69,427	2.3
Others	1*	13,383	2.9	1*	13,076	3.6
Turnout	72.1			72.0		

*MP for the single-member Åland islands constituency.

Source: Compiled by the author from *Eduskuntavaalit 2023*. <https://vaalit.yle.fi/ev2023/tulospalvelu/fi/>.

third place, although trailing the National Coalition by 6 percentage points. Whilst the Social Democrats were clearly heavily indebted to Marin's popularity, they failed to retain their position as the largest party. Indeed, the Social Democrats have failed to gain one-fifth of the national vote in any of the last four general elections and must compete with the Finns Party for the traditional working-class electorate. The last time an incumbent Social Democrat prime minister increased the party vote was in 2003 under Paavo Lipponen when it polled 24.5 per cent and the Finns Party a mere 1.6 per cent. Put another way, the Social Democrats' prospects as the traditional working-class party would appear to rest uncomfortably on the personal standing of the party leader (any leader, not simply Marin).

However, it was the two larger opposition parties that were the undisputed election winners. The National Coalition became the largest parliamentary party for only the second time in its history, marginally improving its 2011 vote of 20.4%. Its 20.8 per cent was none the less well down on the 26 per cent it registered in the opinion polls when for long it was the solitary pro-NATO party and benefitted most from Finland's decision to apply for membership in May 2022. The National Coalition gained 10 extra seats to end up with 48 MPs in the 200-seat Eduskunta.

The National Coalition emerged as the dominant party in the 'deep south' – Helsinki ($m=23$), Uusimaa ($m=37$) and Varsinais-Suomi ($m=17$) – which together account for almost 39 per cent of the Eduskunta seats – and in these three constituencies it averaged over one-quarter of the vote. The National Coalition reclaimed the top spot in Helsinki from the Greens – the latter witnessing their poll plummet by 8.2 percentage points; it displaced the Finns Party as the largest party in Varsinais-Suomi; and it consolidated its position in Uusimaa. It gained ground in all 12 mainland constituencies, albeit polling under its national average in the

more northerly districts. Whilst the National Coalition became the largest parliamentary party for only the second time in its history, its 2023 result was still 1.5 percentage points below the 22.3 per cent it polled in 2007 when, ironically, it came in second behind the Centre.

The Finns Party achieved its best-ever result of 20.1 per cent, surpassing the 2011 big-bang (*jytty*), displacing the Centre in its traditional northern heartland and its female leader, Riikka Purra, gained the largest individual vote of any candidate nationally. The Finns Party retained its position as the second largest party on the basis of both the popular vote and parliamentary seats (46) and gained an almost identical poll to the Sweden Democrats, whose leader Jimmie Åkesson visited Finland as part of the Finns Party campaign.

The Finns Party replaced the Centre as the leading party in three constituencies – Savo-Karjala, Oulu and Lapland; the Social Democrats in two – Satakunta and Häme; and the Swedish People’s Party in Vaasa. It thus emerged as the largest party on the basis of the popular vote in half of all the mainland Finnish constituencies, making its strongest gains in the two most northerly constituencies of Oulu and Lapland. It gained over one-quarter of the vote in each of these two constituencies and advanced by a remarkable 9.6 percentage points in Lapland, largely at the expense of the Centre and Left Alliance. The Finns Party’s Achilles heel is in the populous south, managing 1.9 per cent below its national average poll in the Helsinki hinterland of Uusimaa and no less than 8.8 percentage points below it in the capital city. None the less, in the four general elections since its big breakthrough in 2011, the Finns Party has averaged 18.6 per cent of the national vote, survived a split in its ranks when Jussi Halla-aho (demonized by the Centre prime minister and National Coalition minister of finance) was elected chair in spring 2017, and has become a fully institutionalised political party.

The election of the first-term, female MP, Riikka Purra, as Finns Party chair in August 2021, replacing the widely vilified Halla-aho, represented a conscious de-demonisation strategy designed to give the party a softer image, broaden its appeal to women and young people and, above all, increase its governing potential. The populist rhetoric was toned down without a significant change in policy positions. The Finns Party also demonstrated a fine blend of traditional and postmodern campaigning. In February 2023 a *Helsingin Sanomat* poll revealed that the Finns Party was the most popular party among young, first-time voters. 28 per cent of respondents favoured it compared with 13 per cent for the next-best Social Democrats. Significantly, three young Finns Party MPs elected in 2023 were indebted to their active use of Tiktok and YouTube videos. They eschewed traditional

methods of campaigning – providing pea-soup, coffee and handshakes in the market-place – in favour of building a digital personal vote.

The two big losers

The two big losers were the Centre and Greens, both members of the Marin-led coalition. The largest party in half the eight general elections between 1991 and 2019, the Centre (which changed its name from Agrarian Party in 1965) polled its lowest vote since Finnish independence in 1917. It lost its leading position in four northern constituencies and, symptomatically, the Finns Party displaced it as the leading party in the former Centre Prime Minister Juha Sipilä's (2015–2019) home town of Kempele in the Oulu constituency. The Centre leader, Annika Saarikko, insisted directly after the election that the party would go into opposition.

The future of the second historic class party, the Centre, would seem very much in the balance and its decision to enter the new government following a disastrous election result in 2019, would appear in hindsight a serious error of judgement. Sniping at its left-wing coalition partners on a range of issues as the 2023 election approached, the Centre lost ground in all the mainland constituencies. It failed for a second consecutive election to win a seat in Helsinki – polling a miserly 1.6 per cent in the capital – despite running in an electoral alliance with the Christian Democrats (KD). It managed to preserve its two seats in Uusimaa, moreover, only by dint of the substantial popular vote for Antti Kaikkonen, the minister of defence in the Marin government, who played a prominent role in Finland's NATO application process. Of the 111 MPs elected from the area embraced by the southern cities of Helsinki, Tampere and Turku in 2023, the Centre won only 5.

However, it was in its historic northern heartlands that the alarm bells really rang. For the first time since independence in 1917 the Centre was not the largest party in Oulu and Lapland – overtaken by the Finns Party in both. The latter's party secretary's summation was brutal: 'the Finns Party has given the Centre the *coup de grâce*' – a killer blow. Whilst he later apologised for the bluntness of a remark that caused widespread offence – 'in reality the Centre is an important party and Finland needs it', he soft-soaped, doubtless between gritted teeth – his assertion was, from a Centre viewpoint, uncomfortably close to the bone. By way of emphasising the point, this was the first time the Centre's national poll fell below its Norwegian sister party (13.5 per cent in 2021) when comparing proximate elections (Aardal and Bergh 2022).

The Greens registered their worst performance since 1995 and shortly after the election their leader Maria Ohisalo announced that she would be standing down. The party lost seven seats and its vote was down by

4.5 percentage points compared with 2019 and in Helsinki by no less than 8.2 per cent, where it lost its position as the leading party. There is at least anecdotal evidence that some Green supporters cast a tactical ballot for the Social Democrats to counter the prospect of a right-wing government when the opinion polls showed a tight race. According to a senior Green MEP, the Social Democrats ‘cannibalised the Greens and Left Alliance’. Equally, during the campaign, the Greens appeared marginal to the main debate and lacked a clear alternative. It may be, too, that with the news dominated by Covid and the war in Ukraine and the fall-out from the latter – inflation, the energy crisis and rising interest rates – the typical middle-class Green was more intent on making ends meet than with environmental concerns.

Red lines

Since the early 1980s, Finland has witnessed a series of stable, majority-based – at times over-sized – coalitions, that have ‘crossed the blocs’ (in Swedish parlance) and at times brought together such strange bedfellows as the Left Alliance and National Coalition in so-called ‘rainbow coalitions’. In contrast to the other Nordic countries (Kosiara-Pedersen 2023) there is a strong presumption in favour of majority government – the last minority cabinet (and then short-lived) was over four decades ago – and majority coalitions have had a Social Democrat-National Coalition, Centre-Social Democrat or Centre-National Coalition core. Since 1991, moreover, every parliamentary party has at some point been a governing party and that includes the Finns Party between 2015 and 2017. With the party system lacking a bloc structure, voters have little clue about the composition of the post-election coalition but, invariably, notwithstanding tortuous negotiations, Finland has a new government by midsummer.

This is not to suggest the electorate lacks preferences with regard to the shape of the new government. In a *Maaseudun Tulevaisuus* poll in January 2023, 27 per cent of respondents favoured a National Coalition-Social Democrat blue-red coalition, notwithstanding their diametrically different economic policies. This is not to suggest either that the composition of the new government does not play a part in the campaign. From the outset the Finns Party was treated as a pariah party by the left-green coalition parties. On January 10, in an *Ilta-Sanomat* interview, Marin announced that the Social Democrats would not govern with the Finns Party; the Left Alliance and Greens followed suit in short order; whilst the Swedish People’s Party stated that any such co-operation was highly unlikely. The Finns Party made a condition of government participation a substantial reduction in immigrant numbers. Meanwhile the Centre chair made clear that the party could not participate in a cabinet

comprising the present configuration of parties. Only the National Coalition leader avoided the banana skin of laying down ‘red lines’, albeit insisting that his party could only co-operate with parties ready to work to implement the ministry of finance target of 9 billion euros’ savings over the next two electoral terms, 2023–2031.

Government formation

The convention in Finland (there is no formal rule) is that the chair of the largest post-election parliamentary party group – in this case the National Coalition – is authorised to take soundings on the composition of a new ruling coalition. Consequently, the process began with the National Coalition chair, Petteri Orpo, circulating a 24-item questionnaire to all the parliamentary parties with a deadline of April 18 for completion. In a one-page response the Centre simply stated it was going into opposition. On 27 April, having sifted through the returned questionnaires, Orpo announced he would try and form a 4-party centre-right government comprising the National Coalition, Finns Party, Swedish Peoples Party and Christian Democrats. This would have a narrow but working majority of 107 of the 200 Eduskunta seats. Work then proceeded on the basis of a nexus of negotiating groups covering the entire spectrum of public policy. Orpo, it seemed, was pursuing a strategy of ‘co-operation by stealth’, focusing on areas of ready policy agreement whilst leaving the major stumbling blocks – climate policy and immigration – to the last, doubtless hoping that compromise would prevail as the finishing line came in sight.

As proceedings entered a fourth inconclusive week, however, the Finns Party chair, Riikka Purra, turned up the heat, insisting on 23 May that attention be concentrated on precisely these two contentious issues and that the other negotiating groups be temporarily stood down. Purra was driving events and on 26 May she issued a *de facto* ultimatum: ‘if sufficient progress is not made by 6pm the Finns Party will withdraw from the negotiations.’ This raised the spectre of a Swedish and Danish scenario, with the radical right, the Sweden Democrats and Danish People’s Party, exacting policy concessions from minority non-socialist governments while gaining votes in opposition.

Purra’s threat had the desired effect and ‘position papers’ on climate policy and immigration were produced in short order. Too hastily it seems for the Swedish People’s Party, which dug in on the immigration paper despite its acceptance by the other three political parties. Remember here that co-operation with the Finns Party was one of the Swedish People’s Party’s ‘red lines’ and that its liberal approach to immigration was as different as chalk and cheese from the Finns Party.

Ultimately, at 22.45 on 15 June – over two and a half months after the general election – the leaders of the National Coalition, Finns Party, Swedish People's Party and Christian Democrats appeared before the press to announce that agreement had been reached on the programme for a new centre-right coalition. In the words of the Swedish People's Party leader, the negotiations had made 'the impossible possible'. The government programme, which ran to an unprecedented 240 pages, contained a package of measures designed to halt the debt spiral and achieve savings of 6 billion euros over the lifetime of the new government, 2 million of which was to be found from increasing the proportion of those in work. An innovative investment programme would be funded by the sale of state assets.

The new cabinet comprises 19 ministers, 8 from the National Coalition, 7 from the Finns Party, 2 for the Swedish People's Party and 1 for the Christian Democrats. In addition, the Swedish People Party and Christian Democrats will share (two years each) the new ministry of movement, sport and young people charged inter alia with tackling the burgeoning levels of obesity among children. With cuts in social security, structural reforms in the workplace, the opening up of markets, restrictions on the right to strike and making the first sick-leave day unpaid, the Orpo government is well to the right of its recent predecessors.

In order to move towards balancing the books, income tax reductions of 500–600 million euros over the next four years (lower than the National Coalition wanted) are designed to maintain purchasing power and are offset by VAT increases on goods presently taxed at 10 per cent (food-stuffs exempted). There are to be graduated cuts in income-related unemployment benefit, with a particularly sharp drop after eight weeks out of work; cuts in development aid (although not affecting support to Ukraine); and cuts in housing support (with senior citizens unaffected).

Ten pages in the government programme are devoted to the controversial immigration and integration questions. The minimum income required for issuing permanent residence permits for work-based immigrants is raised (although by nowhere near as much as the Finns Party wanted) and work-based residence permits would expire if a new job was not found after three months of unemployment. The annual refugee quota is to be halved and asylum would be granted for a maximum of three years. The number of police officers is to be raised by 10 per cent and a steep increase in tuition fees imposed on students from outside the European Union and European Economic Area.

The rise in petrol and diesel at the pumps as a result of the EU requirement to increase the share of biofuels was, as the Finns Party demanded, to be offset by reductions in the fuel tax. The Christian Democrats could scarcely have been enamoured of the agreement to raise

the alcohol limits for drinks in grocers and supermarkets from 5.5 per cent to 8.0 per cent – something the National Coalition strongly favoured – although wines and spirit were to remain in the state-owned alcohol outlets.

An ‘unhappy marriage’ or formula for quickfire divorce?

‘Unhappy marriages’ do not always end in divorce although the previous National Coalition-led ‘six pack’ coalition, which included the post-communists, Social Democrats and Greens, did so on the eve of the 2015 general election. It is certainly much too early to speak of the emergence of Swedish-style ‘bloc politics’ in Finland. However, when it takes 240 pages and consultation with 850 experts to stitch together a coalition programme, the suspicion must be that the devil lies in the detail and that the new government may well struggle to hold together its rank-and-file members as the economic shoe pinches and the opposition parties pick up support through the electoral cycle.

Indeed, the government was in trouble from the outset. On the last day of the Eduskunta session before the summer recess, the Finns Party Economy minister, Wilhelm Junnila, narrowly survived a vote of no confidence, initiated by a Green MP, who questioned his fitness for office based on his presence at far-right events and his use of discreet Nazi symbols in his campaigning. The vote went 95:86 in Junnila’s favour, albeit with 21 MPs either absent or abstaining. Behind the scenes, however, the Finns Party chair Purra (now minister of finance) made it clear that a vote of no confidence in Junnila would mean the collapse of the new coalition although, in the event, none of the governing Swedish People’s Party’s parliamentary group backed Junnila. Never before in Finnish political history have ministers voted no confidence in a fellow minister. The episode represented an inauspicious start for the Orpo cabinet and the prime minister was obliged to admit that the government was ‘a marriage of convenience’ designed to get the Finnish economy back into shape.

Matters deteriorated further. Purra claimed after the Junnila no confidence vote – and the Swedish People’s Party’s refusal to back the Finns Party minister – that there was an ‘open wound’ in the coalition, whilst the president Sauli Niinistö described the episode as ‘extremely taxing for the government – to say the very least’. The Christian Democrat MP, and former party leader, Päivi Räsänen, then rubbed salt into the wound by digging out a written question Junnila had submitted in 2019, shortly after becoming an MP, in which he stated that, in view of the deleterious implications for the climate of the population growth in developing African countries, Finland should assume responsibility and encourage

‘climate abortion’. The Christian Democrat chair and new minister of agriculture, characterised Junnila’s views as ‘eco-fascist’. Ultimately, Junnila resigned in order to facilitate the continuation of the government and preserve Finland’s reputation abroad. All in all, it seems eminently possible that an ‘unhappy marriage’ could lead to a quickfire divorce.

Note

1. Other recent reports in the Elections in Context series include Kosiara-Pedersen (2023), Durovic (2023) and Garzia (2023).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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