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# Finland after Kekkonen

F. SINGLETON

THE Kekkonen era in Finland came to an end 27 October 1981, when, after more than 25 years in office, the world's longest serving democratically elected Head of State was forced to retire through ill-health. The election of his successor, President Koivisto, in January 1982 will not change the fundamental course of Finnish foreign policy, as the new President shares with most Finns the determination to follow the Paasikivi–Kekkonen line which has served the country so well since the end of the Second World War. It will probably change the style of government, however, especially as it affects the domestic economic and social scene. The Finnish Constitution grants to the President far wider powers than those given to the heads of state of most democratic countries. They include virtual control over foreign relations, the command of the armed forces, the power to dissolve Parliament, to initiate legislation and to veto Bills, and the right to appoint judges, university rectors and senior civil servants. In addition to these formal powers, a president who serves as long as Kekkonen has done acquires a vast array of informal influences which enable him to stamp his personality on the body politic.

Mauno Koivisto, the docker's son from Turku, is a man of different background to that of Urho Kekkonen, the countryman from the rural backwoods of eastern Finland. Koivisto's youthful experience as a student and social worker in post-war Finland contrasts with that of Kekkonen, who came to maturity during the 1920s, in the early years of Finnish independence.

Kekkonen's career mirrors the history of his homeland during the twentieth century. In 1900, when he was born, Finland was a Grand Duchy of the Tsarist Empire. After Lenin's seizure of power, Finland declared its independence on 7 December 1917 and, within a few weeks, was plunged into a bitter civil war. Kekkonen served in General Mannerheim's White Army, which, with German help, crushed the Reds amidst a welter of fratricidal bloodshed. In a recent memoir, Kekkonen confessed that he was still haunted by the terrible memory of an incident in the civil war, when he was responsible for the execution of four captured Reds. Before entering the *Eduskunta* (Parliament) in 1936, he made his name as a sportsman, at a time when Paavo Nurmi, the 'Flying Finn', was blazing the trail which put Finland in the forefront of international athletics. In 1931 he became President of the prestigious Sports Federation, and remained an active runner and skier into his seventies.

When he first entered politics, as a member of the Agrarian League,<sup>1</sup> Kekkonen seemed to share the anti-Communism and nationalism of the small farmers he

<sup>1</sup> In 1965 the Agrarian League (*Maalaisliitto*) changed its name to that of the Centre Party.

The author, formerly Chairman of the Postgraduate School of Yugoslav Studies at the University of Bradford, was a post-graduate student in Helsinki in the early 1950s and continues to visit the country regularly, most recently for a lecture tour.

represented. His suspicions of the Russians were confirmed by the Soviet attack on his country in 1939, and when Finland was forced to accept the Peace of Moscow in 1940, Kekkonen spoke out against ratification. For the next three years, during which Finland again became involved in war with the Soviet Union, Kekkonen worked to resettle the refugees made homeless by the frontier changes in Karelia in 1940.

In December 1943, in a speech in Stockholm, he first made public the misgivings which many Finns were beginning to feel about the wisdom of a foreign policy which had led them into co-belligerency with the Nazis in a war which they appeared to be losing. Kekkonen's speech on the theme of 'Good-neighbourliness with the hereditary enemy' was the first step in a process of re-education which completely transformed Finnish attitudes to the realities of their geopolitical situation. The romantic dreams of Greater Finland as a Christian bulwark against the godless hordes of Asia were abandoned. Mannerheim, the army commander who became President in 1944, told them that, however gallantly they fought, they could not stand against the sheer weight of the Red Army. Paasikivi, the conservative banker and the one prominent Finn with whom Stalin felt he could do business, stuck to the line which he had first advocated in pre-independence days—Finland must face facts and come to terms with its great eastern neighbour, whether Tsarist or Bolshevik, if it is to preserve its national identity. Paasikivi, who succeeded Mannerheim in 1946, began to lay the foundations for a new approach to Soviet-Finnish relations. A close supporter of Koivisto put the position to the present writer with the wry humour typical of Finns: 'The Bible tells us we must both love and respect our neighbours, but for fallible humans it is hard to do both. We respect the Russians.'

### **The Paasikivi-Kekkonen line**

The formal basis of the new relationship was the Treaty of Friendship, Co-operation and Mutual Assistance (known by its Finnish initials as the YYA Treaty), concluded in 1948 and since renewed until 1990. As it has been subjected to much misunderstanding and misinterpretation by Western commentators, it is perhaps necessary to summarize its main provisions. Article I states that, should 'Finland, or the Soviet Union *through Finnish territory*' be attacked 'by Germany or any state allied with the latter', Finland will 'fight to repel the attack . . . *within the frontiers of Finland* . . . and if necessary with the assistance of, or jointly with, the Soviet Union.' Armed assistance must be '*subject to mutual agreement*' [author's emphasis]. Article II provides for joint consultation if 'it is established that the threat of an armed attack is present'. The remaining clauses of this short treaty pledge the signatories to respect each other's integrity and to refrain from joining alliances directed against the other party. There are also clauses dealing with the development of economic and cultural relations. Only once, in 1961, has an attempt been made to invoke Article II concerning joint consultations, because of a threat which Nikita Khrushchev alleged had arisen from the proposed participation of German forces in joint Nato exercises in the Baltic.<sup>3</sup> Kekkonen flew to

<sup>3</sup> See George Maude, 'Finland's security policy', *The World Today*, October 1975, p. 407.

Novosibirsk to explain to the Soviet leader that Finland perceived no such threat. He returned to Helsinki to inform his people that the crisis was over, and not surprisingly he was able to turn the affair to good advantage in ensuring his re-election in the 1962 presidential contest. Since then, Kekkonen was assured of re-election whenever he chose to stand—and even on one occasion when he chose not to, and had his term extended by parliamentary vote.

During the 1970s, secure in his feeling of indispensability, Kekkonen began to take initiatives in foreign policy which carried the Paasikivi–Kekkonen line far beyond the cautious, ‘low profile’ concept of his predecessor. He involved Finland in UN peacekeeping operations in Cyprus and Suez, obtained Soviet acceptance of Finland’s association with Efta and the European Community, balancing the latter with a treaty with Comecon<sup>3</sup>. He also promoted closer co-operation with Finland’s Scandinavian neighbours in the Nordic Council, although he failed to win them over to his proposals for a northern nuclear-free zone. The high point of his policy of active neutrality was the 1975 Helsinki summit conference on European Security and Co-operation, in the preparation of which he played a decisive role.

Kekkonen wrote in 1980 that the objectives of his policy were ‘peace, national independence, the country’s vital interests and good international relations’.<sup>4</sup> He has always maintained that the policy of neutrality is of vital importance in the preservation of Finland’s democratic system. ‘We shall stand by our democracy and we shall defend it.’<sup>5</sup> ‘Good-neighbourliness’, however, does not mean subservience, or the ‘odd concept of “Finlandization” which has been created’<sup>6</sup> by some Western commentators to explain Finland’s relations with the Soviet Union. Few in Finland now question that the Paasikivi–Kekkonen line was in the national interest and that it has paid handsome dividends, although in the early days those who advocated it were often bitterly attacked. Kekkonen recalls the robust vilification to which he was subjected in the early post-armistice period. ‘When we began implementing the terms of the armistice . . . “brown tongued” was the epithet of abuse that we heard and saw most frequently.’<sup>7</sup>

### The presidential election

During the run-up to last January’s presidential election, there were speculative stories in the Western press that the Soviet Union would use its influence to prevent the election of Koivisto and promote that of Ahti Karjalainen, a former Prime Minister and Foreign Minister and co-chairman of the Finnish-Soviet Economic Commission. In fact, Mr Karjalainen was not chosen as the Centre Party’s candidate, despite the backing of the whole party leadership, as a grass-roots revolt resulted in the nomination of the Speaker of the *Eduskunta*, Dr Johannes Virolainen. Because of the curious mechanism of the presidential electoral college, it was still thought possible that Karjalainen could be drafted as a ‘dark horse’ outsider if a deadlock occurred. This was the hope of the hard-line,

<sup>3</sup> See F. Singleton, ‘Finland, Comecon and the EEC’, *ibid.*, February 1974.

<sup>4</sup> Urho Kekkonen, *A President’s View* (London: Heinemann, 1982), p. 179.

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*, p. 179.

<sup>6</sup> *ibid.*, p. 57.

<sup>7</sup> *ibid.*, p. 53.

pro-Moscow group of Communists, led by Mr Taisto Sinisalo, and also of elements in the business community who were doing well out of Finnish-Soviet trade. To lessen the possibility of a deadlock, the electoral college was enlarged by one seat, so that in case of a run-off between the two leading candidates on a second ballot, the 301 electors would not be evenly divided. It was perhaps remembered that, when Kekkonen was first elected in 1956, he had a majority of only two over his Social Democrat rival in a college of 300 members. In fact, the Soviet Union, whilst showing obvious interest in the outcome, behaved correctly, and when Koivisto emerged on 17/18 January as the obvious winner, with 43 per cent of the popular vote, Moscow radio welcomed the result as a clear rebuke to the bourgeois parties. Koivisto's victory, a week later in the electoral college was ensured when the People's Democratic League (SKDL) candidate, Kalevi Kivistö, who received 11 per cent of the popular vote, promised his support.

The SKDL is an electoral grouping, formed in 1945 to enable the Communist Party to return to the open political arena after almost two decades of proscription. It has within it a group of left-wing Socialists and two Communist Party factions. The split in the Communist Party began in the late 1960s, following the Warsaw Pact intervention in Czechoslovakia. The chairman of the SKDL at that time, the Socialist Ele Alenius, now a director of the Bank of Finland, was bitterly attacked for criticizing Soviet policy, and has since been a regular target for denunciation in *Pravda*. The majority group, led by the veteran party leader Aarne Saarinen, has a Eurocommunist tendency, and is prepared to share office in coalition governments with non-Socialist parties. The minority group, led by an ex-docker from Kotka, Taisto Sinisalo, is more pro-Soviet and takes an uncompromising stand on co-operation with the bourgeois parties. The 'Taistoists', who run their own newspaper, expend a great deal of energy on attacking Saarinen and the non-Communist members of SKDL. In the general election of 1979, Sinisalo lost his seat to a left-wing Socialist and SKDL membership in the *Eduskunta* slumped from 40 to 35 seats. Sinisalo still remains a power behind the scenes, and keeps in regular contact with Moscow. The fact that the Communists have not formally split apart is thought to be due to pressure from the Soviet Party, which may share the minority factions' hope that the Taistoists may eventually capture the leadership. At present, the SKDL parliamentary group comprises 20 Saarinen supporters, 11 Taistoists and 4 non-Communists. Kalevi Kivistö, the non-Communist SKDL chairman, was chosen as the presidential nominee after manoeuvres of Byzantine complexity within the various elements which make up this unique electoral alliance. At first, the Taistoists proposed one of their own members, but when she appeared to be a forlorn hope, they switched their support to Saarinen in an attempt to defeat Kivistö. When this ploy failed, they then began to drum up support for the defeated Centre Party nominee, Ahti Karjalainen. Whatever may have transpired 'below stairs' between the Taistoists and the Soviet Party, the official Soviet line was one of diplomatic rectitude. The realists in the Kremlin clearly saw no threat to their vital interests in the election of the popular Koivisto, despite his Social Democrat antecedents, and were not prepared to embark on a futile adventurism which might threaten the harmonious and mutually advan-

tageous relations with Finland which ensure stability on their far north-west frontier.

### **Moscow and the Social Democrats**

Koivisto's election confounded another myth about Soviet-Finnish relations—that Moscow would never tolerate a Social Democrat as President. This goes back to the immediate post-war period, when the Social Democrats were seen as the party of Vainö Tanner, who was Foreign Minister during the Winter War of 1939–40, and was regarded as implacably anti-Soviet. Tanner was imprisoned as a 'war responsible' from 1946 to 1949, but in 1957 he was elected party chairman. The Social Democrat Party shed its Tannerite image in the 1960s and swung decisively behind the Kekkonen line in the presidential election of 1968. Koivisto was one of the rising young party members who helped to bring about this change, although he had previously supported the Tanner line. Since then, coalitions of Social Democrats, SKDL and the Centre Party, usually with Social Democrat prime ministers, have formed the majority of Finnish governments. Koivisto led two of these administrations (1968–70 and 1979–81), the second ending with his assumption of the post of Acting President when Kekkonen stood down last autumn.

Koivisto's 43 per cent of the popular vote was almost double that attained by the Social Democrats in the 1979 general election, which indicates that he has a personal following far in excess of his party's popularity. Many Finns obviously crossed party lines, although large shifts in party allegiance are rare. Although he has always been a steady and reliable middle-of-the-road Social Democrat, Koivisto has held a number of posts which have placed him above the day-to-day horse-trading of Finnish party politics, and he is clearly regarded by many Finns as a non-party national figure, as he must be if he is to be a successful President. Since 1968, he has been Governor of the Bank of Finland.<sup>8</sup> In this powerful position, he has had a great influence on economic policy, and is given credit for the healthy state of the Finnish economy when compared with those of most other European countries. His critics have often accused him of indecisiveness, but the record hardly shows this. He is reflective and unflappable, but capable of decisive action when he has thought through its implications. His refusal to yield to government pressure over the devaluation of the markka whilst Governor of the Bank in the early 1970s, or in his quiet defiance of President Kekkonen during the Cabinet crisis over financial policy in the spring of 1981, indicate a man who knows his own mind.

This author recalls an afternoon spent in his office during the height of the latter affair. He sat behind an uncluttered desk, totally at ease, discussing in an open and unhurried manner, as though in a university common room, a wide range of topics, from the nuclear arms race to the military history of the Winter War, and even his experiences in an English student farm camp. Outside his office, the news-

<sup>8</sup> Nominations to the Board of Directors of the Bank are, like most high offices in Finland, quasi-political appointments. When Koivisto took leave to serve as Prime Minister, his Centre Party rival, Ahti Karjalainen, became Acting Governor.

papers on sale in Senaatintori bore headlines announcing that the President had asked for his resignation, and that a government crisis was about to break. Koivisto quietly let it be known that the *Eduskunta* and not the President would decide, the crisis evaporated and he remained in office until he became Acting President several months later.

The coalition of the three major parties, with the support of some of the smaller groups, is likely to form the basis for future governments at least during the first half of President Koivisto's term of six years. The results of the 1979 election give it 133 seats in the 200-member *Eduskunta*. It seems likely that the conservative National Coalition Party, despite electoral gains in 1979 which gave it 47 seats, will continue to be excluded from a share in government. The President's decision to ask Kalevi Sorsa, Chairman of the Social Democrats and a former Prime Minister, to head the new government will reduce the influence of the Centre Party. It was thought that Karjalainen, smarting from his own party's rejection of him as presidential candidate, would not be willing to serve—although another Centre Party Premier was a strong possibility. If, however, Koivisto wins a second term—and at 58 years he is only two years older than Kekkonen was when first elected—he will be in office when the YYA Treaty comes up for renewal. Whether a need arises for any change in this arrangement will depend partly on the world situation and the attitude of the Soviet Union's new leaders when the present gerontocracy, already depleted by the loss of Suslov, leaves the stage.

Although geopolitical necessity places the issue of Finnish-Soviet relations at the head of the foreign policy agenda, they form the basis for a complex and delicate balance of relationships with the Scandinavian neighbours, with Finland's trading partners in Efta and the EEC, and with the wider world community. Finland's economic success, which is vital to the maintenance of its political stability, depends on its fruitful trading relations with both the Soviet Union and with the members of the West European trading groups. Koivisto's record in economic management shows that he understands the importance of these relationships.

In 1981, 24 per cent of Finland's foreign trade was with the Soviet Union, and the proportion is likely to increase in 1982 following a new trade agreement signed on 1 December 1981. Finland receives two-thirds of its oil imports from the Soviet Union, and, as the price of oil has risen, Soviet imports of industrial goods have increased in order to maintain the trade balance. The strength of Finnish-Soviet trade has been an important factor in holding down the level of unemployment which, at 5 per cent of the labour force, is amongst the lowest in the OECD countries. In his end of year statement as Acting Governor of the Bank of Finland, Mr Karjalainen noted that the rate of inflation was falling, the exchange rate of the markka was stable, and a modest growth in production would continue in 1982. 'Economic growth was principally sustained by Finland's exports to the socialist countries, which grew about one-third in volume terms,' he said.<sup>9</sup>

In the recent election, the Soviet leadership played a correct role by refusing to

<sup>9</sup> Statement by Dr Ahti Karjalainen, *Bank of Finland Monthly Bulletin*, Vol. 56, No. 1, January 1982, p. 1.

express a preference for one or other of the candidates during the campaign, and welcoming the newly elected President as a man who will continue on the path laid down by Paasikivi and Kekkonen to the mutual benefit of the two countries.

Koivisto will be less autocratic than Kekkonen in his use of presidential prerogatives, and this will lead to a greater role for the parliamentary machinery. As there is no serious dissent on major foreign policy issues, and as the Soviet Union appears to be as happy as are the Finns at the outcome of this election, it is likely that domestic political and economic issues will become more prominent. The smooth transfer of power and the lack of any major problems suggest that Koivisto's honeymoon period will be long and uneventful.

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