

## The Split in the Finnish Rural Party: Populism in Decline in Finland

### 1. The Course of Populism in Finland

The literature on social movements is replete with models of the rise of populist or fascist parties. However, except for analyses of the cataclysm which put an end to Italian and German fascism in 1944–45, the demise of these important political phenomena has received little research attention. The purpose of this paper is to help right the balance by suggesting some causes for the rapid disintegration of the populist Finnish Rural Party led by Veikko Vennamo.

After sitting as the only representative of his small-holder party in the Finnish Parliament (*Eduskunta*) from 1966 to 1970, and in the wake of a respectable showing as a candidate for the Finnish presidency in 1968, Vennamo led his slate of candidates to an upset victory in the 1970 parliamentary elections, garnering 10.5 per cent of the vote and 18 of the 200 seats.<sup>1</sup> By Scandinavian standards it was a major disruption of the seemingly stabilized post-world war II party alignments and presaged other substantial readjustments in the region's party systems, such as Mogens Glistrup's success in Denmark in 1973 and Anders Lange's breakthrough in recent Norwegian elections.<sup>2</sup>

Although all the evidence is not in yet, it now seems evident that the electoral shift represented a temporary defection from the institutionalized parties and not a major realignment of the party system. Cracks began to appear in the Finnish populist movement less than two years after its election success. The stage was set when the Finnish president, Urho Kekkonen, hoping to develop a more stable parliamentary base for the formation of a new cabinet, dissolved the *Eduskunta* and announced elections for January, 1972.

Although support declined somewhat from the previous election, the Rural Party managed to retain its 18 seats in parliament. Indeed, within the parliamentary group no great changes occurred.<sup>3</sup> It lost a seat in two constituencies, but gained two seats in two others. With changes affecting only two districts this stabilization of support possibly increased the confidence of the M.P.'s in their own capacity to carry the party. In the 1970 election the Finnish Rural Party (FRP) candidates believed they succeeded only by hanging on tightly to Vennamo's coat-tails; re-election may have contributed to a sense of self-reliance and sparked a significant change in attitudes toward the party leadership.

Symptoms of divisions within the party began to appear in early February 1972, when the new parliament was convened. Five members of the FRP parliamentary group opposed Vennamo's choice for speaker of the new session. The dissension became public when an unexpected development occurred in the selection of *Eduskunta* committee membership. Rainer Lemström, newly elected M.P. from a township outside Helsinki and former Social Democrat, called for a secret ballot in the selection of electors within the so-called Grand Committee, a vestigial 'second' chamber elected by the members of the unicameral body and charged with, among other things, determining the composition of the various parliamentary committees. The socialist–non-socialist balance on the Committee was 21 to 24, approximating the proportion in the *Eduskunta* as a whole (92–108). In the balloting, however, the socialists turned up with a majority of one (23 to 22). The FRP representatives – Vennamo and Lemström – were suspected of defecting to the socialist ranks.

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FRP, would include the Finnish People's Democratic League (containing the Finnish Communist Party) and the Social Democratic Party.<sup>4</sup> Claiming the cabinet could effectively represent the interests of the nation's dispossessed, Vennamo announced that this change in attitude toward the left reflected a permanent reorientation of FRP policy. When, in addition, he announced at a press conference that a non-socialist majority no longer existed in the *Eduskunta*, the news media began to suggest that the so-called *Asialinja* (translated roughly as 'policy of concern', the FRP catchword for, among other things, distrust of all traditional party politics in favor of 'people rule') had been discarded.

These developments were met with a flood of reaction in the countryside. Rural party M.P.'s Asunmaa, Sainio, Suokas, and Kurppa announced to their supporters through the local rural press that they continued to support the *Asialinja* and could not join hands with the left.<sup>5</sup>

On the 11th, the left renounced the support it received in the Grand Committee vote. After more public criticism by FRP members of parliament, the party issued a statement supported by all 18 representatives that party chairman Vennamo's words had been provocatively misconstrued by the right and that in fact no shift to the left had taken place at all. On the 15th, Vennamo sought to muffle any remaining discordance by criticizing the four FRP representatives in an editorial in the party organ *Suomen Uutiset* for voting against the party line in a minor parliamentary vote.

From this point on, however, the breach within the party grew steadily. The nation's press was filled throughout the summer with accounts of Vennamo's tightening grip on the FRP party machinery. He was chairman of the *Maaseudun taloussäätiö* (Rural Economy Foundation) which financed all party activities, sat on the board of the *Oy Pientalonpoika* (Small Holder Association), as well as serving as head of the editorial board of the *Suomen Uutiset*. He also served as combined head of both the FRP parliamentary group and the party at large. Further, the Small Holder Association had put up collateral for loans to both the party and the party press, but the terms of the extension of credit ended whenever Vennamo stepped down as head of the party.

Some FRP members of parliament found this concentration of power intolerable and attempted to change the party by-laws so that the head of the parliamentary group could not serve simultaneously as chairman of the party. The issue came to a head during the 1972 summer party convention, but Vennamo succeeded in either shutting the dissident members out of the meeting or denying them the floor to present their motions. In the words of one disaffected M.P., 'Democracy in the Finnish Rural Party had been trampled in the mud.'<sup>6</sup>

After this fiasco 12 FRP members of parliament formed their own distinct group within the party. Although a semblance of cohesion was maintained through the municipal elections in the autumn, a change in the party legislation, granting state financial support to any group formed by a majority of M.P.'s seceding from an established party, apparently provided the incentive needed to establish an entirely new organization.

Discarding any notion of using the Rural Party name, the group of 12 representatives formed a new party in the beginning of 1973. Called the Finnish People's Unity Party (FPUP), the organization held its first party convention the following summer.<sup>7</sup>

## 2. Toward an Inventory of Causes for the Rural Party Decline

The probable reasons for the rapid disintegration of the Finnish populist movement are complex and no doubt largely interrelated, but for the sake of simplicity they may be subsumed under three categories: factors relating to the Finnish political system, factors identified with changes in the Finnish socio-economic structure, and factors within the Rural Party organization. The former two contain the effects of the political institu-

tional and socio-economic environment on party cohesion, while the latter classification includes factors which centrifugally have acted to diminish party cohesion from within.

#### *External Factors: The Political System*

We noted that a change in the party finance law early in 1973 provided the final catalyst for a breakdown of cohesion within the parliamentary group. A second factor relating to interparty relations may be found in the changing nature of the FRP's role as an opposition party. For four years, between 1966 and 1970, the country was governed by a 'popular front' cabinet with ministerial portfolios distributed among the People's Democrats, a small splinter leftist party, the Social Democrats, the Center Party (formerly the Agrarian Party), and the Swedish People's Party.<sup>8</sup>

The opposition was limited to Vennamo as the sole FRP representative and to 35 deputies of the rightist National Coalition and Liberal Party. With the coalition and liberal group representing the interests of the urban middle class, big agrarian and industrial capital, the FRP leader was provided with a unique opportunity to speak in defense of the so-called 'forgotten people' of the country. This he did with a fervor not seen in the *Eduskunta* since the fascist disruptions of the 1930s. Though frequently called out of order for his outbursts from the *Eduskunta* floor and condemned in the press for his vituperative attacks on the established parties and elites, his outspoken methods no doubt gained votes for the party in 1970 in industrial areas, and contributed to the shift in voter support from the less developed part of the country to the urbanizing southwest.

In 1971, however, the People's Democrats left the cabinet – in a dispute over rent and price controls – and resumed their traditional role as the mouthpiece for industrial workers and, to a certain extent, the rural small holder and forest workers. A metal workers' strike during the winter, caused by trade union discontent with the progress of wage contract negotiations, apparently served to reunite the working class and strengthen support for the Social Democrats and People's Democrats.

These changing alignments can be hypothesized to have had a dual effect. In the new parliament Vennamo and his deputies had to share loyal opposition functions with other parties and thus lost any strategic programmatic advantage a monopoly position (at least with regard to supporters of the left and center) might have afforded. Secondly, the strengthening of support for the leftists – after the apathy which was apparent during the popular front years – did not dispose the socialist party leaders to react favorably to having the FRP as coalition partners in a new cabinet. Thus the situation also seemed to conspire to deny the Rural Party a programmatic role in the government. In terms of Sjöblom's typology, these restraints seemed to inhibit any effective maximization of parliamentary influence and, as a consequence, program realization.<sup>9</sup>

#### *External Factors: Socio-Economic Change*

Several broader social and economic factors also conditioned the inter-group relationships of the party elites. The changing nature of the Rural Party support base, for instance, contributed its own dynamic to the process of group disintegration within parliament. Begun as a party of small holders (the original party's name was the Finnish Small Holder's Party), the social and geographic centers of support have shifted continuously from its agrarian origin to non-agrarian occupations and urban areas. In 1962, for example, 77 per cent of the 49,773 votes cast for the party were in the six less developed provinces of northern and eastern Finland. In 1970, the figure had dropped to 53 per cent of 265,939 total votes cast for the party, and in 1972 the proportion was down to 52 per cent. Although the absolute number of Rural Party votes declined between 1970 and 1972, the decrease in the urban centers amounted to 4 per cent, while the corresponding figure for the rural communes was 14 per cent.<sup>10</sup>

The shift in the support base for the party was also reflected in the backgrounds of the party candidates. Those from agrarian occupations numbered over 60 per cent of all candidates in 1962 and 1966 (the combined number equaling 218); in 1970, they numbered only 38 per cent of the 199 candidates fielded. The votes cast for the candidates were in roughly the same proportion in each election.<sup>11</sup>

While the occupational composition of the elected Rural Party members of parliament did not change between 1970 and 1972 (eleven listed their occupation as agriculture-related, three were businessmen, and four were salaried middle class), the northern and eastern provinces lost one of their 11 representatives to the developed south and west.

Thus increasingly, the parliamentary and constituency support base was becoming less agrarian. There is reason to assume that these changing conditions contributed to a sense of alienation among rural elements in the party. It is interesting to note in connection with the social make-up of the Rural Party that of the 13 founding M.P.'s in the new Finnish People's Unity Party, 11 had agriculture-related occupations, one had small-holder parents, and one was a businessman. They were overwhelmingly from rural Finland. The five Rural Party stalwarts all claimed non-agrarian occupations and all were from developed Finland.<sup>12</sup>

The shift away from agriculture within the support base was not only the result of Vennamo's electoral tactics. As in other parts of Scandinavia, the depression of incomes from farming – as the result of the inefficiency of the small family farm unit and a glut of dairy and wheat products on the national market – generated considerable unrest among the agrarian population in the late 1960s. Vennamo succeeded very well in mobilizing these discontented rural voters to the Rural Party cause.<sup>13</sup>

By 1970, however, the situation had begun to change. The upturn in the Western economy increased demand for Finnish wood product exports, which in turn increased employment in rural forestry operations. Government support for agricultural prices and soil-bank programs considerably improved the material lot of the farmer-entrepreneur. Coupled with a continuing out-migration of the rural work force to urban centers, these changes virtually eliminated agriculture as a major political issue by 1972. Vennamo was thus no doubt well-advised in seeking an 'opening to the left' in search of potential urban support; but he did so at the expense of traditional elements in the party.

#### *Internal Factors*

The organization of the Rural Party was ill-equipped in the face of these changing social and political circumstances. First the role of the charismatic leader and strong local level organization – essential ingredients in the mobilization phase of populist movements – began to weaken within the FRP in the early 1970s. We noted how Vennamo used his influence to increase his own power base instead of building a party organization which would be capable of de-centralized collective decision-making. After the 1970 election the party did not become a 'rational' organization in terms of the Weberian dialectic. The transition from a charismatic – or traditional – phase in a sense assumes a modal change in a more or less fixed organizational mass. But this was not the case with the Finnish populist movement. Vennamo was the movement and the only way his authority could be challenged, when it became totally discredited, was from outside his organization – by the formation of a rival party.

In the take-off phase of the Rural Party, Vennamo succeeded in almost single-handedly molding a local party organization in the rural areas.<sup>14</sup> An extensive network based largely on face-to-face communication diffused Vennamo's anti-elitist message over a vast sparsely populated area of the country. In recent years, however, these basic associations have been severely weakened. In addition to the debilitating effects of depopulation, the FRP had great difficulty in stabilizing the support it had

built up. This very likely related to the rather high average age of persons identifying with the FRP – and their general disposition to political passiveness. In addition, Vennamo perhaps was not able, because of demands at the national level, to attend to grass-roots politics, permitting the well-organized local structure to atrophy somewhat.<sup>15</sup>

More significantly, a well-elaborated political ideology might have gone a long way toward cohering the various components of the party at all levels of the organization. Although the programs of populist movements have generally been characterized as an eclectic patchwork incorporating elements from several belief systems – often self-contradicting – Vennamo's Rural Party had an exceptionally weak programmatic make-up.<sup>16</sup> Two reasons – one broadly conceptual, one more concrete – may be suggested.

First, as noted, the party 'charter' group during the formative years after the first party convention in 1959 was distinctively small farmer. Like their independent producer counterparts who formed the backbone of upstart populist and social credit movements in the western areas of North America, their centrist antagonism to both big business interests and the organized working class may be said to be founded on what C. B. MacPherson has defined as the 'illusion of independence'.<sup>17</sup> Although free to direct their own labor and free of direct dependence on other's labor, they are dependent on an economy directed by others and which subordinates them. This condition does not lead to a conscious reflection of class position but to a definition of action defined only negatively. As MacPherson points out after examining the rise of Social Credit in Alberta:

While the other classes may tend to become more cohesive, the petite-bourgeoisie cannot be cohesive. Its different elements have nothing in common except the increasing insecurity which results from their increasingly anomalous position in the economy . . . From this illusive consciousness, and from their perennial insecurity, arises the oscillation between conservatism and radicalism which is characteristic of the petite-bourgeoisie. They cannot entirely identify themselves, or make common cause, with either of the other two classes.<sup>18</sup>

As a consequence, he goes on to note in this same chapter on the 'Implications of Independent Production',

When several sections have been led by simultaneous pressure of insecurity to support a political programme, their cohesion has generally been temporary, for the economy rarely affords a basis for the success of a programme attractive to them . . .<sup>19</sup>

Thus the program shortcomings may derive from factors peculiar to the class composition of the movement and not solely result from conscious neglect by the party head. Considered in the light of populist experience outside Scandinavia, it was perhaps inevitable that the Rural Party would lack a forthright program of action which would serve as guideposts for the party and unite the membership. Like populist movements elsewhere, the major rallying tenets were based on attacks on 'big capital' on the right, 'collectivization' on the left, and the governmental and party 'bureaucracy' across the whole political spectrum; the official party program was bereft, however, of any positive proposals aimed at correcting these deficiencies.

This looseness in the program, while suiting the particular world view of the rural small holder, had, of course, a practical electoral function: in its broad attacks on elements on both left and right the party was able to cross class lines and to a certain extent secure votes from a number of social groups, especially in non-rural Finland.<sup>20</sup> One could speculate that had the party ideology been more firmly directed toward the interests of a particular class, cohesion might have been easier to achieve.

The FRP even failed to develop an ideological ingredient used with success in other populist movements: the economic 'formula'. The party had no monetary schemes like those which congealed support for North American populism. There was no silver or greenback issue, no program to forestall forced land auctions, and no social credit proposal to provide each family with the Finnish equivalent of \$25.<sup>21</sup> The closest the program came to an overall economic scheme was in calling for reduced general levels of taxation. The FRP did strongly oppose the implementation in 1970-71 of a new tax on farm income, and has continuously sought to eliminate gasoline taxes for independent truckers and power saw/tractor operators. These isolated proposals did not suggest a panacea, however, and taxation thus did not become a key program element as it did, for instance, within Mogens Glistrup's Progressive Party in Denmark.<sup>22</sup>

Further the *Asialinja* was less a set of alternatives or proposals for change than a cover phrase invented by Vennamo to sell his party to the electorate. He has used it variously to refer to the need to eliminate corruption and favoritism in government, to the stagnation of the established parties, and to recovery of traditional virtues through a re-emphasis on entrepreneurship and private ownership. Like many election slogans, however, *asialinja* did not come to signify a comprehensive model to correct society's ills.

Thus the weak party structure and feeble party program did not contribute to party unity. In both instances one may say that Vennamo failed to build structures which would have strengthened the party from within. Instead of a broad-based organization with routinized functions, he insisted on treating the FRP as his personal satrapy – and ideology was less an institutionalized set of working doctrines and outlines for legislative action than a continuation of the party leader's negative rhetoric and intonation.

### 3. Conclusion

The cumulative effect of these factors was thus a near total disintegration of the Finnish populist movement less than three years after its greatest triumph. As we have attempted to point out, some of the causes were no doubt to be found in the peculiar Finnish social and political environment which fatefully conspired against the FRP. However, the failure to institutionalize the party through routinized organizational behavior and doctrinal codification appears to us a shortcoming generic to populist movements everywhere. Our hope is that more studies will be conducted on the demise of populism so that these suppositions may be put to a proper test.

In the municipal elections held in October 1972, the strife-ridden FRP suffered a setback – support declined to 5 per cent of the total vote. The periodic national polls taken during 1973-74 consistently showed less than 5 per cent support for the Rural and Unity parties. In fact, the October-December 1974 estimates showed the FRP with 3.5 per cent of the vote and the FPUP at 0.2 per cent.<sup>23</sup> Thus, despite 13 M.P.'s in the parliament, another election could leave the Unity Party without any representation in the *Eduskunta*. The party has not succeeded in establishing a local organization of any kind – and is likely to have a short political history.

Vennamo's party, on the other hand, will probably have representation in the next parliament, and, though weakened, will continue to be a presence in Finnish politics. It is too early to say whether the Rural Party history will terminate with the next election; in Finland, as elsewhere, significant political changes are occurring which Vennamo could use to his advantage.

David Matheson  
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## NOTES

1. Risto Sänkiäho and Seppo Laakso, 'Results of the Parliamentary Election and the Formation of the Cabinets of Teuvo Aura and Ahti Karjalainen in 1970', in *Scandinavian Political Studies*, Vol. 6/71 (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1971), pp. 212-215; unless otherwise specified, the article is based on numerous newspaper and radio-tv accounts of events over the past five years; some parts of the narrative are also derived from personal conversations with members of parliament.
2. See Ole Borre, 'Denmark's Protest Election of December 1973', in *Scandinavian Political Studies*, Vol. 9/74 (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1974), pp. 197-204; and Henry Valen and Stein Rokkan, 'Norway: The Election to the *Storting* in September 1973', *ibid.*, pp. 205-218.
3. Pertti Pesonen, 'The 1972 Parliamentary Election in Finland', in *Scandinavian Political Studies*, Vol. 7/1972 (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1972), pp. 266-271.
4. This cabinet would have had a parliamentary base of 110 seats.
5. *Helsingin sanomat*, Sunday, 20 February 1972.
6. Heikki Kekkonen and Teuvo T. Ojanen, 'Räjähtääkö puolue?', *VIP*, No. 9, September 1972.
7. The number grew to 13 (leaving 5 in the FRP delegation) when A. Sainio performed the longest hop, step and jump in Finnish political history. First he announced his defection to the People's Unity Party, but after an apparent change of mind returned to the Rural Party the following day; a third change of heart found him joining his colleagues in the Unity Party.
8. For a list of the factors which contributed to an increase in support for the Rural Party, see Risto Sänkiäho, 'A Model of the Rise of Populism and Support for the Finnish Rural Party', in *Scandinavian Political Studies*, Vol. 6/71 (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1971), pp. 27-47.
9. Gunnar Sjöblom, *Party Strategies in a Multiparty System* (Lund: Berlinska boktryckeriet, 1968), pp. 75-88.
10. David Matheson, 'The Finnish Rural Party: A Study of the Regional and Social Bases of Support', Unpublished master's thesis, University of Helsinki, 1970, pp. 4-7; and Official Statistics of Finland, XXIX.A, 28, 29, 31, 32.
11. *Ibid.*, pp. 39-44.
12. 1972 *Eduskunnan kalenteri* (Calendar of the Finnish Parliament).
13. Lauri Hautamäki and Risto Sänkiäho, 'Some Features about the Support of the Finnish Rural Party in Years 1962-70', in *Fennia*, Societas Geographica Fenniae, No. 109, (Vammala: Vammala Press, 1971), pp. 1-27.
14. *Ibid.*, pp. 20-25.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 25; and Matheson, *op. cit.*, pp. 11-14.
16. Olavi Borg, *Puolueiden ohjelmat 1970* (Helsinki: Tammi, 1970), pp. 182-197; Risto Sänkiäho, 'Maalisvaalit', in *Aika*, No. 2, 1970, pp. 95-98; the Small-Holders'/Rural Party program was developed in 1959 and 1967.
17. C. B. MacPherson, *Democracy in Alberta: Social Credit and the Party System* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1953), pp. 225-226.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 226.
19. *Ibid.*, pp. 226-227.
20. Risto Sänkiäho, 'Puolueohjelmien kohderyhmät: menetelmällinen kokeilu' (Object-Groups in Finnish Party Programs: A Methodological Experiment), Institute of Social Science Publications, University of Jyväskylä, No. 22, 1974, pp. 8-9 and 16-21.
21. Cf., John D. Hicks, *The Populist Revolt* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1931); John A. Irving, *The Social Credit Movement in Alberta* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1959); MacPherson, *op. cit.*; and Borg, *op. cit.*, pp. 182-197.
22. The tax issue has of course become more salient everywhere in Scandinavia since the inflationary surges of 1973-74. Taxation was not a major grievance among Vennamo's supporters in 1970 as it apparently was in Denmark in December 1973. However, new sources of alienation may be found in Finland among the salaried middle class as inflation-chasing incomes move families into more steeply progressive tax brackets. See, e.g., Juhani Aromäki, 'Odattavtko meitä verokiertopuolue?' (Can We Expect a Taxation Party?), *Helsingin sanomat*, January 11, 1975.
23. These figures are based on Finnish Gallup results published in the *Helsingin sanomat*, January 5, 1975.