

A TALE OF TWO FINLANDS

ARE URBAN GREENS OUT OF TOUCH WITH RURAL REALITIES?

ARTICLE BY
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The Finnish Greens have surged to record-high popularity, with recent polls placing them as Finland's second largest political party. But while the Green League is winning the hearts and ballots of voters in urban centres, the rural electorate remains cool to their wooing. Why aren't the Greens connecting with the countryside – and is this symptomatic of a growing urban-rural ideological divide in Europe?

On an overcast day, a visit to the sleepy east Finnish town of Outokumpu in North Karelia is about as inspiring as watching paint dry. The empty streets are flanked by unprepossessing grey buildings, and the melancholy regulars in Pub 'Wildhouse' recall a scene from an Aki Kaurismäki movie.

Some might recognise Outokumpu as the name of Finland's leading steel manufacturer, but the town's sole tourist attraction, the Mining Museum, is among the few surviving reminders of the town's glory days as a prosperous copper-mining hub. The eponymous corporate giant has long since relocated to more lucrative pastures.

In recent years, Outokumpu's fortunes have taken a woeful turn for the worse, echoing a pattern seen in many fading mining towns from Wakefield in North England to the coal mining belt of Appalachia. Ever since the last mine was closed in 1989, Outokumpu has been blighted by high unemployment, economic setbacks, and rapid population decline.

FADING FORTUNES

The town's unemployment rate is alarmingly high: 18.6 per cent at the end of July 2017, more than double the national average of 7.5 per cent.¹

The population – totalling just over 7,000 – has been spiralling downward since 1975, with young people and families moving to bigger towns in search of a brighter future. Between 1975 and 2014, the proportion of under 15s declined from 22.5 per cent to 14.2 per cent, and that of over 65s increased from 8.9 per cent to 14.2 per cent.² The high elderly dependency rate exacerbates the strain on the already beleaguered public purse.

Outokumpu is among many small Finnish towns where the Green ‘hipster agenda’ of liberal urbanism meets with a response of frosty indifference. In the April 2017 municipal elections, the Greens gained only 3 per cent of the local vote, while the conservative agrarian Centre Party seized 30.6 per cent. Although Outokumpu is anything but a farming town, local voters are responsive to the Centre Party platform of “keeping the whole of Finland viable”.

Jenni Karimäki, Senior Research Fellow at the Turku University Centre for Parliamentary Research, regards Outokumpu as a typical example of the malaise afflicting eastern Finland.

“With people moving away, eastern municipalities are struggling to make ends meet to provide services for the ageing population

amid declining tax revenues. This does not create a favourable environment for the Greens to attract voters. The Green agenda is usually more salient in circumstances of prosperity than austerity.”

HIPSTERS VERSUS HAYSEEDS?

While the streets of Outokumpu look gloomy and grey, the panorama that unfolds from the 96-metre mining tower is a breath-taking spectacle of green. Situated in conifer-rich heartlands, the declining industrial hub is surrounded by endless miles of woods that stretch as far as the eye can see – pristine nature of the kind the Green League is keen to protect.

Miles of woodlands also surround Jyväskylä, a larger town located 178 kilometres southwest of Outokumpu, but unlike its eastern neighbour, Jyväskylä is green both inside and out. The Green League is currently the biggest party, having won 19.9 per cent of the ballots in the April 2017 municipal elections. This victory marked the first time in history that the Greens emerged as the most popular political party in any Finnish town.

A stroll through the pedestrian precinct yields clues as to why this university town is sympathetic to Green values. Bearded hipsters commute by bike between the city centre and the

1 North Karelia Employment Bulletin 2017, Finnish Centre for Economic Development, Transport and the Environment.

2 City of Outokumpu Budget 2017-2018

student villages of Kortepohja and Roninmäki, and a young clientele fills the cafés and bars along lively Kauppakatu Street. The city attracts tourists with architectural landmarks designed by the legendary Alvar Aalto, and residents enjoy a lively cultural scene.

INVESTING IN LIVEABILITY

With a steadily climbing population of 140,000, Jyväskylä is the largest city in Central Finland. Unemployment has declined rapidly: it has shrunk by 18 per cent in only twelve months according to the latest statistics. The demographic structure is more balanced than in the east, with 16 per cent of the population aged under 15 and 17 per cent over 65.

With the city's economic prospects brightening after years of austerity, the forward-looking local authorities are focusing their sights on investment and development. One of the city's key goals is to reduce dependency on fossil fuels through measures such as reducing oil consumption.

“While the population is growing at a rate of 1,500 new residents a year, per capita carbon emissions have declined by 40 per cent since 2010,” says Pirkko Melville, City of Jyväskylä R&D Manager.

Recent surveys indicate that the majority of the city's residents are happy with their

quality of life. Among the assets enhancing liveability is the active work being done to profile Jyväskylä as ‘a city of sport and culture’. Various ambitious initiatives are being undertaken to increase the city's appeal, including the full overhaul of its concert hall, the construction of a completely new hospital scheduled to be operational in 2020, and the new Hippos2020 sports centre, which, together with the new hospital, will form a national centre of excellence focusing on health and wellness.

THE “GREENING” OF THE POLITICAL LANDSCAPE

Thriving towns like Jyväskylä are at the forefront of what the newly elected Jyväskylä-based Green Party chairman Touko Aalto has described as a “continental shift” in Finland's political landscape. According to recent polls, the popularity of the Greens is at an all-time high. The Green League is currently the biggest party in Jyväskylä and the second-biggest party in Finland, ranking second only to the conservative National Coalition.

The Green League has continued to make steady gains on traditional political parties by appealing to a diverse electorate with a broad agenda highlighting issues such as education. The recent rise of right-wing populism and the migration debate have also spotlighted the Greens as a humane, liberal alternative.

“The current conservative government coalition and its unpopular decisions to cut education funding have been ‘fruitful’ for the Greens, who have explicitly opposed these issues and profiled themselves as an education-friendly party,” notes Karimäki.

INVISIBLE ISSUES

But while the Greens are pushing all the right buttons in Jyväskylä and other larger towns, ‘big city issues’ such as public transportation, compact urban development, and environmental preservation seem less relevant in rural areas struggling with acute economic hardships.

“If you live in a city, it’s much easier to demand environmental preservation, since it doesn’t affect your livelihood or everyday life. The Greens often have a negative image among rural inhabitants as they are perceived as making life more difficult with demands that often run contrary to the interests of agricultural entrepreneurs and rural land owners,” says Karimäki.

A somewhat different view is taken by Emma Ojanen, researcher and chair of the Jyväskylä Greens, who argues that the urban-rural divide is largely over-exaggerated: “There are lots of people in rural areas who are

interested in nature conservation, clean water, sustainable energy, and other Green themes.”

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She contends that the Greens’ weaker performance in rural areas is more a communication issue than a real difference in people’s interests. “The public doesn’t know much about Green rural initiatives. We have promoted the use of biogas

for years, which would create jobs in rural regions. Often people simply haven’t heard our thoughts because they don’t get much media coverage,” she reflects.

“People are often happily surprised to hear that we even have a specific organisation called the ‘Rural Greens’ which focuses on issues relevant to rural regions, such as food production, forest management, and sustainable energy production.”

ARE CITIES THE NEW NATIONS?

The stark contrast that exists between towns like Jyväskylä and Outokumpu seems to mirror a widening worldwide rift between urban and rural voters.

Many theorists believe that cities – as engines of economic growth and home to half the

global population – are new hubs of power that can find agile solutions to problems which nation-states have been unable to tackle. In its recent report on education trends, the OECD even argues that “cities are becoming the new nation states.”³

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 IN THEIR OWN COUNTRY

What this essentially means is that large concentrations of people living together in a small space share many identical concerns and challenges. Today’s cities are ultra-connected hubs of employment, business, developed transport systems, and innovation, yet along with the positives come many shared problems, such as pollution, extremes of wealth and poverty, overcrowding, and issues related to migration.

Cities have become their own cultural and economic micro-climates, and many metropolises have more in common with each other than with rural regions within their own country. New York can identify more readily with London or Shanghai than with Nebraska – a megatrend that is pushing cities to hook up and share lessons to help each other find solutions to common problems. When one city comes up with an innovation, the blueprint can be copied in a similar metropolis.

LEFT IN THE DUST

According to the OECD, cities are “now the most relevant level of governance, small enough to react swiftly and responsively to issues and large enough to hold economic and political power.”⁴

Cities are thus forming a global village from which rural areas are more or less excluded. Scholars such as Stanford professor Jonathan Rodden see this urban-rural polarisation as an outcome of globalisation. The groups who benefit from globalisation and trade live in cosmopolitan cities, while those who feel ‘left in the dust’ typically live outside urban centres.

As a result, the way people vote is increasingly determined by where they live. In the US, the rural vote is solidly Republican, while cities vote Democrat. In Britain, the pro-Brexit vote was concentrated in rural areas, while cities voted in favour of the EU. The lion’s share of support for the French far-right politician Marine Le Pen came from rural France, and in Germany, the recent influx of refugees provoked the greatest backlash in the least densely populated areas. Berlin continues to draw foreigners and Germans alike, but surrounding rural areas are suffering from rapid

3-4 <http://www.oecd.org/education/trends-shaping-education-22187049.htm>

demographic change. The same pattern can be observed all over Europe: rural regions are in crisis as younger, educated people move to cities in pursuit of a better life.

YOUNG CITIES VERSUS OLD VILLAGES

Political parties thus tend to be seen as either defending the urban ‘haves’ or the rural ‘have nots’, which is a salient challenge for the Finnish Greens, who are traditionally pigeonholed as an ‘urban’ party.

“The Finnish Greens started out in 1976 as a Helsinki-based political party opposing car domination, the demolition of historic buildings, and brutal urban planning. We have traditionally been strong in the capital, but I think we have successfully moved beyond our Helsinki-centric image,” says veteran Green politician Osmo Soininvaara.

He notes that the age demographic is also a significant factor: “Our supporters tend to be younger. It’s not that we don’t have young rural supporters. The trouble is that there are just so few young people living in the countryside now. Most of them migrate to cities.”

Soininvaara adds that the urban vote is in the end more important for the Greens, since the battle for political dominance in Finland is ultimately fought in cities. “Of course we

need to take care of rural areas, too, but the rural population is so small that you don’t win elections by focusing only on rural issues,” he ponders.

“You can win elections in Finland simply by capturing the urban vote, because most of the population is concentrated in urban centres. But focusing narrowly on urban issues would be a mistake. The nation must not be divided.”

How, then, can the Finnish Greens extend their reach beyond their current urban base and engage the electorate in rural regions?

UNITING URBAN AND RURAL INTERESTS

“To a certain extent we already have expanded our base. Right now in the polls we are the second largest party in Finland: we already are a relevant political force. In the April 2017 municipal elections there were many rural regions where a Green candidate was elected for the first time. That’s a stepping stone for nationwide change,” states Ojanen.

She believes the Greens can attract a wider electorate by further broadening their agenda. The towns of Jyväskylä and Nokia offer a good example of how campaigning around the themes of education, employment, and well-being are well received also in regions outside the capital.

“The results of the municipal elections show that there’s much more interest in Green themes than might be expected. It’s important not to underestimate people’s interest in a better future. Education, science, human rights, environmental protection and biodiversity, renewable energy – all these themes are important everywhere,” notes Ojanen.

She sees sustainable food and energy production as a core issue uniting urban and rural interests. “It would be strange to think that rural areas are not ‘on board’ with Green agendas, since the farms and forests of the future will provide new forms of energy and raw materials. Rural areas play a critically important role in sustainable development.”



CONNECTING LIKE-MINDED PEOPLE

The June 2017 election of Touko Aalto as the new Green chair is likely to be a strategic advantage in future rural campaigning. As the man behind the Jyväskylä triumph, Aalto is expected to attract more rural votes than a party chair from Helsinki.

Ojanen believes the key to a Green turnaround in towns like Outokumpu is encouraging the bold pioneers who take the first step as Green candidates. “In the recent elections, we had towns in Central Finland where people took part for the first time and immediately got elected to the municipal council. Everyone has to start somewhere. Finding these like-minded people is the first big step.”

Soininvaara agrees that finding good local candidates is the only way to gain support in outlying regions. “In Finland we vote for individual candidates, not for parties, and in towns like Outokumpu, we haven’t been able to establish a strong organisation. But wherever we have had good local activists, our support has been good.”

COMMON SOLUTIONS TO WICKED PROBLEMS

While cities across the world continue sharing lessons and learning from each other’s experiences – and while Jyväskylä hipsters will most likely relate better to their bearded peers in Helsinki or Hong Kong than to the realities of post-industrial towns like Outokumpu – it serves no one’s interests to deepen the urban-rural cleavage.

The challenge – both for the Greens and for all other political parties – is finding a platform that convincingly unites rural and urban aspirations, reaffirms Emma Ojanen.

And the political group with the strongest potential to unify rural and urban agendas under the common banner of sustainability appears to be – at least for now in Finland – the Greens.



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