

Finland: Prime minister resigns over Iraq war scandal

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Finland's recently elected prime minister, Anneli Jäätteenmäki of the Centre Party, resigned June 18 amid accusations of misleading parliament and soliciting the leaking of secret documents.

Her Centre/Social Democratic coalition government temporarily stood down, to be reinstated minus Jäätteenmäki last week. Jäätteenmäki claimed that her position had become untenable after being called in for questioning by a police investigation into the leaking of secret Foreign Office documents to the press. In reality, Jäätteenmäki's crime has been to partially expose Finnish diplomacy to public scrutiny.

The investigation had been set up after the March parliamentary elections, during which documents relating to a meeting between the then Social Democratic prime minister Paavo Lipponen and US President George W. Bush were leaked to the press. The leaked information confirmed suggestions by Jäätteenmäki, then leader of the opposition, that Lipponen had given his backing to Bush's war plans at a private meeting between the two men in Washington in December.

In the final stages of the election Jäätteenmäki had asked Lipponen if the US had a correct understanding of the Finnish position on the war—that as it had not been sanctioned by the United Nations it was illegal. She questioned if the Bush administration had the idea that Finland was in some way part of the so-called “coalition of the willing”.

Lipponen rejected Jäätteenmäki's suggestion, assuring the country that there could be no doubt that Finland was not in an alliance with the US against Iraq. The official position of Lipponen's government, upon which it stood in the elections, was that Finland remained committed to upholding the UN's authority. The Centre Party opposed US war policy on the basis

that it undermined the United Nations.

Shortly after this exchange, and just days before the election, top-secret Foreign Office documents implying that Lipponen had privately given his backing to Bush were leaked to the media. The Social Democrats (SDP) immediately pointed the finger at Jäätteenmäki, claiming that the Centre Party was encouraging security breaches to aid its election campaign. Jäätteenmäki denied that she had ever possessed or leaked any confidential papers.

The Centre Party won the elections, becoming the single largest party in parliament, largely due to its criticism of Lipponen's equivocal stance on the US-led invasion of Iraq. With 55 out of 200 parliamentary seats, Jäätteenmäki's party went on to form a coalition government with the SDP and the small Swedish Peoples Party.

Meanwhile, a police investigation into the leaks had rumbled on until the beginning of June when a Centre Party protocol was leaked to the *Ilta-Sanomat* newspaper. The pre-election protocol recorded senior party figures, including Jäätteenmäki, agreeing to pursue Lipponen on the question of his stance on the US-led attack on Iraq. The possession by Jäätteenmäki of certain foreign policy “documents” was discussed in this context.

An aide to Jäätteenmäki said he believed the party leak was intended to paint the prime minister “in the most negative light” and so divert attention from the main issue of whether Lipponen had given the US the “wrong impression” about Finland's policy on Iraq.

As a result of the leaked protocol, Jäätteenmäki was questioned by the police on June 11. Six days later a former presidential aide, Matti Manninen, told the *Finnish News Agency* that Jäätteenmäki had personally asked him to provide her with information on the

discussions between Lipponen and Bush. A long-time Centre Party member, Manninen denies giving any stolen papers to Jäätteenmäki but acknowledges that he passed on, at Jäätteenmäki's request, confidential information gleaned from Foreign Office accounts of Lipponen's private meeting with Bush. He has denied being the source of the election-time press leak. Manninen faces police charges of breaching official secrecy, charges which could be extended to Jäätteenmäki.

In a statement to parliament on the day of her resignation Jäätteenmäki assured MPs that she had acted properly during the election campaign in raising the issue of the Lipponen government's duplicity regarding its position on the Iraq war. Denying that she possessed or leaked any secret government documents, she admitted that two memoranda from Matti Manninen had been sent to her, unsolicited, in which Lipponen's meeting with Bush was discussed.

In response, an emergency meeting of MPs from the governing parties was convened at which the SDP demanded the prime minister's resignation or the government would be dissolved. That evening Jäätteenmäki tendered her resignation to the president.

In the two months of its existence the Centre Party-led coalition had been dogged by continual SDP attacks on Jäätteenmäki, despite the party quickly overcoming its pre-election reservations about SDP policy. The new prime minister, a former lawyer, was also the subject of fierce attacks from coalition partners in the last government, the conservative National Coalition Party.

SDP and National Coalition outrage over the divulging of official secrets is a brazen attempt to cover over the far greater deception committed by Lipponen's government. Lipponen found his government caught between the hardening positions of America on one side and mass popular opposition to the Iraq war on the other. Like many European powers, his response was to present one face—devotion to the principles of international law and the UN—to the world, and another to Bush.

With political and media pressure focused on Jäätteenmäki, the craven duplicity of Lipponen, his government and senior advisers and the entire Finnish foreign policy establishment has been left largely untouched. The SDP, which has been in government for over 25 years, has moved against Jäätteenmäki

because any exposure of the machinations of Finnish diplomacy to the public eye is completely unacceptable behaviour for a prime minister.

In response Jäätteenmäki and the Centre Party have rolled over.

Even at the time of the elections there were senior Centre Party figures who opposed criticising Lipponen's foreign policy. Former leader Esko Aho had warned Jäätteenmäki against using the "Iraq card" and praised Lipponen for acting in line with longstanding Finnish foreign policy. The leak which finally brought Jäätteenmäki down is likely to have originated from a person or persons within the Centre Party who saw their leader as a stumbling block in the way of continued cooperation with the SDP in government.

The new Centre Party prime minister, the former party vice-chairman and Defence Minister Matti Vanhanen, has urged his party and the SDP to "stop the election campaign." Vanhanen had been among the most vocal Centre Party critics of Jäätteenmäki in recent weeks.



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