



Election night history

Sunday, April 17, 2011. I wake up at 8:00 am feeling optimistic, yet anxious. It's election day in Finland, with 12 hours to go until the first exit polls, and I'm a candidate in the

national elections for the first time. Scary.

The opinion polls look good for us, but you never know. Margins in Finnish elections are always small. Traditionally the fight is between three big parties: the centre-right National Coalition Party (that's us), the Centre Party and the Social Democrats. Each usually receives about 20 per cent of the vote. Two of them form the government and the third is left in opposition.

Now there's a new kid on the block, the True Finns. It's a populist movement with nationalistic, anti-EU tendencies and a charismatic leader named Timo Soini. No one knows how they will fare in the elections, it could be anywhere between ten and 20 per cent.

I CALM MY NERVES by running a 17.4-kilometre road race. I'm happy with my time, a two-minute improvement over last year's result. I get a lot of cheers from the crowd. Is it a good omen?

After the run I go to cast my ballot. It's a beautiful, sunny day. Spring is finally here. The local school is raising funds by selling coffee and banana bread outside the polling station. I enjoy the moment. There is something magical about election day.

My nerves are settling, at least for a little while. I feel calm, almost serene. There's nothing left to be done. After a hard and long campaign, all we can do is wait. People around the country are out in force. More than 70 per cent of the population votes. That's almost three per cent more than in 2007, which is good news.

I BEGIN THE EVENING by talking to the international press. I try to explain our political system. I tell everyone that Finns are pragmatic and responsible people.

We have always had coalition governments. That means compromises.

I move to our election night celebrations at Helsinki's restaurant Bank. I can sense the nervous energy, the anticipation. I talk to my team, thanking them for all their hard work.

The exit polls are published at 8:00 pm. It looks good, we're in the lead. That has never happened before. The Centre Party is heading for a catastrophe. The Social

DON'T WORRY — FINNS ARE A PRAGMATIC AND RESPONSIBLE LOT.

Democrats have gained ground. The True Finns are the big winners.

The night is a rollercoaster. The results keep fluctuating as votes come in from smaller towns and rural areas. We are stronger in the bigger cities, which send in their results last.

THE FINAL RESULT is bittersweet. Sweet because we are the biggest party for the first time in modern Finnish history. Bitter because the result is not clear-cut. A message of protest has been voiced through support for the True Finns. And we must live with it.

I am more than happy with my personal score, but most importantly – our team has won. The rest of the evening is a blur: interviews, celebrations and emotions. That's what election night is all about.

I get home around 3:00 am and have a hard time falling asleep. It's all too overwhelming. It's hard to imagine that the campaign is over. But I wake up and smell the coffee. It's time to start working on a coalition government. I hope we can get it all together before I catch my next Finnair flight in May.

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ALEXANDER STUBB is Finland's minister of foreign affairs.
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