



## BUSINESS VIEW

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The writer is a journalist and columnist for Helsinki Times. He is also a private investor with over ten years of experience.

## The decline and fall of European democracy

"I DON'T need to tell you things are bad. Everybody knows things are bad... All we say is 'Please, at least leave us alone in our living rooms. Let me have my toaster and my TV and my steel-belted radials, and I won't say anything. Just leave us alone.' Well, I'm not going to leave you alone. I want you to get mad."

THE 1976 movie *Network* had some powerful writing, including the iconic "I'm mad as hell, and I'm not going to take this anymore!" line. Recently I've been feeling some affinity to the character Howard Beale. I want people to get angry about what is happening in Europe.

THE EU, defined by its bloated, lumbering bureaucracy, is not known for being a glorious example of democracy. The people did not vote for **Herman Van Rompuy** to be head of the European Council. The people did not vote for **Jean-Claude Juncker** to speak for all of us using the euro.

THIS decomposition of democracy has spread to sovereign governments. The Italians had a premier foisted upon them, as did the Greeks. The last Greek PM that went through an election, **George Papandreu**, lost his job for the unforgivable sin of suggesting the Greek people should have a vote for the currency they use.

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He dared to imply that the Greek people were smart enough to make their own decisions.

IT IS NOT only happening in troubled nations. It is happening here in Finland. Not only are we not allowed to have

a say in some European matters, we are not even allowed to know what decisions our government has made. I'm speaking of the secret Greek collateral deal, of course.

NO ONE has convincingly explained why it is secret. Our government says it is because the Greeks requested it. One rumour is that the Greek banks don't want us to know which of them were participating. (They are Alpha, Eurobank, National and Piraeus, according to Reuters.) Some conspiracy theorists suggest our government doesn't want us to know because of how bad a deal it is for Finns. (It is a bad deal. I calculated it is costing us €102 million over five years, based upon publicly-available information.)

OF COURSE, some official information should be secret. Our national defence plans and our counter-terrorism operations shouldn't be released, for instance. But no one has been able to explain why the details of our public finances must be kept from us. The simple fact that our MPs insist on keeping this from us is disquieting.

STRANGELY, we don't seem very interested. We're more concerned with being left alone with our toasters and TVs. This isn't right. We have a right to have a say in our governance. We have a right to know what our MPs are doing. We have a right to be mad. I want you to be mad. Frankly, Greek bankers have no right to withhold information from us about our own public finances. And neither does our own finance ministry.



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## Business travelling

People still take business trips, but the industry is changing.

DAVID J. CORD  
HELSINKI TIMES

THE FINANCIAL crisis and ensuing recession impacted different industries in different ways. Some have fully recovered, while others have languished. For the business travel industry, the recession

was hard and the recovery is slow in coming.

"For larger companies, business travel is usually among the top three variable costs," explains **Sari Viljamaa**, Managing Director of the Finnish Business Travel Association. "Thus, it is often one of the first categories to be cut when the economy is down."

One proxy often used for corporate travel is the number of premium seats sold. According to the International Air Transport Association, the share of premium

seats out of total airline tickets sold has decreased. The trend had been evident for some time: in 2004 almost 10 per cent of all tickets sold were for premium seats, but by the end of 2007 that percentage was about 9.

The recession dramatically impacted the number of premium seats sold. From a high of 6.8 million, the amount fell to 5.3 million by early 2009. It has improved, growing to about 6.3 million by the end of last year, but is still not at pre-crisis levels. Yet this fall in premium seat tickets does not mean that business travel has decreased by a similar amount. Corporations might instead be more cost-conscious.

"Special attention is paid to the duration of business trips, ticket prices, travel class, hotel standards and rental cars, for instance," continues Viljamaa.

### Video conferencing

Besides economic cycles, changes in technology have impacted business travel. Viljamaa says that video conferencing, conference calls and other forms of virtual meetings have influenced the industry.

"A permanent shift occurred during the recession in 2008-2009, when a lot of companies invested in equipment and software for virtual meetings," she says. "Also, many introduced policies where certain types of meet-

ings were to be primarily conducted in a 'non-travel way.' This is naturally very sensible in many ways, also for sustainability reasons. These virtual ways of meeting are here for good, and will be used also when the economy is up."

Viljamaa believes that virtual meetings and actual meetings can complement each other. As examples, she cites regular meetings among people who already know each other could be conducted virtually. But for a sales call to a client one has never met before, she thinks it would be better to meet face-to-face.

"On a personal note, I have attended conference calls with 30 or more participants from all over the world. All of us had our personal English accents and intonations. Topping that with several different time zones, I wonder if it would have been more productive if we had been in the same room and able to see each other's faces and expressions."

### Travel apps

While some advances in communications technology are negatively impacting the corporate travel industry, other improvements are making travel easier and more efficient.

"There is a world of possibilities for both travellers and travel management in smart phones and applications," Viljamaa says. "Managing traveller risks, the duty of care, is an issue that needs to be taken seriously by any company with business travellers."

### Some tips for frequent business travellers

- Pack light. Never put anything integral to your trip in checked luggage. If you do check luggage, put something distinctive on your suitcase so you can recognise it immediately.
- Have an alternate route in mind in case you need to rebook.
- Be polite to airline staff. Keep your temper.
- Carry a pen on the flight. Some destinations require you to fill out customs forms.
- Consider a portable scanner to keep track of receipts.
- Sign up for automatic SMS alerts with your airline.
- Have one full set of toiletries only for travel. It will save time with packing and unpacking. If you have any liquids, remember to use only the small "travel size" containers.
- Be prepared for security before you get in line. Put your watch, cell phone and any metal items in your carry-on to save time.
- Print out your boarding pass before you go to the airport, if possible. Alternatively, consider the self-serve kiosks, which are frequently unoccupied.
- Consider a travel agent that specialises in corporate travellers. They might save time and money.
- Ask for an upgrade. If there are any available, they might give it to you for free.

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