

65 Degrees North Interviews

Between 2005 and 2012, the City of Oulu ran an English language online newspaper, aimed at expatriates, called *65 Degrees North*. I worked for it part-time across this period and interviewed a number of prominent Finnish people:

Friday Prayers at Oulu's Mosque (March 2008)

(Abdul Mannan, Prominent Islamist)

The international media is full of reports on the growth of 'fundamentalist Islam.' European politicians have expressed particular concern about its rise amongst marginalised Muslim immigrants in countries such as Britain – with its 2005 Islamic terrorist bombings – and the Netherlands where the maker of a controversial film about Islam was murdered in 2004.

Muslims have been widely stereotyped as being 'fundamentalists' who believe in barbaric punishments and that all non-Muslims are 'infidels' who will go to Hell. There are far fewer Muslims in Finland than in Holland but they are a growing minority in Oulu. I went to Oulu's Mosque for Friday Prayers to see if these stereotypes have any truth in them.

Friendly Welcome

I was welcomed to the mosque – which meets at 1pm in a converted flat near the railway station – by **Dr Abdul Mannan**. He came to Oulu from Bangladesh to do a doctorate in geochemistry and is now the unpaid 'Imam' of Oulu's mosque.

I was offered tea by a Somalian refugee before the male-only service began. Worshippers came in throughout Abdul's sermon from the Koran, which he conducted in English, moving into Arabic to say 'Peace be upon him' every time he referred to the Prophet Mohammed. By the end of his sermon, there were thirty-four worshippers and the carpeted prayer room was about as full as it was going to get. The attendees were a mixture of ages and nationalities and speaking to them afterwards I found people from Jordan, Somalia, Pakistan, Morocco, Iraq and two native Finns in their early twenties. In addition, there were a few boys playing at the back of the room where there were copies of the Koran.

Paradise for Believers

Abdul took the Koran literally, claiming that it was 'science' and doesn't need to be updated for the modern world 'because it's already been updated.' The Koran was unquestionably true and Abdul preached that if you follow the Allah, through 'his Prophet Mohammed' as set out in the Koran and the 'Sunnah' then you are a 'true Muslim' and you will go to Paradise on 'Judgement Day.' If you don't, then you will go to Hell though this is all ultimately up to 'Allah' because only he can know who is a 'true Muslim' and who is not. This was the essence of his public sermon. He then summarised the sermon in what seemed like very good Finnish and then in what I understood to be Arabic.

There are Muslims in Turkey who have recently been arguing that the Koran and in particular the 'Hadith' – a book which is believed to encompass Mohammed's advice on how to live life or 'Sunnah' - should not be taken too literally; a common view amongst many Muslims hundreds of years ago prior to the rise in 'fundamentalist' Islam. They believe that there's a great deal in the Koran and Hadith which is politically motivated, of its time or probably

can't be attributed to Prophet Mohammed. Abdul, however, seemed to take a far more literal view.

Prayers

After the sermon, everyone – who was sitting on the floor – stood-up and got into rows facing east. I instinctively followed. I didn't notice that they were all standing with their legs apart with their feet touching those of the person next to them. Eventually, a Jordanian asked me in Finnish if I was a Muslim and when I said 'No' he explained that 'It's not necessary for you to take part in the prayers.' I sat down on a chair and the prayers began with a Somalian – dressed in traditional Muslim costume – standing, covering his ears and praying. People answered with set responses to his prayers.

Then the Imam called out 'Allah Akbar!' and everybody in the room prostrated at once in a sign of complete 'submission' to Allah. In response to various commands the 34 men got up and then did this again and again. When they had finished, the service was over and I was able to talk to various worshippers

'Not Real Muslims'

One worshipper from Jordan who had been in Finland for four years told me he came to the Mosque on Fridays 'because I am a Muslim. It's a sign of being a Muslim.' A Pakistani student I interviewed felt the only problem being a Muslim in Oulu was the lack of a prayer room at the university for his five daily prayers.

A thirty-year old student from Somalia, who had been in Finland since 1992, was studying biomedical sciences. He claimed that, 'the West have brought a war against Islam. There is propaganda about Islam in the media and they say that there are 'moderate' and 'extreme' Muslims.' He emphasised that it was they who were 'moderate.' Those that the west sees as 'moderate' are simply westernised and are 'not real Muslims.' 'The West tries to say that all evil is in Islam,' he continued. And many agreed with his statement that the Mohammed cartoons were 'deliberate provocation' which should be 'a crime.'

Abdul himself told me that the mosque was established in Oulu in 1992 – when he came here with his family – and in 2001 they purchased their current premises. The broader 'Islamic Society of Northern Finland' has about 500 registered members. They are from numerous different countries. The group is a branch of the 'Islamic Forum' of Europe in which Abdul is leading figure.

'God sent the Prophet to all mankind' said Abdul. 'Be cosmopolitan . . . but always keep true religion at the front.'

Abdul does some occasional work teaching Islam to Muslim children in the area. He claimed that he stayed in Finland after getting his PhD for family reasons and due to a desire to serve the Muslim community.

‘I offer my thanks to Mr Bush’

In his view, 9.11 was very positive for Islam. ‘I offer thanks to Mr Bush for his propaganda!’ laughed Abdul. ‘People have been more curious. You used to be able to get the Koran in the library! You can’t get it now because people are so interested!’

He emphasised that the Koran ‘is from God’ and therefore the only acceptable way (from God’s viewpoint) to run a country is in accordance with the laws of the Koran. ‘True Islam is the only way,’ he said.

This included propagating ‘True Islam’ and instituting ‘Sharia Law’ in ‘Muslim states’, something which Abdul defended. ‘The cutting off of hands for the thieves is in Sharia Law . . . Sharia is from God and I think God knows which is the right law for humans.’ He also informed me that Saudi Arabia – where strict Wahabist Islam including Sharia is practiced – has ‘a very low crime rate. This is because people are afraid of God and they are afraid of the law.’

You will not find them fighting or in bars . . .’

However, he also stressed what he felt was the fundamental ‘goodness’ in Muslims at his mosque.

‘They are good people. You will not find them fighting or in bars or in trouble. They are good for their neighbours and they are good for the Finnish state.’ He felt that Finland was different from his own country because it was less religious and family oriented.

He assured me that whether people went to Hell was 'up to Allah' not him and, like many of the worshippers, distinguished 'True Islam' from supposedly 'westernised' Islam of the kind found in countries such as Turkey. He insisted that woman are not discriminated against in Islam because they have 'honour and prestige' and couldn't understand the fuss about the hijab in countries like Holland saying, 'It's nothing new. There are nuns in the West that cover themselves.'

‘Just do it!’ says Globe-trotting Finnish ‘Madventurer’ (September 2009)

(Riku Rantala, Finnish celebrity)

This year’s hit series ‘Madventures’ recorded the dare-devil antics of two backpacking Finns in some of the world’s deadliest places. As the pair hit American TV, 65DN caught up with the one in front of the camera.

They’ve drunk of the blood of newly killed chickens with a corpse-dwelling Indian sect, scoffed a radioactive lunch in the shadow Chernobyl and hung out with gun-toting Brazilian gangsters. It’s travel . . . but not as the average sun-seeker knows it.

Riku Rantala caught the ‘travel-bug’ as a boy. ‘When I was six, my dad worked for the UN and we lived in Kashmir,’ he recalls. ‘I went to school there, in English, and this had a big effect on me.’

But it was his fellow Madventurer, Tuomas “Tunna” Milonoff – the guy behind the camera who always ends-up eating the monkey-brains and human placentas - who really encouraged Riku to explore the beyond.

Avoiding Military Service

‘We were at high school together,’ laughs Riku, who was born in 1974. ‘Tunna was trying to get out of military service. In Finnish, military service is called ‘Inti’ so Tunna decided that

he would go to India ('Intia' in Finnish) for six months! All I did was work as waiter – and live like a monk – trying to save money!’

Tunna was ecstatic about his second trip (to Cambodia and Thailand) and was constantly encouraging Riku to come with him. Eventually, at a meeting in Helsinki, he persuaded him and ‘ten days later we were in Bangkok.’

Anarchy on a Low Budget

After Riku finished his journalism degree, he got a job working for Helsingin Sanomat. ‘We still went travelling but there was less time,’ he remembers. ‘This was in 1999. We started discussing that we’d travel round the world. At the time, there was all this hype about the internet. We thought we’d keep a video blog, but then the bubble burst. So we looked into doing a kind of anarchistic, low budget TV programme.’

In 2002, Riku and Tunna made their successful pitch to MTV3. ‘We pitched a pilot on Indonesia,’ recalls Riku. ‘They said that they would soon be starting a daughter channel called SubTV and it would be perfect for that.’

‘We write the scripts of what’s going to happen in advance. It’s 80 percent written in advance.’ The rest is played by ear in response to what tribesmen in Papua New Guinea or cricket fight organisers in China happen to do. ‘We don’t use voice-overs in the series. Everything is in front of the camera. It’s harder to do but it feels more like an adventure.’

The series has been a success in Finland. In the country's 'Golden TV Awards' it was voted the best programme of 2008 and Riku was voted the best male TV personality. Madventures began airing on the American 'Travel Channel' in September and is due, at some point, to air of the British cable channel Fiver.

Eating Human Flesh

There's no doubt that Riku and Tunna take big risks. In the last series, they visited an Indian cult: the 'Agoris'. Adorned with human bones and smoking human ashes, they live on cremation grounds and are suspected of eating human flesh.

'We got to know a guy who knew some Agoris and that's how we found them,' remembers Riku. 'They were unpredictable, they threatened us. They said if we make something bad about them they would kill us. Our translator said they were very dangerous and we had to be careful.' They were forced to leave the Agori area and leave in a hurry, their camera splattered with blood from a ceremony in which a live chicken has its head bitten off.

Riku laughs of the dangers when asked about where, on his Madventures, he has felt the most frightened. 'Helsinki city centre at the weekend!' he chuckles. 'I've never witnessed such drunkenness – such aggressive drunkenness – and I've travelled all around the world!'

Chilling with the Dons

But his description of being in a Rio 'Favela' (slum) seems a little scarier than a Helsinki bar.

‘In order to film at a party run by one of these gangs who run the Favelas,’ he explains, ‘we had to get permission from the head of the gang. We wanted an audience with him but it had to be in a secret place. We weren’t allowed to know where his gang were taking us or where we were and we had to hide our cameras.’

Having made their way through a ‘labyrinth’ of shanty streets, they arrived at the ‘base.’ ‘Everyone was pretty young . . . they don’t reach the age of 25! They had rifles and they were high as fucking kites on coke!’ remembers Riku. ‘We were told we could only point our cameras towards the jungle. We couldn’t film the don or his guards. But you can hear people shooting AK47s in the background on the film.’ Before long they were told they’d better ‘get going’ and they weren’t given permission to film one of parties.

The Finnish Secret Code

To sell it abroad, the second series of Madventures was in English. ‘It was a huge effort to speak English,’ says Riku. ‘You had to build the right language for the scene . . . so we had a script-writer with us all the time to help us with that.’

But knowing a language that very few people speak came in handy in hair-raising situations, such as Brazil, where some people spoke English. ‘We spoke in Finnish as a kind of code language. ‘And also, when I was very scared, what I said would just naturally come out as Finnish!’

In fact, for Riku, being Finnish helped them survive some of the adventures. ‘You could go anywhere in the world and say you were a Finn and nobody would be offended,’ he claimed.

‘And maybe this kind of “humbleness of the Finns,” this “shame” . . . it’s a good attitude to have. It’s easier to make friends, not come across in a negative way . . . so it’s easier to explore things.’

‘Just do it!’

Riku is engaged but he has no children. Nevertheless his advice to any budding Madventurer, even if they have children, is simple: ‘Just do it! I don’t have kids. It’s more complicated with a family but while we were adventuring, we met many independent travellers and some of them had kids.

My message, in the end, is “Just do it!” You will profit from it! Don’t worry about it not being “cosy” because you can always come back to Finland and live in cosy surroundings here.’

Graffiti Tagging Oulu (April 2010)

(Paavo Ahrinmäki, MP, leader of the Left Alliance, Minister for Culture and Sport).

For many locals, Oulu is identified by a particular piece of graffiti. For some, graffiti's an urban art form. For others, it's criminal vandalism. 65DN investigates Oulu's street art.

'I think it's been there as long as anyone can remember, well . . . maybe since the 80s,' says Jari, 32, a software programmer. Amongst locals, at least, Oulu is infamous for a not especially flattering graffiti tag – 'Paska Kaupunki'. It translates as 'Shit City', with the Finnish word for city ('Kaupunki') spelt incorrectly.

There are many 'genres' to graffiti: asserting a gang's area, plain art, political statements and, in this case, illegal advertising for Finnish pop star Kauko Röyhkä's 1986 single 'Paska Kaupunki.' The tag became such a cult phenomenon in Oulu that a bar opened in 2006 called 'Paska Kaupunki' with one of its external walls being the very wall which displayed the graffiti in question.

Culture of Rebellion

'Part of graffiti and urban culture is a kind of rebellion,' says Paavo Ahrinmäki. The 33 year-old Member of Parliament and leader what he calls the 'socialist worker' Left Alliance Party, has spent a good part of his career campaigning for the rights of graffiti artists.

He is unsurprised at what happened to the 'Paska Kaupunki' graffito. As it became synonymous with Oulu, and especially when a bar was opened named after it, it gained a kind of authority. This needed to be rebelled against and the graffito is now continuously defaced and re-sprayed. Pop-psychologists tend to argue that graffiti is a combination of displaced anger against authority and trying to fit into a group of some sort.

According to Mr Ahrinmäki, who is also a Helsinki City councillor, 'The whole hip-hop, American, break-dancing graffiti culture came to Finland a little bit later than the rest of Europe . . . in the 1980s. By the 1990s, 1000s of young people were doing graffiti art.'

Where there's Writing there's Graffiti

Of course, graffiti goes back much further. According to ancient world expert Dr Bradley Maclean, the word derives from the Italian word for 'scratched' and refers to the way that ancient graffiti was scratched onto walls or into paint. There are many examples of graffiti in the ancient world – in fact pretty much everything you'd find in the modern world including political slogans, caricatures and obscene images, declarations of love or sexual conquest, name tags and even advertisements for prostitution.

American sociologist Ernest Abel claims that the modern 'urban art' style began to develop in New York in the late 1960s amongst both political activists and gang members. As it was illegal defacement of property, artists used distinctive 'tag' identifiers. They attempted to 'tag' as many places as possible leading to a competitive environment and increasing amounts of graffiti as they tried to go 'all city' – to graffiti every single area of New York. By

the 1970s, this artistic graffiti had moved beyond New York and gradually made its way across America and Europe.

Fighting the Backlash

‘In the 1980s there was a flourishing urban art culture in Finland and especially in Helsinki,’ Paavo Ahrinmäki explains. ‘But there was a big backlash against it in the 1990s and it was forced to go underground.’

‘In 1998, Helsinki was soon to be the European City of Culture,’ explains Mr Ahrinmäki, ‘so they decided to wash all the graffiti off all the walls in Helsinki. They even employed stewards to pick up youngsters who they found doing graffiti.’ Graffiti was banned ‘everywhere . . . even in empty houses and train tunnels where nobody can see it.’

Ahrinmäki was horrified by the campaign, known as ‘Against Scribbling’ and ‘Zero Tolerance’.

‘Art experts agree that graffiti is a kind of urban art form,’ he told 65DN. ‘I don’t think graffiti is okay everywhere . . . for example on church walls . . . but some of it can very beautiful art on empty buildings, for example.’

The Member of Parliament successfully overturned ‘zero tolerance’ and there are now designated ‘graffiti walls’ in Helsinki. But most artists have no choice but to remain anonymous if they move beyond these walls. Graffiti-ing can get you up to four years in prison. As Mr Ahtinmäki puts it, ‘You can get more for doing graffiti than you can for raping

somebody.’ Accordingly, graffiti-artists work under pseudonyms, sometimes work in groups (known as ‘crews’) and usually operate at night.

Electricity Boxes, Signposts and Underpasses

Sana Lakso, Oulu’s Youth Work Co-ordinator, claims that there are almost no walls in Oulu where it is legal to do graffiti.

‘Sometimes when companies are building something there are these temporary walls and they can graffiti those and then they are taken down,’ she told 65DN. ‘Or there are a few little places where it is legal.’ But, otherwise, it is illegal and, if you are over 15 and the police catch you, you will, at the very least, be fined to cover its removal. According to Mrs Lakso, levels of graffiti have ‘definitely’ increased in Oulu over the last twenty years.

But, apart from the notorious ‘kaupunni’ tag, what kind of graffiti is there in Oulu and where is it? Though there are a few cases of private property being tagged, it is usually restricted to walls and street furniture that don’t seem to belong to anybody. These include underpasses, the backs of signposts, public bins, lamp-posts and, most consistently of all, the electricity boxes which can found on pretty much every residential street.

In some areas of Oulu, the larger electricity boxes – which are like small brick sheds – and the underpasses may have been legally decorated. Some of these boxes are painted with flowers and animals while a particular Oulu underpass contains a cartoon-like painting signed by members of a particular Oulu school.

However, much of it has been illegally defaced. This includes numerous different tags such as 'Flame', 'Bad FC', 'The Crew' and 'Kimble.' The latter two are particularly ubiquitous on public property. 'Kimble' is on his way to going 'all city.' In addition, there is forthrightly expressed fringe political graffiti: 'Fuck Islam', 'White Power' and 'Fuck Capitalism' as well as comical pictures of dogs and, occasionally, sexually obscene images. Some of the wording has stencilled, some sprayed and some just scrawled on in marker pen.

Lutheran Church in Crisis (October 2010)

(Dr Päivi Räsänen, leader of Christian Democrats, Interior Minister)

Oulu leading the way as over 30,000 resign from the church in homophobia furore.

The Finnish Lutheran Church has been plunged into crisis in the wake of a television debate on the church and homosexuality. Broadcast last Tuesday, the programme Ajankohtainen Kakkonen has led to – by 3p today - 30,192 people resigning their membership of the church.

During the debate – sparked by on-going discussions in the Lutheran Church over whether priests should marry homosexual couples in church - the leader of the traditionalist Christian Democrats Dr Päivi Räsänen strongly opposed any change arguing that gay marriage was un-Biblical because there is no possibility that a gay couple could naturally have children.

The Archbishop of Finland, Dr Kari Mäkinen, stressed that Dr Räsänen, despite being a member, did not ‘speak on behalf of the church’ but this plea appears to have done nothing to stem the snowballing resignations.

Currently, about eighty percent of Finnish adults are members of the church, which involves paying a small amount of their salary to the church every year. To make it easier for them to ‘resign from the church’, a group of humanists established a website, in 2006, called ‘eroakirkosta.fi’ (resign from the church.fi). Ninety percent of those who resign from the church now do so through this one website.

Massive Financial Loss

Usually, about 400 people resign from the church every three days, with a spike at the end of December because resignation then allows you to avoid paying church tax for the entire year. However, the website reported that, in the wake of the show, people were resigning in their thousands.

On Thursday 14th October, the website reported that 2633 people had resigned from the church. This was more people leaving in just day that in the entire month of July.

‘So far 30,192 people have resigned through our site,’ site co-ordinator Heikki Orsila told 65DN today. ‘This is a significant number. It is half the number who resigned in all of last year, which was 44,000.’

‘It will have a massive effect on the church. We estimate that each of the members is paying the church 240 euros a year. So the church will lose 6.4 million euros.’

According to Mr Orsila, the resignations have not yet peaked. ‘So far today 1300 people have resigned,’ he explained, talking to 65DN at 11.50am on Tuesday.

He emphasised that though some may return to the church ‘in order to be God-parents’ this is often only ‘temporary’ and the church will make a ‘net loss.’

Resignations seem to be higher in the larger cities. By this morning, 954 people had resigned their membership in Oulu. As a percentage of the population, this puts Oulu ahead of both

Tampere and Turku and behind only Helsinki, Kerava, Lahti and Riihimäki, which is the home of Päivi Räsänen.

Don't Blame Räsänen

Mr Osila explained that 'a fifth' of apostates had included messages, indicating that they were resigning because they were so offended by Dr Räsänen's remarks. However, he felt that her comments were merely the 'trigger' and that the resignations were caused by people feeling 'too distant' from the Lutheran Church.

Päivi Räsänen, who was criticised by the culture minister Stefan Wallin for the effect her remarks would have on church finances, defended herself.

She told 65DN that, 'Now over 30,000 have left. I am not responsible for it. We live in a Facebook time so it is very easy to make a campaign on the internet and it is very easy to leave the church.'

She repeated her view that, 'Marriage is an agreement between a man and a woman. This is a Christian view . . . I see it in the Old and New Testament and in Jesus' teaching.'

She also emphasised her opposition to gay adoption emphasising that, 'a child needs both parents.'

‘Christian Democrats are not the Lutheran Church’

Tuomas Pesonen, the church’s director of communications, stressed to 65DN that, ‘People think that the Christian Democrat Party is the same as the Lutheran Church. It is not. It is completely different. Things that (Räsänen) says are not the message of the Lutheran Church.’

According to Mr Pesonen, the church has made no decision on ‘homosexual marriage’ but is looking into giving gay couples ‘prayer time’ with the priest, something short of ‘blessing’ the union.

Priests opposed to doing this will be given ‘freedom of conscience’, though he emphasised that this was also given to priests when the first women pastors were ordained and it has become now become compulsory for dissenting male priests to work with female colleagues.

He felt that the mass resignations reflected a general ‘frustration with institutions’ including voluntary organisations and political parties, which are also losing members. ‘People don’t want to take responsibility for common things. They will always find a topic . . . and then push the button’ he said.

Accepting that there would be a big financial loss, Mr Pesonen stressed helping the weak – such as children – would be prioritised while spending in other areas would likely be slashed.

Profile: Päivi Räsänen and the Christian Democrats

Born in 1959, Päivi Räsänen is a medical doctor and leader of the Christian Democrats, for which she is a Member of Parliament. The party has seven MPs (out of 200) and, in 2007, took just under 5 percent of the vote. She is opposed to abortion even if the mother has been raped, fertility treatment to single women, IVF (unless all the embryos are implanted), adoption by single women, homosexuality and sex before marriage.

Her party, likewise, is religiously and socially conservative. One of its candidates in Oulu, for the 2007 Parliamentary election, was a priest who resigned because he could not work with women priests.

A Role Model for Young Somalis? (April 2011)

(Abdirahim 'Husu' Hussein. Prominent Political Activist)

Somali candidate for Eduskunta hopes his standing will inspire Somali youth.

Abdirahim Hussein, 32, does not see himself as a particularly Westernised Somali. 'I don't think of myself as Westernised. I'm still the same person I always was,' he explains. 'But when you come to another country you have to do what you have to do.' Nevertheless, Abdirahim speaks fluent English and Finnish and he works as a translator, translating back and forth between Somali and these languages.

Though adamant that Somalis in Finland should keep aspects of their culture such as their dress and religion, he emphasises that, 'this should only be if they wish. I don't think people should be forced about what to wear' and he has no time for fundamentalist Islam, comparing it to the Catholic IRA in Ireland. 'You always get people who take religion and use it for politics. I strongly disagree with them and I think they should be dealt with harshly.'

Abdirahim's central message to young, immigrant-background voters is that they can do what he's done. They can integrate without extinguishing their immigrant identity, they can get a reasonable job and even a certain degree of prominence. Abdirahim was the chairman of Centre Party Youth, the first immigrant to head a youth movement in any Finnish political party.

'I want immigrant kids to know they can go as high as high as possible,' he emphasises. 'I want to motivate them. A lot of young Somalis, they are the ones that feel they are the

victims of racism. They feel that there is nobody helping them, there is nobody like them on television . . . they don't feel part of this country. They think, 'What's the point of studying at school and trying to go to university when I'm just going to end up doing a cleaning job?' They need to see good examples of Somalis who have integrated well. They just don't have them and so by running for parliament I want to show them that they are part of this country. There is an aging population here. We will become backbone of this country.'

Abdirahim came to Finland when he was fifteen. 'There was a war in Somalia and the kids were being recruited by fanatics to fight in it,' he recalls. 'My family wanted to save me from this and so I was sent to Kenya.'

Abdirahim claims that 'Kenya still wasn't safe enough' and so family contacts in Kenya wanted to arrange for him to be sent to 'one of the Nordic countries' where he would claim asylum. Only the night before he left Kenya he was told by his family which one this would be: Finland.

'I never asked. I never questioned. You're not supposed to do that in African culture,' he stresses. 'But now I'm very glad I'm here. I kind of feel that it was my destiny to be here!'

The Centre Party seems to have a strong hereditary following. Certain areas of the country, especially the countryside, tend to vote for the Centre Party and this support can seemingly be traced all the way back to the Civil War. So why should a Somali immigrant want to be involved in the party of Mari Kivieniemi and Urho Kekkonen?

‘First I lived in Turku and then Helsinki. After a while I realized that I had all these ideas about what Finland could do to be better but I wasn’t doing anything about it. Then I found out about this project in the Centre Party to help immigrants; to help immigrant youth politically and socially. So I was involved in that for about five months and they said that they really appreciated my points. So, I think the Centre Party don’t just talk the talk . . . they walk the walk. They gave me a chance. And so I was in the right place to change the destiny in this country.’ So he decided to stand in the Helsinki region.

Abdirahim insists that he’s not the ‘token foreign candidate’ to mop up the Somali vote or just make the party look inclusive. ‘One old man in the party told me that they wanted to let me ‘do what you feel.’ And I really appreciated that. I’m tired of being taken care of.’

As far as Abdirahim’s concerned, he’s a candidate because he has political nous, not just because he’s a Somali and his policies are not just based around helping other Somalis. His other big issue is business, running a translation company himself.

‘It is so hard to set up a business here. There is so much bureaucracy. We need to make Finland an easier place to set up a company,’ he insists.

Facts: The Centre Party

The Centre Party was founded in 1906 as the Agrarian League. Its base was in the countryside and amongst religious Lutherans, especially the temperance movement. It stood in opposition to the more extreme nationalist influences in Finland after independence. During the Cold War, it dominated Finnish politics as the party of President Urho Kekkonen

(1956 – 1981), changing its name to the Centre Party in 1965. It has been part of most Finnish governments either as senior or junior partner and is the party of the current Prime Minister, Mari Kiviniemi. It was last in opposition between 1995 and 2003.

Maasai Warrior Aims to Win the Race for Kokoomus (April 2011)

(Wilson Kirwa, Champion Middle Distance Runner)

Champion runner Wilson Kirwa has come from living on the streets to standing for parliament.

Every expatriate has a story but Wilson Kirwa's is more interesting than most. Journalistic convention demands that you quickly reveal the subject's age, but Wilson doesn't know his.

'I was born in a small village in Kenya and nobody wrote down my age!' Wilson laughs. When, in order to come to Finland, he required a passport, 'I came up with my own age. My brother said he was born in 1947. I don't think that's right but I reversed it to 1974 and then I made 28th December my birthday because that's Children's Day!'

Wilson – actually named William Wilberforce after the British politician who campaigned to abolish slavery – was born to a Maasai mother and a father from another tribe. 'I was a Maasai warrior when I was young,' he chuckles, in his always-musical tones.

His father had worked his way up from stealing cattle and donkeys and selling them to having a farming business and being the local chairman of the ruling party.

‘My father could never read though. When he drove the car, he would put his arm out of the window to work out what speed he was going at. I don’t think he ever understood even that the world was round!’

Nevertheless, Wilson was ‘educated’ and began studying engineering at Nairobi University before his father cut off his source of funding, refusing to sell his cows to pay for the course in case it meant that nobody wanted to marry his son.

‘My father said that if he sold the cows then I would get no wife!’ recalls Wilson.

After leaving university, Wilson did various odd jobs ranging from taxi driving to scaring away monkeys. He even qualified as an army officer and, on the back of this, got a job as a security guard, salesman and general babysitter for a family.

‘While their kids were at school I would run a kiosk which they had and one day this white couple came to buy bread and eggs. It was very rare to get white people, so I asked them where they were from. They said ‘Finland’ and that it is ‘the last country in the north’ and ‘it is very cold and there is snow.’ I never imagined there could be such a country!’

The couple returned the following year and in 1997 they invited Wilson to come and stay with them in Finland on a three month tourist VISA. ‘Even then, I wasn’t sure it was a real country!’ laughs Wilson.

‘I arrive in Finland on 25th April 1997 with three t-shirts,’ he recalls. ‘The climate was so different! I was always waiting for the sun! Everything was so clean!’

The family he stayed with, 'didn't speak English. We communicated through body language.' This meant that when the grandmother invited him to the sauna, and imitated getting undressed to show him what he had to do, Wilson thought she was propositioning him for sex.

'I told her that in my culture it is forbidden for a young man to go to bed with a grandmother!' he smiles. 'I thought it was a crazy country!'

It was during his three month VISA period that Wilson began showing off his running skills. According to Wilson, the Maasai believe that all cows were given to them by God. Accordingly, they steal cows from other tribes and, over thousands of years, have had to get very good at running. 'It's natural selection . . . Evolution . . . the ones that are good at running survive and have more children!'

'I would win every competition I was entered into and so people took an interest in me.' He came seventeenth in a big race in Pori, despite his trainers being completely the wrong size. So that he could continue running, his running club arranged for him to do a degree at Seinäjoki Polytechnic, such that he could stay in the country. He ended-up living in his coach's spare room.

Wilson reached his lowest ebb when the joy of getting a girlfriend – a Canadian, living in Lahti, who is now his wife – turned sour because he couldn't continue living with his coach and have his girlfriend staying. Too 'ashamed' to admit that he couldn't support himself, he ended-up living at Helsinki Railway Station for over a year.

‘I actually got frostbite!’ he admits. ‘But people eventually started asking, “Where is Wilson?”’ and then his situation came to light.

He went on to win gold in various Finnish national championships, married his Canadian girlfriend and received Finnish citizenship in 2004. This has made him a celebrity in Finland. Now, no longer running so much, he works as a motivational speaker for school children, a sports coach and he has also published a number of children’s books full of stories from Africa.

‘People were interested in me. They knew of me and Kokoomus invited me to stand for the city council in Lahti and in 2008 I was elected.’ Recently, he was asked to run for parliament in the Häme constituency.

‘They are called the National Coalition Party but I think they should be called the International Coalition Party. They accept multiculturalism, they are very liberal, they are the kind of party that want foreigners to be able to succeed.’

Wilson realizes that he is a success story amongst foreigners. He knows that Kokoomus is sometimes regarded as a party for ‘the rich,’ but, as he sees it, it’s a party that wants to give everyone the opportunity to succeed and it’s a party that sees him as an ‘individual’ rather than as a special interest group such as an ‘immigrant.’ For Wilson, this ‘opportunity’ should include cutting unemployment benefit so that it *always* pays to work. If Wilson can make it from being an immigrant living on the streets to representing Finland as a runner, other

people can do similar things if they're prepared to work hard and Kokoomus is the party, he thinks, that will encourage this.

'In standing, I want other immigrants to see what they can achieve,' says Wilson. 'I want to give hope to people. I think Finland is really ready for this.'

Immigrant or ‘True Finn’? Freddy Says He’s Both (April 2011)

(Freddy van Wonterghem, True Finns activist)

Freddy van Wonterghem sees no contradiction between being originally Belgian and standing for the True Finns.

Why would a foreigner – even if they have acquired citizenship – want to become a MP for True Finns? Isn’t it Finland’s most nationalistic, even anti-foreigner party?

Maybe so. But Freddy van Wonterghem (56) is the man who journalists are asked to contact whenever they ask the party about immigration issues. He even makes light of his peculiar status. His election slogan in the 2009 European Parliamentary Election was ‘Send an Immigrant Home;’ the European Parliament being in Belgium most of the time.

But since 1973, Freddy’s home has been Kotka on the southern coast. ‘I was a sailor in the merchant navy. I first came to Finland in 1972 and every third week we would spend five days in Kotka, where I now live. For the young Finnish girls, I was the exotic man from the south and for me they were the exotic girls from the north!’ he laughs.

‘So, in 1973 I came here on a three week holiday and, well, I have been here ever since!’ Freddy married a Finnish woman and then had to wait to get a residence permit.

‘There were very few foreigners back then. Very few of the Finns spoke English, though some of the older people did speak German which I can speak.’ Freddy’s native language is Dutch, which is very close to German.

Freddy managed to get work extremely rapidly. ‘There was a labour shortage in Finland at that time. My residence permit came through and I got a job working at a paper factory the next day!’ he recalls. ‘The factory boss spoke English but I was having to speak in Finnish for four or five hour shifts every day, so I quite quickly started to communicate in Finnish.’

Freddy got involved in politics almost by chance. ‘It was in 2003. The then Prime Minister, Paavo Lipponen, had made a speech saying that Finns should get used to foreigners and integrate to foreigners. I thought, “No. It should be the other way around!” and I wrote an opinion piece about it in the local newspaper.’

‘The Co-ordinator for immigrants in Kotka read this and she asked me to give a speech at a meeting about immigrants. People said to me that it was a really good speech and that I should go into politics! So I went on the internet and looked at different political parties and Perussuomalaiset was the only one whose manifesto I really understood.’

‘So I sent them my documentation. At that time they were a very small party. Nobody contacted me for six months and I thought, “Okay, they are not interested in me.” But then somebody rang me.’

Freddy stood as a council candidate in the 2004 elections, as a parliamentary candidate in the 2007 elections and was elected to the local council in the 2008 local election.

He doesn’t find it odd to be a foreigner – or naturalized Finn – in True Finns. ‘Of course, there are people in the party who are strongly against immigrants but in Finland nearly every

party has people of that kind. Whenever people in the party want to talk about immigration, they contact me and I think that Finland does not have enough opportunities to integrate its immigrants.'

'Also, when Finns use the word 'immigrant,' they're not thinking of Freddy. They're thinking of blacks and Muslims and, in the east of the country, Russians.'

Freddy emphasises that he has good relations with local Somalis and he wants to help them integrate. For Freddy, it is do-gooder politicians 'who treat the Somalis like they are children' who are often the problem, not the Somalis themselves. He refers to scandal in Kotka when it was revealed that Somalis were asking for Muslim-only swimming times at the pool. It turned out that this idea came from Finns working for the council. 'The Somalis just wanted female-only times which some Finnish women wanted as well.'

In Freddy's view, it is in the interests of foreigners that Finland is a good place for their children to live and this means that Finland should primarily 'take care of its own people.'

And, in his view, True Finns are the only party genuinely in favour of preserving free speech and this, he thinks, benefits everybody. 'I say what I think! Maybe people don't like it. Maybe I don't like it! But I say the truth.'

In Freddy's native Flanders, there is a popular party to which some critics have compared True Finns: the anti-immigrant, Flemish independence seeking Vlaams Belang. Freddy is in two minds about the party. He has met their leaders and, 'there are things I agree

on. There are things I don't agree on. Maybe I am between Vlaams Belang and the NVR (the New Flemish Alliance, a moderate conservative party).'

'I think independence would be better for Flanders but, for myself, I live here in Finland so it's not my problem anymore!' he laughs.

‘They have no reason to be afraid’ (April 2011)

(Ville Vähämäki, True Finns MP)

Oulu’s new True Finns MP insists that foreigners have no reason to be scared of his party’s success.

Some foreigners – and quite a few Finns – are deeply unhappy with the election result. A quick browse of social media websites such as Facebook reveals such comments as ‘Oh no, this is horrible!’, ‘I am speechless : (’, and ‘Finland. RIP. We love you.’ A special, tongue-in-cheek Facebook page has been set up called the ‘Fenno-Ugrian Refugee Centre of London’ which claims to offer asylum to Finns wishing to flee Finland because of the True Finns’ breakthrough. It already has almost 10,000 members.

Timo Soini told the BBC last night that, ‘We are not a party of extremists so you can sleep safely’ and new Oulu MP Ville Vähämäki agrees.

The 32 year-old Oulu University graduate and city councillor is extremely calm for a man who only last night was elected to parliament. He is clear on why he thinks True Finns did so well.

‘The first reason is EU politics. We are opposed to the EU while all of the other parties and the government are in favour of it.’ True Finns are pledged to oppose using Finnish taxpayers’ money to bailout any more failing Eurozone states.

‘The second issue is immigration. They are all in favour of it. We want to tighten it.’

‘And the third issue is the old-fashioned politics of consensus in Finland.’ Ville is sympathetic to the view that the vote for True Finns is a delayed reaction to the end of the Cold War, though he thinks there’s more to it. During in the Cold War, Finland became very close to being a client state of the Soviet Union; substantially losing its independence and democracy. The three main parties governed the country and created a ‘consensus’ on most issues, to avoid displeasing the Soviets. This policy involved, for Ville, ignoring the wishes of the Finnish people and this situation has carried on since the Cold War ended.

Unlike the three parties – all of whose votes declined last night – Ville insists that, ‘They are the old politics of consensus. They are old-fashioned. We are the only party that listens to the people. We will make the decisions that the people want. We are a new party. We are the party that will change Finland so that it reflects what the people want.’

Ville is calmly of dismissive of the belief that foreigners in Finland should fear his party. ‘If you are asking if they should be afraid of us, then no not at all. They have no reason to be afraid.’

‘We are a party that is socially on the left and economically on the right. I think that’s not a bad thing for foreigners in Finland.’ Ville is happy to conduct the interview in English if so desired, though it ends up mainly occurring in Finnish.

What about the accusation, made by some opponents, that True Finns are ‘racist’?

‘That is just a disgusting,’ snorts Ville. ‘We are not racist. Some of our opponents accuse us of being racist because they do not like the positions that we take; they do not like that we disagree with them. They are playing with us. There is nothing in our background to suggest that we are racist.’ (The predecessor of True Finns, the Finnish Rural Party, split from the Centre Party in the 1950s.)

Ville stresses that he is not opposed to all immigration. He wants the asylum system heavily tightened, along with the student system.

‘If people want to come here and study and work then that is good. But it is not good if they come here to take advantage of our society and to take advantage of our welfare system. That is a big problem. And as for asylum, it should be reduced.’

Some journalists have compared True Finns to groups in Europe such as the Front National in France. But Ville is not especially interested in immigration politics.

‘I do not know enough about them to comment,’ he says, suggesting I ask a colleague of his about these issues.

In the European Parliament, True Finns is allied with populist, Euro-sceptic parties. It is in the ‘Europe of Freedom and Democracy’ group alongside the UK Independence Party, the Danish People’s Party and Lega Nord, which is part of Silvio Berlusconi’s government in Italy. It has no alliance with parties such as the Front National, often labeled ‘far right’ by critics. Instead it allies with the ‘Movement for France,’ a smaller party which split from the French conservatives. According to another True Finns insider, it is the ‘Finnish Freedom

Party', a tiny grouping which 0.1 percent last night, which should be compared to the Front National and not them.

Ville is far more interested in sorting out unemployment and the health service. 'We have a lot of unemployed people. Some of them have never worked and this is something I will campaign on in parliament. They need help as do people who become unemployed in their 50s.'

And Ville himself is a victim of 'unemployment.' Having graduated from Oulu University in Computer Science in 2008, he has only ever done temping work. At 32, representing Oulu in Parliament will be his first 'proper job.'

The health service is also in a poor state, according to Ville. The waiting lists are too long and more should be done to encourage doctors to work at health centres rather than in private practices by paying health centre doctors better.

Ville's involvement in True Finns had nothing to do with immigration politics. He became involved because, from what he could see, True Finns politicians were people who actually helped ordinary people, including his own family.

Nevertheless, returning to immigration, he does think that this election result may have saved Finland from becoming like Sweden; a country he sees as rife with far too many immigrants, many of them unintegrated and only there to take advantage of the society. 'We have watched Sweden as this happened,' he laments.

Is it likely that last night's result will stop this happening to Finland? 'I believe so,' he says, calm as ever. 'I believe it will stop it.'

Little Boy Perishes in Play House Fire (March 2012)

(Sampo Terho, Leader of Blue Reform, split from True Finns)

A three year old boy died on 17th March after being overcome by a fire in his garden Wendy house.

The cause of the fire, which took place in the garden of a detached home in Vepsä near Ylikiiminki, is not yet known. It started at about 5pm.

According to the police, the boy was playing alone in the 1.5 metre by 2 metre cottage when a fire somehow broke out. By the time he could be rescued, the little boy had died. The mother was in the kitchen, dealing with another of her children, when the incident occurred. From the kitchen, she did not have a direct view of the area of the garden in which the cottage was located.

Another of her children, a six year old, came rushing into the house to say that the cottage was on fire. The mother entered the cottage to rescue the three year old boy but it was too late to save him.

Police are still attempting to determine the cause of the fire.

Century Old Yellow House Condemned

A hundred year-old yellow cottage, which was to have been rescued from the tower blocks surrounding it, will be destroyed after all.

65DN reported in summer last year that the cottage, on Pakkahuoneenkatu, was scheduled to be rescued by Haukipudas couple Hannu and Tarja Lihavainen.

Wishing to preserve a piece of Oulu history, they had intended to move the cottage to their own town. But in preparing to do so, they took down the covering of one of its walls only to find that the cottage's central beams were rotten and full of holes.

Mr Lihavainen described them as looking as if somebody had attacked them with a shot gun. Accordingly, he concluded that the cottage cannot be salvaged and it will now be demolished.

Foreigners Catching Up With Finland Swedes

The number of speakers of a foreign language living in Finland may soon outnumber Swedish-speaking Finns, according to Statistics Finland.

According to the most recent statistics, 90 percent of the population speak Finnish, 5.4 percent speak Swedish (the two official languages nationwide). In addition, 0.03 percent speak Saami, recognized as an official language in certain Lapland municipalities. However, 4.5 percent of the population now has a native language other than Finnish.

Of these various languages, the largest is Russian (spoken by over 58,000 people) followed by Estonian (33,000). In third place is Somali (14,045) which only just beats fourth place English (13,804). Foreign citizens in Finland are now 3.4 percent of the 5.4 million resident population.

But despite foreign languages snapping at Swedish's heels, this is not seen as a threat to the status of Swedish in Finland.

Christina Gestrin, chair of the Swedish People's Assembly (a consultative parliament), told 65DN that foreigners 'are a group with 150 languages so it's not like one group. We don't see it as a problem . . . They are not a united group.'

Gestrin, who is also a Member of Parliament for the Swedish People's Party, added that although the percentage of the population who speak Swedish is slowly falling, 'the total number is actually increasing.' And, whatever the percentages, it is numbers that count because as long as a municipality is home to at least 3000 Swedish-speakers it is legally bilingual.

However, Sampo Terho – Chair of the Association of Finnish Culture and Identity – cautiously disagrees. He told 65DN that 'already in most areas' foreigners outnumber Finland-Swedes and that 'it's rather silly to talk about Finland as a bilingual country.'

Terho, who is a True Finns MEP, added that the situation 'adds pressure to make political changes but change will be very slow because the Swedish People's Party fiercely defend their position.'

Big New Community Centre in Kastelli

86 million euro project will include school, daycare centre and youth club.

The City of Oulu has confirmed that construction can begin on a large community centre in the Kastelli area of the city.

The new community centre will offer facilities to 1500 children and teenagers, including a kindergarten, daycare centre, school for the full age range, a library, a youth centre and auditorium and a gym.

Construction of the 23,000 square metre centre will begin this summer when buildings on the proposed site will be demolished. It is expected to be ready by August 2014.

Expatriate Oulunsalo Councillor Sets Sights on City (October 2012)

(Latekoe Lawson Hellu, Political activist)

Toga-French Oulunsalo councillor campaigns to make the move to big city politics.

A number of expats are campaigning to be the 'immigrant voice' on Oulu City Council. But 49 year-old Cllr Latekoe Lawson Hellu is in the rare position of being just such a voice, albeit in a municipality with hardly any foreigners.

Since 2004, the first time he stood, Lawson has been a Green Party councillor in Oulunsalo. But now that the municipality of 10,000, which is home to Oulu Airport, is merging with its larger neighbour, Lawson is campaigning to sit in Oulu city hall.

Born in the former French colony of Togo (West Africa), Lawson moved to France when he was three. He met his Finnish future wife when they were both studying in Toulouse – he engineering and she the French language. After a long distance relationship, he moved to Oulu 28 years ago, encouraged to live in Scandinavia by his brother, an academic at Sweden's Uppsala University.

To avoid having to return to France, Lawson did military service in Finland – rising to the rank of corporal – and it was then that he started to notice that, 'in Helsinki there are foreigners involved in politics' but none were in the Oulu region. This got him thinking.

And in the early 2004, when Lawson was working for Nokia, ‘four different parties asked if I was interested in standing for them. The Green Party asked a second time and I went to one of their meetings and saw them talking and I thought that this is very good for me. A lot of the parties are only old people but the Greens had a lot of younger people. And there was a lot of openness. They were open to children and people with young families and to foreigners.’

Lawson stood as a Green Party candidate in the 2004 election, explaining that many of the Finns in the town knew him and were always ‘very friendly’ to him. In the small town, 70 votes was more than enough to get him elected, a Green colleague getting through with just 47 votes.

Having caught the politics bug, Lawson used his own money to stand for the Greens in the 2007 Parliamentary Election, was re-elected in the 2008 council election (with 112 votes), ran for the European Parliament in 2009 and stood for the Finnish parliament in 2011, gaining 513 votes (which would likely see him comfortably elected this year if all these votes came from the Oulu municipal area).

There are two main planks to Lawson’s campaign and the first is ‘to solve the problem of public services. There are many old people who need more help. They need help to eat and look after themselves. And there is also a big problem with transport in the area.’

‘I live close to the airport and there is only one bus (into Oulu) and all the tourists go on it so it is always very full. A ticket costs €4.50, so that is €9 for a return trip. It’s too much!’ he

exclaims, ever passionate in his views. Sixty percent of Oulunsalo residents work in Oulu, explains Lawson, and have to pay what he sees as extortionate public transport prices. Apparently it's a particular problem for teenagers who get summer jobs in Oulu and can't drive. 'In Helsinki you buy one ticket, it cost's much less and you can use it within two hours!' he adds

Lawson is also unhappy about the standard of medical care in the region. 'You pay tax your whole life! Why?!' he exclaims, insisting that such taxes should surely buy a right to see a doctor quickly, rather than having to go on a waiting list that's months long.

When asked how he would fund these improvements, Lawson explains that having been a councillor for eight years he has observed in detail how the authorities 'waste money. There are lots of projects that could be cut. For example, this underground carpark in Oulu is not necessary at the moment. There are plenty of free parking spaces in Oulu. This is not the right time to build this carpark.'

Lawson's other main policy is ensuring that the resources are there to make it easier, and even more necessary, for foreigners to learn Finnish. One of the '700,' Lawson was let go by Nokia a few months ago. But, he tells me, he's at an advantage over many expatriate colleagues because he can speak Finnish and at this point the interview starts to be conducted in Finnish.

'We need to invest more money in foreigners so that they can learn Finnish,' he insists, explaining that in Sweden it is far easier to get onto something like a MAMU course. 'It is stupid not to learn the language if you live in a country and it makes a divide between Finns

and foreigners. There need to be more Finnish courses because foreigners have to learn Finnish!’

For Lawson, Nokia ‘made a big mistake’ in pursuing a policy whereby English was the sole language of the workplace. ‘It means that there have been people here for ten years, they have houses and families and they cannot speak any Finnish at all!’ he exclaims, adding that if they lose their job it will be very hard, with next to no Finnish, to find another one. Lawson argues that it should be effectively compulsory for foreigners to learn Finnish and that ‘the government are making a mistake’ by suggesting that you can get by in Finland in English because, in reality, you will be reliant on English-speaking Finns to help you.

Lawson, however, is confident that he is in the best position to help not just the people of Oulunsalo but all foreigners in the area if he is elected to Oulu City Council.

‘I know the system. I have been a councillor in a commune for eight years. I have talked to foreigners. I know what foreigners need. They need to learn the language and they need a job. At first they need a practice place and they need other foreigners who they can talk to and practice Finnish with at the weekends.’

Lawson says that, as councillor, he will represent everybody. ‘We need to be together. And we do need to be one municipality. Sixty percent of Oulunsalo people work in Oulu,’ he repeats. ‘So it is easier if we are one municipality.’