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Self-Reliant Citizens, Market Deregulation, and Labour Flexibility: The Case of Finnish Entrepreneurship Strategy (2000–2022)

Anuhya Bobba 

Economic Sociology, Department of Social Sciences, University of Turku, Turku, Finland

Correspondence: Anuhya Bobba (anbobb@utu.fi)**Received:** 29 February 2024 | **Revised:** 12 May 2025 | **Accepted:** 5 June 2025**Funding:** This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement No. 861047.**Keywords:** critical policy analysis | entrepreneurship | Finland

ABSTRACT

Since 2000, entrepreneurship has come to occupy a central position in Finnish policy, praised not simply as a form of work but as a disciplinary ethos that places increased responsibility on the individual for employment and welfare. From decreased labour productivity, depleting labour supply, insufficient foreign investment, and unemployment to climate deterioration and poverty, entrepreneurship will allegedly offer a solution, if necessary conditions for entrepreneurial development and success are enabled by government intervention. However, the reality of entrepreneurship differs starkly from policy expectations and predictions. Instead, it is a largely precarious form of work that involves financial risk and with monthly earnings subordinate to the national average. To explore this inconsistency, I take inspiration from Bacchi's (2009) 'what's-the-problem-represented-to-be?' (WPR) framework to analyse a total of six strategy documents and five implementation documents from 2000 to 2022. I argue that the problem representations embedded in entrepreneurship policies since the second Lipponen cabinet do not permit a broader critique of entrepreneurship, the very subject of these policies, and instead advocate for a series of measures that prioritise market deregulation and strip important labour protections.

1 | Introduction

On 5 September 2002, in his speech for Entrepreneurship Day, former Prime Minister Paavo Lipponen declared, 'Valuing entrepreneurship and entrepreneurs is something that is no longer disputed' (Lipponen 2002). Since the start of the millennium, entrepreneurship has come to occupy a central position in Finnish policy, both as a form of work but also a disciplinary ethos that citizens should internalise and emanate. Various ministries, from Education and Culture to Economic Affairs and Employment, aim to produce in Finland an attractive environment for national and international entrepreneurial activities and to improve entrepreneurial outcomes for

companies of different sizes, but specifically small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs). The official rendering constructs entrepreneurship as a positive economic phenomenon that will 'create employment and well-being throughout Finland' (Työ- ja elinkeinoministeriö 2022, p. 7).

However, the reality of entrepreneurship differs starkly from policy expectations and predictions. For the lamentations that entrepreneurship will boost productivity and create employment, this does not reflect in practice. The majority of self-employed persons and companies in Finland are either self-employed without employees or single person businesses (Statistics Finland 2021; Entrepreneurship in Finland 2022).

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Entrepreneurial wages average roughly less than 2000 euros per month, and are subordinate to the national median (Yle 2022a). Concurrently, large companies in Finland are considerably more productive, and account for a significant portion of the value of total exports and nearly half of the value of total imports (Työ- ja elinkeinoministeriö 2022, p. 12 & p. 37).

Therefore, a contradiction underlies policy discourse versus empirical reality. Moreover, these inconsistencies are littered through Finnish strategy documents but rarely assessed in a manner critical to entrepreneurship as a policy priority, which inadvertently 'limits the generative and creative potential of experimenting with new potential solutions' and political horizons (Archibald 2020, p. 11). Accordingly, the broad policy consensus of the past two decades remains steadfast: 'Finland should be a country of entrepreneurship' (Työ- ja elinkeinoministeriö 2022, p. 12).

From decreased labour productivity, depleting labour supply, insufficient foreign investment, and unemployment to climate deterioration and poverty, entrepreneurship is purported in policy to offer a partial solution, provided that necessary conditions for entrepreneurial development and success are enabled by government intervention. Hundreds of millions in taxpayer money have been allocated to promote entrepreneurship in the form of business services, education curricula, innovation vouchers, and research and development funding. This presents an important opportunity to ask whether entrepreneurship is indeed indisputable in its value.

Consequently, the aim of this article is to conduct a critical policy analysis of Finnish entrepreneurship strategy from 2000 to 2022. This is conducted through three steps: (1) to critically analyse Finnish entrepreneurship policies for the problem representations they delineate, (2) to consider the assumptions and presuppositions that produced and prioritised these problem representations and subordinated other representations, and (3) to provide alternative problem representations that answer to 'the contradictions, paradoxes, ambiguities, and tensions at the heart of "entrepreneurship"' (Verduyn et al. 2017, p. 38).

While entrepreneurship-related policies in the form of for example, an SME policy already emerged in the 1990s, this paper takes the year 2000 as a point of departure. With the release of the Lisbon Strategy in 2000, entrepreneurship-supportive structures and systems assume a central position in the economic strategy of the European Union (EU), of which Finland is a member state (Koskinen 2022, pp. 28–29). From 2000 onward, the term 'entrepreneurship' appears more frequently in Finnish government programmes as well, or a shift in the country's approach to entrepreneurship policy (Koskinen and Saarinen 2019, p. 146). Evolved from earlier SME-focused industrial policies, this approach was formalised in 2000 with a 2-year entrepreneurship strategy led by the former Ministry of Trade and Industry, which is analysed in this article. Heinonen and Hytti (2016, p. 153) mark this as 'the starting point for Finnish entrepreneurship policy' that is nationally coordinated and locally executed, the responsibility of which is shared by various ministries and public bodies like the Finnish Funding Agency for Technology and Innovation (TEKES).

Theoretically, I draw from literature on the economic and political transformation of the Finnish welfare state to a neoliberal, competition state, to provide an overview of the historical context that resulted in the importance afforded to entrepreneurship in the contemporary moment. Accordingly, Finland offers a unique case study from which to examine entrepreneurship. Finland is typically seen as a late adopter of the Nordic welfare state model, and thus considered an 'exotic exception' (Kettunen 2004). On the other hand, it appears at the forefront of neoliberal reforms based on competition, best reflected by increased labour market segmentation and a rise in nonstandard work. Finland has the lowest rate of transition from temporary to permanent employment and the highest rate from temporary employment to unemployment (Svalund 2013, pp. 136–137). Solo self-employment, or solo entrepreneurship, is most prevalent in Finland and has seen a steady rise since 2000 (Larsen and Ilsøe 2021, p. 26). Denmark, Norway, and to a lesser extent Sweden have maintained a better balance between welfare protection vis-à-vis entrepreneurship promotion, and have responded to the near exclusion of solo self-employment from collective bargaining agreements with different initiatives (Ilsøe and Larsen 2021, p. 219). Finland's trajectory reveals the complexities and tensions in the reconciliation of a social democratic foundation with market competitiveness, which as section II demonstrates, is intimately linked to entrepreneurship-friendly policies and proposals.

Methodologically, I take inspiration from Bacchi (2009) 'what's-the-problem-represented-to-be?' (WPR) framework. This framework, a form of critical policy analysis, considers policies as problem-making rather than problem-solving activities. Policies, in their attempt to answer a specific socioeconomic problem, create a specific articulation of the problem that requires further investigation. A traditional policy analysis typically assesses policy for what it proclaims to solve and the extent to which it solves it. In contrast, a WPR approach does not accept 'the designation of some issue as a "problem"' but rather interrogates 'the kinds of "problems" that are presumed to exist and how these are thought about' (Bacchi, *ibid.*, p. XII).

Analysing a total of six strategy documents and five implementation documents through the WPR framework, I argue that the problem representations embedded in entrepreneurship policies since the second Lipponen cabinet do not permit a broader critique of entrepreneurship, the very subject of these policies. Instead, entrepreneurship is presented as a worthwhile economic activity that requires facilitation at the expense of a range of economic, social, and regulatory practices. At the same breath that Finnish policy acknowledges the empirical disparities produced in the drive for entrepreneurship, often a result of broader structural transformations to the political economy, it also essentialises the latter. Structural conditions—like globalised capital flows, labour market deregulation, or the retreat of welfare protections—are presented as inevitable, naturalised outcomes that entrepreneurial subjects must adapt to. Crucially, it is not only the structural conditions that are naturalised, but also the solutions or responses. In this way, Finnish entrepreneurship policy mediates contradiction not by its resolution, but by its rearticulation within the possible limits of competition-oriented, neoliberal capitalism, where entrepreneurship becomes both a product of and a response to the conditions that it is purported to

overcome. This analysis was further supplemented with secondary data such as government programmes, national and supranational statistics, reports from intergovernmental organisations and think tanks, and news reports.

In this article, I will first delineate the historical trajectory of entrepreneurship and then locate the emergence of entrepreneurship as an esteemed labour market status in the transformation of the Finnish welfare state to neoliberalism and post-industrialism. This comes to enclose what is viable and unviable economic action, and thus inhibits a more critical appraisal of entrepreneurship in policy. Thereafter, I will provide a more detailed overview of methodology, specifically how the WPR framework was applied to each policy document. The analysis section will present the three problem representations that have constituted Finnish entrepreneurship strategy since 2000. The discussion will account for alternative problem representations that have been subordinated in the analysed documents.

2 | Entrepreneurship and the Competitive, Post-industrial Transformation of the Finnish Welfare State

Before acquiring a central position in policymaking, delimited by small and medium-sized enterprises or entrepreneurial citizens, entrepreneurship was interpreted differently. Initially restricted to the urban elite and nobility under mercantilism, modern private entrepreneurship proliferated during the era of business freedom, which emerged after the mid-19th century with industrialisation. Möttönen (2019, p. 25) traces the evolution of how entrepreneurship was conceptualised in various phases of economic development in Finland and linked to the dominant type of company for each period: 'the family business until about the middle of the 19th century, the industrial plant at the turn of the 20th century, and the conglomerate after the Second World War'. By the early 2000s, the small and medium-sized enterprise comes to define entrepreneurship, with the entire citizenry conceptualised as potential entrepreneurs. This transition in the definition of entrepreneurship is noteworthy and warrants further examination.

While entrepreneurship may appear elusive in which form of company or disposition is attached to business creation, it is crucial to recognise that each shift in its definition is not arbitrary but historically contingent. To better understand the rise of entrepreneurship since 2000, accordingly, it is essential to consider broader economic, political, and social forces that rendered such a movement incumbent. This section outlines the transition in two parts: (A) the political reorientation of the Finnish welfare state to competition and neoliberalism and (B) how entrepreneurship configures in the economic landscape of post-industrialism.

A. The 'mantra for all policy choices'

i. Consolidation of the Finnish welfare state

Based on a tripartite consensus with trade unions, employer organisations, and the government, in the aftermath

of two consecutive wars, the Finnish welfare state assumed a more concrete shape in the 1960s. The first incomes policy agreement in 1968 was a notable event in its formation. Welfare policies entailed progressive taxation, redistributive incomes policies, and a robust public sector premised on universal access (Kantola and Kananen 2013, p. 813). The state implemented fiscal policies that contained unregulated competition, prevented crises of overproduction, and reduced the dependence of individuals on the market value of their labour (Slavnic 2009, p. 5; Esping-Andersen et al. 1988, p. 33).

Entrepreneurship, as it later becomes interpreted, did not constitute a separate policy concern. Business creation was primarily broached in terms of industrial expansion and a strategy of full employment, in which large firms, including state-owned enterprises, occupied a central role in corporatist arrangements as funders of the welfare state (Möttönen 2019, p. 108). It is important to note here that these measures were not reached harmoniously; 'public interest' was variedly defined and subject to contestation (Yliaska 2015, p. 440). Concessions, which did not fully relinquish the influence of private money, also served as countermeasure to leftist radicalism on the part of employer organisations and political parties (Ahlqvist and Moision 2013, p. 29; Wuokko 2019, p. 669). In this period, capital was still largely national and 'patient', and competition was often seen as a threat to national independence and sovereignty (Ahlqvist and Moision 2013, pp. 28–29).

ii. Crisis of post-war economic strategy, competition, and neoliberalism

In the 1970s, industrialised countries faced an economic depression and an energy crisis marked by 'stagflation'—high inflation, stagnant growth, and an increase in unemployment. Yliaska (2015, p. 439) describes how the crises have been explained by several theories: a shift from the industrial, Fordist model to post-industrialism; the failure of Keynesian policies and the welfare state; or overproduction. While the nucleus of the economic turmoil is subject to debate, it produced numerous debates over the success of post-war economic strategy and revived critiques of state interventionism and welfare.

This precipitated both national and international transformations to the capitalist socio-political-economic structure, generically termed neoliberalism. As an economic and political thesis, neoliberalism consists of austerity measures, liberalisation of financial markets, privatisation of state services, and state intervention 'to insulate market actors from democratic pressures' (Slobodian 2018, p. 4). Competition, instead of a detrimental force, assumes a normative position from which both policy and political strategy were to be interpreted and structured (Koskinen and Saarinen 2019, p. 147).

From 1970 to 1990, the Finnish welfare state experienced concerted attacks by business leaders and neoliberal think tanks (Wuokko 2019, p. 8). The expansion of the public sector and the increase in public expenditure were considered a 'hazard' to democracy and resource allocation, and the implementation of New Public Management

(NPM) was positioned as a solution (Yliaska 2015, p. 444). NPM reforms in Finland downsized and partially privatised the public sector and refashioned it to pursue the market-driven principles of the private sector. The crisis had also initiated a 'hegemony of capital' with the deregulation of financial markets in 1985 to 1986, the dissolution of the interest rate cartel in 1986, and the Finnish membership to the European Monetary Union (EMU), all of which introduced international capital to a previously protectionist country (Outinen 2017, pp. 398–400).

Initially driven by corporate and pro-market actors, such reforms received bipartisan traction (Yliaska 2015, p. 446). Kärrylä (2023, pp. 130–132) explains that conservatism shares 'many continuities and affinities' with neoliberalism, and while the extent and approach have varied, policies that call for cuts to social services and taxes, financial liberalisation, and public sector privatisation have earned conservative party support in Finland. What is more peculiar is that leftist parties and trade unions shared similar continuities and affinities; the SDP as well as the Confederation of Finnish Unions (SAK) supported a majority of the former decisions. Outinen (2017, p. 401) writes how the SDP and the SAK shifted to embrace the market as a 'rational' response to a globalised economy: 'Capital flight had taught nation-states, including those with Left-wing governments, that in an open world economy their freedom to act was restricted, capital-friendly politics was an economic necessity and capital was firmly in power'.

This political convergence around market liberalisation and facilitation laid the foundation for the deeper transformations that would follow in the 1990s, as capital control comes to be seen as increasingly unfeasible in an open economy, which will further reconfigure the welfare state and elevate entrepreneurship as a strategic policy arena that advances individual responsibility and labour flexibility over state-led security.

iii. *Economic crises, post-industrialism, and the entrepreneurial turn*

The economic depression of the early 1990s marked a watershed moment. Triggered by external shocks—the collapse of the Soviet export market and recessions in core Western economies—Finland experienced a contraction equivalent to 12% of its GDP between 1994 and 1996 (Honkapohja et al. 1999, p. 423; Kangas 2019, p. 157; Jutila 2011, p. 196). While a devaluation of the Finnish markka helped stimulate export competitiveness, marked by steady economic recovery from 1994 and budget surpluses from 1998 to 2008, policymakers interpreted the crisis as more than a cyclical downturn. Framed as a 'crisis of the post-war national consensus', a more consequential transformation of the Finnish welfare state was initiated, which effectively ushered in policies centred on competition and marketisation (Kantola and Kananen 2013, p. 812; Ahlqvist and Moisio 2013, p. 30).

These policies aimed to increase labour supply and flexibility, rendered unemployment a personal responsibility, required

employment for welfare eligibility (i.e., workfare), and considered health and social services as excessive costs. Finland's accession to the European Union (EU) in 1995 further exposed it to the pressures of globalisation, which placed it in direct competition with countries with looser labour regulations and better positioned to manoeuvre fluctuations in the global economy. Jutila (2010, p. 2) encapsulates the 'mantra for all policy choices' that transpired: 'In order for Finland to survive and continue to be successful, cuts had to be made and the global trends had to be followed'. This 'mantra' necessarily demonstrates an enclosure, whereby 'alternative practices that challenge capitalist priorities are difficult to sustain', which becomes especially lucid in the Great Recession post-2008 (Ferguson 2016, p. 51).

Like the 1990s depression, the Great Recession stemmed from global financial turbulence—in this case, a subprime mortgage crisis in the United States and trade sanctions on Russia that diminished exports. However, Finland's membership in the EMU significantly narrowed the scope of recovery measures that it could pursue. Under requirements set by the EMU, the public debt of Finland could not exceed over 60 percent of the GDP. Any increase was to be compensated by added cuts to public expenditure, which institutionalised austerity as a non-negotiable economic doctrine (Harjuniemi and Ampuja 2018, p. 460). Without the ability to devalue its currency, "structural reforms" of labour markets and welfare arrangements' or internal devaluation emerge as the only available solution: wage suppression and further cuts to public services (Dølvik and Oldervoll 2019, p. 217).

Compared to its Nordic neighbours, Finland is considered 'the most integrationist of the Nordic states' to the EU and has participated in 'the extraordinary crisis decisions and reforms' considered by the EMU with few reservations (Jokela 2015, p. 27). Sweden and to a lesser extent Denmark—whose monetary sovereignty is slightly more constrained—pursued more flexible responses to the crises. Norway implemented counter-cyclical Keynesian policies and expanded its welfare state, supported economically by revenue from energy and oil assets and politically by nonparticipation in the EU nor the EMU (Dølvik and Oldervoll 2019, p. 226). Conversely, Finland encountered a deeper recession, with an economy marked by sluggish growth and a GDP that remains behind Denmark, Sweden, and Norway. Finland enacted strict fiscal management combined with a deflationary wage policy that weakened domestic demand and export competitiveness (Kärrylä 2020). Simultaneously, tax reforms reduced state revenue from capital, inheritance, and wealth, accelerating income inequality as well as intraregional disparities (Jutila 2011, pp. 194, 200 & 202; Kangas 2019, p. 158).

Constrained by supranational obligations and a broader ideological shift that contests key features of the welfare state, Finland has been largely unable to pursue an alternative course of action. As employer federations, trade unions, and parties across the spectrum place increased focus on competition and profit, tripartite negotiation and consensus policy have been repurposed to achieve neoliberal outcomes, which has allowed the welfare state to persist in shape but with a redefined, market-oriented purpose (Wuokko 2019, p. 1). Crucially, this

reconfiguration did not arise from political ideology alone—it was also a structural response to the transformation of the national economy from industrialism to post-industrialism.

The rise of information technology, the shift to post-industrialism, and the growth of the service sector have largely undermined the foundations of the mid-century economic order. Corporations that once operated within national compromise frameworks have increasingly sought autonomy from collective arrangements considered ill-suited to the demands of global competitiveness, largely supported by a state oriented to the needs of private business. Correspondingly, the figure of the entrepreneur—particularly the SME—is elevated as the symbol of the adaptability, innovation, and self-responsibility necessary to meet 'global trends'. Yet this celebration obscures a more tumultuous reality: small enterprises and entrepreneurs now operate in an increasingly deregulated landscape shaped by the needs of large firms, to which they remain structurally subordinate. This historical context is essential to understand how Finnish entrepreneurship policy rearticulates the structural contradictions of the postindustrial economic order and presents entrepreneurship as a solution to the very issues from which it is borne.

B. Entrepreneurship in postindustrial Finland

The shift to post-industrialism—marked by the advent of information technology and the expansion of the service sector—has fundamentally altered the material foundation of Finland's tripartite consensus. Economic shifts and political transformations were mutually reinforcing processes, unfolding in ways that make it difficult to determine which preceded the other—each shaped and enabled the conditions for the other's development. External shocks—notably the collapse of Soviet trade—negatively impacted industries like forestry and shipbuilding and compelled a pivot toward Western markets, where trade liberalisation and thus intensified competition with lower-cost producers accelerated their decline (Kuusisto 2004; Haavio et al. 2021). This trend deepened with EU and EMU membership, which imposed fiscal and monetary constraints that limited state-led intervention. In the wake of the Global Recession, fixed investment in industries fell by roughly 40%, while investment in machinery and equipment has been lower than other European countries (Kaitila and Ylä-Anttila 2012). Firms, now exposed to global shareholder pressures, responded with automation, cost-cutting, and outsourcing, further eroding industrial employment (Parviainen 2003; Heino 2013). In response, Finland made sizeable investments in education and research and development, catalysing the rise of the information and communication technology (ICT) and service sectors, with Nokia emblematic of this transformation.

These structural shifts in the socioeconomic sphere were underpinned and accelerated by deeper technological transformations that reshaped the relationship of capital, labour, and state. Information technology rendered production increasingly immaterial and globally distributed, which has subordinated national economies to transnational flows of capital, labour, and production: 'Advances in technology—in transport, communications, information and data processing and organisation—rendered geographical distances irrelevant and

made possible the movement of plant to labour, while ensuring centralised control of production' (Sivanandan 1979, p. 113). This transition reduced the need for labour-intensive work characteristic of industrialism, and instead facilitated the rise of the service sector. Today, the service sector employs roughly 75% of all employees in Finland (Statista 2025).

The service sector's rise has contributed to major shifts in the labour market: 'As technology drives down wages paid for workers engaged in routine tasks, low-skill workers have re-allocated their labour supply to service occupations which are relatively more difficult to automate' (Kolade and Owoseni 2022, p. 9). The expansion of the service sector, which is less capital-intensive, has placed increased emphasis on flexible, low-cost, and non-standard forms of employment. Non-standard work in Finland, such as agency work, fixed-term contracts, part-time work, project employment, and self-employment, has been subject to a steady rise since 2000 (Ojala et al. 2021, p. 97). Kauhanen (2008, pp. 218, 240–241) explains that 40 percent of the country's total employment growth from 1997 to 2005 can be attributed to part-time work, which can be explicated by 'the change in employer's labour use strategies' to reduce labour costs. Accordingly, the rise of the service sector, enabled by technological change and facilitated by an ideological and political orientation to competition and neoliberalism, has accompanied in modern economies like Finland a 'more precarious economic order characterised by increasingly polarised labour markets, widening inequalities, and economic stagnation' (Moraitis 2021).

In this context, the call for labour market 'flexibility' reflects a strategic response on part of the state to 'the dissolution of the classical corporation' that is neither geographically nor nationally bound: As firms shed core functions from finance to customer service and outsource each to subcontractors, they evolve into 'coordinators of a massive network of nodes' (Waterhouse 2017). This transformation necessitates a workforce that is equally fluid, capable of moving across locations, roles, and sectors. As corporate structures and state priorities shifted, policy discourse increasingly frames the worker not merely as an employee, but as an enterprise in themselves—adaptable, efficient, and self-directed—embodying the entrepreneurial ethos demanded by the post-Fordist economy (Dardot and Laval 2014). Such a shift also reshapes how deregulation is justified and implemented to encompass all firms and subjects.

Small businesses in Finland have long resisted regulatory oversight, but their resistance was historically grounded in material concerns: they lacked the capacity—administrative, financial, and legal—to comply with the wide array of labour protections negotiated through tripartite structures. As Jensen-Eriksen (2024, p. 12) remarks, the gains achieved by trade unions often imposed disproportionate costs on small firms. As I will demonstrate in the discussion, the anti-regulatory language once used defensively by small businesses has been usurped more broadly by the state and large corporations—but under very different historical conditions. Deregulation is framed not just as a necessary accommodation for the entrepreneurial subject or the SME, but as a universal imperative for growth in the throes of global competition. Yet while these figures appear

empowered by deregulation and the state's retreat from direct economic intervention, their success is structurally contingent on the large firm.

A clear example of these contradictions can be found in the rise and later reorganisation of Nokia, once considered a success story in Finland. Nokia's triumph in the 1990s and early 2000s was not simply a product of market dynamism, but was deeply mediated by a supportive state apparatus. The Finnish state, whose leadership often maintained close ties with Nokia executives, invested in research and development that produced the infrastructure for GSM phones essential to the company's international breakthrough; underwrote high-risk investments that facilitated its expansion; reformed the Finnish university system in partial reason to fulfil the company's need for high-skilled labour; and proffered a series of tax concessions to ensure Nokia's production remained national (Lindén 2021, pp. 32, 40–41, 43). At its peak, Nokia accounted for a considerable portion of Finnish exports and GDP.

However, Nokia's trajectory also exemplifies the structural volatility of postindustrial capitalism. Between 2000 and 2008, in a bid to overcome lofty costs in Finland, Nokia offshored large segments of its production to China. These decisions, while rational from a corporate perspective, had consequences domestically: approximately 300 SMEs—many of which were tightly integrated into Nokia's supply chain—were forced to cease operations (Lindén 2021, pp. 23 & 122). The very SMEs that had been encouraged, through policy, to consider themselves as partners in the entrepreneurial ecosystem were rendered obsolete in pursuit of global cost efficiency. The state, despite its deep entanglement with Nokia, could neither prevent the relocation nor mitigate the fallout.

Taken together, these developments cast a critical light on the entrepreneurial agenda that has become central to Finnish policy. Entrepreneurship displaces 'responsibility for full employment onto the individual', and in this way, aligns greatly with recent structural shifts to the political economy (Heilbrunn and Iannone, 2019, p. 157). While entrepreneurship is valorised in official accounts, as critical to job creation, investment, and productivity, it is ripe with contradiction in practice. Of the 277,000 self-employed persons in Finland, 191,000 are self-employed without employees (Statistics Finland 2021). Out of the 294,965 companies in Finland, 93% employ less than 10 persons, while 68% account for single person businesses (Entrepreneurship in Finland 2022). Consistently, single person businesses report earnings of less than 2000 euros per month (Yle 2013, 2022a). In this vein, while entrepreneurship does not deliver in what it is purported to achieve, this does not produce a critique of this form of work in policy.

While this policy orientation has produced notable successes—particularly in the technology sector—it has failed to provide similar support for entrepreneurs that operate in low-margin service sectors. These endeavours, like hair salons or kebab shops, rarely benefit from the finance, infrastructure, or visibility afforded to technology start-ups or large firms (Yrittäjät 2023, 2024). Instead, they face deregulated competition, inflation, and unstable demand, with little cushion from the state. What the Nokia case reveals is not just the fragility of

entrepreneurial subjects or small enterprises in a liberalised economy, but also the unwillingness—or incapacity—of the state to intervene when national interests diverge from corporate ones.

As entrepreneurship continues to be celebrated as a solution to economic uncertainty, it is imperative to interrogate the structural conditions under which it operates and to ask whether policy can meaningfully support entrepreneurial activity without confronting the logics of capital flight, cost-cutting, and deregulation that increasingly define the postindustrial order. In 'the kinds of "problems" that are presumed to exist and how these are thought about' in Finnish entrepreneurship policy delineated in this article, the possibility to overcome these structural vulnerabilities is largely foreclosed (Bacchi 2009, p. XII). Instead, as I demonstrate in the analysis and discussion, these vulnerabilities are recast as naturalised features of a national economy subsumed to global market competition—conditions to which individuals must adapt with entrepreneurial fervour.

3 | Trajectory of Political Cabinets (2000–2022)

As Welter (2011, p. 166) emphasises, '[C]ontext is important for understanding when, how, and why entrepreneurship happens and who becomes involved'. This subsection provides an overview of the political cabinets that considered the policies and proposals central to this article, to offer the context necessary to interpret the problem representations discussed later. From the Lipponen II cabinet to the Marin cabinet, Finland has experienced a more pronounced shift from a traditional welfare state model to a more neoliberal, competition-driven state. This evolution in policy was influenced not only by political ideologies but also by external economic pressures described in the previous section.

Under Lipponen, key policy measures included reductions in public expenditure in relation to GDP and workfare policies, following the economic depression of the 1990s (Outinen 2017, p. 402). This also resulted in public accusations of Lipponen as 'neoliberal' by fellow party members, but his policies were largely in line with the more fundamental shift in the SDP described previously (Fellman 2024, p. 192). A departure from normative welfare state principles is evident: rather than the state as a provider of welfare, the individual is expected to assume full responsibility for employment. In specific relation to entrepreneurship, Suomen Yrittäjät (SY) was one of the key actors involved in the formulation of the Lipponen II cabinet's government programme and credits the Entrepreneurship Project as an outcome of its involvement (Jensen-Eriksen 2024, p. 14). These policy developments coincided with the early phases of Finland's postindustrial transformation, as the country started to move from manufacturer-led growth to knowledge-based and service-oriented sectors. In this changing landscape, entrepreneurship starts to emerge as a viable policy arena.

The centre-right Vanhanen cabinets aimed to enhance labour market flexibility with the further use of workfare, where the individual's ability for employment was considered best honed by education and rehabilitation as opposed to more structural

solutions (Kokkonen et al. 2018, p. 40). Both administrations positioned business-friendly policies and entrepreneurship, both as a form of work but also as an ideology that engenders flexibility, as critical to a healthy economy. This policy orientation reflected broader economic transformations: the early 2000s witnessed continued decline in industrial employment, alongside the expansion of ICT and service sectors. The Great Recession post-2008 unfolded in the second Vanhanen cabinet. At the time, however, the crisis was seen as a temporary one. As such, the initial responses to the crisis contrasted from the economic depression of the 1990s, where policymakers rapidly implemented austerity measures. The Vanhanen II cabinet, which set out to consolidate public finances precrisis, considered cuts to engender an insecurity 'far worse than a temporary downfall in state finances' (Yle 2008). This cabinet instead placed an emphasis on basic social security, which was made possible by an economic upturn in the early 2000s, but quickly retracted and austerity pushed in lieu—once the scale of the post-2008 financial crisis assumed clarity (Kärriylä 2023, p. 139; Kangas 2019, p. 159).

The Eurozone crisis resulted in a pro-business stance with austerity measures on part of the Katainen cabinet and later the Sipilä cabinet, the latter of which became the 'public face of austerity in Finland' (Elomäki 2019, p. 186). The Katainen cabinet justified austerity, which was realised with structural reforms, so as to rescue the welfare state—which assumes a normative stance in the 2010s (Kettunen 2019, p. 259). Notably, the measures deemed necessary to contain the crisis at the European level was subject to widespread electoral dissatisfaction in Finland. The 2011 parliamentary elections that led to the formation of the Katainen cabinet also saw the rise of the populist, right-wing Finns Party, which openly criticised deeper European integration. The Katainen cabinet ultimately collapsed from difference of opinion in relation to austerity policies, owed to the broad political spectrum of the parties involved (Kangas 2019, p. 161).

The Sipilä cabinet marked a pronounced turn toward austerity and neoliberalism, which promoted labour market deregulation, significant welfare reductions, and tax cuts in the name of enhanced competitiveness. The cabinet also championed entrepreneurship more aggressively, as necessary for economic recovery and often as an extension of neoliberal austerity policies. Notable to the Sipilä cabinet is the Competitiveness Pact, a national collective-bargaining agreement that passed in 2016, which included an additional 24 extra hours of unpaid work, increase in employee contributions for social insurance, a shift of social security payments from the employer to the state, as well as reductions in public sector holiday pay (Kylä-Laaso and Koskinen Sandberg 2019, pp. 89–90). While this has been seen as an erosion of the corporatist system, it is precisely through tripartite negotiation that this pact materialised. This is in line with Wuokko (2019, p. 678) who writes that hallmarks of the welfare state can be refashioned for competition and neoliberalism, which 'does not necessarily spell the end of corporatism but only its modification'. By this point, Finland's economic base had fully transitioned to post-industrialism. The state's role shifted from employer and provider to facilitator and regulator of individual adaptability, positioning entrepreneurship as a responsibility and a structural necessity in a more precarious economic order.

In contrast, the Marin cabinet attempted to introduce a more progressive agenda focused on climate action, gender equality, and social welfare expansion. The Marin cabinet supported entrepreneurship as well, especially in green innovation, albeit less aggressively than the Sipilä cabinet. Despite a rhetorical shift, it still operated within a socioeconomic framework that placed an imperative on competition. The cabinet's response to the nurse strike in 2022 exemplified this tension, which ended with emergency legislation that prevented the right to strike. The legislation was interpreted by nurses' unions as a 'forced labour law' (Yle 2022b). While Marin advocated for improved public services, the failure to adequately address the needs of healthcare workers illustrates how even progressive leadership is severely constrained by neoliberal ordinance, where limited public expenditure and the privatisation of formerly public services takes precedence.

Accordingly, the trajectory of these cabinets underscores a departure from state support and social safety nets toward a system that values market competition and individual responsibility. This represents the conditions in which entrepreneurship takes place, at the same time, these conditions also act as justification for why entrepreneurship should proliferate in the first place.

4 | Policy as a Problem-Making Activity, or the WPR Framework

The WPR framework comprises a novel approach to policy analysis, where 'the very idea of "policy" becomes a subject for interrogation' (Bacchi 2009, p. IX). The framework considers problems as endogenous to the policy-making process, and shaped by the very process, counter to the normative assumption that policies address problems that exist 'out there' (ibid., p. X). The framework, which defines policies as 'problematizing activities', consists of six questions:

1. What's the 'problem' represented to be in a specific policy or policy proposal?
2. What presuppositions or assumptions underpin this representation of the 'problem'?
3. How has this representation of the 'problem' come about?
4. What is left unproblematic in this problem representation? Where are the silences? Can the 'problem' be thought about differently?
5. What effects are produced by this representation of the 'problem'?
6. How/where has this representation of the 'problem' been produced, disseminated, and defended? How has it been (or could it be) questioned, disrupted, and replaced?

Since the purpose of the study is (1) to critically analyse Finnish entrepreneurship policies for the problem representations they delineate, (2) to consider the assumptions and presuppositions that produced and prioritised these problem representations and subordinated other representations, questions one to five were chosen to orient the analysis.

Initially, the empirical material was limited to strategy documents, or what a certain cabinet intended to achieve over the parliamentary term regarding entrepreneurship. However, this offered an incomplete picture. Strategy documents do not specify what was achieved, only what it is intended to be achieved. Thus, implementation documents were included in the analysis as well. Here it is important to note that under the WPR framework, achievements and failures too require analytical scrutiny, since 'the representation of the problem at hand in turn shapes the evaluation by influencing the selection of evaluative criteria' (Archibald 2020, p. 10). In the analysis, I will make explicit mention when an implementation document is cited, either as an 'end' or 'evaluation' report. While I do not assess the implementation process measure-by-measure, I focus on how the broader representation of the problem shapes the outcomes, namely the way issues are framed and evaluated that in turn influences the continuation of policies—even when their intended results have not been fully realised. Furthermore, the strategy document under the Sipilä cabinet was commissioned by the Ministry of Finance and written by Jussi Järventaus, a former managing director of SY, and Henrietta Kekäläinen, a carbon-tech entrepreneur. The proposals of the document, while not instituted officially, were discussed in his cabinet (Työ- ja elinkeinoministeriö 2018b).

Entrepreneurship could not be analysed in isolation from other policy concerns. Rather, a precursory reading of strategy documents demonstrates that entrepreneurship exists in conversation with various other themes, including but not limited to business regulation, extended working careers, labour costs, lifelong learning, research and development, and national competitiveness. To contextualise the problem representations that concerned entrepreneurship specifically, it was also important to understand problem representations preoccupying a certain administration generally. This necessarily led to the inclusion of government programmes, which delineate what a cabinet intends to achieve over the parliamentary term, in the empirical material. Table 1 provides a list of the empirical material.

To apply the WPR framework, Bacchi (2001, p. 17) suggests: 'As a procedure, I suggest starting with the policy and working backwards. Start with what it recommends and see how this reveals what it assumes needs to change—this is what it represents as the problem. This is only the beginning of the exercise, however'. In certain texts, such as the evaluation report of the Lipponen II Entrepreneurship Project, problems were readily defined under subsections labelled 'the problem'. In other texts, it required a 'working backwards', where from the recommendation, the problem could be inferred. In my first reading of each document, I paid particular attention to how entrepreneurship was constructed, why it is deemed necessary and under what conditions, and ultimately, what it is purported to achieve for Finland. This proffered an initial list of problem representations.

Bacchi (ibid.) continues, 'We have to interrogate the proposal to see the underlying presuppositions which ground this representation of the problem. We have to uncover what is considered to be unchallengeable and unchangeable. We have to consider what will follow from this representation of the

problem'. To achieve this, a second reading was required, where the focus shifted to the cabinet's approach to economic, education, innovation, taxation, and industrial policy. This situated the relevance of entrepreneurship to a particular administration, in addition to the historical development of entrepreneurship as a policy concern. As a result, it was possible to discern how problem representations concerning entrepreneurship developed side-by-side to changing understandings of the relationship between business and labour as well as the role of the Finnish welfare state, or the 'underlying presuppositions which ground' the problem representations identified.

Ultimately, three problem representations were discerned across the different documents: (1) the Finnish welfare state requires more entrepreneurs, but entrepreneurship is not seen as an attractive career choice, (2) the business environment hinders the creation of more entrepreneurs, and (3) the cost of labour hinders the creation of more entrepreneurs. The analysis will offer empirical descriptions of each problem representation, while the discussion will consider the implications of these representations.

5 | Analysis

A. Number of entrepreneurs

Each document constructs entrepreneurship as a necessity. Finland, or society more broadly, 'needs successful entrepreneurs' and 'more SMEs' (Valtioneuvoston kanslia 2003a, p. 8; Valtioneuvoston kanslia 2011b, p. 65; Työ- ja elinkeinoministeriö 2022, p. 10). The need is framed in substantial terms, that without entrepreneurship, 'the welfare state cannot be sustained' (Työ- ja elinkeinoministeriö 2018a, p. 13). Accordingly, because entrepreneurship is consistently and repeatedly framed as a necessity for Finland, a 'working backwards' of this necessity reveals the dominant problem representation of Finnish entrepreneurship policy: the lack of entrepreneurship or insufficient entrepreneurial activity (Bacchi 2001, p. 17). All policy documents examined agree that to increase entrepreneurship, a 'strong spirit of entrepreneurship' needs to be inculcated among individuals, which will transform entrepreneurship into a 'socially desirable activity' (Valtioneuvoston kanslia 2007, p. 11; Kauppa- ja teollisuusministeriön 2002, p. 18).

Despite the absence of an explicit definition of the entrepreneurial spirit or attitude, it is frequently linked to individuals' 'self-reliance and willingness to take responsibility for themselves and others' (Kauppa- ja teollisuusministeriön 2002, p. 28). This is a broader concern of every cabinet observed: the Finnish citizenry's 'ability to cope independently' (Valtioneuvoston kanslia 2003a, p. 15). For example, in the Sipilä programme, Finland's weaknesses include 'individual change-resistance' and 'the outsourcing of responsibility' (Valtioneuvoston kanslia 2015a, p. 9). Phelwe (2020, p. 122) notes that entrepreneurship is regularly deployed to 'postulate [the] allegedly universal characteristics of economic humankind'. Accordingly, entrepreneurship policy

TABLE 1 | List of policy documents analysed by cabinet.

Cabinet(s)	Timeframe	Member Parties	Strategy documents	Implementation documents
Lipponen II	1999–2003	Green League (1999–2002), Left Alliance, National Coalition Party, Social Democratic Party, and Swedish People's Party	Entrepreneurship Project	Evaluation of the Government's Entrepreneurship Project Follow-up report on the programme of Prime Minister Paavo Lipponen's second government
Vanhanen I	2003–2007	Centre Party, Social Democratic Party, and Swedish People's Party	Entrepreneurship Policy Programme	Entrepreneurship policy during the 2003–2007 government of Prime Minister Matti Vanhanen: Entrepreneurship Policy Programme - Final Report
Vanhanen II	2007–2010	Centre Party, Green League, National Coalition Party, Swedish People's Party	Work, entrepreneurship, and working life policy programme	Final report of policy programmes: Election period 2007–2011
Katainen	2011–2014	Christian Democrats, Green League, Left Alliance (2011–March 2014), National Coalition Party, Social Democratic Party, and Swedish People's Party	Included under priority III (strengthening sustainable economic growth, employment and competitiveness) of government programme	Jyrki Katainen and Alexander Stubb Final monitoring of government programmes 2015
Sipilä	2015–2019	Centre Party, Finns Party (2015–2017), Blue Reform (2017–2019), and National Coalition Party	Transforming work and entrepreneurship – from vision to implementation: Proposal for a strategic action plan to promote entrepreneurship 2018–2028	
Marin	2019–2023	Centre Party, Green League, Left Alliance, Social Democratic Party, Swedish People's Party	Entrepreneurship Strategy	

programmes, projects, and strategies appear to serve as an avenue to promote self-reliance and responsibility not only in potential entrepreneurs interested in business creation, but the broader citizenry. In this way, the problem representation of 'not enough' entrepreneurs is not simply a concern of the rate of business creation, but also a concern of how the Finnish citizenry perceive work and welfare. Evidently, entrepreneurship now concerns everyone, which is also relayed in the Proposal for an Entrepreneurship Strategy: '[P]roposals to strengthen entrepreneurship are not only important for entrepreneurs, but are important for all citizens' (Työ- ja elinkeinoministeriö 2018a, p. 13).

One major component of the Lipponen II Entrepreneurship Project, which includes more than 130 measures to promote entrepreneurship, is dedicated to render entrepreneurship an attractive career choice (Kauppa- ja teollisuusministeriön 2002, p. 13). Society is tasked to cultivate 'entrepreneurship-friendliness' and a 'pro-entrepreneurial attitude'; the education system is specifically defined as the key actor in this effort (ibid., p. 13 & 27). While the follow-up report of the Entrepreneurship Project acknowledges that 'only a relatively small proportion of the population' possess the qualities required for successful entrepreneurship, it is purportedly possible to manipulate the number of likely entrepreneurs by 'influencing the conditions and the environment for entrepreneurship' (ibid., p. 16). It even explains that while 'it is impossible to "inculcate" an attitude of self-reliance', entrepreneurship education can facilitate such an inculcation (ibid., p. 36). The follow-up report, which is structured as an evaluation of the project, rarely contests entrepreneurship as a 'socially-desirable activity' (ibid., p. 18). Instead, the report is primarily concerned with the extent to which the project rendered entrepreneurship socially desirable. The report even delineated additional barriers to the social desirability of entrepreneurship, including the negative perception of 'economic success through entrepreneurship' that can lead to 'envy and a loss of acceptance in the community' as well as the attractiveness of paid employment (ibid., p. 29).

The Vanhanen I Entrepreneurship Policy Programme calls for more businesses and enterprises, since opportunities offered by the business environment are not sufficiently captured (Valtioneuvoston kanslia 2005, p. 1 & 3). Here again, by way of entrepreneurship education, citizens are 'empowered' to entrepreneurship with the end prerogative 'to increase the attractiveness of entrepreneurship as a career option' (ibid., p. 3; Valtioneuvoston kanslia 2003b, p. 24). Under this policy programme, the Ministry of Education implemented guidelines and measures for entrepreneurship education in primary and upper secondary school curricula. Additionally, different universities of applied sciences adopted a joint entrepreneurship strategy in 2006, within which 'a target of one in seven graduates being self-employed within 10 years of graduation' was set (Kauppa- ja teollisuusministeriön 2007, p. 21).

Similarly, as part of the work, entrepreneurship, and working life policy programme, the Vanhanen II

cabinet also aimed to improve the entrepreneurial environment and its conditions (Valtioneuvoston kanslia 2007, p. 43). The 'enhancing sustainable economic growth, employment, and competitiveness' policy line of the Katainen cabinet connected more interest in entrepreneurship to better competition (Valtioneuvoston kanslia 2011b, p. 65). The Proposal for an Entrepreneurship Strategy states that entrepreneurial development is 'positively linked to the economic and mental well-being of the population', where 'the degrees of freedom, control, and enthusiasm for work make self-employment an attractive choice' (Työ- ja elinkeinoministeriö 2018a, p. 30 & 40). Proposal 34 demands teachers to internalise 'transformational trends' in entrepreneurship and work (ibid., p. 111). Under the strategic theme of an 'entrepreneurial culture society', the Entrepreneurship Strategy strives to cultivate 'a positive and realistic view of entrepreneurship' in which it is seen as an attractive career path (Työ- ja elinkeinoministeriö 2022, p. 72). The Marin programme similarly sought to motivate entrepreneurship and self-employment with incentives (Valtioneuvoston kanslia 2019, p. 15).

While shaping entrepreneurship as a socially desirable activity via an attitudinal change was especially evident in the activities of the Lipponen I and Vanhanen I cabinet, and is still reflected in the latest Entrepreneurship Strategy of the Marin cabinet, it becomes less of a priority by the Vanhanen II cabinet. Heinonen and Hytti (2016, p. 156) write that while the Vanhanen II cabinet was less concerned about entrepreneurship, 'assigning more responsibility to individuals could be seen as a part of the entrepreneurship programme: viewing every person as an entrepreneur in charge of their own employment'. As entrepreneurship education becomes more and more institutionalised, the preferred method to promote self-responsibility, problem representations concerning the regulatory nature of the Finnish business environment and the cost of labour compose the crux of the empirical material.

B. Business environment

The prioritisation of entrepreneurship as a policy concern coincided with the competitive restructuring of the Finnish welfare state, where the focus of business policy aims to improve market function and facilitate success in international competition. As summarised in the Vanhanen I programme, 'Finland must be a competitive location in terms of both infrastructure and taxation for businesses and their key functions' (Valtioneuvoston kanslia 2003a, p. 8). In relation to entrepreneurship, the business environment is repeatedly described as 'inhibited by regulatory rigidities', littered with 'barriers to entry for a new business' and inappropriate administrative, infrastructural, and regulatory constraints (Kauppa- ja teollisuusministeriön 2002, p. 16; Valtioneuvoston kanslia 2015a, p. 8; Valtioneuvoston kanslia 2015b, p. 42; Työ- ja elinkeinoministeriö 2018a, p. 37). The barriers include severe tax treatment for businesses, high inheritance tax impacting generational company transfers, lack of risk finance for new and growing businesses, municipal

monopolies, social security and pensions for entrepreneurs, and excessive charges. Across different cabinets, extensive measures have been implemented to address these barriers and rigidities, to 'set people's resources free' for creative activity, entrepreneurship, and well-being (Valtioneuvoston kanslia 2015a, p. 8).

This problem representation animates numerous critiques of traditional features of the welfare state. One of which is the public provision of basic services, criticised as creating an 'artificial competitive advantage' that inhibits 'the creation and development of private enterprises to become competitive' (Kauppa- ja teollisuusministeriön 2002, p. 23). The public sector, governed by the municipality, is portrayed ultimately as inefficient. The evaluation of the Entrepreneurship Project defines 'a supportive and positive environment for businesses' as one of market liberalisation and deregulation, whereby 'free market access for businesses' acts as a catalyst for more entrepreneurship (ibid., p. 24). Central to a supportive business environment is 'the competitive provision of public services by the private sector' (ibid.). Under the Lipponen II cabinet, which oversaw this project, JULMA was launched—a public procurement marketplace established to simplify 'the process of municipalities purchasing care services' (ibid.). This sentiment is reiterated in both of the Vanhanen cabinets' entrepreneurship efforts. To this end, the Vanhanen II cabinet even contemplated amending the Act on Competition Restrictions to 'ensure equal conditions for private and public service production through competition policy' (Valtioneuvoston kanslia 2007, p. 44). These efforts are not only linked to entrepreneurship, but more broadly to national 'economic growth' and 'the stability of public finances' (Valtioneuvoston kanslia 2003b, p. 10).

Although earlier policy efforts prioritised conditions for public and private service provision, the balance veers in the favour of private sector in the Sipilä cabinet. Proposal 34 ('fair competition and the municipal sector') of the Proposal for an Entrepreneurship Strategy states, 'Under our proposal, municipalities will systematically withdraw from markets where there is or could be sufficient competition from private supply' (Työ- ja elinkeinoministeriö 2018a, p. 17). Here, the entrepreneur is considered 'vulnerable' in relation to the municipality, which can reportedly obtain loans easier than entrepreneurs and can favour its own subsidiaries in the procurement process (ibid., 2018, p. 123). This results in a recommendation for a 'penalty payment for public authorities infringing competition neutrality' and the conclusion: 'It is also difficult to see any good reason for a municipality to operate in a competitive market at all' (ibid., 2018, p. 124).

A second aspect of the traditional welfare state under scrutiny is the progressive taxation policy. The Finnish tax system is labelled as a 'constraint' that requires change 'in a more motivating direction', ensuring it does not impose 'an undue tax burden on future generations', encourages employment and entrepreneurship, and renders Finland an attractive location for companies (Kauppa- ja teollisuusministeriön 2002, p. 58 & 64; Valtioneuvoston kanslia 2003a, p. 9). The Vanhanen I cabinet introduced major

tax cuts and adjustments, reducing the corporate tax rate to 'strengthen the international competitiveness of the Finnish tax system' (Valtioneuvoston kanslia 2003b, p. 13). Earned income taxation was decreased by 295 million in the 2003 budget and was proposed to be reduced by 775 million in 2004 (ibid.). The wealth tax was abolished in this administration. To support family entrepreneurship, in the Vanhanen II cabinet, the tax-free portion of the net inheritance tax was raised (Valtioneuvoston kanslia 2011a, p. 34). The Katainen cabinet entered force as two consecutive financial crises unfolded, and therefore, the capital tax rate and the inheritance tax were increased. However, the corporate tax rate was proposed to be lowered to 'enhance the competitiveness of Finnish business, to encourage business investment, and to promote employment' (Valtioneuvoston kanslia 2011b, p. 15–16). While the Sipilä cabinet's tax policy aimed to support entrepreneurship, work, and employment by easing labour taxation, the Marin cabinet interpreted tax policy in accordance with its 'traditional main function' as a means to sustainably finance public services (Valtioneuvoston kanslia 2015a, p. 11; Valtioneuvoston kanslia 2019, p. 22).

The Proposal for an Entrepreneurship Strategy suggested tax incentives for SMEs. Since Finnish tax policy already deviates from neutral taxation, with high incomes taxed more than low incomes, providing tax incentives for entrepreneurs should not be viewed as an additional deviation (Työ- ja elinkeinoministeriö 2018a, p. 66). While the proposal connects labour supply issues to jobseekers with 'insufficient' skills or inappropriate education and work experience, it considers entrepreneur bankruptcy to be 'a natural part of economic regeneration and efficiency', a challenge to be managed compassionately (ibid., p. 79 & 83). It also supports the complete abolition of transfer and inheritance tax (ibid., p. 133). The Entrepreneurship Strategy deems the 'high overall level of taxation as a challenge to incentives for entrepreneurship and employment' (Työ- ja elinkeinoministeriö 2022, p. 26).

In addition to these critiques, the problem representation also shapes a new role for the redefined welfare state: business support. The Government Evaluation Report of the Lipponen II cabinet reduced administrative burdens on SMEs through the Business Information Act, 244 (2001); (Valtioneuvoston kanslia 2003c, p. 19). Enterprise Finland was launched in 2002, meant to serve as the one-stop-shop for 'businesses, entrepreneurs, and would-be entrepreneurs to find key public sector services and connections' (ibid.). Finnvera Oyj, the state-owned financing company, was established under the same cabinet and directed to support the generational transfer of companies and to internationalise Finnish SMEs through loans and guarantees (ibid.).

From 2000 to 2002, a total of 343 million in investment, development, and operating aid was allocated to improve the long-term competitiveness of SMEs (ibid., p. 20). The entrepreneurship policy under Vanhanen I approved an allocation of 13 million to finance start-up innovation companies, and also instituted a specialised fund under Finnvera in 2005 (Kauppa- ja teollisuusministeriön 2007,

p. 15). The end report of the second Vanhanen cabinet's entrepreneurship policy programme also saw an increase in Finnvera's domestic financing powers (Valtioneuvoston kanslia 2011a, p. 28). Nearly 150 million euros were also received by Suomen Teollisuussijoitus, which while not intended for SMEs, 'their impact on the SME sector is also significant' (ibid., p. 29). More recently, the Entrepreneurship Strategy under Marin deems research and development aid as 'the most economically sustainable form of business support' in the form of 'grants, interest rate subsidies, loans, guarantees, equity financing, [and] tax aid' (Työ- ja elinkeinoministeriö 2022, p. 19 & 32). The Proposal for an Entrepreneurship Strategy also recommends an innovation voucher scheme for SMEs.

C. The cost and flexibility of labour

The final problem representation concerns labour, which is repeatedly marked as too 'costly'—especially for the small entrepreneur. As described previously, the welfare state is traditionally characterised by the decommodification of labour. However, within these policy documents, the prioritisation of workers in relation to business is criticised as a disparity that must be restored: 'Labour law will be developed in a way that balances worker safety and the flexibility that businesses need to operate' (Valtioneuvoston kanslia 1999, p. 13). This is reiterated in direct relation to entrepreneurship, where as part of the policy programme for employment, entrepreneurship, and worklife, the Vanhanen I cabinet writes, 'A new Finnish modus operandi will be worked out to create greater harmony between job security and flexibility. Promoting these objectives side by side will help respond to the needs of both the employer and employees'. (Valtioneuvoston kanslia 2003a, p. 62).

Namely, an increased labour supply is seen as critical to secure economic growth, which necessitates a rise in the share of the working-age population and a delay in the age at which people exit the labour market. The Vanhanen II cabinet even financed the 'Senior in Work' TV series 'to present examples of people who, after reaching retirement age, still wanted to continue their working career' (Valtioneuvoston kanslia 2011a, p. 27). Here, it is evident that the source of reproval is not necessarily the 'structural change situations' brought on by competitive capitalism, but rather the 'readiness' of workers to 'take responsibility for themselves and for those closest to them' (Valtioneuvoston kanslia 2011b, p. 12 & 95). Efforts to boost labour supply may appear unrelated to entrepreneurship, but they behave complementarily. The individual must adapt to a competitive economy with increased flexibility, which may mean a delayed exit from the labour market, and entrepreneurship and entrepreneurial skills are regularly presented as venue to actualise the self-reliance necessary to create a workforce that can respond to market needs without state support.

This absence of balance and harmony comprises the 'problem': the scale is reportedly tipped to the benefit of labour, which curtails business development. Intimately bound to this representation are the purported 'changes in working life' required to sustain the Finnish welfare state in an era of competitive capitalism, where '[a]n increasing number of citizens will face

alternate periods of work, training, and unemployment' (Valtioneuvoston kanslia 2011b, p.77). The Proposal for an Entrepreneurship Strategy suggests in lieu of a career, it is 'more appropriate to speak of a work-life story' (Työ- ja elinkeinoministeriö 2018a, p. 36). Instead of a 'linear career perspective' marked by a permanent employment relationship, 'the need to react rapidly' to 'various forms of employment' is valorised (ibid.). In this sense, instead of a balance, the empirical material appears to suggest that the enterprise should now assume precedence.

The Entrepreneurship Project evaluation cites '[t]he main constraints on growth identified by businesses were high ancillary wage costs and the high cost of labour' (Kauppa- ja teollisuusministeriön 2002, p. 38). The evaluation of the project recognises that 'the main factors affecting entrepreneurship, such as taxation, labour costs, and bureaucracy' are discussed as 'general economic policy issues', and effectively calls for enterprise policy to 'focus on supporting and monitoring the main economic policies that promote entrepreneurship' (ibid., p. 40). This convergence of entrepreneurship policy with main economic policy in relation to the question of labour and labour cost become more evident in the cabinets of Sipilä and Marin. This is in line with Kaitila (2019, p. 55) observation that after the Eurocrisis, Finnish policies now work to reduce unit labour cost or 'the average cost of labour per unit of output produced', as opposed to technological change and innovation as avenues to pursue competitive advantage (OECD 2023).

The Sipilä cabinet increasingly urged a shift from collective bargaining agreements, a central feature of the welfare state, to 'local agreement practices' that would determine employment terms and conditions at the level of the firm—specifically intended to increase the SME 'willingness to employ' (Valtioneuvoston kanslia 2015a, p. 16). As mentioned previously in relation to the Competitiveness Pact, this shift can also occur in the context of tripartite negotiation. Remarkably, a metric of success delineated by the cabinet had been 'the number of permanent employment relationships concluded' in employment services (ibid.). Proposals 15 to 17 of the Proposal for an Entrepreneurship Strategy, disseminated under his cabinet, specifically address labour in relation to entrepreneurship.

Proposal 15 calls for 'fairness and well-being' of employers and entrepreneurs next to that of employees (Työ- ja elinkeinoministeriö 2018a, p. 14). Proposal 16 seeks to remove the requirement of serious cause in relation to the dismissal of an employee from the Employment Contracts Act, so that 'under-performance in a job or unsuitability for the work community' would 'constitute a right to termination of employment' (ibid., p. 88). Proposal 17 characterises collective bargaining agreements as 'barrier[s] to best practices for maintaining and increasing employment' (ibid., p. 91). Accordingly, it proposes that in companies with less than 10 employees, 'the legal right to conclude agreements that deviate from the provisions of collective agreements' should be granted (ibid., p. 94). For the sake of 'linear business growth' in the long term, however, this legal right 'should apply to all employer enterprises' (ibid., p. 96). The problem representation of labour as costly also necessitates a description of labour as inflexible, where existing labour legislation purportedly does not allow for 'a mechanism

in the labour market which would allow labour costs to be adjusted' to maintain competitiveness, which amounts to greater risk for the employing entrepreneur and ultimately inhibits the rate of job creation made possible by entrepreneurship (ibid., p. 91).

Similarly, the Marin cabinet also encourages 'company-level agreements', albeit with the intention 'to protect the weaker parties in the labour market, in other words employees' in simultaneous consideration of 'the competitiveness of the country and enterprises' (Valtioneuvoston kanslia 2019, pp. 17 & 145). The Entrepreneurship Strategy, developed under this cabinet, explains that 'the increased use of local agreements could increase the flexibility of the Finnish labour market and strengthen productivity developments' (Työ- ja elinkeinoministeriö 2022, p. 26). It also cites a study that similarly concludes, 'Finland's position could be improved by improving regulation affecting competition, facilitating labour mobility by reducing protection against dismissal, and favouring measures that increase entrepreneurs' human capital, that is, knowledge and skills' (ibid., p. 118).

6 | Discussion

Bacchi (2012, p. 2) writes, 'By studying problematizations therefore, it is possible "to demonstrate how things which appear most evident are in fact fragile and that they rest upon particular circumstances, and are often attributable to historical conjectures which have nothing necessary or definitive about them"'. In each policy document considered, entrepreneurship appears as purely beneficial, or 'positively linked to the economic and mental well-being of the population' (Työ- ja elinkeinoministeriö 2018a, p. 40). If this assessment remains unsubjected to careful examination, the 'complex relations' and 'historical conjectures' that produced this appearance remain obfuscated. Accordingly, the elevation of entrepreneurship in Finnish policy is not a 'necessary or definitive' development. Rather, it is historically situated in a broader transformation of the Finnish welfare state—from a corporatist model characterised by full employment and universal social services to a neoliberal framework oriented around competition, fiscal discipline, and labour market flexibilisation.

The sheer number of measures required to develop 'entrepreneurship-friendliness' necessarily demonstrates Bacchi's definition of policy as problem-making activities, where the problem representation of 'not enough' entrepreneurs and a dissatisfactory attitude toward entrepreneurship is first stated and then addressed within policy. While entrepreneurship is repeatedly presented as a positive economic activity in its very essence, policy documents reveal the degree of effort and intervention needed to shape it as a positive economic activity. Once entrepreneurship is displaced from this essentialising interpretation, then the political implication of each problem representation is opened for critical consideration.

First, a majority of the policy documents in question describe the failure of entrepreneurship. The Evaluation of the Entrepreneurship Project notes, 'Studies have found that around half of all businesses go out of business or close down during

the first 5 years of operation' (Kauppa- ja teollisuusministeriön 2002, p. 35). Similarly, despite the considerable breadth of entrepreneurship measures in Vanhanen's tenure, the end report of the second cabinet concludes, 'There have been no significant changes in companies' willingness to grow during the government period' (Valtioneuvoston kanslia 2011a, p. 14). The same report remarks that the rise in entrepreneurial activity is to be located in the increase of 'sole proprietors' rather than in the number of companies that employ, even as the valorised quality of entrepreneurship is job creation (ibid., p. 22). The Entrepreneurship Strategy explains, 'Young growth-oriented firms are characterised by a high job creation rate, but also by a high job destruction rate, which means that employment in SMEs involves not only growth but turbulence-induced job insecurity' (Työ- ja elinkeinoministeriö 2022, p. 16). However, this does not deter the same text from concluding in a later page, 'Young growth-oriented firms are important for productivity growth, as they create the most jobs in the longer term' (ibid., p. 64).

Because the main problem representation of each document remains insufficient entrepreneurial activity based on the assumption that entrepreneurship is intrinsically positive for the economy, the volatility of business creation in the era of competitive capitalism does not lead to a more radical scrutiny of entrepreneurship. Rather, it results in the second problem representation, where the business environment becomes the object of scrutiny. This then acts as an avenue to critique fundamental characteristics of the welfare state, and ultimately, to promote competitive restructuring in which market liberalisation for private enterprise development assumes precedence. Like entrepreneurship, competitiveness is presented as a favourable economic orientation *au fond*. Competition is described as a positive 'incentive' for companies, and thus, the 'fragmented careers, dispersed workplaces, multiple simultaneous sources of income, and an increase in multiple discontinuities' that result are not criticised but rather realities that labour must adjust to (Työ- ja elinkeinoministeriö 2018a, p. 27; Työ- ja elinkeinoministeriö 2022, p. 22).

Hallmarks of the Finnish welfare state, such as centralised wage setting and the strict regulation of employee dismissal, are now obstacles to the competitiveness of Finnish businesses. Namely, they are portrayed as obstacles to the small and medium sized enterprise. Confusingly, the latest Entrepreneurship Strategy cites a survey that demonstrates 'wage levels, the risk of dismissal, labour legislation and collective agreements, part-time pay, and taxation' were not commonly listed obstacles by small enterprises (Työ- ja elinkeinoministeriö 2022, p. 40). Rather, a majority simply 'did not need to employ' (ibid., p. 39). As indicated by the extent of business support proffered by taxpayer money, smaller enterprises do not have the financial resources to scale operations, and thus do not have the capacity to exploit weaker labour legislation to make headway. In this sense, the assault on these provisions is most beneficial for larger corporations, which are far more productive and constitute a considerable portion of national imports and exports. If labour legislation is weakened, then expendable labour in the form of single person businesses or entrepreneurial employees acts as additional sources of profit for large corporations. As discussed in section II, Finnish SMEs—celebrated

as entrepreneurial vanguards—are in many cases structurally subordinate to the global strategies of large corporations, a dynamic exemplified by the Nokia case.

This is seemingly why there is no further appraisal of the type of jobs created by the entrepreneur or the small and medium sized enterprise. The latest Entrepreneurship Strategy cites a survey that describes the preferred use of subcontractors over employees by self-employed persons and employer entrepreneurs. Entrepreneurial job creation then does not produce more employees but results in the use of subcontractors, which effectively creates a chain of enterprises that do not have to afford basic services for workers. Effectively, the worker becomes an enterprise, best reflected here: 'An entrepreneur wants to be an entrepreneur, not an employee' (Työ- ja elinkeinoministeriö 2018a, p. 49). For Tavares (2018), this is a development that warrants political contestation.

On a more global scale, several reports display a positive correlation between wealth inequality and entrepreneurship, precisely because the conditions required to facilitate more entrepreneurship necessitate the dismantlement of measures used to protect labour (Lippmann et al. 2005; Ragoubi and El Harbi 2017). Given this, it appears to be a worthwhile task to displace entrepreneurship as a positive economic phenomenon. The failures of entrepreneurship as a policy concern cannot be solely attributed to any one policy, its implementation, or entrepreneurship per se. Instead, they must be viewed within the broader framework of structural factors imposed by transformations in the capitalist political economy, such as competition, globalisation, and neoliberal reform. These forces afford the 'shape' taken by the entrepreneurial turn, which underline both the limits of what can be problematised and the scope of acceptable policy solutions.

I contend that these structural factors come to comprise an alternative problem representation, from which the 'contradictions, paradoxes, ambiguities, and tensions at the heart' of Finnish entrepreneurship policies arise (Verduyn et al. 2017, p. 38). Policies that assume entrepreneurship can propel economic success rarely problematise competition, globalisation, or neoliberal reform, which are instead rendered immutable and unquestioned aspects of the entrepreneurial landscape. If such structural factors assumed the form of a problem representation, the incessant push for entrepreneurship and an entrepreneurial outlook and entrepreneurship's studied inability to create employment or prosperity, procure skilled labour, and increase productivity could lead to more critical, honest enquiry. A more historically and structurally attuned approach would reframe the entrepreneurial turn not as a policy failure to fix, but as a symptom of deeper contradictions in Finland's post-industrial political economy—contradictions that must be surfaced if more equitable alternatives are to be imagined.

7 | Conclusion

This article started with the observation that entrepreneurship, as described in policy, deviates from empirical outcomes: entrepreneurship does not result in job creation or increased investment and productivity in the manner that it is routinely

described. To make sense of this disjuncture, I turned to theoretical literature on the neoliberal transformation of the Finnish welfare state and the transition to post-industrialism, wherefrom I situate the rise of entrepreneurship as a policy concern. Analysing entrepreneurship strategy since 2000 for the problem representations they delineate, I demonstrated that rarely is entrepreneurship assessed in a manner that accounts for this primary contradiction. Rather, it is repeatedly constructed as an 'integral part of the welfare state', which further lends to additional reforms of the welfare state itself from private provision of public services to decreased labour protection to ensure that entrepreneurship is able to fulfil its purported promise (Koskinen 2022, p. 61).

The WPR framework, as employed here, does not propose a corrective policy agenda but offers a critical space to interrogate the very terms in which problems are posed. As Bacchi (2009, p. 46) argues, it is a question of reclaiming the right to question how problems are conceptualised, rather than merely accepting the forms they are given. Accordingly, I contend for a shift in focus that incorporates the economic and socio-political conditions under which entrepreneurship emerges as a plausible solution in the first place.

Welter (2011, p. 177) explains that 'a contextualised view on entrepreneurship asks for an interdisciplinary perspective'. Accordingly, this article is complementary to discussions in fields such as business history, critical entrepreneurship studies, critical policy studies, and political economy. From an interdisciplinary approach, this article underscores how entrepreneurship reveals key tensions between welfare state policies and market-driven approaches. Such an analysis illuminates the tensions between Finland's historical commitment to social democracy and the increased prioritisation of entrepreneurship as a driver of economic prosperity, namely how neoliberal practices have repurposed policy and how entrepreneurial policies and proposals are oriented antagonistically to collective welfare.

Finally, with the use of entrepreneurship as a point of entry and an analytical anchor, this article unsettles normative assumptions about the compatibility between competition-oriented, neoliberal capitalism and a Nordic welfare state framework. The article provides a critical lens to explore similar dynamics in other Nordic countries and offers broader relevance to worldwide discussions on whether welfare policies can withstand or even persist vis-à-vis the structural pressures of a largely deregulated, global market. By calling into question the assessment of entrepreneurship as a socioeconomic panacea, this article opens space for more critical and historically grounded assessments of the policy directions that modern welfare states pursue.

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

All data relevant to the study are included in the article. Please find relevant ISBN and URL data for each implementation and policy document analysed in the references.

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