

EDITORIAL

Anna Lindh and Education for Democracy

IAN WINCHESTER

University of Calgary

Anna Lindh will not be a name known to most of the readers of this journal. She was a democratic figure in Sweden and Europe. She was 46 years old, a mother of two young boys, the Foreign Minister of Sweden, and an important figure in the European Union. For some months she had been campaigning for the Swedes to vote "Yes" to the adoption of the Euro as the official currency in Sweden, replacing their Crown or Krona.

Anna Lindh was attacked by a young man on September 10, 2003 while shopping, with no security forces around her, in the Swedish equivalent of Macy's department store. She was stabbed (and ultimately died on September 11 after heroic medical intervention) by an ordinary looking young Swedish man wearing a Nike baseball cap and a Nike sweatshirt over a pair of green multi-pocketed pants. She was stabbed to death by a Swedish children's utility knife – a knife that most Swedish children would possess and which they use when they are out in the woods, which Swedish children often are, for pleasure and for educational purposes.

The referendum on the fate of Swedish currency was on September 14 and when the vote was counted Sweden soundly rejected the Euro and embraced its traditional currency. It also rejected Anna Lindh's position, for she had been the strongest advocate in the ruling Social Democratic party for embracing the pan-European currency. The turnout was very high, perhaps 90% of the eligible voters. Her vote would not have mattered either way and her position would go down to defeat. Her face, even on Sunday, was still on billboards everywhere saying: "On Sunday I am voting yes." But her vote was never counted.

Sweden has perhaps the most effective longstanding educational tradition in Europe, and perhaps in the world. It has had universal literacy, for all segments and ages of its population, from the mid-17th century, in Gothic or Latin script, and if runic writing were counted, probably for much longer. It has two of the oldest and most well known universities in Europe and perhaps the world, and a very extensive

system of newer university institutions. It is home of the various academies which choose the recipients of each year's Nobel Prizes in chemistry, physics, medicine, literature, and economics.

It is a country with a tiny population of perhaps 9 million people. Yet it has produced its own large passenger boat fleets, its own military aircraft, its own railways, its own nuclear reactors, its own space tracking program, and perhaps the best anti-aircraft weapons in the world. For the first 30 years of the 20th century, until the arrival of the talkies, its film industry was comparable in size to that of the United States and equally influential internationally. It routinely does much better in the Olympics, winter or summer, pound for pound, than much larger rich countries like Canada. It is one of the major contributors to international medical, chemical, pharmaceutical, and physical research. Its automobiles and trucks (Volvo, SAAB, Scania) are known world-wide. And it does all this with very few natural resources, including a total lack of oil or coal. Essentially it is country of pine and spruce trees growing on granite, with some mountains and waterfalls, some lakes and rivers, and very little growing soil.

In the 17th century Sweden was a European Great Power, in spite of a tiny population base. But it has maintained military and political neutrality since 1815 which was the last time it was at war.

It is a country which has been incredibly generous to foreigners. It gives them million dollar prizes every year. It welcomes them as immigrants, especially political refugees. It has taken unto itself the children unwanted in their homelands via large adoption schemes, including children of mixed American-Korean backgrounds who were not accepted in Korea after the Korean war. It rescued hundreds of thousands of Europeans, often Jews, that Hitler might have murdered, during the Second World War.

It has a social welfare system second to none on earth. It offers a minimum of six weeks paid vacation to all workers. And yet it supports its industry and business as the lifeblood of its system.

In such a country, with such generous traditions and kindly attitudes, how could a young woman politician be stabbed to death in a very public place and the young man who did it walk away untouched into the crowd?

Can we speak of an educational failure here? Swedish education, which is essentially public education, even when nominally private, is nothing if not an education for democracy. It is a child-loving, child-supporting, family-supporting kind of education. But it is a rigorous

education as well. In international tests Swedish children do a little less well than their international peers at very young ages. But as the years go on they surpass their international compatriots. This is likely due to the fact that in Sweden children historically did not go to school until they could read, as learning to read was seen as a family responsibility. So sometimes they did not enter school until they were seven or eight on the average, where in most countries the age of school entry is often five or six. For the last couple of centuries Swedish education has been based on the principles of the great European educator, Comenius, whose primary dictum is like that of Whitehead, namely: "Do not teach too much. But what you teach, teach thoroughly." The equally great Swedish educator, Torsten Husén, who is largely responsible for the present design of Swedish school education, followed Comenius in moving the Swedish system somewhat towards the American principle that everybody should be educated as far as possible, preferably to the end of their 18th year and beyond. The idea here is the democratic one, namely, that it is better to let people find their own interest and level and then to select them for their expertise, rather than to try to choose a few at an early stage and educate the life out of them.

But that said, and assuming the Anna Lindh's murderer, like that of the Swedish Prime Minister Olaf Palme in 1986, was an ordinary product of the Swedish educational system, how could such a democratic education lead to such murderous results? How could an ordinary Swede, with the democratic education common among them, engage in the murder of such politicians as Palme and Lindh who lived and moved democratically and among the common people without fear?

It is interesting that the immediate suspicion of the Swedish police was that the murderer must be a psychiatric patient who had ceased to take his medicine, or at least an undetected madman. For this could not be a rational act, by a Swedish citizen, just before a national referendum. I think that it is, and remains, unthinkable to the ordinary Swede, a possibility that such an act is a result of their democratic educational activities and arrangements.

Swedish education, like Canadian education, makes a great deal of the diversity of human beings and of the importance of our tolerance of and kindness to one another, however we may look, whatever our religion, whatever our political beliefs, and whatever the social standing of ourselves or our parents. In this it is largely successful. Swedes are enormously embracing of foreigners in their midst, and have been so historically. For most of the 20th century, through the fruits of their

educational arrangements and their own enormous energies and intelligence, they have been rich enough to tolerate and embrace foreigners with flair. And since the late 1960s, when the official government immigration policies became real and vigorous, foreigners, especially political refugees have been migrating to Sweden in larger and larger numbers.

One of the effects of this was the removal of the educational system from the control of the Swedish State Church, the Swedish Lutheran Evangelical Church in the late 1960s. Another, only a few years ago, was the disestablishment of the State Church itself. Since the 1960s Greek Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Muslim, and Buddhists have been arriving in Sweden in larger and larger numbers. Perhaps 15% of the population is now no longer Swedish Lutheran. And most of those who are do not attend church except at Christmas, New Years, or for baptisms, weddings, and funerals.

In the towns and villages in the countryside, prosperous everywhere and in the work of the local people, foreigners are increasingly present. The newcomers are no longer confined to the cities. In village after village the local authorities are turning over newly built apartment buildings, which those native to the village may have thought would have gone to their own elderly parents or neighbours, to the incoming foreigners. And the foreigners chosen by Sweden, as political refugees, may now speak any language other than their own. They may have fragmentary or non-existent education. They may not want their children to play with Swedish children after school. And they may want the opportunity to easily follow their own religious beliefs and cultural traditions.

As a consequence, in this most kindly and generous of countries, there has developed in many of the smaller centres and sometimes in the larger ones too, an element of resentment for the foreigners so generously treated by the essentially permanently governing Social Democratic government. It is hard for a public education system to guard against or counteract such rooted resentment. Whole suburbs of cities like Stockholm may be devoted to one or two main groups of new arrivals. This does not sit well with the local, native population either.

It may not, therefore, be surprising if one or two who feel the resentment most strongly take direct action of a horrible and despicable and cowardly kind. And perhaps that is what happened in the case of Palme and now of Lindh. Palme, though Prime Minister, effectively ran the foreign affairs of Sweden during his time at the top. He traveled

extensively. He was especially close to communist countries (or other socialist countries as he spoke of them) and tried to distance himself from the liberal western democracies politically, while still maintaining official neutrality. Lindh followed much the same policies as Palme, making much of her numerous visits to the Balkans, where hatred is rife but where political refugees of the kind which Sweden has wanted for over 40 years, are generated at a great rate.

Anyone educated today in a Swedish school would know about the foreign affair related activities of Palme in the past and Lindh in the immediate past. If modern democratic education could not always overcome such native resentment, perhaps murder is an unsurprising, though terrible and unacceptable outcome.

Could Swedish education have done more? Perhaps. But suppose that it turns out that Lindh's murderer is not somebody who opposed in principle the Euro as being Sweden's future currency or even to the wholesale import of foreigners. Suppose it turns out that the murderer was in fact a new Swede of Serbian or Croatian origin who thinks that Sweden is wise to import Serbs, but not Croatians, or Croatians but not Serbs. Here we have the educational system in opposition to the family and its native traditions, prejudices, and hatreds. And who can doubt, in our kinds of democracies and those which Europe is trying now to bring about generally, that such opposition often occurs.

In countries like Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and the United States we have taken the fact for granted that the educational system can, in time, triumph over these deeply held national, religious, ethnic, and perhaps social class presuppositions or prejudices. Perhaps this is an assumption of all the educational systems in the modern European Union too. The evidence of Sweden's recent terrible tragedy suggests that we should perhaps review not only our educational system, but practical things such as how we actually receive or select our immigrants so as to not generate resentment, whether among themselves or among the populations already here. But of these things, the one over which we have greatest control is the educational arrangements designed to combat hatreds, misunderstandings, and poor or inadequate knowledge and thinking. If we can do these things better perhaps our Prime Ministers and Foreign Ministers will be a little less at risk.

Ian Winchester
Editor

