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The Spell of Sweden's Golden Past

By GORAN ROSENBERG

STOCKHOLM — Has Sweden not woken up from its innocence yet? Foreign journalists have been asking me this in their frantic efforts to explain the second murder in 17 years of a leading Swedish politician walking in Stockholm without police protection.

My answer has been that Sweden had no innocence to wake up from. That we had long since become a card-carrying member of the union of security-sedated societies. That ever more private and public buildings in Swedish cities were protected by ever more advanced security gadgets, and that ever more security guards regularly patrolled the streets, stores and subways. That our levels of brutal murders, armed robberies, random assaults, crackpot violence and gang rape had nothing innocent about them.

And that no Swede in his or her right mind would have expected the foreign minister of Sweden, in the last days of a referendum campaign of which she perhaps was the most visible and most controversial combatant, to take a walk in the commercial center of Stockholm, teeming with thousands of people and thousands of posters with her face looking at them, without a bodyguard.

The unprotected walk of Foreign Minister Anna Lindh on Sept. 10 was not the result of innocence. It was the result of the appalling lack of professionalism on the part of the Swedish security police, SAPO, that inexplicably had assessed that there were no "threat pictures" against Anna Lindh, which at best can be explained by SAPO's long and gloomy tradition of erratic judgments and bungled missions. What Swedes at long last might have woken up to is the need to do something about their security police.

What Swedes have yet to wake up from is not innocence, but self-delusion. Both the fatal stabbing of Anna Lindh and Sweden's resounding rejection a few days later of the cause she championed — replacing the krona with the European Union's common currency, the euro — took place in an increasingly volatile climate of fear and nostalgia: fear of an uncertain European future and nostalgia for a certain Swedish past. Anna Lindh symbolized the future that many feared, and the anti-euro campaign symbolized the nostalgia that many harbored.

Sweden is still spellbound by its remarkable success story, in which one of the poorest nations of Europe evolves into a world model for wealth and welfare. It is the story of a nation making neutrality its identity. It is the story of a small nation with a big voice (as symbolized by Prime Minister Olof Palme, who was assassinated in Stockholm 17 years ago).

Many Swedes who said no to the euro were saying no to the idea that Sweden was about to swap its successful national model for a risky European project of which many Swedes did not feel a part and for which many did not see a need. The historic success of Sweden was not perceived as having been achieved by being a part of Europe, but by staying apart from it.

That this success story of Sweden also happens to coincide with the success story of the Social Democratic Party, in government for 60 out of the last 70 years, helps explain why the European Union as a whole has turned out to be a particularly hard sell in Sweden. Many Swedes simply still believe that they will be better off outside the European Union than inside it, better off with the Swedish model than with whatever model Europe might offer them, and they simply voted no to what they regarded as a self-serving attempt by "the establishment" — the four largest national parties, trade unions and industrial organizations — to replace national success with supranational failure.

This remarkable expression of distrust is in large part the result of a failure in Sweden's political leadership. It is the failure of a leadership that in 1994, when Sweden narrowly voted to become a member of the European Union, avoided discussing the true implications of membership — not only to the political system of Sweden, but to its historical identity and self-image. Many Swedes thought they had voted to make Europe more Swedish (and to save Sweden from a severe fiscal crisis), not to make Sweden more European.

That tactic of 1994 could work only once, since people hate to be deceived. What the political leadership had failed to understand, until it was too late, was that the vote on the euro would inevitably develop into a deep conflict about how the Swedes see themselves and what kind of nation Sweden wishes to be.

For this failure Sweden will eventually pay a price. The death of Anna Lindh should be a wake-up call from our delusion about our society, and our delusion that we can be in Europe but not a part of it.

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