

Speaker's Welcome

Per Westerberg, Speaker of the Swedish Parliament

Opening Ceremony Tuesday, June 9, 2009

Welcome to the conference, and to Sweden, the birthplace of the Parliamentary Ombudsman 200 years ago. Our country's Parliamentary Ombudsmen play an important role in safeguarding the rule of law and ensuring that the citizen's basic rights and freedoms are respected. It is imperative that the exercise of public power be subject to scrutiny. It is a matter of pride for Sweden that so many other countries have been inspired by our example to set up similar institutions.

A very warm welcome to you all, to Stockholm and to Sweden, and to the 9th International Ombudsman Institute World Conference.

In conjunction with this conference, we are also celebrating the birth of the Parliamentary Ombudsman, which took place here in Stockholm almost exactly 200 years ago.

The year 1809 was epoch-making for Sweden. It marked the end of a long period of recurrent wars, and it finally put an end to any illusions that Sweden was still a great power. In the peace agreement with Russia, Sweden ceded Finland, the eastern half of the old kingdom and one-third of the once powerful Baltic state with Stockholm as its capital city. This terminated 600 years of shared Swedish-Finnish nationhood.

The events of 1809 initiated a new epoch in the Nordic countries. The end of the old Sweden became the start of something new.

"Two medium-sized and mutually hostile powers became four small ones, which were able to live in agreement," as Horace Engdahl, the former Permanent Secretary of the Swedish Academy, put it. Instead of greater Sweden and greater Denmark, there now emerged the separate nations of Denmark, Norway, Sweden and Finland.

In fact, these small countries have not just been able to live in agreement, but have also cooperated very closely, developing a Scandinavian or Nordic model in a number of areas of society.

The events of 1809 were dramatic. The king was deposed and a new Instrument of Government was adopted. This fundamental law was based on a division of powers between the monarch and Parliament, with independent courts and the freedom of the press as important elements. It also included the world's first parliamentary ombudsman, and established the world's first parliamentary ombudsman office.

The 1809 Instrument of Government became "the living constitution," and provided the foundation for Sweden's political development towards democracy and the rule of law. It was not replaced until 1974.

The Office of the Parliamentary Ombudsmen is one of those institutions whose democratic responsibilities, generally speaking, are the same, according to the provisions of our current Instrument of Government, as they were in 1809. It is also an institution that, at least in its general characteristics, is common to Sweden and the other Nordic countries.

Finland was the first of these to establish a parliamentary ombudsman, in 1919, followed by Denmark in 1955, Norway in 1962, and Iceland in 1987. Here too, we can speak of a Nordic model, even if there are significant differences between these institutions due to differences in national constitutional traditions.

In our country, the Parliamentary Ombudsmen play an important role in safeguarding the rule of law and ensuring that the citizen's basic rights and freedoms are respected. In a state with democracy and the rule of law, it is imperative that the exercise of public power should be subject to scrutiny, and that the people who are entrusted with exercising this power can be held responsible for their actions.

As I wrote in the invitation to this conference, it is a matter of pride to me that so many other countries – on every continent – have been inspired by the Swedish example and have set up institutions resembling the Swedish Parliamentary Ombudsmen. I would like to extend a very warm welcome to you all as colleagues of our Parliamentary Ombudsmen – colleagues exercising the same crucial function as our Ombudsmen here in Sweden. I wish you a most successful conference.

Welcome to Sweden and to Stockholm!