

IOI President's Welcome

Bill Angrick, President of the International Ombudsman Institute

Opening Ceremony

Tuesday, June 9, 2009

Welcome to perhaps the most important conference in our history, as we pay tribute to the 200th anniversary of the Ombudsman institution and plan the transition of the IOI secretariat to its new home in Vienna. What was initially a Swedish idea has gradually become one of the defining characteristics of the modern democracy, and the modern ombudsman faces many new challenges. Gatherings like this one allow us, as society's watchdogs, to keep our bark strong and our teeth sharp.

My dear Ombudsman friends and colleagues, it is with great pleasure that I welcome you to the ninth World Conference of the International Ombudsman Institute. We come together at these regular gatherings to meet, to exchange ideas, information and experiences and to conduct the business of our Institute.

Since our last World Conference in 2004, our community has experienced a number of transitions as incumbents left office and their successors joined our ranks. To those friends and colleagues who are no longer in office, good health and good fortune to you in your current endeavors. To those of you who are new to our community, welcome! May your experience as ombudsmen be both challenging and rewarding.

Since we have entered the 21st century, among those transitions have been the passings of many ombudsmen and former ombudsmen. Each will be missed for his or her unique and special contribution. I do not want to attempt to name each passing, each loss, because I am sure to miss more than one who is no longer with us.

But today, as we begin our entry into the third century of the modern ombudsman, I would like to take a moment to acknowledge the loss of three scholars and advocates, giants in the effort to establish ombudsman offices in the later part of the 20th century and whose effort and scholarship is felt even unto this very day.

Bernard Frank was an American lawyer who found special value and hope in the ombudsman concept. He worked tirelessly to foster understanding and commitment toward establishing many offices in many places. He was a founding force for the International Ombudsman Institute. He was active in creating ombudsman committees in both the American and the International Bar Associations. We lost Bernie in 2002, yet even in late 2001 he was contributing to the effort to forestall acceptance of the weakening of the ombudsman standards published by the American Bar Association.

Professor Donald Rowat was a Canadian professor of law and public administration. Among his many books and articles is *The Ombudsman Plan*, a fundamental treatise on the global spread of the ombudsman idea. We lost Don in late 2008, but not before he authored a feisty article criticizing the movement, especially in the United States, that dilutes what it means for the ombudsman to be independent and effective.

And just this past month, in May, our community lost Stanley Anderson, an American professor of political science and public administration and the author of many books, monographs, and articles on the ombudsman. Stan was instrumental in the evaluation of the federal funding program which led to the creation of general-jurisdiction, statutory, legislatively based ombudsman offices in several American states, including my own state of Iowa. Within the past few months, Stanley's latest study was published; in it he chronicled the case of a whistle-blowing doctor in a prison system and the ombudsman who sought to protect him for speaking out. In his recent work, Professor Anderson challenged us all as ombudsmen to give careful attention to the value and protection of the whistleblower in our society.

This conference is perhaps the most important one since the establishment of our Institute in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada in 1978. Your Board of Directors will bring before our General Assembly on Thursday a proposal to relocate the administrative offices of the IOI to Vienna, Austria. This is a proposal which has been almost five years in the making, one which is being brought before you with considered thought and decision so that the future of our Institute and our global ombudsman community can remain a champion of good government and democratic principles in the years and decades ahead.

The Ombudsman institution has developed significantly over the past two centuries. What was initially a Swedish institution, then a uniquely Scandinavian one, gradually has become one of the defining characteristics of the modern democracy. This development is an appropriate and natural one, for the ombudsman is fundamentally an agency of governmental accountability, responsiveness, and responsibility. And through its agency the ombudsman makes government more fair, consistent, reasonable and humane.

We should not be surprised that as this development unfolded, the original defining characteristics of the ombudsman evolved to meet variations in culture, geography and history. The ombudsman who addresses governmental maladministration is no longer the only, or even primary, way we fulfill our responsibilities. Focus has shifted to include emphases on human rights, civil rights, anti-corruption and topical specialization, for example child welfare, prisons, housing. The scope of the ombudsman's jurisdiction has moved beyond what once only encompassed governmental maladministration. Contemporary societies and economies now call for the creation of ombudsman offices for many different sectors of life, including, but not limited to, insurance, housing, communication, business, health care, banking and finance.

As our collective mission expands, so do the challenges and expectations placed upon us. We strive to find ways to meet our responsibilities, often in times of static or reducing resources. Efficiency and accountability within the

ombudsman office becomes as important as the findings, recommendations and reports we table. As society's watchdog we must keep our bark strong and our teeth sharp. We do this through critical self-examination, cooperative sharing with and learning from our colleagues globally, and through the continuing search for creative ways to achieve our missions. We accomplish this each and every day because our work is never-ending. We accomplish it through our collegial associations and organizations and the annual and biannual gatherings they sponsor.

And we do it through our active participation as members in the International Ombudsman Institute and at quadrennial conferences such as this, the ninth World Ombudsman Conference.

It is exceedingly appropriate that we meet in Stockholm this year to celebrate the bicentennial of the Swedish Parliamentary Ombudsman. I do not believe that we ever before had the opportunity to commemorate such a momentous anniversary. I want to thank Mats Melin, his office and staff for the planning, preparation, program development and accommodation they have provided. I thank Congrex Sweden for their professional management of the conference registration and venue. And I also thank IOI Office Administrator Diane Callan and Editor Linda Reif, and my colleagues on the Board of Directors for all the work they have put forth in helping us get to today.

I am very much looking forward to the speeches, presentations and panel discussions over the next several days. I challenge each and every one of us to listen carefully, engage one another and to leave Stockholm with refreshed ideas and renewed vigor to carry out our important work.