



Aulaloengud

THE CHALLENGES OF DEMOCRACY FOR THE NEW MILLENIUM

BIRGITTA DAHL

THE CHALLENGES OF DEMOCRACY
FOR THE NEW MILLENIUM



UNIVERSITY OF TARTU

BIRGITTA DAHL

**THE CHALLENGES OF DEMOCRACY
FOR THE NEW MILLENIUM**

Aula Lecture
January 29, 1998

TARTU 1998

Corrector: Meelis Leesik

© Birgitta Dahl, 1998

ISBN 9985-4-0059-3

Tartu University Press
Tiigi 78, Tartu 50410, Estonia
Order No 243

Mr Speaker,
Mr Rector,
Distinguished Professors and Faculty of the University,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

— There is a bridge between Sweden and Estonia and one of its firmest buttresses is the Tartu University.

— The University of Tartu was founded with the University of Uppsala as a pattern.

— Tartu and Uppsala are closely linked together, not the least by the fact they have declared themselves twin cities.

These and other facts have often been quoted as evidence of friendship and good neighbourliness between Estonia and Sweden in general and between Tartu and Uppsala in particular.

But there is one more, a very strong link: Suffice it to say that the home town of the Speaker of the Riigikogu, Dr Toomas Savi, is Tartu and mine is Uppsala ...

For me it is a great experience to come back to Tartu. The first time I was here was in 1990, in connection with a political meeting which was important in the process leading up to the reestablishment of independence in 1991 (the founding congress of the social democratic independence party).

It is also a great experience to be back in Estonia. Not only on the personal level I have very strong ties with this country — you might know that my husband is Estonian — but also on the political and official level: I was

the first Swedish cabinet minister after the Second World War to make an official visit to Estonia (that was in 1989), and the first trip abroad, which I made in my capacity of newly elected Speaker of the Swedish Parliament, the Riksdag, in 1994 was to Tallinn.

Yesterday I began my official visit to Estonia as the head of an official delegation from the Riksdag. It is a large delegation consisting of eminent representatives of all seven political parties of the Riksdag.

It is no coincidence that the delegation is that numerous. We consider the relations with Estonia and the Riigikogu to be of utmost importance, and we avail ourselves of all opportunities that we have to increase our contacts and to exchange views, ideas and experience in the field of parliamentary democracy.

These personal contacts and communications between Swedish and Estonian politicians and parliamentarians are extremely useful to both sides. We learn from each other and support each other.

The topic of my address today in this august hall is "The Challenges of Democracy for the New Millenium".

One might think that the issue of democracy and its challenges is — and should be — topical in our political lives at all times.

That is certainly true.

Democracy has to be reconquered over and over again — and nursed with care, intelligence and courage. We must never believe that the system of governing the people by the people that we have at a particular moment is a final one.

Absolute people's power is in its nature a very slow process. Administrative efficiency is necessary in our time of rapid communications. This is only one of the contradictions of political life that makes it necessary for us to reflect on our democratic system and to seek ways to refine it.

In Sweden we had something to think about in 1995, when elections to the European Parliament were held. The participation in general elections during the last thirty years has been around 90 per cent of the electorate. This time the figure was the lowest in modern times: just under 42 per cent.

That was a real eye-opener. What we experienced was a democratically expressed opinion by the people — a clear warning signal given with the help of available democratic means, which is abstaining from voting or voting for other parties or candidates than usually.

The message was that the voters wanted to make their voice better heard.

We, who have been entrusted with confidence and political power, must listen attentively to the people we are elected to represent. We must be careful to take in their ideas and react to them — certainly not uncritically, but with respect.

Then we have to do our utmost in finding a politically healthy balance in a process that needs to contain both an effort to explain the ideas that we ourselves believe in and a serious and obvious attempt to accommodate the concerns expressed.

In the end the decision has to be presented honestly. Good leadership in a functioning democracy also implies courage to stand up for well founded decisions even though they might not be immediately popular. But, of course, we also have to stand up honestly and unwaveringly from the beginning for what we think is right and try to stimulate and influence the public opinion in the direction we think is the correct one.

The fact that the reaction became so obvious in connection with an election concerning the European Union should perhaps not have come as a surprise:

— the problem of the so-called democratic deficit in the union,

— the more complicated processes of decision-making when fifteen member states are involved (this is today, tomorrow we hope there will be many more),

— and a general difficulty of registering rapid progress (one might even talk about unfulfilled hopes that were somewhat unrealistic),

— all these phenomena probably contributed to a feeling of lack of political influence against which the voters reacted.

This is of course a potential problem that Estonia will encounter when it becomes a member of the EU. Maybe it will be even more of a challenge to you as a nation that has only recently been able to re-establish its national identity after a long period of foreign dominance. We will all have to address this problem jointly in the complicated decision-making processes in Brussels, Strasbourg and the capitals of the Presidencies.

The core of the matter is that many policy issues, which have traditionally been conceived as domestic ones, in the EU context are decided after a process of international negotiations.

Things may seem to be decided not only *in* Brussels but also *by* Brussels — even though member governments, of course, have participated actively in the decision-making.

For those who know a little bit about decision-making in the EU it is clear that it is a myth that decisions are made by faceless bureaucrats in Brussels, outside the reach of normal national political means.

It is true that decisions are *prepared* by non-elected experts and international civil servants of the Commission. It is also true that the directly elected European Parliament is not functioning — and should not be functioning — as a legislative body. *The legislative body* of the European Union is the Council of Ministers, where all member governments are represented — and, indirectly, the national parliaments. In the long process lead-

ing up to the final decision in the European Union there is ample opportunity for influencing its contents.

It goes without saying that, in reality, no Union decision can be made without active support by national parliaments and citizens, especially since almost all of them have to be complemented by national political decisions of different kinds.

This means that the citizens of new member states, who have been used to the short distance for political control functions between voters and a national parliament, will now have to exert their political power at a greater distance:

- *The voters* elect a national parliament;
- *The national parliament* delegates the power to deal operatively with union matters to the government;
- *The government* negotiates political decisions with other member governments in the *Council of Ministers*;
- The national parliament has to design ways and means to signal its political will to *the government* and to check whether the government has properly carried out the intentions of *the national parliament* (and here all democratic measures can be used — from mild criticism in an oral statement to formal moves for votes of no confidence);
- *The voters* may signal their approval or disapproval in general elections.

In the Riksdag we have so far exercised our powers *vis-à-vis* the government's handling of EU matters on several levels:

- In *the standing committees*
- In the specially created *Advisory Committee of European Union Affairs* (where ministers appear every Friday before they go to meetings in the Union)
- In *the plenary* (where *written yearly reports* from the government are scrutinized and debated, where *special debates* are arranged — sometimes in connection with *oral reports by the prime minister or some other*

minister — and where the instruments of *questions and interpellations* is frequently used to shed light on various EU issues).

The methods and processes for the Riksdag to more effectively — and more obviously — influence and control the government in EU matters are under constant internal parliamentary discussion. Our main concern for the moment is to signal, as early as possible, to the relevant minister how the parliament looks upon a particular subject or issue. The best way to attain this goal is to make the standing committees active at an early stage, since they are the bodies where the specialized knowledge is. This is what we are working on for the moment.

I have dwelt for quite a long time on the challenges posed to democracy by the membership in the European Union. I have done so because I know that the membership issue is very central in Estonia.

But these challenges are, by no means, the only ones that we encounter and discuss in Sweden.

Another one has been made especially clear in our discussions about environmental problems — and about other political issues that are unlikely to stop at local or national borders.

When we talk about how to solve such problems, we are moving in the same area that we touched upon before in connection with the European Union: the risk of having a democratic deficit. We can express this in a much simpleway: political decisions should be taken as close to the citizens as possible. We have to find the right balance between decision-making on local, national, regional and global levels.

This means that if it is practical to handle the problem on the *local* level, this should be done. Some questions have a scope that necessitates decision-making at the *national* level. Sometimes nations of a *sub-region* or a *region* — be it in the Baltic area or in Europe respectively — will have to cooperate to find effective solutions.

And I have only to point out the issue of green-house gasses and climate change for you to think of the need for *global* solutions.

The division into different levels for effective political decision-making seems pretty obvious when it is presented like this. But the art is to remember it when we are tempted to make a decision too far away from those who are exposed to the results of the decision and consequently have an interest in influencing it.

A prerequisite for the proper functioning of such a democratic political set-up is of course an enlightened and well informed body of citizens. Let me make a historical flashback:

In the last part of the 19th century and in the beginning of this one, Sweden, as you know, was a backward, agriculture — based society with the highest infant mortality in Europe and an appalling rate of alcoholism. The population was so poor and the lack of political, social and religious freedom so suffocating that almost a third of Sweden's population felt that their only way to secure a decent living was to emigrate. With the introduction of democracy, however, the country was lifted — economically and socially — to a highly industrialized nation, which at a comparatively early stage embraced environmental awareness and consideration in its political decision-making.

The operative manner of achieving this goal was mobilizing people, making people aware, empowering people — through a broad and profound educational effort, carried out not only by the state, but to an even larger extent by popular, idealistic and political movements, churches, labour unions, temperance groups etc etc. That meant making people aware of their own responsibilities and potentials. That meant making them capable of making wise political decisions.

The interesting thing with these "study circles" and "people's high schools", which sprang from spontaneous popular movements, was that they served as virtual cra-

dles of Swedish democracy. They gave an injection of knowledge and competence to the population and had a tremendous impact on decision-making. Citizens had acquired insight, had acquired the capability of arguing for what they believed in. We still feel that impact.

Today we are coping with the problem of empowering immigrants in Sweden. There are more than a million of them in Sweden today. The backgrounds for their coming to Sweden differ — and the historico-political and psychological complications are not as marked as the minority issue here in Estonia — but they need to be made an active part of the society they live in.

Another, related, problem we are right now trying to cope with is to counter founded hostile attitudes towards immigrants among certain strata of the Swedish population. That, too, is a challenge to democracy for the coming millenium.

In September this year we will have general elections in Sweden. As you know, we have had a multi-party system since parliamentary democracy was established in the beginning of this century. All the time up to this decade the political division between left and right was clear and predictable.

This did not mean, however, that majorities were as clearcut. In the nineteen twenties, a series of short-lived minority governments succeeded each other.

In 1932 — under the weight of national and international economic and political crises — a deal was struck between the actors on the national political scene. The social democratic party was by far the biggest in the Riksdag, but did not have enough mandates to form a majority government. A social democratic minority government was, however, tolerated by the other parties and could count on direct or indirect support from some of them in order to make the country governable and to make it possible to solve the acute economic and social problems that plagued the nation.

That decision was a turning point in Swedish political life. The government became competent to come to grips with a demanding and challenging issues of the time.

But there was more to it. Not only could the government focus on real and critical political problems instead of on the question of how to stay in power. A new political climate emerged. A climate of negotiations, compromise and tolerance. The parties stuck to their political identities and fought for their positions and got respect for them, but were in the end prepared to accept modifications and adjustments in the interest of the country.

This turned out to be a functioning and constructive democratic system. Of course, there are some drawbacks connected with it: it can be somewhat dull, because the spectacular ideological fights are toned down. I think we can live with that. Another thing is that some of the political deals are made outside the public reach. This is a little bit more problematic, but in the interest of good results and as long as the reporting back to the parties and the electorate is effective, we have accepted it.

Among the advantages that it has brought, one could point at the emphasis on honesty or trustworthiness. Negotiated political solutions are of no value whatsoever if the negotiators later go back on their word.

During the last ten years we have seen a marked change in the political landscape. We have developed new preoccupations and priorities within older parties and new parties, which do not occupy self-evident positions on the traditional left-to-right scale. This means that patterns of cooperation among parties are not always predictable any more.

In a situation where the two largest parties can get a fairly similar amount of mandates and several other parties can demand substantial concessions to give their support, we might see some interesting political results — and combinations. I think that it is rather safe to forecast that the task which the appointed prime minis-

ter will face in September will be just about the same as the present one has — to strive for as broadly accepted solutions as possible.

This year's parliamentary election will for the first time on the national level give the voters a limited possibility to show preferences for certain candidates on the party lists. It will be interesting to see how this experiment works. The advocates of the reform say that it will enliven the campaigns and give the voters a more direct say in the choice of their representatives. The critics point at the role financing might play in this kind of campaigning and that candidates with less money or with less affluent backers might be at a disadvantage.

One of my own concerns is that we must be extremely careful not to destroy what we have attained in terms of equality between men and women in national politics. Today the Riksdag contains 44% women deputies. This is the best record in the world, but it is still too few, since the share of women in the population is more than 50%. We know that the system of party lists has made it easier to get more female deputies elected. We will have to scrutinize closely the outcome of this year's election in this respect ...

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I have touched upon a few central issues in our Swedish discussion on how to secure and possibly further develop our democracy. Reverting to what I said in the beginning of this address: There is no better way of dealing with problems of democracy than to talk about them — and that is what parliamentarians of Sweden and Estonia are doing during the three days we have the privilege of being here.

That is one of our ways of trying to meet the Swedish and Estonian challenges of democracy for the next millennium.

BIRGITTA DAHL

Speaker of the Swedish Parliament since 1994.

MP for the Social Democratic Party, Uppsala, Province of Uppsala. Born 1937, MP since 1969, Minister with special responsibility for energy issues 1982–1986. Minister of Environment and Energy 1987–1990. Minister of Environment 1990–1991. Participant in a number of National Commissions of Inquiry including those on education, housing finance, social aspects of housing, energy and energy saving. Chairman of the Socialist International Environment Committee 1986–1993. Member of the High-Level Advisory Board on Sustainable Development to the Secretary-General of the United Nations with special responsibility for following up on the Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro 1992. In 1996 elected Chairman of that body.

AULA LECTURES OF TARTU UNIVERSITY

Michael Heltzer. Eesti Vabariigi ja Palestiina juudi asunduse suhted kahe maailmasõja vahelisel ajal. 28. aprillil 1993. Tartu, 1993. 12 lk.

Els Oksaar. Emakeelte ja isamaade Euroopa. 19. mail 1993. Tartu, 1994. 18 lk.

Hando Runnel. Juhan Luiga ja Vene küsimus. 8. oktoobril 1993. Tartu, 1993. 31 lk.

Vello Salo. Maakeelse piibli kolm kuube. 26. jaanuaril 1994. Tartu, 1994. 16 lk.

Eve Suurvee. Kas Eesti vajab psühhoanalüüsi? 29. aprillil 1994. Tartu, 1995. 28 lk.

Jakob von Uexküll. The Estonian Path to the Green Future. (Eesti tee rohelisse tulevikku.) 6. septembril 1994. Tartu, 1994. 32 lk.

Mart Laar. Rahvusliku liikumise suurlõhe ja Jakob Hurt. 16. septembril 1994. Tartu, 1995. 28 lk.

Béla Jávorszky. Eestlased ja ungarlased uuenevas Euroopas. 6. oktoobril 1994. Tartu, 1995. 16 lk.

Kaljo Villako. Haritlane, poolspetsialist ja poolharitlane. 28. novembril 1994. Tartu, 1995. 16 lk.

Ants Laaneots. Eesti Vabariigi julgeolekukontseptsiooni areng aastail 1991–1994 ja kõrgkoolid. 8. veebruaril 1996. Tartu, 1996. 28 lk.

Jaan Sootak. Surmanuhtlus: kriminaalpoliitiline ja õigusfilosofiiline aspekt. 10. aprillil 1996. Tartu, 1996. 18 lk.

Boris Meissner. Ida-Euroopa uuringute areng ja struktuur Saksamaal. 8. mail 1996. Tartu, 1998. 60 lk.

Boris Meissner. Entwicklung und Aufbau der Osteuropaforschung in Deutschland. 8. Mai 1996. Tartu, 1998. S. 72.

Lennart Meri. Kaks ajalugu, seljad vastamisi. 14. mail 1996. Tartu, 1996. 24 lk.

Pär Stenbäck. Põhjamaad ja põhjamaade koostöö Euroopa Liidu arengu taustal. 28. mail 1996. Tartu, 1998. 16 lk.

Toomas Savi. Haritlane ja riik. 31. mail 1996. Tartu, 1996. 14 lk.

Mark B. Lapping. Ameerika kõrgharidus: arengu probleemid. 26. septembril 1996. Tartu, 1998. 16 lk.

Andrus Öövel. Eesti kaitsepoliitilistest suundumustest. 9. oktoobril 1996. Tartu, 1996. 32 lk.

Ilse Lehist. Keelekontakt — keelekonflikt. 21. mail 1997. Tartu, 1998. 22 lk.

Michael Stolleis. Europa — seine historischen Wurzeln und seine künftige Verfassung. 16. Juni 1997. Tartu, 1997. S. 32.

Tarja Halonen. Soome, Eesti ja Euroopa integratsioon. 21. oktoobril 1997. Tartu, 1998. 14 lk.

Seppo Zetterberg. Jüri Vilmsi saatus. 27. oktoobril 1997. Tartu, 1998. 20 lk.

Magnus Mörner. Comparative Approaches to the History of the Countries Around the Baltic Sea. 20 November 1997. Tartu, 1998. 37 p.

Jānis Stradiņš. Tartu University in the History of Culture and Science of Latvia. 25 November 1997. Tartu, 1998. 30 p.

Wolfgang Drechsler. Sotsiaalteadused kui silmapaistev eriala Tartu Ülikoolis XIX sajandil. 1. detsembril 1997. Tartu, 1998. 36 lk.

Wolfgang Drechsler. On the Eminence of the Social Sciences at the University of Dorpat. 1 December 1997. Tartu, 1998. 36 p.

Anna Verschik. Eesti jidiš ja selle uurimise perspektiivid. 10. veebruaril 1998. Tartu, 1998. 20 lk.

Toomas Hendrik Ilves. Eesti välispoliitika minevik, olevik ja tulevik. 30. aprillil 1998. Tartu, 1998. 21 lk.

Valdis Birkavs. Latvia and Estonia: partners on the way to Europe. May 7, 1998. Tartu 1998. 27 p.