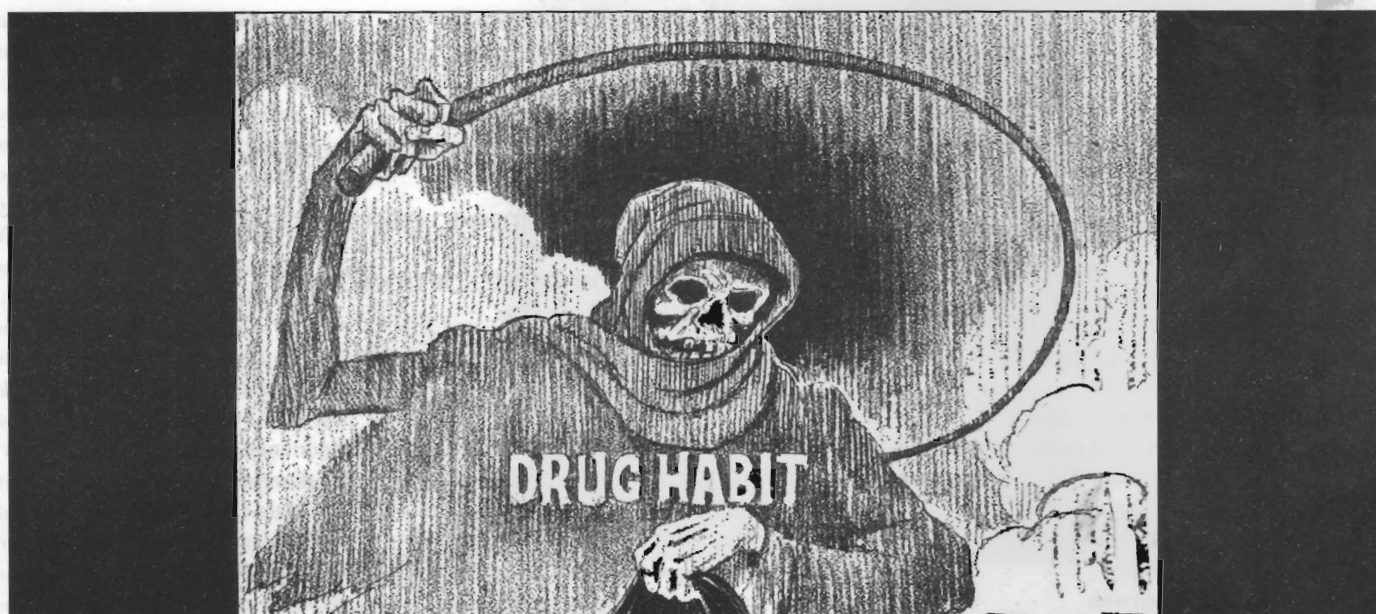


Dr Arthur Gould

A drug-free Europe?

Sweden on the offensive



Remember when Sweden had the reputation for being 'free and easy', a model of liberalism, or even (some might say), licentiousness? Not any more. As the cold winds of economic troubles whipped through the country, so a new crusading consensus emerged, determined to tackle that evergreen benchmark of hedonism – drug use.

Dr Arthur Gould is in the Department of Social Sciences at Loughborough University

Sweden's moral panic about illegal drugs was of little concern to outsiders until recently. However, in 1995, Sweden became a member of the European Union with a clear set of priorities – to reduce unemployment, to improve gender equality and to resist attempts to liberalise drug policy. The first two goals may be welcomed and cause no surprise, but the dogmatic adherence to the latter is a genuine threat to attempts by other European countries to adopt a more pragmatic, more liberal approach to drug issues. To understand the reasons behind this claim, it is important to consider how Swedes came to develop such a remarkable political consensus behind the goal of a drug-free society.

Throughout the 1980s, the National Association for a Drug-Free Society (RNS), together with like-minded

organisations, campaigned for the restrictive line of their guru – Dr Nils Bejerot. Bejerot had consistently argued that drug misuse would achieve epidemic proportions and threaten the whole basis of society unless the fight against drugs concentrated on the consumer rather than the supplier. Suppliers could always be replaced, he claimed, whereas without consumption, there would be no market in the first place.

This 'theory' was backed by a set of inter-related propositions – that any use of drugs was to be regarded as misuse; that there was no difference between soft drugs and hard drugs; and that drugs were so addictive, users could not act in their own best interests. Any deviation from this line was regarded as capitulation.

Until the end of the 1970s, there

had been a genuine debate about drug issues resulting in some liberal reforms. In 1982, for example, the maximum time for which adult substance misusers could be taken into compulsory care had been reduced from two years to two months. At that time, liberal Swedes dismissed the likelihood of restrictive policies being put into practice at a national level. However as the reputation of the Swedish 'model' society diminished and as the country became prey to the sort of economic and social problems which beset the rest of Europe, so the organisation and impact of the restrictive lobby gained ground.

By the end of the decade, RNS had achieved three important goals – an extension to the amount of time adult misusers (of alcohol and drugs) could be taken into compulsory care; the rejection of the National Medical Board's proposal that a country-wide experiment with syringe exchange schemes be established; and the criminalisation of drug use. Each of these policy decisions was made almost unanimously by the Swedish parliament under a Social Democratic government. In 1993, a Centre-Right coalition went even further – though this time without the support of left wing parties – and made the criminalisation of use (ie, being under the influence of a drug) an offence punishable by six months in prison.¹

The success of RNS can be measured by the extent to which politicians, social workers, doctors, the police and the press repeat the basic tenets of the restrictive line when being interviewed about drugs. Academics who have questioned the effectiveness of the restrictive approach at international conferences have been called traitors by other Swedes. Moreover, to be considered a *drogliberal* is a real impediment to career advancement.

Sweden and Europe

The perceived threat to Swedish society is not only from domestic users and liberal academics but also from the surrounding countries of Europe. Sweden has become a member of the EU for economic reasons, but has no desire to be infected either by foreign drug cultures, drug treatment practices or ideas. EU countries, Russia and the Baltic States are regarded suspiciously

as the sources of the drugs entering Sweden. Moreover, the drug problems of countries like the UK, Switzerland and the Netherlands are seen as a terrible indictment of liberal experiments. In the run-up to the referendum on EU membership, a significant part of the debate was fear about the implications for Sweden's restrictive line on drugs. Would the single market and the Schengen agreement mean drugs would come flooding into the country? Would attempts be made to harmonise drug policies? Would the legalisers of the European Parliament (EP) succeed in their aims? These fears were expressed in newspapers, official reports and campaigning journals.

For many Swedes, drugs are not a matter for rational political debate.

The fight against them has the character of a moral crusade

Soon after Sweden became a member of the EU, a series of articles was published by *Dagens Nyheter*, Sweden's broadsheet equivalent of *The Guardian*, under the headline 'Europe on its knees in the face of heroin'.² It proceeded to emphasise European drug problems while simultaneously rubbishing harm reduction and decriminalisation policies as attempts to protect society from the consequences of crime while ignoring the needs of addicts. Official reports and journal articles depicted Sweden as a country under threat. One showed a deserted part of the Swedish coast under the title 'We Will Never Surrender'; another an island occupied by an idyllic Swedish cottage being invaded by a rat with syringes in its pocket. The editor of RNS journal *Narkotikafrågan* (The Drug Question) recently wrote three books on the depths of depravity into which Germany, the Netherlands and the UK had sunk. In the British volume, John Marks is referred to as "Dr Drug, the charismatic psychiatrist". The advertising blurb on the cover says that the books "should be obligatory reading for Swedish MEPs".³

A watching brief

RNS members keep a watching eye over local authorities, politicians and administrators to ensure they do not stray from the path of righteousness. Anita Gradin, Sweden's EU Commissioner, is constantly being exalted to take a more pro-active line on drugs. Calls are made for the resignations of EU officials like Emma Bonino who are advocates of legalisation. RNS has been instrumental in setting up EURAD (Europe Against Drugs), ECAD (European Cities Against Drugs) and in promoting parental groups in other countries with the title Parents Against Drugs. Swedish officials sitting on various European and international committees dealing with drug issues advance only one set of arguments – the restrictive line. In interviews with Swedish MEPs carried out by myself earlier this year, drugs was the only issue on which they were all united. These interviews, quite by chance, coincided with the first major illustration of concerted Swedish pressure – the presentation of the D'Ancona Report to the European Parliament.

The D'Ancona Report

The Report of the Committee on Civil Liberties and Internal Affairs, chaired by the Dutch MEP Hedy D'Ancona, was a brave attempt to liberalise and harmonise drug policy throughout the EU. In January this year the Report was submitted with 13 recommendations. The first suggested that the divergent approaches of member states to drug problems were impeding co-operation between them. Other recommendations called for a greater degree of pragmatism, local harm reduction experiments, more local autonomy, hard drugs to be supplied on prescription as a form of treatment and the promotion of:

"reform of the UN conventions of 1961, 1971 and 1988 such that the contracting parties are authorized to decriminalise the consumption of illegal drugs, to regulate the trade in cannabis and its derivatives and to permit the medical prescribing of methadone and heroin".⁴

The Report might have stood a chance of approval by the EP were it not for two factors. The first was an explicit instruction from Downing



A Swedish paradox?

Despite their obvious hardline approach to drugs, on the basis of their statute book, Sweden has some of the more lenient drug penalties across the EU. For example, minor drug offences are often dealt with by fines to a maximum six months in prison while the maximum penalty for trafficking is ten years. According to Dr Josef Zila, Associate Professor in Criminal Law at Stockholm University, this can be explained by the fact that (apart from the most serious crimes such as murder), there is a generally low penalty

scale for all crimes in Sweden. "However, considering the severity of the actual punishments for drug crimes within the Swedish legal system, [compared with] punishments for other crimes, the picture looks different. Some authors have pointed out that the severity of punishments for drug crimes in Sweden does not correspond with the seriousness of the drug problem in Swedish society. I share this opinion. The Swedish courts are inclined to use the upper part of the penalty scale or range prescribed for individual drug crimes more frequently than they do for other crimes."

Street to British MEPs not to subscribe to a document recommending any form of decriminalisation. A subsequent meeting of the PES group (all Social Democratic MEPs) was asked by the chairperson not to vote against the Report but to refer it back to its committee for reconsideration. Not to have done so would have resulted in a personal defeat for D'Ancona who is herself a significant figure within the PES group.

The second factor was the hostility to the Report shared by all Swedish MEPs. The bulk of amendments came from Swedish MEPs both on the left and the right of the political spectrum.⁵ They wanted it to be made clear that "drug laws fall within the jurisdiction of member states". They wanted member states to stick to the international conventions, which they had ratified, and for all signatories to be evaluated in terms of the extent to which they honoured the conventions. They were hostile to any idea of local autonomy and any "form of legalisation". Finally, one amendment called explicitly for support for the aim of a drug-free society.

Prior to the Report being presented to the EP, pressure groups held meetings to promote their views. One such group was ECAD which has its headquarters in Stockholm City

Council where it is co-ordinated by Carl Cederschild, the husband of the Swedish Conservative MEP who tabled many of the amendments to the report. RNS also sent two of its members to join the ECAD group to lobby against the Report. They claimed that their intensive lobbying alongside the work of Swedish MEPs had "turned opinion and stopped the proposal".⁶

The final version of the Report, published in May, shows that harm reduction is hardly mentioned, decriminalisation has been removed and the aim of a drug-free society has been inserted.⁷ This however was not enough for RNS. The organisation wrote to all the members of D'Ancona's Committee asking them to reject the new set of proposals.⁸ In the version which went to the vote in October, the 'liberals' regained a little ground. The aim of a drug-free society was replaced by the recommendation that the goal of treatment should be a "drug-free life".

In the latest issue of *Narkotikafrågan* it states:

"All Swedish MEPs voted against the Report partly because of a reference to 'problematic use' (which implies that there is such a thing as unproblematic use)...The voting was...no great victory for the

restrictive line. But...the dominance of drug liberals over debates in the EP has been broken."⁹

A moral crusade

In a recent and excellent study of Swedish drug policy, a Dutch researcher describes the background to the restrictive line, criticises the assumptions on which it is based and questions its claim to be effective.¹⁰

With the emergence of mass unemployment in the 1990s, the need to cutback on welfare costs, including drug treatment facilities, and the spread of drug-taking among young people world-wide, van Solinge feels that the maintenance of the restrictive line is doomed. He cites evidence of a growing willingness among front-line professionals to consider a more pragmatic approach. I remain to be convinced. The aim of a drug-free society has become the last remaining symbol of Sweden's national potency. The coherent, if flawed, ideology promoted by RNS has won over an entire nation. Swedish administrators and politicians within the EU have been charged to protect the country from drug-liberalism. Sweden may be a small country, but minorities that hold fervent moral beliefs have historically been very successful in advancing them when majority resistance is divided and pusillanimous. Local support for a more pragmatic and less moralistic approach to drug problems may be strong in many EU countries, but national politicians still lack the courage to speak up for harm reduction and decriminalisation.

Those who wish to see a more liberal line throughout the EU should be warned. For many Swedes, drugs are not a matter for rational political debate. The fight against them has the character of a moral crusade ■

1. Gould A. "Pollution rituals in Sweden: the pursuit of a drug-free society." *Scandinavian Journal of Social Welfare*: 1994, 3(2).

2. "Europa på knä för heroinet." *Dagens Nyheter*: 23-25 April 1995.

3. Olsson P. *Smack City: Storbritannien och narkotikan*. Sober Förlag and RNS, 1996.

4. European Parliament. Report containing a proposal on the harmonisation of the member state's laws on drugs A4-0359/97. Strasbourg, 1997.

5. European Parliament. Amendments to the D'Ancona report A4-0359/97. Strasbourg, 1997.

6. Nordin G. and Cnattingius K. "Så stoppades EU-förslaget", *Narkotikafrågan*: Stockholm, 1998, 2, p.21.

7. European Parliament. Second report containing a proposal on the harmonisation of the member state's laws on drugs A4-0211/98. Strasbourg, 1998.

8. Johansson P. "Brev till EU-parlamentet", *Narkotikafrågan*: Stockholm, 1998, 3, p.15.

9. Johansson P. "EU stöder FN's konventioner", *Narkotikafrågan*: Stockholm, 1998, 5-6, p.10.

10. van Solinge T.B. *The Swedish drug control system*. Centre for Drugs Research, University of Amsterdam, 1997.