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Democracy Building Activities in the Swedish Riksdag; the Role of a Parliamentary Library;

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Abstract:

A comprehensive and well-developed system of information about society is a fundamental requirement in a democracy. It is a precondition for an active dialogue between citizens and their elected representatives. Parliaments have a special responsibility for promoting information about society in general and for providing impartial information without party political bias about Parliament and its work. In the western democracies young people tend to take democracy for granted. Voter participation – especially by young people – has been declining gradually. What can be done to change these trends? The Parliament of Sweden – the Riksdag – has created a new office with the objectives to contribute actively to increasing the public's – and especially young people's – knowledge of and interest in the Riksdag and its work. The Riksdag Library contributes to satisfy the need among the public for accurate and easily accessible information about the work and decisions of the Riksdag with its open-door policy, regional activities and training of librarians from all over Sweden.

Text:

“Many forms of Government have been tried, and will be tried in this world of sin and woe. No one pretends that democracy is perfect or all-wise. Indeed, it has been said that democracy is the worst form of Government except all those other forms that have been tried from time to time.”

Winston Churchill, Speech, House of Commons, November 11, 1947.

Democracy Building Activities in the Swedish Riksdag; the Role of a Parliamentary Library

Democracy – a mutual responsibility

A comprehensive and well-developed system of information about society is a fundamental requirement in a democracy. It is a precondition for an active dialogue between citizens and their elected representatives. As the principal representative of the people, the Parliament has a special responsibility for promoting information about society in general and for providing impartial information without party political bias about Parliament and its work. Knowledge of Parliament and our society is a fundamental prerequisite for citizens in exercising influence. Good knowledge of how Parliament and society work is the basis for commitment and responsibility. The citizen's trust in the democratic institutions is vital for a democracy to function.

The information activities of the Parliament of Sweden, the Riksdag, take their starting-point in the fundamental rights relating to freedom of expression and public access to information stipulated in the Swedish Constitution. These laws constitute an obligation for the Riksdag to provide information and a right for the public (media, organisations, education system, agencies, businesses etc.) to obtain information about the role, the work and the decisions of the Riksdag. The Riksdag Administration must therefore be accessible, transparent and service-minded. The media and other distributors of information are to be actively supported in their task of informing the public.

Declining participation in general elections

In the western democracies young people tend to take democracy for granted. Democracy has after many years of struggle given people a relatively good standard of life. The media – the fourth branch of government – are today the principal source for information about society and the work of the Parliament. But politicians many times are looked upon with criticism and distrust, both by the media and by the electorate.

Swedes have been regarded as firm keepers of democracy. We haven't had a war since 1809. The general right for all citizens alike to vote was obtained in 1921. But in the last general elections in Sweden (2002) voter participation declined to 80 % – the lowest figure since 1958. Voter participation has been declining gradually since 1979. The number of young persons voting for the first time has decreased even more. The lower the education these young persons have the less interest they show to go to the polls. And the elections for the Parliament of the European Union in May this year gave a severe shock to Swedish politicians – only 37.8 % of eligible Swedes voted, less than the 41.6 % who voted the last time. Sweden has been a member of the European Union since 1995, but still this fact is not really accepted by many citizens. But is the best course of action for the citizen really to ignore politics and elections?

What can be done to change these trends? What can Parliament do? And are these problems really something for the Parliamentary Library and the rest of the administration to tackle? Personally I think so. Parliament has an important supporting role to play in the education of citizens and the training of distributors of information like journalists, teachers and librarians.

In what follows I will describe the activities of the Library and the other departments of the Riksdag in this field. I will also mention what some other Parliaments do to enhance communication with the public. I am sure that many of you here today can add to the list!

Information and Communication of the Riksdag

The Swedish Riksdag is a single chamber with 349 members from 7 political parties. It has 16 committees plus a special committee for EU issues. Around 550 non-political staff work for the Parliament. The party secretariats employ around 400 persons, mostly political secretaries.

One year ago, in 2003, the Library and other departments of the Riksdag working with information and knowledge were reorganised and taken out from under the parliamentary Administrative Office. They now form a new office directly under the Riksdag's General Secretary: the Office for Information and Knowledge Management. This gives the Library and the other related departments a more prominent part to play towards external groups of special interest to the Riksdag. One of the goals of the Riksdag is to be as open as possible towards the media and the public, and this is also one of the main objectives for the new office:

- to contribute actively to increasing the public's – and especially young people's – knowledge of and interest in the Riksdag and its work
- to satisfy the need among different segments of the public for accurate and easily accessible information about the work and decisions of the Riksdag.

The organisation of democracy-enabling activities varies from one country's parliament to another's. In many parliaments the Library organises nearly all public relations contacts with the surrounding world – one good example is the Parliamentary Library of Canada, another is the House of Commons Library in the UK. In Sweden this is not the case. Many of the democracy-building activities of the Riksdag are organised by the Information Department. Indeed, the first public relations activities of our parliament were started in the 1960s by the Secretariat of the Chamber, and an information department was set up only in the early 1980s.

The Information Department today is responsible for

- a telephone service for the general public, media, organisations, companies, public authorities and educational establishments;
- press contacts and service to the media;
- advertisements in the press;
- courses and training for teachers, journalists, information officers etc.
- school visits, primarily from upper secondary school and adult education classes;
- guided tours for the public;
- study visits from organisations, public authorities, etc;
- work experience programmes for school pupils;
- exhibitions, fairs, open days, Youth Parliament etc.;
- production of information materials for external and internal users, including teaching materials, fact sheets, books, brochures, a staff journal etc.;
- electronic publication of the Riksdag's documents, databases and other information about the Riksdag.

Press and Information Services

The Press and Information Office answers over 25 000 *telephone enquiries* per year from the public, media, authorities, organisations and companies. The section's information officers respond to questions about current business in the Riksdag, the scheduling of debates, results of votes in the Chamber and the implications of decisions. Other questions may for example concern the Riksdag's working procedures, the formation of Government, referendums,

elections and distribution of seats. The telephone service is open on weekdays. Most questions are answered over the telephone but an increasing number are answered by e-mail.

The section is responsible for issuing *press releases*, dealing mainly with current business, committee reports, forthcoming activities in the Chamber and the engagements of the Speaker.

A brief *summary of the decisions* taken in the Chamber is compiled and sent at regular intervals via fax or e-mail, primarily to the media.

Every Friday the Press and Information Office compiles the *Riksdag business agenda* with information about forthcoming business in the Chamber, new Government bills, public committee hearings etc. The Riksdag business agenda is distributed internally and externally to the Government Offices, public authorities, the media, etc.

Press releases, the summary of decisions and the Riksdag business agenda are all available in Swedish on the Riksdag website.

Twice a year a *two-day course* about the work of the Riksdag is held for journalists. Courses are also arranged for journalism students and public sector information officers.

A telephone service with a voice answer-back function provides extensive information about activities in the Riksdag. Among other things, it is possible to listen directly to debates in the Chamber, to public committee hearings or to press conferences. Recorded messages also give up-to-date information about current business in the Chamber etc. Via a fax-on-demand service it is possible to order agendas and lists of speakers for the current week, the Riksdag business agenda, summaries of decisions, press releases etc. Service to the media is available on a separate number – journalists can simply phone in free of charge and listen to the debate in progress in the Chamber. Various television channels use the parliamentary recordings of the plenary proceedings free of charge.

Some 30 journalists representing the major newspaper, radio, television, and news companies have offices in the Riksdag. The journalists receive services aimed at facilitating their work in the Riksdag.

School and Visiting Services

The goal for which the Riksdag's School and Visiting Services strive is to give visitors, especially young people, knowledge of how to influence decisions before they are taken in the Swedish Parliament. They are also informed about the democratic process and about the work and conditions of being an MP.

Activities of one kind or another are organised for around 100,000 visitors a year by the booking office. These activities cover educational programmes and include guided tours.

School groups

In the school unit former teachers work as school information officers. They work with students from the age of 16, but also with adult students. The visiting class receives lessons about the Constitution, the historical background of the Swedish Parliament, the law-making process etc. in a specially equipped classroom. Sometimes they look at a video and after that they visit the chamber from the public gallery and listen to a debate; often they also get a

chance to speak to a Member for about half an hour. The whole visit takes about 1.5 hours. The Riksdag usually receives twenty classes a week.

For younger students (14-15 years old), special programmes of about 40 minutes are arranged. They get basic information about the work of the Parliament and they visit the public gallery. There are six to eight classes of younger students per week.

Special groups

For other groups, guided tours through the different parts of Parliament are arranged. Fifteen part-time guides are employed to take care of these tours. Some days of the week are reserved for assistance to MPs' privately booked visitors.

General public

During the parliamentary session guided tours for the general public are arranged on Saturdays and Sundays both in Swedish and in English. There are also special "art-in-the-Riksdag" tours on Mondays. During the summer, guided tours for Stockholm tourists are arranged every weekday in Swedish, English, German and French.

Educational material

Different kinds of education materials such as books, fact sheets, brochures, overhead transparencies, videos and CD-ROMs are published, especially for upper secondary school. The aim is to provide schoolteachers with educational resources to increase pupils' interest in politics and democracy. Law-making is often a complex process and requires pedagogically designed educational materials to be properly understood.

Training

Courses about the organisation and work of Parliament are arranged for teachers and university students. About 1,200 persons participate every year. The courses for teachers are very popular and there are always lots of applications to participate. The courses are inexpensive for the participants because the Parliament considers teachers a primary target group and subsidises these courses. A course can last one day, three days or even four days. Half-day courses are often arranged for students at the university level. The course program consists mainly of lectures, talks and discussions with MPs and listening to debates in the chamber.

Exhibitions

Generally one or two big educational exhibitions are created every year.

Student trainees

Each year about 60 upper secondary school pupils can accompany MPs in their work for a week or two. In co-operation with the MP and with regard to the trainee's age and interests the Information Department arranges study programs, to take place when the MPs are occupied with their work in the standing committees. The sessions in the committees are not open to the public and the trainees are consequently not allowed to be present. The Library takes part in these programs by arranging historic political walks in the Old Town of Stockholm. The young trainees really appreciate the opportunity of being in the centre of politics.

Youth Parliament

Many Parliaments arrange Youth Parliaments. On the 19th of March this year 349 young high school students from all parts of Sweden met in the Riksdag for the fourth Swedish Youth Parliament. These delegates were gathered to practise as members of Parliament for one day. They had been preparing themselves for this day together with their teachers and fellow students for half a year beforehand. After the Speaker had welcomed them to the Riksdag, they gathered in parliamentary committees to discuss the different subjects on the agenda. Under the guidance of one MP and one officer from each committee they discussed the motions sent in to the Youth Parliament from schools all over Sweden. A debate and voting in the Chamber followed. Then they had an opportunity to ask questions to Members of the Government. An opportunity to meet with Members of Parliament concluded the day.

Educational Centre

An interactive educational centre will open in the Riksdag next year. The idea has been borrowed from the Danish Parliament, the Folketing, where the program is called “Politician for a day”. The Centre in the Folketing is situated in the basement of the Parliament, and is a high technology mini-parliament with chamber, committee rooms, library, MPs offices, etc. Here pupils from grades 8 and 9 can take part in an advanced role play reflecting the political life of an MP.

Publications and Electronic Information

The Publications and Electronic Information Section is responsible for the Riksdag website, the public databases (Rixlex), the Riksdag’s Intranet, graphic design, electronic information and production of the *Citizens’ Guide*.

The *Riksdag website* (www.riksdagen.se) contains information about the work of the Riksdag, current business, members, the Riksdag and the EU etc. Much of this information is also available in English. A subscription service is available for members of the public wishing to receive press releases, the Riksdag business agenda and a summary of decisions taken by the Riksdag. When the Riksdag is in session, the website has an average of 180 000 visitors per month.

The *Riksdag’s public databases* (Rixlex) are available via the website. Rixlex contains full-text databases dating back as far as the late 1980s. It also contains a directory of all the members of the Riksdag.

All printed and electronic information material is given a special *graphic design*. The Section often functions as an internal consultant for other departments when they wish to produce information material. Material for external target groups includes a presentation brochure about the Riksdag in several languages, fact sheets and a directory of the members of the Riksdag. A brochure entitled *Schools and the Riksdag* presents teaching materials for different school levels. Much, but not all of the Riksdag’s information material is free of charge. Information material and parliamentary documents, i.e. Government bills, private members’ motions, committee reports, records etc. can be purchased from the Riksdag’s Information Centre in Stockholm or ordered via the website.

The *Citizens’ Guide* is an easily comprehensible guide to the rights and obligations, laws and regulations that apply in Swedish society. It also provides practical information on topics such as how to start a business, how to apply for a building permit, what rules apply in the case of

industrial injury etc. It is continuously updated. The *Citizens' Guide* is available in Swedish on the Internet: www.samhallsguiden.riksdagen.se.

The EU Information Centre of the Riksdag

The task of the EU Information Centre is to keep the general public informed about the European Union and Sweden as a member state. The activities are focused on answering questions about the EU from the general public. Responsibilities also consist in producing and distributing information material. The information concerns both basic facts and issues of current importance. The information provided by the EU Information Centre must be non-partisan and politically impartial, in accordance with requirements laid down in the parliamentary guidelines for all information activities.

The public can contact the EU Information Centre in several ways. The most common way is via the Riksdag website or by telephone. The telephone service is open weekdays 5 hours every day. Information material can also be ordered via a 24-hour answering machine service. The call is free of charge when phoning within Sweden. The number of questions received by fax and e-mail is growing every year. Questions can also be forwarded by post.

The material produced by the EU Information Centre is in most cases available in both printed and electronic form. The ambition is to make it possible to access all needed information on the website. Some of the material is also available in English. The Centre publishes fact sheets, brochures and other types of publications.

“Från Riksdag & Departement”

is a special journal containing news about the business of the Riksdag and the Government and is published every week when Parliament is sitting. It is intended to keep central and local government employees, the private sector, organisations and the public abreast of what is going on in the Riksdag, the Government Offices and the EU. It covers topics of current interest, inquiries and Government bills. It also describes the progress of various proposals in the Riksdag, parliamentary debates and decisions, and how affairs relating to the EU are being dealt with. Experienced journalists write the articles. “Från Riksdag & Departement” has around 20 000 subscribers, and is also issued in audio format as a talking newspaper.

The Research Service

of the Riksdag have no special activities directed towards the public. Of course they do a lot of research work for MP:s that these can use in their contacts with their constituencies, but the research reports and InfoPM:s are not available to the public.

People with special needs

For many years the Riksdag has tried to improve the general public's access to the work of the Parliament. A couple of years ago a discussion started as how to help persons with special needs, i.e. persons with physical handicaps like blindness or deafness, but also people with dyslexia and other learning problems, to understand and follow the work of the Parliament. Also, Sweden has an immigrant population of around 10 %, many of whom have difficulties understanding the Swedish language. What could be done for these groups? For many years some of the Riksdag material has been published on cassettes, but what more would be needed to reach these groups?

Discussions started with the Ombudsman for disabled people, with immigrant and handicapped persons' organisations. These were given the opportunity to go through the website and the printed material of the Riksdag, to criticise and give advice. This led the

Riksdag to change the formats and versions of the information both on its website and in its print publications.

As a result all staff of the Riksdag working with information have been educated in intercultural communication and how to present material for persons with special needs. Easy to read versions of the brochures about Parliament and its work were published and special areas for easy to read information and information in sign language were added to the website. A special audio function that lets the user listen to the information on the website was created. Text was added to the videocassettes of the Riksdag and some of the guided tours were led by interpreters of sign language. All televised broadcasts of debates in the chamber include interpretation in sign language, and there have been requests for subtitled debates in the future. Furthermore, a project to publish all information brochures of the Parliament in some of the immigrant languages has started this year (2004).

Information Centre

The Information Centre of the Riksdag was created in 1995 and used to be located close to the main entrance of the Riksdag. As of August 2004 the Information Centre has been reopened in a new form and in a new place – the entrance hall of the Library. This will make it possible for the Information Centre and the Library to work very closely together and easier for the public to follow the work of the Riksdag. We hope both to spark a greater interest in the activities of the Riksdag and to create a new meeting point for the public and members of the Riksdag. The Information Centre has up till now received approximately 45 000 visits per year. The Library has more than 100 000 visitors per year, so the co-operation will probably be fruitful.

The new Information Centre will sell parliamentary documents, official government reports and souvenirs. The public can follow the debates in the Chamber on a wide-screen television and multimedia work stations are available for accessing the Riksdag website and for searching the Riksdag's collection of public databases, Rixlex, or viewing presentations about the Riksdag and its history.

Once a week when the Riksdag is in session an informal meeting is to be held in the reading corner of the Information Centre, giving members of the public the opportunity to meet and discuss with politicians. The reading corner also has current information about the party groups in the Riksdag. Program activities and exhibitions concerning the work of the Riksdag are also arranged at the Information Centre.

And, finally, what does the Library of the Riksdag do to build democracy? In my opinion the most important democracy enabling activity of the Library is its open door policy towards the public.

A Riksdag Library open to the public

The function of the Riksdag Library when it was founded in 1851 was initially to serve only members of the Riksdag and their staff, together with the committees and agencies of the Riksdag. At the end of the 19th century, representatives of the governmental bodies were granted permission to use the services. Over the years, close contacts developed with the libraries of the ministries, all situated in the near neighbourhood. As the collections of the library to some extent lacked a counterpart in other Swedish libraries, the Riksdag decided that scholars should be allowed access to the library. In 1918, when the library became one of the agencies of the Riksdag, it was formally declared open to researchers and advanced

students. This has always been interpreted in a broad sense and in reality it meant that the library was open to the public. The Riksdag Library participates in a close co-operation with university libraries, special libraries of various kinds and the public libraries of Sweden. The Riksdag Library is furthermore a depository library for documents of many international organisations and has agreed to keep this material available to the public. Thus the library is a parliamentary library, but it also has obligations towards other groups and the general public. In 1983 direct access for the public from the street into the library was opened.

The Riksdag Library is of course first of all responsible for the provision of information and knowledge to members of the Riksdag and to their staff, by acquiring and making available factual and briefing material. But it also has as one of its aims to help to create openness and access to the work of the Swedish Parliament, and to promote greater knowledge of and interest in the Riksdag and its work. The Library is responsible for informing the general public about the official materials it holds and for keeping them accessible to the public.

Many parliamentary libraries say that they are open to the public, but very few are open to all members of the public without any previous application or notification. Being paid for by tax money parliamentary libraries should, in my mind, be open to the ones who are paying for them. And nowhere are librarians with a deeper knowledge about parliamentary affairs and politics to be found! Five hours every weekday the public may use the Riksdag library. To the Riksdag it is of course open all day.

The Finnish Eduskunta Library, the Library of the Italian Camara dei Deputati and the National Assembly Library of South Korea are other parliamentary libraries that I know work with the same model. The Finnish Eduskunta Library is an excellent example: it is open 9–18 Mondays and Fridays and the rest of the week 9–20. It is even open to the public 9–15 on Saturdays! I think this is a model for the rest of our parliamentary libraries to follow!

In March this year (2004) I had the great pleasure to visit the Italian Parliament and its wonderful library. The Library is completely open to the public, with direct access, and offers truly beautiful surroundings for students and other members of the public to study the parliamentary documents and other subjects of the collections. The Italian Parliament opened its library to the general public in December 1988. They have developed and gradually extended the following services to the general public:

- guidance to legislative research and to Italian, foreign and EU documents
- assistance in bibliographic research, catalogue consultation and using the databases and the CD-ROM service of the Library
- Internet access and assistance in searching networked electronic resources
- training sessions on legislative and juridical research, with special reference to the parliamentary documentation available on Internet
- photo copying and reproduction services

And an extensive assistance is available in the reading rooms from the entire staff working rotating shifts.

Library user analysis

Who are the visitors to a parliamentary library from the public and how often and why do they visit? Only two months ago, in Spring 2004, the Riksdag Library did a survey among the people visiting it from outside:

Mainly the visitors are young people: 48 % are students between 20 and 30 years of age, 27 % are between 30 and 40. A total of 71 % come to the Library on account of their university studies. 18 % come to solve problems related to their work (lawyers and employees of the courts in the neighbourhood) and 12 % use the Library for research purposes. About one-third – 33 % – of the external visitors come to the Library every month and as many as 27 % come once a week or more. The remaining 40 % visit the Riksdag Library once or twice a year.

What information do they seek?

As many as 43 % seek information about older parliamentary documents and decisions, while 28 % are looking for information about current parliamentary issues. Some 39 % of the public visitors are looking for general information about society: on environmental matters, about the European Union, about Swedish social issues, about international politics and laws; or just want to read the periodicals. Only a very few are interested in facts about how Parliament works. As few as 6 % come to borrow a certain book. Mostly the students are looking for course books, law books, case law, historical material and research reports. Some of the outside visitors simply use the Riksdag Library as their working place when in Stockholm.

Website and information

The Library has invested much more effort in the Intranet than in the extranet, its public web site. I am quite proud of the Riksdag Library's Intranet and all the digital information our members and staff can find there, but that lies outside the scope of this presentation. There is a special smaller Intranet for visitors from the public to use in the library. They can search and order from the library catalogue, of course, but they also have access to some of the major law databases of Sweden.

The Riksdag Library's public Internet site will be renewed at the end of this year. There is a big project going on to update all the web site of the Riksdag, and the Library web is part of this work. Already today the public can search and order material, so that it is waiting for them when they arrive, and they can also extend their loans. The web site gives all of Sweden access to the Library, and that is quite democratic.

Indexing

Librarians index all official documents of the Riksdag. The Library publishes one of the public's most important gates to the Riksdag documents – the printed index. At the moment a project for automatic indexing of the documents with the help of the search system Autonomy is in its final stages.

Training of librarians

Libraries and librarians in Sweden are a very important target group for parliamentary information delivery. The staff of the Riksdag Library consists of only 40 persons, and very few of the citizens of Sweden have the opportunity to use the Library personally. We have to use other libraries and librarians as retail dealers of information about the Riksdag. That is why we twice a year arrange training courses for librarians from all over Sweden. The duration of the course is three days. The Riksdag pays for the stay: two nights at a hotel in Stockholm. We also arrange a dinner for the participants and members of Parliament in the Riksdag restaurant. But the main objective is that when the librarians leave Stockholm, they shall know everything that is worth knowing about the Parliament, the building, the history, the documents, the proceedings. Librarians from all types of libraries (public, university,

special) can apply for the course, but librarians working with the social sciences and with parliamentary documents have the best chance to get selected. The Riksdag Library training course is looked upon as one of the best educational opportunities for librarians in Sweden, and it helped us get the “Library of the Year” award in 2002.

Regional information services

In January 2004 the Riksdag Library in Stockholm started regional Riksdag Information Centres in three other mayor cities of Sweden: Malmö, Gothenburg and Sundsvall. The Riksdag Library picked up this idea from the Finnish parliamentary library, which did something similar as a project with several Finnish provinces some years ago, but we have tried to polish and refine the concept.

For several years the opening of regional Riksdag Information Centres in other parts of the country had been suggested in private members’ bills. This led us to investigate how to realise the idea at a low cost to the Riksdag. Every city of Sweden has a very good public library. As a librarian I thought that using these public libraries would be the best solution. We selected three major cities, one in the very south, one in the west and one in the north for this regional Riksdag Information Centre project, which will run for two years. If all turns out well, some new cities will be selected, and the project will be transformed into a current activity of the Riksdag.

The public library selected as host has to offer a good space where the Riksdag can set up a regional centre. The Riksdag pays for the equipment, hardware, furniture etc., and the public library puts staff at the centre’s disposal. This staff – two librarians from each library – is invited to the Riksdag for two or three days twice a year. They get a thorough education in how the Riksdag works and they meet with MPs from the constituency. They also learn all about the publications of the Riksdag and they get to practise both in the Riksdag Library and at the Information Department. They meet a special contact person at the Riksdag, whom they can call for help whenever they need it. The Riksdag pays for their stay in Stockholm during the training sessions. The public library is in charge of the local marketing of the centre. During weekends Members of Parliament from the region are invited to use the centre as their meeting point with their constituency.

On the 9th of February the three regional Riksdag information centres were inaugurated. Many other public libraries from different parts of Sweden are waiting for their chance to be part of this project.

These are some of the ideas practised in the Swedish Parliament and I am eager to hear about the experiences of other parliaments and their libraries in activities that enable democracy.

And remember that this work of democracy–building which we do is no small matter. A wise man observed, ***“You can never have a revolution in order to establish a democracy. You must have a democracy in order to have a revolution.”***(G.K. Chesterton, Tremendous Trifles, 1955.)

When we work to build democracy through our parliamentary libraries, we are working to help citizens change their world.

July 29, 2004