

Daisaku Ikeda's Recollections of World Figures Swedish Prime Minister Ingvar Carlsson — A Leader Who Lives Among the People

A Person's Behavior Decides Everything

EVEN after he became prime minister of Sweden, Ingvar Carlsson continued to take the bus to work each day—a ride of some forty minutes. And though his work might continue late into the night, and no matter how tired he might be, he refused to use taxis or official cars. Like every other ordinary Swedish citizen, he rode the subway and lined up at the bus stop.

When his two daughters grew up and left home, he and his wife, Ingrid, a librarian, decided their house was now too large, and they moved to a smaller one with only three rooms. Prime Minister Carlsson, who had also once been minister of Housing and Physical Planning, registered with the public housing agency for a rental and waited his turn for a vacancy, just like any other Swedish citizen would have to.

Also, whenever he entertained guests as head of his political party, Mr. Carlsson would contact the party's accounting department in advance for authorization. The ability to draw a clear line between one's private life and public life— nothing distinguishes a leader's genuineness more clearly.

A Tradition of Leaders As "Ordinary Citizens"

DURING my meeting with Mr. Carlsson [in June 1989] at the Prime Minister's Office, I remarked on his commuting by bus or shopping at the market after work. He smiled and commented: "We have a long tradition for a prime minister, cabinet members and political leaders to lead an ordinary life. This is important. Of course, today the issue of security is a growing problem and Sweden is no exception. But we are trying to lead normal lives."

The Prime Minister's Office, too, is simple and understated. It is neither imposing nor ostentatious, but has the refined and functional beauty of a modern office.

Stockholm, Sweden's capital, is known to many as "the Venice of Scandinavia." It is a city literally surrounded by water—built as it is upon thirteen linked islands and extending onto the mainland of the Scandinavian Peninsula. My first meeting with Mr. Carlsson took place on the seventh floor of the Prime Minister's Office building. I was treated to a beautiful view of Lake Mälaren in early summer. The sky was a bright, translucent blue.

The Swedish leader's aforementioned remark that "the issue of security is a growing problem" was a specific reference to the February 1986 assassination of his predecessor, Prime Minister Olof Palme (1927–1986), who was shot on the street when returning home late at night after seeing a film with his wife. Mr. Palme had declined having bodyguards accompany him, saying it was his "private time." For Sweden, a nation that had prided itself on its civic order and low crime rate, this was a startling and unprecedented event. The world mourned for Prime Minister Palme, who had been a leader devoted to the pacifist cause.

The government was thrown into confusion, but a successor was quickly decided upon. Ingvar Carlsson, then the deputy prime minister, was the unanimous choice. He shared his predecessor's commitment to peace, though being of a quieter, more restrained temperament compared to the vibrant charisma of Mr. Palme. No one doubted his

integrity or his ability to implement government policy.

Before our meeting, the prime minister arrived alone five minutes early to the meeting room where press representatives from Japan were waiting, and he shook hands with each of them in a friendly, casual fashion. They were surprised by how warm and personable he was. I was also dazzled by his brilliant smile—as bright as a blue Scandinavian sky—the moment we met.

Toward a Just Society

PRIME Minister Carlsson was born in the small provincial town of Borås. His father worked in warehousing and his mother in the textile industry. Mr. Carlsson was 12 when his father died. He told me that his father's death had come as a terrible shock, and confessed that he will probably never get over it entirely. Raised by his mother, the young Ingvar Carlsson pursued his studies despite facing great obstacles and hardships, and entered the University of Lund [Sweden's second oldest university, founded in 1671]. In those days, the educational welfare system was not yet in place, and it was very difficult for him to manage to pay for his university education. That experience may have led him to dream of a society in which everyone has a fair chance.

He threw himself zealously into his studies, completing a four-year course in just two years, while at the same time taking a leading role in political activities. That is when he was discovered by his "second father," Prime Minister Tage Erlander (1901–1985). Erlander led Sweden for twenty-three years in the difficult years following the Second World War, and was responsible for the construction of Sweden's welfare state. The young Carlsson adopted him as his mentor and father. Those who find a great teacher are indeed fortunate.

When we met again in Tokyo [in March 1991], Prime Minister Carlsson told me that one of his mentor's dictums was that a political leader must never ask others, or members of a rival political party, to do what he himself was unable to do. These are simple yet profoundly significant words; they resound with integrity and a sense of responsibility. If this one rule was universally adopted, how much healthier politics would be.

An Open Government

ALONG process of trial and error ensued before Sweden achieved its high standard of living and universal welfare system. Up until the start of this century, Sweden was a poor agricultural nation. Almost a third of its 3.5 million population at that time emigrated to the United States. Now, immigrants from around the world flock to Sweden.

With a dynamic spirit of experimentation, Sweden attempted to create a "third social system," combining capitalist competition in the creation of wealth and socialist justice in the equal distribution of that wealth. Many of the nations in Eastern Europe, it will be remembered, looked to Sweden as a model after their liberation from communism.

Though Sweden has faced crises on several occasions, it has always been able to summon the wisdom and ingenuity to solve them and improve its lot. Its open government is what has made these unceasing reforms possible. The agreement of its citizens is a necessity for supporting Sweden's highly developed welfare system and

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the high taxes needed to sustain it. To assure that support, the government presents the facts to its citizens, offers policies, and has the citizenry debate them.

There are no lies, no conspiracies. Government information is completely open to the public. There is a prevailing belief that government is not a special job of a special group of people but the daily, ordinary task of ordinary citizens to make their society a better place. As a result, debates on current government policy and close monitoring of the government's actual performance are encouraged on all levels of Swedish society, including school classrooms.

Recently, the government has set researchers to the task of checking all spheres of Swedish society—including government, business and the bureaucracy—to see whether power is fairly distributed and whether there is any disparity or imbalance. The government's tradition of strict self-monitoring has built one of the most proudly democratic societies in the world. This mature spirit of self-discipline also governs Prime Minister Carlsson's life and work.

The People's Happiness Must Be a Country's Fundamental Criterion

REJECTING the insidious temptations of power for power's sake and making people's happiness the ultimate criterion of all decision- and policy-making—this humanism forms the foundation of Sweden's policies of peace. Sweden is a nation that has not known war since the time of Napoleon (1769–1821), nearly two centuries ago. The efforts of prime ministers Palme and Carlsson for peace have also been conspicuous. They have always criticized the aggression of the superpowers from the standpoint of a small nation—a position not unlike that of ordinary citizens attacking the abuses of the powerful.

As deputy prime minister, Mr. Carlsson attended the opening of the "Nuclear Arms: Threat to Our World" exhibition in Stockholm in September 1984. The exhibition was presented by the United Nations Department of Public Information and organized jointly by the SGI and the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. In his address on that occasion, he denounced the concept of nuclear deterrent, insisting that Hiroshima and Nagasaki were clear lessons showing that nuclear weapons do not protect humanity but are its greatest threat.

We must not allow ourselves to be deceived by the pronouncements of so-called experts. We must follow the dictates of what our solid common sense as ordinary people tells us is right. The courage to do so is what will ultimately protect the people.

It is some five years since Mr. Carlsson remarked to me in Stockholm: "We human beings are not controlled by an unclear destiny that we cannot change. We create our own future here and now." In the most recent cabinet he assembled [in 1994], ten of the sixteen ministers are women. There are truly many, many lessons we can learn from Sweden as a pioneering nation leading the way for humanity with an unflagging spirit of challenge. □