

Sweden: Murder of Foreign Minister Lindh expresses volatile social relations

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Anna Lindh, foreign minister in the Swedish Social Democratic government, was brutally killed on September 10 in Stockholm.

Lindh was stabbed repeatedly in the arm, chest and abdomen by a lone attacker while she was shopping. Like most Swedish politicians, she did not have any personal security. She was rushed to hospital but died after surgeons spent 10 hours trying to save her life.

Her horrific murder has shocked millions of Swedish citizens, amongst whom Lindh was something of a favourite. An all-night vigil was held at the hospital where Lindh was being treated and, following her death, churches were opened for special services. Posters of Lindh have been turned into shrines and flowers have been piled up at the spot where she was attacked.

Campaigning for Sunday's euro referendum was immediately suspended, although, after all-party discussions, Prime Minister Goran Persson announced that the vote would go ahead as planned. Persson also said he will lead a demonstration in protest against Lindh's killing and violence in general.

No motive has been alluded to in her murder, but the initial suggestion by Stockholm police that it was not politically motivated cannot be taken seriously. Pictures of Lindh are currently on posters all over Sweden, as the most prominent face of the "yes to the euro" campaign. In addition to her position on the European Union (EU) and the single currency, Lindh had also been critical of the US attack on Iraq, preferring United Nations support for a war, and had condemned the Israeli government's war against the Palestinians. All these, along with her previous support for environmentalist policies, are likely to have made the former lawyer and mother of two a hate figure for the far right.

At the time of this writing, a 32-year-old homeless man with a criminal record, known to carry knives and with a history of issuing death threats to officials, is the sole suspect. The speed with which this individual, someone clearly known to the police, has been identified—apparently from fingerprints left at the scene—points at the very least to significant security failings beyond Lindh's lack of a bodyguard. It is extraordinary in any event that someone who must have been covered in blood could have made a getaway from a murder committed in a public place.

Lindh's killing invites comparison with the assassination 17 years ago of then Swedish prime minister Olof Palme.

The Social Democrat Palme was shot in a Stockholm street—again apparently by a lone killer. Similar to Lindh, he was loathed by the far right for his condemnation of the US war against Vietnam and his anti-imperialist rhetoric. Indicative of tensions within the Swedish state apparatus, Palme's murder was never solved. The police were criticised for a botched investigation, although a Christer Pettersson was tried, found guilty and then acquitted. The murder remains the focus of numerous conflicting theories as to who or what agency was actually responsible.

Subsequently, Sweden has seen a significant level of extreme right-wing violence. Over the 1990s, 16 murders were attributed to fascists, including the killings of gays, immigrants and police. In 1999 alone, syndicalist leader Bjorn Soderberg was killed, a journalist and his son were badly injured in a car bomb and the justice minister received a letter bomb. Fascists shot two policemen during an attempted bank robbery, and numerous judges, lawyers and journalists received death threats.

It is entirely possible that the killer was not associated

with any far-right group, but deranged individuals often gravitate to such organisations or at least echo their paranoia, prejudices and hatreds. During the euro referendum campaign, the far right's nationalist and xenophobic views have achieved additional prominence in the media and the entire body politic given the majority position held by the "no" campaign. This could easily have spurred a psychotic personality into action.

In any event, such are the levels of social and political tensions building up in Sweden and across Europe—tensions which none of the mainstream parties openly acknowledge—that explosive events of the most unexpected and dangerous forms can be anticipated.

Lindh has been killed, after all, in the final days of a referendum campaign in which both sides warned of economic apocalypse and the end of social welfare if their position were not adopted. Yet neither side was able to honestly explain the real issues being fought out to the Swedish population.

Moreover, Sweden the "people's home," the "Swedish model" of nationally isolated social welfare has been eroded for many years, replaced by a society of deepening inequality, with significant pockets of poverty alongside conspicuous wealth. None of the mainstream Swedish parties even acknowledge this, let alone offer a viable alternative. Is it surprising then that these events, working on the minds of disoriented and alienated people, produce tragic consequences?

In this regard, the killing bears comparison with the murder last year of the right-wing populist Pim Fortuyn in the Netherlands. Fortuyn, a flamboyant self-publicist who proposed an end to immigration, was shot by an animal rights supporter who was appalled by his anti-Muslim views.

The killing triggered such a wave of national grief and criticism of the Dutch Labour Party establishment that a rejuvenated Conservative party was able to take power with the assistance of Fortuyn's own political outfit, the Pim Fortuyn List.

Anna Lindh's killing confirms that Europe as a whole has become a seething cauldron of barely suppressed social and political tensions that presently can find no progressive political outlet. It points to the urgent need for a viable socialist political alternative to the right-wing politics of inequality and war proposed by all the mainstream parties. This alone can overcome

the desperation that produces such reactionary acts as Lindh's assassination.



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