

A LEADERSHIP IN MEMORIAM

Olof Palme was one of the three great postwar Social Democratic leaders and statesmen, along with Willy Brandt and Bruno Kreisky, who were both personal friends and intimate political associates of Palme. About a decade younger than the others, Palme was in his lifetime never allowed their avuncular respect, nor did he have time to acquire their semi-retired detachment from day-to-day domestic political controversy. He was assassinated while still vibrant with energy.

Palme was a strong and complex personality and politician, who deserves an adult obituary, not a sentimental hagiography. What was his greatness, what were his limitations, and what accounts for them both?

Clearly, his place in history is primarily that of an international statesman in the vanguard of the defence of democratic rights, national self-determination, disarmament, and global economic justice. With his speech to the Christian brotherhood movement within Swedish social democracy on July 30 1965 he was the first leading Western politician to take a principled stand for Vietnamese self-determination and against US intervention.

But the basis for his interventions on the world scene should not be forgotten. Olof Palme was for 16 years the leader of the strongest, most united, and ideologically most imaginative and innovative Social Democratic party of the world. For 10 years he was prime minister of a country which weathered the storms of the international crisis better than most.

However, this does not mean that Palme played the same role in domestic as in international politics. He was in this particular context neither a major statesman nor ideological architect. In fact, none of the three major reform campaigns of Swedish Social Democracy in the past 20 years - the broad Increased Equality campaign of the late 60s, the progressive labour legislation of the mid-70s and the wage-earners' funds - owed anything special to Palme's personal efforts. True, he did influence strongly the new party programme of 1975. Compared to the previous one of 1960, that programme certainly meant a radicalisation. Above all, it had a very strong and elaborate international orientation and flavour. But in his home base, Palme was mainly a party fighter and a tactician.

Till his very last years, Palme's relations with the Swedish Left were rather bad. In the

course of trade union radicalisation in the 1970s, many of the trade union cadres came to dislike Palme intensely, both for his style and for his socio-economic moderation. On the whole, like many brilliant men and women Palme seems to have been little loved by his senior everyday entourage, too shining, too self-assured, too full of his own ideas. But he had nothing of the aloofness of Franklin Roosevelt, nor of the personal squalor of John Kennedy.

He was never a marxist, and he was an ideologically convinced anti-Communist. His party programme of 1975 typically included a substantial section devoted to 'capitalist and communist oligarchy'. He was one of the last among leading Social Democrats to accept the Swedish Eurocommunist party as a legitimate political force with which open negotiations and deals could be made. On the other hand, as a promoter of detente he had good relations with the Soviets, and he was an explicit friend of Cuba and Vietnam.

Four major forces contributed and converged into making Palme what he was. One was his class: aristocratic, small country but cosmopolitan, and humanistic. Secondly, Palme could speak to the Vietnam generation as no other Western politician could, because he was himself largely a product of the first postwar international student movement. He was for several years a prominent figure in the worldwide students organisation, after the break with the Communist International Union of Students, the chairperson of the Western-oriented co-ordinating secretariat. As such, Palme

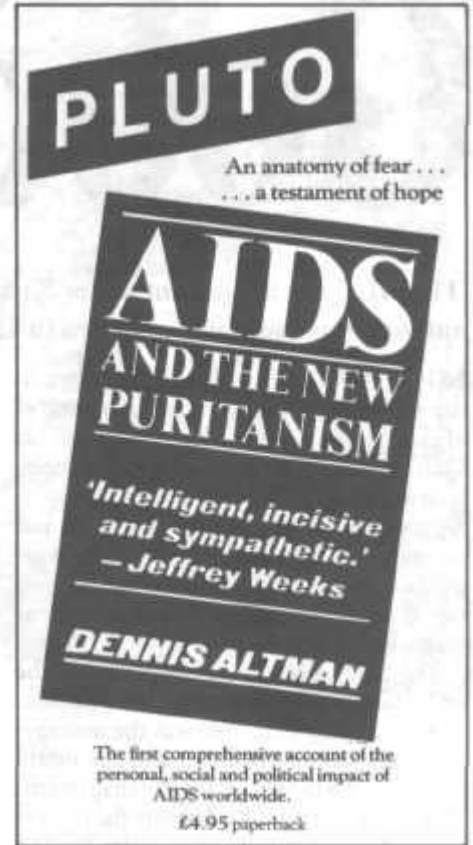
travelled widely in Asia and other parts of what later became known as the Third World, gaining similar experiences of colonialist exploitation and racism to those of later generations of young, open-minded travellers. In Palme there was to remain a strong component of an American student radical.

Palme was also made possible by his country, a successfully neutral country without a colonial past in living memory. On the other hand, the very geopolitical protectedness of his native country gave Palme's internationalism a chance to mature into the policy of a senior politician and later prime minister. The cold war was never really deep frozen in Sweden, and Sweden had no real stake in it. Up till the time of Palme, Swedish neutrality had kept a low profile, but the ground was so well prepared that neither Palme's 1965 Vietnam speech nor his co-demonstrating in 1968 with the Vietnamese ambassador to Stockholm was openly controversial within the Social Democratic party, a liability on his road to party leadership.

Finally, Palme was a man of his party. Swedish Social Democratic party leaders are well groomed and long lived. Palme was the fourth leader of 96-year-old party, and by the time of his assassination, he had led it for 16 years. When he was elected, in 1969, without rivals, Palme had been an intimate collaborator of his predecessor Eriander for 15 years. The SAP is a huge and complex machine, with collectively affiliated trade unions but without a block vote, and it takes great skill to keep it together. The six years of opposition, in 1976-82, put Palme to a tough test. He passed it rather well. A permanent but subtle concern with unity - delaying divisive decisions till a large majority has emerged, always keeping a cocked ear listening to the movement - consistent social reform, moderate or more radical according to the circumstances of pressures and constraints, and always holding forth an ideological vision were major means, elaborated by Eriander and deeply internalised in his successor.

The new party leader and prime minister, Ingvar Carlsson, has followed Palme's footsteps a few years later, although not into the Third World. Carlsson was also one of Eriander's 'boys' and has been Palme's closest party associate for at least a decade. At the end of the day, however, historical forces can only help to make sense of individuals, and never replace them. Olof Palme was unique, and his assassination means a great loss to all humane and progressive forces.

Goran Therborn



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Olof Palme: outside his house in 1976