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Palme's political legacy 'put Sweden on the map'



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As the 25th anniversary of Olof Palme's murder is remembered The Local's Karen Holst explores the political legacy left by the man who delivered Sweden from obscurity and into the globalising world.

While Sweden's Social Democratic party grapples to select its new chief after a second election defeat, the large shadow of the party's now iconic leader Olof Palme serves as a reminder of the passion it once inspired.

But even Olof Palme would have a hard time succeeding himself. Arguably, the extraordinary fit between his politics and the issues of the world during Palme's era unlocked a unique opportunity that lifted him well-beyond Sweden's national borders.

Or maybe his famed sage-like acumen transcends time and Palme's approach today would be equally insightful, influential and controversial.

Of course we'll never know.

The life of 59-year-old Prime Minister Olof Palme was snuffed from behind at close range while walking home from the theatre with

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Although his life vanished that night, Palme left behind a legacy that swept the globe.

It's evident in the more than 70 streets, public facilities and memorials that bear his name in all corners, such as an elementary school in the Western Sahara, a children's hospital in Vietnam and a city park in Iraq.

An energetic, optimistic and well-read, intelligent politician, Palme maintained an altruistic approach to politics, says Eric Sundström, Chief Editor of left-leaning political website Dagens Arena:

"He was a reformist who believed in academic thinking and research, meaning that he believed that listening to the voice of reason would prompt good political debate which would enable sound political decisions that really could make people's lives better."

Having been elected to the Parliament in 1957, Palme served as both Minister of Transport and Communications (1965) and Minister of Education and Cultural Affairs (1967) prior to rising to Sweden's top position for seven years in 1969 and then again in 1982.

"He became Prime Minister and party leader at a time when the world was changing and he quickly understood the international issues that could and would change the world," says Sundström.

Palme made his greatest political impact in the way he wielded Sweden's foreign policy, which according to the Social Democratic Party Secretary Ibrahim Baylan still resonates today.

"Before Olof Palme, the party mostly focused on internal political issues, but since Olof Palme it has become a natural to integrate his focus on international solidarity into the Social Democratic party's policies," says Baylan.

Palme's outspoken position on global affairs transformed the international image of Sweden from an undistinguished country on the northerly fringe of European borders and into a defender of the weak and a powerful voice for peace and disarmament.

"Palme is known, more than anyone else, for opening Sweden to the rest of the world, for putting Sweden on the map," says Klas Eklund, who recently published a short biography on Palme, worked as one of his speechwriters and served as the economic policy adviser to Palme's successor former Prime Minister Ingvar Carlsson.

Both a staunch anti-communist and anti-capitalist, Palme refused to be chained to the narrow mentality of the Cold War and took a vehement stand against it.

"He wanted to create a space, to chisel out a third position for non-aligned, smaller countries that were neither communist nor capitalist but a neutral socio-economic state and progressive brownstone for the Third World," explains Eklund.

His boisterous and bristly criticism of foreign governments, delivered in the five languages in which he was fluent, won him both admirers and enemies. His targets included the US foreign policy, the Vietnam War, the Franco and Pinochet regimes, the South African apartheid regime and Third World struggles for liberation from colonial rule. His stridency on these issues catapulted him into the role international statesman and a crusader for the afflicted.

Back at home Palme was deemed by many a champion of the general welfare state, with domestic policies that largely shaped Sweden into the nation it is today.

The passionate politician is considered to be one of the "intellectual fathers" of the modern Swedish model and its expansive public sector, according to former Prime Minister Ingvar Carlsson.

When Palme left office in 1976 the welfare state was bigger and more all-encompassing than anywhere else in the world, and with correspondingly much higher taxes.

“Even though the public sector has since slimmed and reformed, it still remains as a defining characteristic for Sweden,” adds Eklund.

A trailblazer on gender equality, Palme pushed through a number of radical reforms to improve the lot of women, including separate taxation of husband and wife and the expansion of child care centers.

“He had an amazing ability to read his time and a fantastic sense of understanding – he knew women would soon speak up and their

children, regional

At the same time, Palme is often criticized for over-regulating the labour market and for failing to successfully tend to the nation's economy, thereby indirectly allowing Sweden to lose its competitive edge.

A fiery speaker, Palme was known for his skillful, sharp mastery of words and is still quoted from today. His collection of oratory is often referred to as the ‘holy grail’ within the Social Democratic party.

“His way with words inspired people to get interested in politics, to engage in international policy, to become active in a way that is missing today,” Carlsson tells The Local.

But his aggressive words, having even called Spain's Franco a ‘damn murderer,’ were highly controversial and provoked his political adversaries while generating many enemies.

The shock of his assassination hushed many from discussing Olof Palme and his political ideals for many years.

“It really shook the nation and only now are we becoming more and more aware of what an important politician he was both nationally and internationally,” says Carlsson, who lost a close friend and colleague of 30 years that fateful night.

And while the direct line between Palme's reality and the political arena of today continues to fade, he is still revered as an influential and invigorating leader.

“Olof Palme became a benchmark in the party – one that no one in our current quest for a leader will ever reach up to,” says Baylan, who attributes his Social Democratic affiliation to Palme.

“I am quite certain that whoever becomes the new leader, he or she may not have had personal experience with Olof Palme, but they will surely have been inspired by him,” says Carlsson.

olof palme

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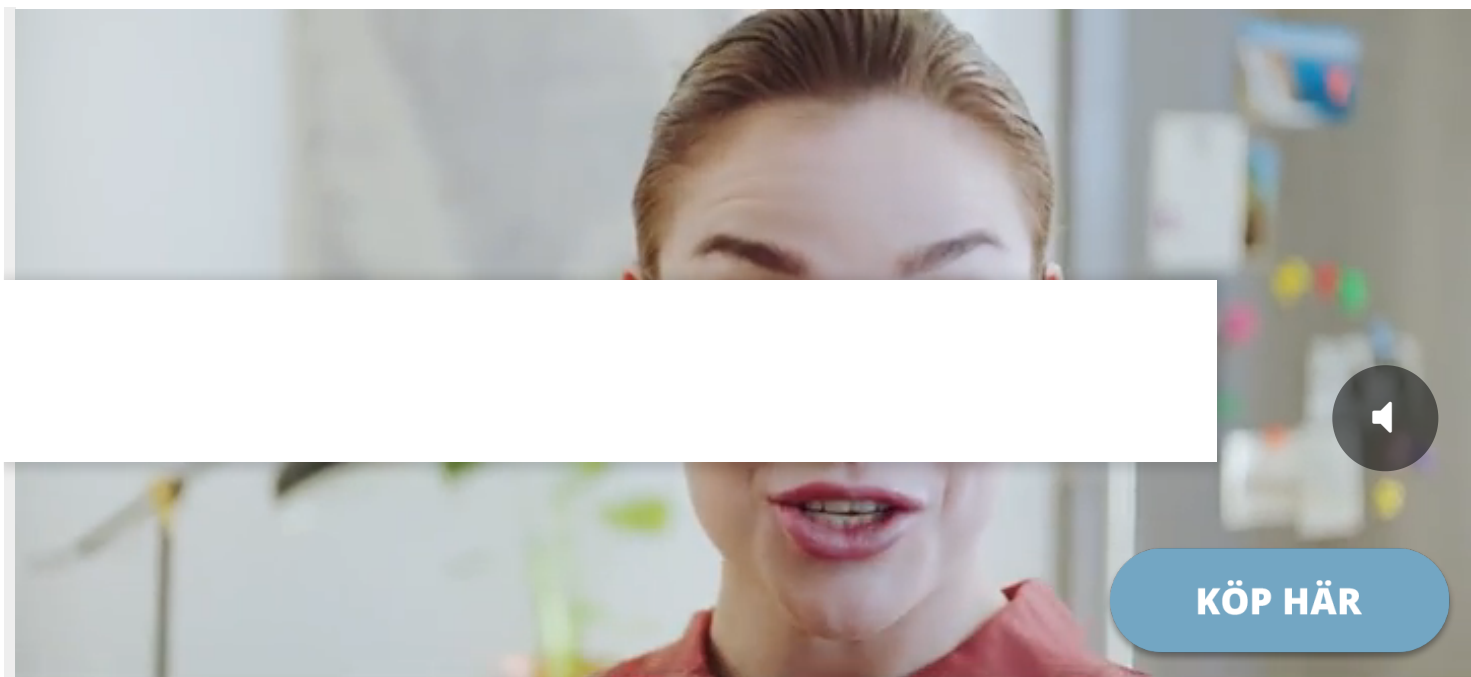
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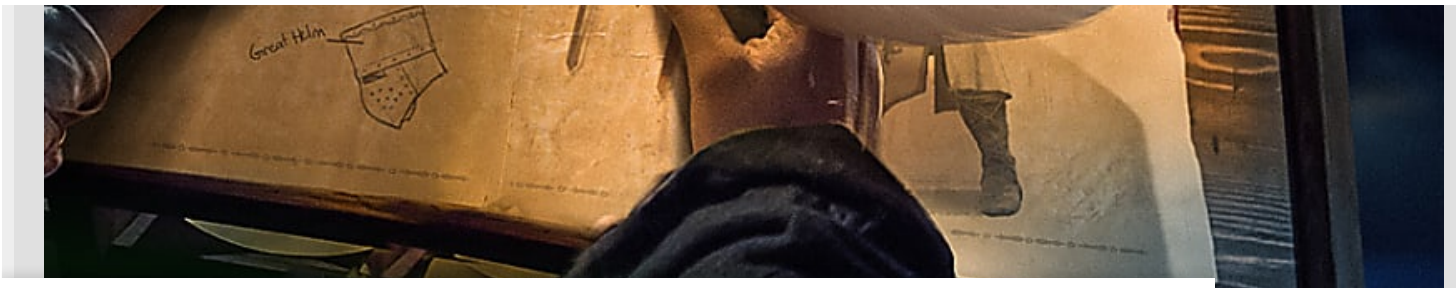
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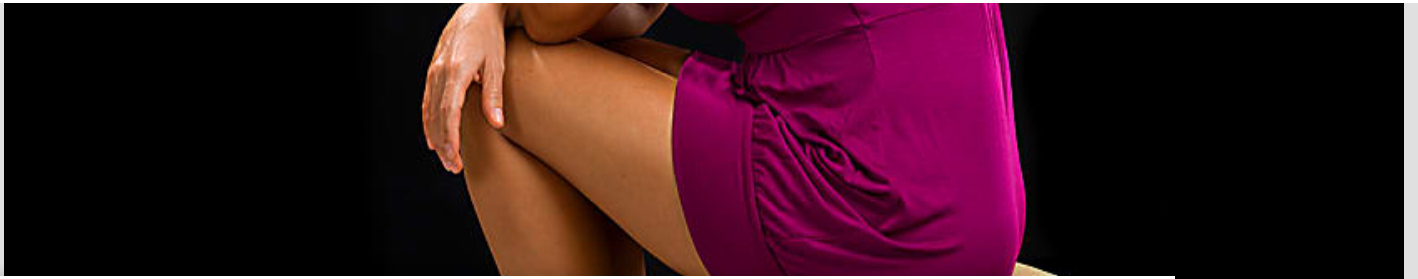




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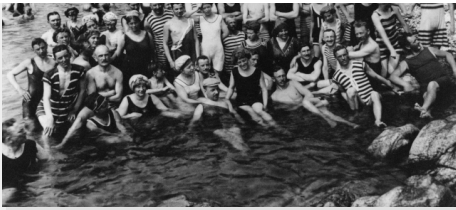
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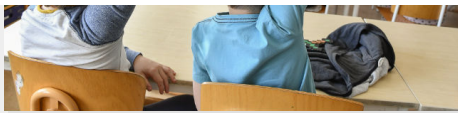
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