

# Institutional racism in Sweden and Europe

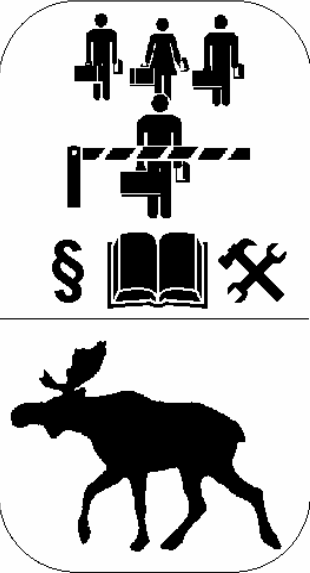
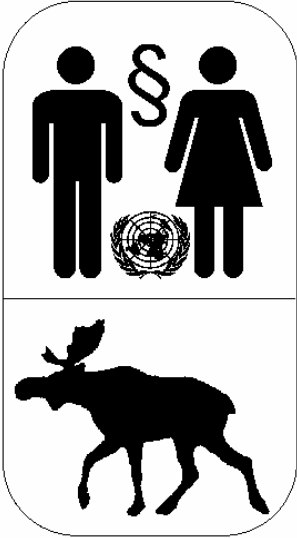
by Paul Lappalainen

For a long time, well-meaning whites went to the segregated areas of the US. They wanted to help with the “black” or “coloured” problem. The turning point came during the 1960s. With an increasingly clear voice the community pointed out that: “We do not have a black problem, we have a white problem.” The key issue was the lack of equal rights and opportunities - in other words, the failure to deal with the racism and discrimination of those with power.

Sweden and much of Europe have not come much further than the US of the 1960s. In words and theory – equal rights are assumed to exist; discrimination is denied; racism is narrowly defined so that it only applies to ideological extremists. In actions – concerning ethnic minorities, including immigrants, they are to be helped, educated, trained, controlled and disciplined. This hides and deflects the focus from those with the power to discriminate and those who benefit from discrimination. This denial contributes to recreating the institutional racism in Sweden and Europe related to ethnicity and religion. What instead is needed is giving priority to equal rights and opportunities, and a clear anti-discrimination policy as a strategy.

In *The Blue and Yellow Glass House: Structural Discrimination in Sweden*, a Swedish government inquiry completed in 2005 and based on existing Swedish research, the following definition was used:

“Structural discrimination / institutional racism refers to rules, norms, routines, and attitude and behaviour patterns in institutions / structures that are obstacles to ethnic or religious minorities in achieving the same rights and opportunities that are available to the majority of the population. It can be open or hidden, intentional or unintentional.”



In this inquiry, I draw the conclusion that institutional racism can be found in the labour market, housing, politics, the legal system, education and the welfare system.

Also, just as there is a gender power structure, there is an ethnic power structure. However, since there has been a strong feminist movement the gender power structure has been given recognition. Another conclusion is that, just as in other countries, there is an ethnic hierarchy with native born Swedes at the top and non-Europeans at the bottom. The denial of this system naturally benefits those with the power to discriminate.

Politicians, civil servants, employers, unions and researchers have maintained the focus on “immigrants”, and have not focused on the racism and discrimination in their own roles. The hesitation and doubts that many have in regard to recognizing

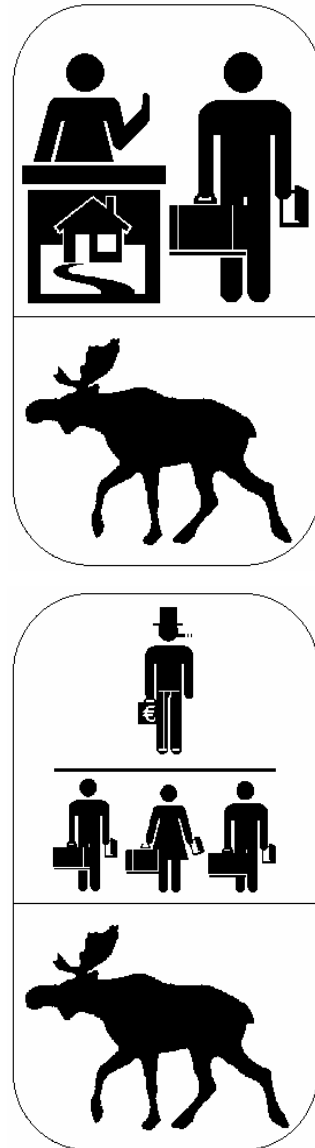
and admitting the role that institutional racism plays in today’s society is often based on an underlying belief that Sweden is “different” from other countries. However, just as in other countries, racism and discrimination are a part of Sweden’s history and culture.

The oppression of the Sami and Roma peoples and the establishment of the world’s first race biology institute in Sweden, and its influence, are clear indications. Sweden’s history and culture is a part of Europe’s. In addition, just as in the rest of Europe, racism and discrimination were denied as internal national problems since the end of World War II.

The denial can also be seen in the country’s immigrant / integration policy, which has been focused on immigrants as a problem. It is also apparent in the failures and difficulties of banning ethnic discrimination in working life as well as other parts of society. Until recently, Sweden and much of Europe at best had ineffective symbolic laws, at worst they asserted that such laws were not necessary since equal treatment was mandated by their constitution.

Naturally equal rights and opportunities are mentioned as goals, even as fundamental rights, but it has generally been assumed that these issues are not a problem. Those with power in Sweden have generally become upset and indignant when such issues are brought up.

The denial can in particular be seen in the development of legislation. Sweden signed up to the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)



in 1980, and a law against sex discrimination in the workplace went into effect the same year. Concerning ethnic discrimination an equivalent law was not adopted until 1999, even though this was required by the UN Convention on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD) when it was ratified by Sweden in 1971. This slow development of laws against ethnic discrimination provides an insight into the difficulties that politicians and others with power have had in even recognizing ethnic discrimination as a societal issue.

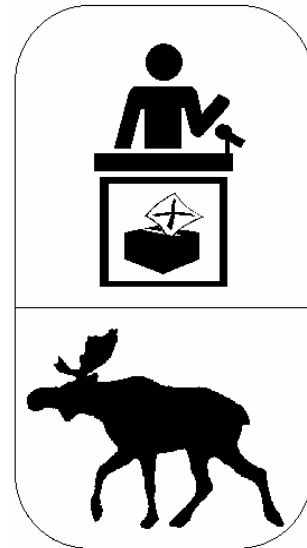
The use of certain “truths” provides an example of how denial functions in practice. The mantra that “a job is the key to integration” has been repeated so often that few dare to question it. What does this truth say about an immigrant who has a Swedish engineering degree, who is forced to work as a taxi driver due to discrimination? What is the signal sent to the individual, his children, his spouse? Or to the people next door who may need both language and other skills? The absurdity can also be seen in that few politicians would ever claim that seeing to it that women get a job, any job, is the key to gender equality.

Work is naturally an important part of every individual’s survival strategy. The effects can be positive, assuming that the point is not to lock immigrants into jobs that others do not want. Assuming that immigrants are not treated as a secondary work force to be called upon once the supply of unemployed Swedes runs out.

The jobs issue, as opposed to discrimination, has for many years allowed politicians to keep a focus on ingrained political positions. In this way the parties on the right have avoided looking at the role of employers in discrimination. On the left, they have avoided examining the role of the unions. Job creation maintains a focus on comfortable issues, and in particular on immigrants, and away from those with the power to discriminate.

I drew some lessons from the women’s movement and the civil rights movement. One is that those affected by discrimination must bring pressure to bear on the political leadership, both the right and left. The pressure has to be directed toward developing measures that lead to changes in behaviour and not just attitudes. In other words, if discrimination leads to costs, employers and others will in many cases change their behaviour, even if their attitudes remain the same.

The inquiry recommended a strategy that puts anti-discrimination policy at the centre, based on the idea that the stairs have to be cleaned from the top. This requires the implementation of various proposals.



- All government authorities should analyse how they can counteract discrimination. These analyses should be formalised in annual plans, with the Ombudsman against ethnic discrimination as a supervisory authority. One factor in the retention and salary development of agency heads should be their work with these plans.
- The government's economic power should be used to promote equality. Anti-discrimination clauses can be added to all state contracts. The government needs to specify the right to cancel contracts if discrimination occurs. These clauses should cover all discrimination grounds. Businesses need to know that discrimination can lead to cancellation of contracts. Similar demands in Canada and the US have had positive effects regarding the employment of ethnic minorities and (“white”) women. The effects have been mainly preventive and proactive.

The following proposals should also be mentioned:

- Requiring the use of discrimination testing as a quality control concerning the equality policies of labour exchanges and other key government authorities.
- An NGO-controlled fund for the development of test cases concerning anti-discrimination law.
- A government inquiry into the socio-economic costs of discrimination.
- Anti-discrimination clauses in all subsidies provided to the private sector.
- An anti-discrimination policy for public funds that indicates that government funds will be removed from banks that discriminate in their lending.
- The removal of all unmotivated differences related to citizenship in various laws as well as the constitution.

It is high time for the well-meaning in Sweden to build on the lessons developed in the US and Canada since the 1960s. This applies to the rest of Europe as well. It is possible to counteract the institutional racism that results in unequal rights and opportunities. It is possible to do this in actions as well as words.

It is up to those who are discriminated against to demand it.

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*Det blågula glashuset - strukturell diskriminering i Sverige* (The Blue and Yellow Glass House: Structural Discrimination in Sweden) can be downloaded from: <http://www.regeringen.se/sb/dD/5073/a/46188> (in Swedish, including a 20-page English summary)

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**[Index\\*](#)**

**[Home\\*](#)**