

Swedish councils' right to veto under attack

The red-green spokesmen for the energy policy in the Swedish Parliament walked directly into a carefully set trap when three days before the election they participated in a wind power political finishing debate at the Conference Wind 2010 in Gothenburg. They were ready to give in to the demands of the wind power industry. Parliament's four representatives for the four liberal alliance parties stood firmer. The event is an example of strategic industrial politics at its worst.

By Peter Skeel Hjorth, Journalist*

If you think that the red-green parties are better at protecting the individual against the problems that arise from the fast growing number of wind turbines it is high time to rethink. The Swedish Parliament's red-green parties want to do away with the councils' right to veto against wind turbines and make the expansion of wind power a national issue without any major influence at council level.

At least this was the message from the energy political spokesmen from the red-green parties three days before the recent election in Sweden when on Thursday 16th September they participated in a wind power political debate ending the conference Wind 2010 in Gothenburg, arranged by the branch organisation Swedish Wind Energy (Svensk Vindenergi) with a program that reminded of an American convention for believers. It was a debate that was directed so rigidly towards the wishes of the wind power *industry* that one could speak about equal part absurd theatre and undisguised pressure.

Currently the Swedish wind power industry experiences limitations because the Swedish councils can veto wind turbines, a demand from the armed forces regarding a 40 km security zone without wind turbines around the air bases of the Air Force and taxation of the difference between the market price and the advantage price of electricity by membership of cooperative ownerships of wind turbines.

A hidden agenda

The wind power industry exerts extreme pressure in order to change this state of affairs politically. One method was the finishing debate, but that was well hidden in the description of the last session of the conference.

"Wind power in the political hot air debate between the parties' spokesmen for energy policies three days before the election" the program announced and continued: "In the middle of a heated election campaign the questions about the levels of ambition and the framework for long term objectives land in the centre of action".

It sounds matter-of-fact and straight forward; however it proved to cover what to an experienced observer was focused and closely orchestrated theatre with representatives for the seven political parties in Parliament as targets. The aim was clearly to pressurise them to back the demands of the wind power industry.

The debate, or whatever it should be called, took place in the big congress hall at the mess centre. Here the industry's businessmen in dark suits sat next to colleagues more casually dressed. The audience were presumably mainly voters from blue alliance parties.

Only approximately a third of the seats in the big hall were occupied. The public was invited, but it appeared that only few had come. And the press shone by its absence.

The right to veto threatened

The seven spokes people were lined up by three tables facing the hall. As by irony of fate the blue government parties were placed to the left and the red-green to the right. *Annika Helker Lundström*, the director of The Swedish Wind Energy, started out by welcoming everybody from the stage.

Simultaneously three sentences appeared on the big screen behind her. It was three questions that 1000 people were asked in a survey done for Swedish Wind Energy. The symbolic effect of using the state institute for consumer research SIFO to carry out an opinion poll and not one of the other private opinion poll firms is unmistakable.

The audience could see the text, but the politicians could not. The questions were read out by Annika Helker Lundström. The first one was about the right to veto and whether the councils should have the right to veto wind turbines when they could not veto drilling of the underground in search of fossil fuel for instance. When put like that the answer was almost given in beforehand. All of 66% of the people asked did not think that the councils should have the right to veto.

A top-tuned moderator

Now the stage was taken over by the session's moderator, the title used in the program, and from the word go she calculatedly took on the role of the main character of the show. As the centre figure she rigidly commandeered the debate.

Lydia Capolicchio is a tall, slender woman with sharp facial features, intensive eyes and brown brushed-back hair as the day's coiffure. She paced up and down the stage with quick, firm steps and made a very determined and self-assured figure.

Her questioning technique was razor-sharp and top professional. It was sophisticated, shrewd and aimed at step by step directing the politicians to where she wanted them with the help of questions from the audience. Her function as a moderator had the hallmark of being carefully rehearsed. In every single question she was the ambassador for the wind power industry. Her questions were leading in a manner that made the person sitting next to me remark:

"If a lawyer put his questions in this way in a court of law, the judge would have stopped her immediately. I know this because often I am a presiding judge. Judges are very observant of questions being leading".

Lydia Capolicchio carried a manual around that she frequently consulted. She gesticulated vigorously with both arms in a typical Italian fashion. When she pointed towards a politician she

stretched out her arm and fingers in a way that created an image of a shining sabre held by an officer in front of a firing squad when he commands: Shoot.

Brilliantly competent

Who is the top trained woman who is a journalist but systematically broke the ground rules of journalism regarding **not** asking leading questions?

On the webpage www.lydiacapolicchio.se she is described as the journalist who for many years delivered news, documentaries and entertainment to TV, radio and newspapers. Everything from war reporting and debate programs to the Eurovision Song Contest has made her broad base of experience sought after even outside Sweden, you are informed.

It continues:

“As a producer, editor and reporter, communication has of course been a passion. The ability to immediately create confidence has resulted in frequent work in the corporate sector, state and councils as a strategic communicator, moderator etc.”

The webpage gives some examples of Lydia Capolicchio’s assignments as a moderator during the last couple of years. Several of the jobs included the complete responsibility for message and contents, it says.

Now this absurd theatre starts emerging in a clearer light. It was a strategic communicator that had been chosen to take the debate to where is best served the interests of the wind power industry. Lydia Capolicchio did her job with brilliant competence. The seven politicians wriggled in her net, and it must have given them a lot to think about afterwards. However, was it strategic communication or sophisticated manipulation remains an open question.

The right to veto took the longest

The conference had 1100 paying participants. A protest concert at Knutstorps Castle in Scania against inappropriately placed wind turbines that are destructive to people’s quality of life, nature and landscapes had on August 29th attracted a similar audience. However, protests from the neighbours of wind turbines do not concern the wind power industry if you look at the program of the conference.

The consideration of the people who have to live in the shadow of wind power certainly didn’t figure much in the of the politicians’ torrents of speech. It was only peripherally touched on by *Anna Kinberg Batra* from the Moderates and *Lars Gustafsson* from the Christian Democrats who pointed out that one could risk that big groups of people would turn against them.

The councils’ right to veto was the theme that ultimately dominated the debate. Questions and answers revolved around how reasonable it is that councils without any motivation could say no to projects in which a lot of money was invested. It created a lot of uncertainty in the industry it was said in the audience. But no one mentioned that as a principle veto is given without an explanation.

Among the audience was *Matthias Rapp*, Swedish Wind Energy's managing director till 2nd quarter 2010 when he was replaced by Annika Helker Lundström. He followed the debate closely and snapped his fingers visibly irritated when aggravated by what was said. A couple of times he did a quick motion to the left with a flat hand as if wanting to signal: Stop this. But he didn't say anything, and he didn't ask any questions.

Threat of an industrial regime

As the debate got underway the pressure on the politicians increased. The Left Party's *Kent Persson* was in no doubt that the expansion of wind power was a national concern and not a local one. The Environmental Party's *Per Bolund* talked about the red-greens' energy political standpoint. Finally the Social Democrats' *Tomas Eneroth* showed his hand. If the red-green came to power the councils' right to veto would be removed he said. But not one of these three politicians mentioned with a word the consideration for people.

No press to cover the event was present. However, the following day Annika Helker Lundström had a mayor debate article in the newspaper *GöteborgsPosten* with the headline "Remove obstacles to remunerative wind power". The article was about exactly the three themes from the previous day's debate and she wrote: "In order to keep the costs down and facilitate a quicker expansion the government ought to remove the councils' right to veto wind power, say no to The Defence's suggestion about stopping wind power around the military flight zones and encourage the local part ownership." (End of quotation)

The arrangement as a whole followed up by a debate article is an example of strategic industrial politics when it is worst. If this is the way, as seen here, that future important political decisions take place, you have at best given in to the tyranny of the industry or in the worst case begun sneaking in through the back door an industrial regime instead of a representative government without consulting the population first. This should indeed invite reflection.

PS: This article is a journalistic description of the event based on observations, experience and notes. All details are correctly described. The course of events is put into perspective and commented on. The article is not a journalistic content report.