

## **OLOF PALME AWARD - DAVID'S SPEECH**

A range of emotions, not all of them beautiful, passed through my head at the moment when I was offered this most distinguished award.

*I am not a hero. I am a fraud. I am being offered a medal for another man's gallantry. Decline.*

*I am not a frontline advocate for truth or human rights. I have not suffered for my writing. I have been handsomely rewarded for it.*

Neither did I feel myself the equal of any of the three writers who have preceded me at this rostrum: Václav Havel, whom I briefly knew and revered, and the intrepid Roberto Saviano, both of whom in separate ways became martyrs to

their work. And Carsten Jensen, writer on world conflict and sharer of its anguish.

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If I wanted further proof of my inadequacy, I had only to listen to Daniel Ellsberg's moving speech at this same rostrum just a year ago. Why didn't *I* ever copy secret documents and stop a war?

\*

It was only when I set out to explore the life and work of Olof Palme, and entered his spell, and discovered that same affinity with him that Ellsberg had so eloquently described, that

it seemed just possible I might not be quite such a bad fit after all.

\*

Reading and thinking Palme makes you wonder who you are. And who you might have been, but weren't. And where your moral courage went when it was needed.

You ask yourself what power drove him - golden boy, aristocratic family, brilliant scion of the best schools and the best cavalry regiment - to embrace from the outset of his career the cause of the exploited, the deprived, the undervalued and the unheard?

Was there, somewhere in his early life, as there is in the lives of other men and women of his calibre, some defining moment of inner anger and silent purpose?

As a child he was sickly, and partly educated at home. He has the feel of a loner. Did his school peers get under his skin: their sense of entitlement, their contempt for the lower orders, their noise, their vulgarity and artlessness?

Mine did. And no one is easier to hate than a contemptible version of oneself.

\*

Graham Greene remarked that a novelist needed a chip of ice in his heart.

Was there a chip of ice in Palme's heart? He may not have been a novelist, but there was art in him, and a bit of the actor. And he knew that you can't make great causes stick without political power.

And for political power, you definitely need a chip or two of ice.

\*

The United States did not take lightly in those days, any more than it does now, to being held to account by a nation it dismisses as tin-pot.

And Sweden was a particularly irritating tin-pot nation, because it was European, articulate, cultured, rich, and *white*.

But Palme loved being the irritant. Relished it. Relished being the outsider voice, the one that refuses to be categorised, the one that shouldn't be in the room at all. It brought out the best in him.

And now and then, I have to say, it does the same for me.

\*

It's a long time since my post box contained estate agents' brochures for deep shelters in the Nevada desert.

You entered by way of a tumbledown shack, designed to look like an abandoned outside loo. An elevator swept you two hundred feet underground to a luxury apartment where you

could hold out till Armageddon was safely over and normal services were resumed.

And when the All Clear was sounded and you came up the escalator, the only people left would be your rich friends and the Swiss.

\*

So why isn't the threat of nuclear war today as present or terrifying to us as it was in Palme's day?

Is it simply that the nuclear threat is so ubiquitous, so diffuse and irrational? North Korea? Isis? Iran? Russia? China? Or today's White House with its born-again evangelists dreaming of the Rapture?

Better to invest our existential fears in things we understand: bush fires, melting icebergs, and the uncomfortable truths of Greta Thunberg.

\*

But the Cold War was anything but irrational. It was two players facing each other across a nuclear chessboard. And for all their clever spying, neither knew the first thing about the other.

\*



I try to imagine how it was for Palme in those times: the shuttle diplomacy, the tireless reasoning with people locked into their positions and scared of their superiors.

I was the lowest form of spy life, but even I got wind of contingency plans for outright nuclear war.

If you are in Berlin or Bonn when the Russian tanks sweep over you, be sure to destroy your files first. *First?* What was second?

And I doubt whether your chances would have been much rosier in Stockholm.

\*

In Berlin, in August of 1961, I look on as coils of Russian barbed wire are unrolled across the Friedrichstrasse checkpoint,

otherwise known as Checkpoint Charlie. Intermittently, in the days that follow, I watch the Wall go up, one concrete block at a time.

Do I lift a finger? No one did.

And maybe that was the worst part of it: the oppressive sense of your own irrelevance.

But Palme refused to be irrelevant. He would make himself heard if it killed him, and perhaps in the end it did.

\*

It's October 1962 and Cuba Crisis time. I am a junior diplomat at the British Embassy in Bonn and I have just moved into a new hiring beside the river Rhine. German decorators

are painting the walls. It's a sunny autumn and I think I must have been on leave because I am sitting in the garden writing.

The blare of the builders' transistor radio is drowned by the din of passing barges, until suddenly it is belting out the news of Kennedy's ultimatum to Khrushchev: 'Turn back your missiles, Mr Chairman, or your country and mine will be at war,' - or words to that effect.

The painters politely excuse themselves, wash their brushes, and go home to be with their families at world's end.

I drive to the embassy in case there's work to be done. There isn't. So I drive home again and continue writing *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold*.

So what was Palme doing while the Soviet fleet continued on its way to Cuba and the world waited dry-mouthed to see who blinked first?

Until I knew better, I pictured him sitting head in hands in some lonely place, despairing. *I am a failed peacemaker. My mediations have been in vain. If the world ends, it's all my fault.*

But he had no time for that stuff. He was here in Stockholm, pressing for educational reform, bumping up Sweden's international aid budget and picking up the pieces after Stig Wennerström, a senior Swedish air force officer, was exposed as a Soviet spy.

And that's something that's too easy to forget about Palme the diplomat for world peace and nuclear disarmament: he had a country to run.

\*

Spying? Palme? There's been a lot of talk about it.

As a young intern in Swedish intelligence, he had acquired an early taste for the black arts and it stayed with him for the rest of his political life.

And who can blame him? When you're defending yourself on half-a-dozen home fronts; when you're sitting out the night on tedious committees; when a far right mob of hooligans is burning your effigy in the street and chucking darts at pictures of your face, what greater relief to settle down comfortably with your spies and give yourself over to the consolations of intrigue?

\*

And I am not at all surprised that in the midst of excoriating the Americans for the Vietnam War, Palme the pragmatist was reading secret American intelligence reports.

After all, he had a country to protect.

\*

Palme never saw the Cold War end, but he experienced its worst years. And by the close of his life they had left their mark: testiness, distraction, impatience, battle fatigue. You only have to look at the last photographs to read the signs.

You only have to hear the barely controlled anger breaking through his voice when he reads his statement on the

bombing of Hanoi. I hear nervous advisors begging him not to use the forbidden g-word, genocide.

\*

They wore you out, those American nuclear warriors. I have a particularly unpleasant memory - and maybe so had Palme - of the US government's twenty-something defence analysts who lived on rock music and Coca Cola while they calculated to the last half-million or so how many of us would be turned to ash in a first strike.

It was their air of superiority that got to me, the 'we know better than you do about how you're going to die.' I just couldn't warm to them. Did Palme have business with their Russian counterparts? I guess they were much the same.

And sometimes it was the sheer decency and good manners of Washington's top warriors that wore you down. Good family men, I remember. Really decent people: touch football with their kids on Saturdays, church on Sundays. I met a few. And so, I'm sure, did Palme.

Well, they'd concede, they did do insomnia a bit. A nervous breakdown here and there, the odd broken marriage. And kids traumatised by what they picked up from the table talk, but that was just parental carelessness.

And Palme the determined non-combatant walked among them. Politely. Lawyer to lawyer. Man to man. And be sure never to mention the g-word, genocide.

\*



As I continue to read and think my way through Palme's life, my sense of kinship becomes possessive. I want a Palme for *my* country, which in my lifetime hasn't produced a single statesman of his stamp.

I want him *now*. I'm not just a Remainer. I'm a European through and through, and the rats have taken over the ship, I want to tell him. It's breaking my heart and I want it to break yours. We need your voice to wake us from our sleepwalk, and save us from this wanton act of political and economic self-harm.

But you're too late.

\*

In just sixteen hours from now, if Johnson and his fellow Brexiteers had their way, at eleven o'clock UK time - midnight in the European Union - the chimes of Big Ben would be tolling out another great British victory over the perfidious European enemy.

Except they won't be. Happily, Big Ben is indisposed.

If Johnson and his Brexiteers had their way, tomorrow would be declared St Brexit's Day.

Church bells across the land would peal out the gladsome tidings from every tower. And good men of England would pause their stride and doff their caps in memory of Dunkirk, the Battle of Britain, Trafalgar, and mourn the loss of our great British Empire.

Empires don't die just because they're dead.

\*

We Brits are all nationalists now. Or so Johnson would have us believe. But to be a *nationalist* you need enemies and the shabbiest trick in the Brexiteers' box was to make an enemy of Europe. *Take back control!* they cried, with the unspoken subtext: and hand it to Donald Trump, along with our foreign policy, our economic policy, our Health Service and, if they can get away with it, our BBC.

\*

So Boris Johnson with our blessing has taken his place beside two other accomplished liars of our time: Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin.

If Palme were trying to get the truth out of them, which of the three, in this judgement of Venus, would he turn to?

Or none of the above?

\*

One day somebody will explain to me why it is that, at a time when science has never been wiser, or the truth more stark, or human knowledge more available, populists and liars are in such pressing demand.

\*

But don't blame the *Tories* for their great victory.

It was Jeremy Corbyn's Labour party, with its un-policy on Brexit, its anti-Semitism and student-level Marxism-Leninism that alienated traditional Labour voters and left them nowhere to go.

They looked to the left and didn't recognise their leader. They looked to the centre and there was nobody there. They were sick of Brexit and sick of politics, and probably as sick of Johnson's voice as I was. So they pinched their noses and voted for the least worst option.

And actually, who can blame them?

\*

Palme hated war, but I don't know how much of it he actually saw. A little goes a long way. Or it did for me.

My first cautious glimpse came when I visited Cambodia shortly before the American defeat. Forty years earlier, Palme had toured South East Asia and seen for himself the disastrous effect of French, British and American colonialism.

By the time I got there, the disaster was wholly American-owned.

\*

Phnom Penh is encircled. The taxi driver charges thirty dollars to take you to the front line. You want shooting? he asks. Yes, please, I want shooting.

He parks, you walk the rest of the way. You get shot at and return to your taxi.

On the road back through town to the hotel, children sit on the pavement selling bottles of petrol siphoned from abandoned cars. One *plastic* would kill every child in the street.

\*

At the edge of Phnom Penh an artillery battery is providing covering fire for an infantry attack against the invisible jungle enemy. Deafened by gunfire, children huddle round the guns, each waiting for his father to come back. They know that if he doesn't, his commanding officer will pocket his pay instead of reporting him dead.

\*

I'm in Sidon, South Lebanon, house guest of the Palestinian chief of fighters, Salah Tamari. He takes me on a tour of the children's hospital. A boy with his legs blown off gives me the thumbs up. Another dreams of going to university in Havana once he's got his eyesight back.

Palme had three sons, I had four. Maybe we had the same nightmares.

\*

Which reminds me. As things stand, one of the first acts of Johnson's post-Brexit government will be to deny child refugees the right to be reunited with their parents in Britain.

\*



How would Palme have responded to today's Orwellian lie machines that would have made Josef Goebbels blush as they wear down our decency, our common sense, and drive us to question incontestable truths?

\*

The last splinters of Jamal Khashoggi have, we assume, been swept under the carpet of the Saudi Consulate in Istanbul.

The culprits have freely confessed that they acted on impulse. They just went a bit wild, the way boys do, and have been duly decapitated in accordance with the highest principles of Saudi justice.

The Crown Prince is shocked. The rest is fake news. No bone saw, no screams, no Khashoggi lookalike walking out of the Consulate wearing the wrong shoes.

\*

So here's a question. If Palme were Sweden's prime minister today, and Sweden had a fat arms deal running with Saudi Arabia, which way would he jump?

Would he take a sensible, relaxed British view and say, look here, for heaven's sake, let's stop moaning and get on with the next shipment, they're Arabs and they've got a war to feed?

Or would he - as I want to believe - tell his arms industry: whatever it costs, just bloody well stop.

\*

I don't know whether Palme read me - you'd be amazed how many people haven't.

What I do know is that, quite soon after I began reading my way through his life, and the causes that inspired him, it seemed to me that every book I had written was some sort of unconscious footstep along his path.

\*

My leading character, and the one I am best known for, is George Smiley.

Smiley was recruited to the Secret Service in his early youth, as I was, and for all his earnest excursions into 17<sup>th</sup> Century German literature, at heart he knew no other world than the secret one.

Throughout his long professional life he was besieged by moral doubt. When I was asked to draw a picture of him, I drew a lonely man carrying his horse uphill - an image that might have won a weary smile of recognition from Palme.

\*

Smiley and I have history together. Sixty years of it. When I took a new direction, Smiley followed me. And sometimes Smiley knew the way better than I did and I

followed him, which is what happens when you invent a character who is smarter than you are.

\*

Here is Smiley in 1979, when the Cold War looked as though it would last forever. With exemplary tradecraft, he has lured his Soviet adversary, codename Karla, across the Berlin Wall.

He has done this by exploiting a *character defect*, as we liked to call it, in this otherwise impenetrable communist diehard.

The *character defect* in question is *love*: a father's love for his mentally sick daughter. In defiance of every rule in the KGB handbook, Karla has spirited his beloved daughter to a

Swiss sanatorium under a false name, and Smiley has used this knowledge to blackmail him.

And now here Karla comes, Soviet zealot, loving father, defector, across the Glienicke Bridge from East to West Berlin.

*'George, you won,'* says Peter Guillam, Smiley's loyal disciple.

*'Did I? Yes. Yes, well I suppose I did,'* Smiley replies.

Palme would have shared his self-disgust.

\*

When the Cold War ended and the Western world was still congratulating itself, Smiley felt betrayed, and so did I.

And Palme would have felt betrayed, if he had lived long enough.

Where was the promised peace we had all been waiting for? Where was the Great Vision? The reconciliation? The nuclear disarmament treaty that Palme had been tirelessly working for? Where was the Marshall Plan that would pull battered nations off their knees?

And above all, where was the voice of hope and renewal?

Is it too fanciful to imagine that, had he lived, Palme might have supplied that voice?

\*

Here is Smiley in 1990, one year after the Wall came down and four years after Palme's death:

'One day, history may tell us who really won. If a democratic Russia emerges - why, then Russia will have been

the winner. And if the West chokes on its own materialism, then the West may still turn out to be the loser.'

I see Palme nodding.

\*

And here is Smiley in great age - he was always older than me, a father figure - still hunting for the answer to a question that has haunted him all his life: did I compromise my humanity to the point where I lost it altogether?

'We were not pitiless, Peter,' he insists to his same disciple. 'We were *never* pitiless. We had the *larger* pity. Arguably it was misplaced. Certainly it was futile. We know that now. But we did not know it then.'



But in my imagination I hear Palme vigorously object:

*'That is an unsound, self-serving argument that could equally well apply to any monstrous act perpetrated in the name of democracy.'*

\*

I see a sharp, swift face. Restless eyes, sometimes hooded. Smiles real and forced. A face that struggles for forbearance in the presence of lesser minds, vulnerable, watchful, and precious in the way we imagine young poets to be. The precise voice barely falters even when its owner is on fire.

I feel an unbearable impatience burning in him, caused by seeing and feeling more clearly and faster than anybody else in the room.

\*

I would have been nervous to engage him in argument because he would have made rings round me even when I was right.

But I never met him. I can only hear him and watch him and read him. The rest is catch-up.

\*

The last speech of his life was to the United Nations in 1985: an unsuccessful appeal to ban the use of nuclear weapons under international law. Thirty years on, the Swedish government voted for just such a ban. Now called upon to reaffirm their vote, they have postponed their decision under American pressure. The issue is back on the table. We shall see.

\*

How would Palme wish to be remembered? Well, by *this* for a start.

For his life, not his death.

For his humanism, courage, and the breadth and completeness of his humanist vision.

As the voice of truth in a world hell-bent on distorting it.

By the inspiring, inventive enterprises undertaken yearly  
by young people in his name.

\*

Is there anything I would like to add to his epitaph?

A line by May Sarton that he would have enjoyed:

*One must think like a hero to behave like a merely decent  
human being.*

\*

And how would I like to be remembered?

As the man who won the 2019 Olof Palme Prize will do  
me just fine.

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