

“Poor, poor Academy of Sciences”

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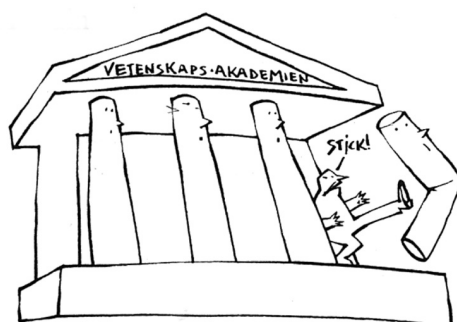
◀ **EAST MALAYSIA** with
the provinces of Sabah
and Sarawak.

The whole thing started on the evening of 18 November 1996, when public service broadcaster Sveriges Television transmitted a report on the Bakun Dam in Malaysia. There was no doubt about its critical tone; programme host Jarl Alfredius set the tone in the introduction, as he glared at the viewers and declared:

Thousands of people will be forced from their homes and several tribes wiped out by the huge dam, shrouded in secrecy, that ABB will construct in Borneo, Malaysia. Yes, this is apparent from the first more detailed reports from the area, and which Aktuellt can show you tonight. And today there is tough criticism of ABB's investment in the dam project from the environment secretary of the Swedish Academy of Sciences.

In the report, the Academy of Sciences' environment secretary, Hans Lundberg, made a “frenzied attack” on Swedish-Swiss export firm ABB and its participation in the dam's construction. His opinion was that its involvement was not compatible with the firm's environmental policy, that ABB was putting its reputation on the line and it should have refused any involvement. To rub salt in the wound, the response from ABB's environmental manager was a media disaster. He stumbled over his words and had to interrupt the interview to think about his answers to the camera. The debacle was accentuated by a long report about how constructing the dam threatened the local population's traditional way of life.

One and half months earlier, ABB had landed a contract that made the firm the principal contractor for the Bakun dam. There was clear enthusiasm about the 20 billion kronor order, a major part of the entire project, which



**RÄKNAS ÄNDÅ INTE YTTRANDEFRIHETEN TILL
EN AV VETENSKAPENS GRUNDPÄLARE?**

SATIRICAL CARTOON by Ulf Frödin for *Dagens Nyheter* in 1996:
“Isn’t freedom of speech one of the cornerstones [“pillars” in the
Swedish expression] of science?”

was worth 35 billion kronor. Over six years, ABB would participate in the construction of a 2,400-megawatt hydropower station – one of the biggest in southeast Asia. For Sweden, this meant 1,500 to 2,000 jobs. But this enthusiasm had limits. The project had been criticised by environmental organisations such as the World Wide Fund for Nature and by the UN, and even the World Bank. A Malaysian court had refused to approve the plans. Yet ABB defended its involvement and CEO Percy Barnevik called the critics environmental fascists. The same day the contract was signed, ABB’s shares rose two per cent on the Stockholm stock exchange.

But the consequences of the television reporting that dark November, as far from the heat and colour of the rainforest as could be, were not so much that voices were raised in protest about ABB’s dam construction in Malaysia. Instead, it was the Academy of Sciences’ environment secretary who ended up in the line of fire.

The day after the report, Environment Secretary Lundberg said that he had received “a severe reprimand” from his boss, the Academy of Sciences’ permanent secretary Carl-Olof Jacobson. His opinion was that the report had created “a great deal of turbulence among the members of the Academy”. Just over a week later, Jacobson told Lundberg that he had to quit. Lundberg was offered two annual salaries as compensation. It was a strange twist of fate that Lundberg, the same evening he was fired from the Academy of Sciences, received the French National Order of Merit at their embassy for his contributions to Swedish-French cooperation on the environment.

The entire story could have ended at the embassy, if it were not for the fact that Nobel Day, 10 December, was approaching, an event that entails media interest in everything relating to the Nobel institutions’ conduct; in



THE BAKUN DAM in Malaysia started operating in 2011.

this context, a conflict over employees’ freedom of speech is just as welcome as the Nobel laureates arriving in Stockholm for the formal reception. Jacobson now denied everything: “His statement about the dam’s construction has nothing to do with the matter. There are other problems behind it.” Ahead of an upcoming reorganisation, Lundberg would have chosen to leave his post himself, rather than be given new tasks.

Lundberg did not agree with that description: “The Academy is getting a new environmental committee and a new chairperson, but that’s not a reorganisation.” The Environmental Committee really was expanded in early 1997, and had a new chairperson. At the same time, the post of secretary for the Environmental Committee was merged with that of the Polar Research Committee, so it would appear that one of the secretaries had less to do. But

no one had discussed this with Lundberg. After his statement on television, being given notice came as a shock. For him there was a clear link between his appearance and being fired: “I can’t interpret it in any other way, because it happened immediately afterwards.” Nor had any criticism of Lundberg’s performance been put forward: “But Jacobson has expressed very strong criticism of my participation in this context. He also said that members of the Academy were very upset.”

Meanwhile, Academy member Gunnar Engström, who had previously been head of research at ABB, maintained that Lundberg “had not represented the Academy in the appropriate manner” and “had been impossible to deal with for long while”. There was also speculation that the Academy of Sciences wanted to silence criticism of ABB because the firm was part of Wallenberg banking and industrial family’s sphere of interest, which, via the Wallenberg foundations, donated “tens of millions of kronor” to the Academy’s activities.

Against these complaints, one member of the environmental committee, Lars Bern, protested that he had never heard a hint of dissatisfaction with the now-fired environment secretary. Bern also took up the heart of the conflict, namely that if “there is the least suspicion that the Academy were to submit to pressure from financial interests, this is extremely serious”. And he continued: “It appears as if the Academy’s permanent secretary wishes to help ABB. Instead, he put his foot in it at the worst possible time.”

The accusation that the Academy of Sciences had been brought to heel after criticism by big money reflected what many people thought, and appears to have opened the gates on a flood of critical voices. The chairperson of the Swedish Society for Nature Conservation, Bo Thunberg, did not hold back: “This is an assault on freedom of speech. The Academy’s behaviour is a clear signal to Swedish research that they must not rock the boat. It is unworthy of a free research community.” The battle-scarred environmental activist Björn Gillberg added, in an interview in the *Aftonbladet* newspaper: “The Academy should be a free forum for debate and allow varied opinions. It is shameful to see their behaviour in Hans Lundberg’s case.” Gillberg’s criticism was not least based upon, one can assume, a desire to obtain some payback for old injuries. Eight years previously, the Swedish Chemicals Agency had tasked the Academy of Sciences with reviewing a study he had conducted:

The Academy politely took on a whitewash job for the powers that be, even though settling ‘learned disputes’ contravenes their bylaws. They said that all our conclusions were wrong, but if there was anyone who was wrong it was the Academy of Sciences.

According to Gillberg, the rot was even more widespread: “The Swedish establishment is very closed-minded [...] Unfortunately, Sweden is not the

open society that many people believe. The further you reach in the corridors of power, the less tolerance there is of dissent.”

The criticism echoed from front pages, opinion columns and from reporters in Borneo: “Why is the Academy of Sciences’ secretary lying on the day before the Nobel Prize is awarded?” and “Give [Lundberg] an apology and compensation”. An editorial in Sweden’s biggest broadsheet, *Dagens Nyheter*, chose an ironically conciliatory tone:

One has to say that the Academy has had phenomenally bad luck in coincidentally relieving Lundberg of his normal duties just after he publicly criticised the dam’s construction. Even people who don’t normally tend towards conspiracy theories may now be of the opinion that this noble and dignified institution is closed-minded. Poor, poor Academy of Sciences.

Cornered on the move in Brussels, the CEO of ABB, Percy Barnevik, made a flatteringly low-key denial that his firm would have influenced the Academy: “I don’t generally think that people who present their opinions – as long as they don’t reveal business secrets – should be fired.” Even the highest patron of the Academy of Sciences, the king himself, had only good things to say about Lundberg in his position of His Majesty’s advisor on environmental issues. Via his press secretary, Carl XVI Gustaf stated that they had “had many and recurring contacts [and] the King had never had reason to be dissatisfied”.

Two days after Nobel Day – when the after-party’s sicklied pale cast had transformed into the hue of resolution – an agreement was reached. Lundberg left the Academy of Sciences with a juicy severance package after twelve years as environment secretary. At the same time, the Academy announced that they would cover the world’s major dam projects in a special environmental review as a direct result of the Lundberg affair. And so the media storm ebbed away. In the waves of criticism before and after the Nobel Banquet in 1996, Carl-Olof Jacobson, the Academy of Sciences’ permanent secretary, had been completely isolated. Not a single voice had been publicly raised in his defence. It has not been possible to determine what support he received from within the Academy. He retired from his position few months later, as befitted his age.

The Lundberg affair certainly ruffled a few feathers, both inside and outside the Academy. This is perhaps not surprising when a thoroughly scientifically-focused organisation like the Academy of Sciences is forced to deal with broader social issues in the media, such as the balance between utilising resources and preserving nature and culture. The answers here are not only scientifically conditioned, but they also depend on moral and ideological positions. Of course, things get complicated when an employee follows an

internal compass in an area on which the Academy of Sciences does not have an official position. Without a nautical chart of organisationally supported perspectives, ones that go beyond bylaws and shiny information leaflets, it can be difficult to manoeuvre past the media's submerged rocks and inlets, especially as polarisation and conflict are often the oxygen of the media world.

Still, it was neither the Academy of Sciences' environmental review of the world's major dam projects nor Lundberg's criticism of the Bakun dam that, just a few years later, caused ABB to terminate its involvement with the project. Instead, the financial crisis that hit Asia's tiger economies in 1997 was why the Malaysian government halted construction. When it restarted in May 2000, it was without ABB's participation. After many, many problems and delays, protests and criticism, the power plant was finally able to start supplying electricity in August 2011.

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The original news report from *Aktuellt*, 18 November 1996, is available from the National Library of Sweden in Stockholm. The affair was also discussed in a report on Swedish public service radio, Sveriges Radio's *Studio Ett* i P1, 9 December 1996; this programme is available in the National Library's audio-visual collections. The above quotes are from articles in the daily press that were published between 8 and 13 December 1996, primarily in *Dagens Nyheter*, *Svenska Dagbladet*, *Aftonbladet*, *Expressen* och *Helsingborgs Dagblad*, and which come from the news agency Tidningarnas Telegrambyrå. Information about the hopes for ABB's order from Bakun come from Hans Olsson, "Kontrakt undertecknat: Dammygge kan starta", *Dagens Nyheter*, 3 October 1996. The quote about Björn Gillberg is from Wolfgang Hansson, "En städgumma åt makthavarna", *Aftonbladet*, 10 December 1996. The editorial quote about the poor Academy of Sciences comes from "Dammyggen vållar stora miljöskador: Det är poänglöst att förringa", *Dagens Nyheter*, 11 December 1996.