

Sweden national day

Sweden looking to future after EU presidency stint

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In the latter half of last year, Sweden served out a six-month rotating presidency of the European Union in the midst of the difficult economic climate. "In general, we are pleased with the Swedish EU presidency," said Stefan Noreen, ambassador of Sweden to Japan, in a recent interview with The Japan Times.

During Sweden's tenure, the United Nations Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen (COP15) was held Dec. 7-18 and the Treaty of Lisbon was finally signed on Dec. 13.

"It is true that the agreement in Copenhagen was not as ambitious as we had expected, but many governments have become more determined to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions. The Japanese government has changed its position, and is now much more in line with the European Union: Carbon taxes, cap and trade, and the emission trading system are slowly being translated into Japanese policy," Noreen said. "The EU and member countries like Sweden have a system in place and we can share our experiences."

The other major objective for the Swedish EU presidency was handling the economic and financial crisis.

"Sweden has managed quite well. We have one of the lowest deficits in the European Union. But many countries are running big budget deficits, which should be addressed. In particular, Euro-zone countries have different responsibilities, as they have to handle the crisis inside the Euro-zone. But of course, the whole EU is affected. And not only the EU — the whole world is involved," he said.

For the moment, Sweden does not seem to be planning to join the euro.

"There have been discussions in Sweden about whether we should have a new referendum on the subject, but after the Euro-zone crisis, I think the issue seems to be less hoped-for than before. There are many who still believe that Sweden should be part of the euro, but they feel that it is too early," Noreen said.

"The Treaty of Lisbon was



Swedish Ambassador Stefan Noreen

finally put in place during the Swedish presidency. It was signed and has been ratified by all member states and that is now the basis of our future action. The EU delegation is now representing the European Union in Tokyo," Noreen said proudly.

Highlights 2010

"For Sweden, 2009 was a year where we focused very much on the EU and the EU presidency — preparing for the presidency and carrying it out. This year, we will shift into a more bilateral mode," Noreen said.

The wedding of Crown Princess Victoria of Sweden and Daniel Westling will be celebrated in Stockholm on June 19.

"The 19th of June is exactly the same date as His Majesty King Carl XVI Gustaf, the current king of Sweden, and Her Majesty Queen Silvia were married in 1967. There have been close contacts for many years between the Imperial court of Japan and the Royal court of Sweden. The king conducted a state visit together with the queen in March 2007, and Their Imperial Majesties Emperor Akihito and Empress Michiko went to Sweden only a few months later in May 2007. So we are very happy that His Imperial Highness Crown Prince Naruhito is going to attend the wedding in Stockholm," Noreen said.

Turning to cultural matters, Noreen touched upon some major events. "2010 is a kind of 'music year' for Sweden in Japan," he noted.

The Royal Stockholm Philharmonic Orchestra toured Japan from February through

March, and in June, the Swedish Radio Symphony Orchestra and the Swedish Radio Choir — conducted by Daniel Harding and Peter Dijkstra respectively — are scheduled to play here. The program will feature orchestra and choir in collaboration, as well as a cappella pieces. Furthermore, male choir Orphei Dränger will visit in October. The choir was originally established in 1853 in Uppsala, to help raise spirits in the city, which had been isolated due to the risk of cholera. "This is probably the most famous Swedish male choir. When the Emperor and the Empress of Japan visited Sweden in 2007, the choir performed for them in Uppsala," Noreen said.

Politics and elections

"As national elections are coming up in both Japan and Sweden, things are unsettled right now. But after the elections, I hope to see some visits at the political level, perhaps in both directions," Noreen said.

Concerning the political situation, citizens play an active and noteworthy role in

Sweden.

"The voting rate has been very high for many years in Sweden. We had even periods when it was 90 percent. Now it is down to between 80 and 85 percent," Noreen said.

But how is it possible to get such a high rate?

"I think it has partly to do with our education system. We try to encourage young people to learn about society and the political system. But it is also because we have very active nongovernmental organizations in various fields, including the trade union movement, corporate and youth organizations, the environment and women's rights. All these bodies are encouraging people to take an active role in society," Noreen explained. "It is very natural for Swedes to vote. They want to make a contribution. So you feel strange if you do not vote."

Politicians who work on a part-time basis are another feature of Swedish politics.

"They are particularly seen in local politics. In national politics in the parliament, you get a leave of absence from your normal work if you are elected to

be a parliamentarian. But in local politics, many members keep their own professions, such as office workers, nurses, carpenters and teachers, and at the same time join the assemblies," Noreen said. "So they keep their relationship with ordinary people and know about everyday problems. In every society, there is a risk that politicians or political groups are out of touch with the general population and people's everyday problems," Noreen added.

"In Japan, there is strong interest in Swedish and Nordic welfare systems, gender equality, women's rights and children's rights. But I also believe decentralization is a very important topic. And this is an important part of the explanation as to why Swedish people are so active in politics. Local communities have important roles to play in our system. The local assemblies are important, as much of the Swedish welfare system is handled at the local level. Therefore, people tend to be involved, because these are everyday problems that affect everybody. This is one of the reasons for the high degree of participation.

"Decentralization is a very important topic in Japan. Many people say that local governments should be given more power. In this respect, I think Sweden has a story to tell. And this is an issue that we intend to come back to after the elections."

From Sata to Soya

On the day of the interview, Noreen was set to welcome a special guest to the embassy: Swedish compatriot 22-year-old Josef Nilsen, who is currently walking the length of Japan.

"I think it is good that Josef wants to learn more about Japan. And he takes a lot of photos along the way. His idea is to publish a book about his experiences (<http://sata-soya.com>). So we wanted to support him when he came, but I can't do it in any other way than to allow him to stay at the embassy. After staying a few days here, he'll continue his walk. I think it's impressive that he's come all the way from southern Kagoshima to Tokyo, and then is due to go up to northern Hokkaido," Ambassador Noreen said with a smile.



Wedding bells: Crown Princess Victoria of Sweden and her fiancé Daniel Westling will be married on June 19 in Stockholm. www.imagebank.sweden.se ©LEIF R. JANSSON/SCANPIX

Swedish film among EU screenings

EU Film Days has been introducing selected European cinema to Japanese audiences since 2003. This year, 22 films from 22 EU member states are being screened at the National Film Center in Tokyo till June 20.

From Sweden comes Ella Lemhagen's 2008 film "Patrik 1,5," which has been favorably received in many countries for addressing the delicate subject of adoption by same-sex couples. The film will be screened on June 17 (3 p.m.)



"Patrik 1,5" ©FILMLANCE INTERNATIONAL AB

and on June 19 (4 p.m.). Tickets cost ¥500.

For more information, visit www.eufilmdays.jp



Lending a hand: Swedish Ambassador Stefan Noreen welcomes his Japan-trekking compatriot Josef Nilsen at the Embassy of Sweden in Tokyo on May 28. ASA SVENSDOTTER



Vocal chords: The Swedish Radio Choir will perform in Nagoya, Osaka, Kanagawa and Tokyo between June 12 and June 19.

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