

25-year Symposium Speech by Honorary Chair:  
From Islander to Ålander

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*translated by Marianne Amor*

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## From Islander to Ålander<sup>1</sup>

Barbro Sundback<sup>2</sup>

*translation by Marianne Amor<sup>3</sup>*

When I was elected a member of the County Assembly<sup>4</sup> of Åland for the first time in 1979, Åland, and the world -of course - looked quite different from today. The logic of the Cold War ruled the world. The welfare state was under development and the times were favourable to the so-called Nordic model. An international student revolt in the late 1960s led to an increased interest in the third world, gender equality and citizen-driven peace work. The Soviet Union and the U.S.A. threatened each other with increasingly dangerous nuclear weapons. The Nordic countries rejected all proposals for nuclear weapons deployment in their territories. Instead, there was growing popular demand for a nuclear-free Nordic region. In this context, international attention was directed at Åland and its unique status as a demilitarised and neutralised area. Legal scholars were soon to notice that Åland is also a nuclear-free zone according to international law. All of a sudden Åland became an important symbol for many in the European peace movement of the 1980s. This came as a surprise to the Ålandic elite, who did not quite know how to deal with the issue. The peace movement was seen by many as a subversive activity that deceptively served the Soviet Union and communism. When the Åland Institute of Peace began its activities in 1992, it did so with the silent consent of the political establishment. The financial support from the Åland Government<sup>5</sup> was very modest.

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- 1 Originally delivered as a speech at the Åland Island Peace Institute's symposium 24.10.2017 in Mariehamn..
  - 2 Ms Barbro Sundback, born 1945 in Vasa, Finland. Moved to Mariehamn in 1958. Graduated with an M.Sc. in political science specialising in psychology in 1972. She is one of the founders of the Åland Islands Peace Institute and its Chair of the Board of Directors from the foundation in 1992 until 2017. Today she serves as the Honorary chair of the Board of Directors of the Åland Islands Peace Institute. Her engagement in the political, cultural and social life on Åland is also impressive. She was elected to the Åland Legislative Assembly and Mariehamn Town Council in 1979 on the Åland Social Democrat list. Member of the Parliament of Åland 1979-2015, and elected to Mariehamn's City council since 1979. Active and initiator of several non-profit organisations such as Emmaus Åland, Cultural Association Katrina, folk music team Kvinnfolk and the Feminist Academy in Åland. She participated in the Nordic women's peace marches in 1981,1982 and 1983.
  - 3 Marianne Amor holds a BA in Nordic languages (esp. Swedish and Finnish) from University College London, and an MSc in Political Science (European Public Policy) from Birkbeck College, University of London. She spent a year of her BA studying at Åbo Akademi. She works professionally with translation and sales.
  - 4 During the first seventy years of self-government Åland's legislature was known as the '*landsting*' (county assembly) but in the new Act (1991) which entered into force on 1 January 1993 the name was changed to '*lagting*' (legislative assembly), which is often translated to 'Åland Parliament'. See Eriksson et. al 2006 p.52.
  - 5 The speech uses in Swedish the term '*landskapsstyrelse*', which is nowadays outdated. The Swedish term

How has the Ålandic community since then been perceiving peace work? And how have the Ålanders viewed their own international role - based on the entity's unique status as a demilitarised and neutralised region in northern Europe? Because of its strategic position, Åland functions at all times as a security barometer for the level of political tension in this part of the world.

The title of my speech "From Islander to Ålander" requires a brief historical retrospect. My starting point is still the year 1979. At that time, political life in Åland was very old-fashioned. The party system was just about to stabilise. There was only one single newspaper, which dominated not only as the leading form of mass media, but also as the leading voice of autonomy, and in the spirit of Julius Sundblom to a large extent set the agenda on popular opinion. How and who could act as the voice of Åland was largely decided at this time by the editorial board of the newspaper *Tidningen Åland*.<sup>6</sup> Parliamentary rule had not been introduced – rather, the county assembly often functioned like a municipal council, where rival regional interests were driven by strong personalities who, with the help of temporary majorities, forced their agenda by using threats and compliments. The power struggle was a question of the hegemony of the city or the countryside. The interests of the archipelago were protected by the existing Autonomy Act, and during this time the services in the archipelago were strongly developed by ferries, roads, bridges, banks and regional archipelago support.

The external threat was absolute; Helsinki as the capital was untouched and disinterested, and consistently avoided following the Åland Agreement and the intention of the Autonomy Act. A kind of cold war was reflected in the relationship between Åland and Finland, and with a clear common enemy; an Ålandic identity was spelled out, which can be described as a political community - an envisaged Ålandishness.

At this time, the Patriarchy was a dominating factor. The term 'identity' was barely invented and an intersectional identity was an implausible thought at the time. The rhetorics of self-government politics contained terms such as particularity, social balance, the special relationship of the region and secluded position, and other similar expressions that emphasised the deviating living conditions of the area and region. In this discourse, women and other marginalised groups were missing. The female experience was manifested in the literary world and gained its idiomatic expression in the work "Stormskärs-Maja" whose persona and life were captured by Vårdö-dweller Anni Blomqvist. Decades earlier, in 1936, the Vårdö native Sally Salminen released her debut novel "Katrina". The two novel characters have common features and lifestyles, but differ in such a way that Katrina

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since 1991 is 'Ålands landskapsregering', which could be translated into 'County Government of Åland', but mostly translates to 'Government of Åland'. Whereas 'styrelse' can be translated to administration, 'regering' literally means government. See Stephan 2011, pp. 37-38.

<sup>6</sup> Also known as *Ålandstidningen* i.e. the newspaper of Åland.

takes on the struggle against class society while Maja relies on the power and comfort of religion. In a strong patriarchal society, it is assumed that Maja appears to be a true female, because she does not impose any political or other claims on her own rights but subordinates, albeit reluctantly.

From 1917 until the mid-1980s, the self-image of the Ålanders was shaped by the Sundblom leadership's aspirations to seek reunification with Sweden. The Sundblom leadership wanted to depart from the system of self-governance as a foundation for its own particular identity and social structure. Through this transformation, Sundblom's role shifted from a campaigner for reunification to the one who initiated autonomy. An impressive political changing of stripes.

It is intriguing to see how the rhetoric of reunification shifted, and from the 1950s onwards it gradually moved towards an increasingly nationalistic ideology of autonomy. The Reunification movement was almost swallowed up by the desire for romantic nationalism. Åland, the lost child, would finally be reunited with the tribe and Mother Svea would cradle and protect Åland in her powerful bosom once and for all. Åland and Sweden were eternally bound by the Swedish language and the Swedish heritage. This gave rise to a growing acute awareness of the Swedish language and common Swedish roots as irreplaceable values for the creation of an Ålandic identity. The gravity of this conviction is illustrated by an archeological dispute over whether the first inhabitants of Åland came from the west or the east. Another example of the thorniness of this question is the dispute over place names, which was taken with utmost seriousness.

After a somewhat lengthy political recovery as a consequence of the decision by the League of Nations, there followed a development of self-governing policy which resulted in an Ålandic rhetoric and identity. This was reinforced by the fact that economically and socially, Åland was developing in a highly positive manner. In almost all areas of society, successes to large and small extents are evident. The self-image of the Ålanders thrived and the belief in their own capabilities was strengthened. Visions of independence were formed among the most brazen.

In parallel to this development, society and politics were becoming more diversified. The media landscape flourished, the political party system was stable, the civil participation of women expanded, the parliamentary system was introduced, the level of education rose and levels of inward migration increased. This resulted in an Åland which progressively became characterised by diversity and a certain degree of modernity. The Ålanders had created a well-functioning society and a strong identity by the time the bells chimed for the new millennium.

Nowadays, an Ålandic identity is one which must be considered from an international perspective. The time is now long gone when the newspaper *Tidningen Åland* took the

liberty of determining who was a “real” Ålander, who was not considered an Ålander, who was an ex- Ålander, or simply a citizen who due to his or her opinions would be ostracised, ridiculed or condemned. In the same way, the political parties and society in general have accepted that diversity and respecting other opinions are essential values, and these values also apply to Åland. To be Ålandic today is not solely a question of speaking Swedish as one’s mother tongue. On Åland, in common with the rest of the Western world, identities are built upon language, gender, origins, sexuality, religion and many other factors. One can be a respected Ålander even if you have a different accent, are of a different religion to the majority, come from a different country or belong to a sexual minority. The challenge of our time is that the individual alone decides if he or she wants to be categorised as an Ålander, and that “we Ålanders” constitute an inclusive identity which permits other opinions of what it means to be Ålandic. Strong social cohesion is not weakened by diversity. On the contrary, the diversity of individualities represents a higher level, a democratic and equal community compared with an archaic belief that only certain qualities meet the criteria of Ålandic society according to language, descent and property ownership.

Modernity is deepened by globalisation, digitalisation and individual mobility. Borders and anachronistic norms which both discriminate and oppress are the curse of our times. On Åland, too.

When the Ålanders attained autonomy, this gave rise to a political, economic, social and cultural structure which made the Ålanders into something much more than merely islanders. The power of initiative, self-belief and stubbornness which exists in many island communities is fuelled by the intrinsic dynamic of autonomy and the desire to increasingly determine one’s own fate, pushed the Ålanders decidedly further forward than if Åland had simply become an island community on the periphery of either the archipelagic region of Turku<sup>7</sup> or Roslagen.

For almost 100 years, the Ålanders have doggedly contributed to the development of Ålandic society, and the results are in many ways impressive and worthy of praise. The pragmatic attitude, despite ongoing resistance and backlash, has slowly and continually yielded results. The Ålanders have progressively made the transformation from political objects to political subjects, and who to an increasing extent govern their territory and themselves. Autonomy has long extended its achievements far beyond the limits of formal jurisdiction. This also applies to the demilitarised and neutralised status of Åland.

When my career in the Parliament of Åland ended in October 2015, that very same month the Government of Åland adopted a historical document entitled “”Policy för Ålands

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<sup>7</sup> In the original speech, the Swedish name *Åboland* was used – a region known i.a. for its beautiful archipelago, that by extension reaches all the way to Åland.

demilitarisering och neutralisering” (Policy for the demilitarisation and neutralisation of Åland). The work on the policy was conducted under the leadership of the incumbent Head of Government (*lantråd*) of Åland Camilla Gunell and Chief of Justice Michaela Slotte. The policy is a progress report and a comprehensive review of all possible aspects related to the specific international status of Åland. In retrospect, it is evident that the document was completed just in the nick of time. Following the emergence of the document, there has been a period of increased military tension in the Baltic Sea region, which also involved the demilitarisation and neutralisation of Åland. This is a phase that is still ongoing and once again means that the national defence forces and other military-obsessed powers are irritated by the horror vacui created by Åland, because they are unable to control the territory of the autonomy with all of their weapon technology and their uniform-clad chest-beating tones.

The document answers the initial question I posed regarding the competence and readiness of the authorities of autonomous rule and the political establishment to conduct their own actions within the realms of security policy, in particular aggressive military-political developments and opinions on how the demilitarisation and neutralisation of Åland should be adapted according to the requirements of today, whereby there is a wish to deviate from conventional rules and practices as well as the conclusions of customary law. A more dramatic example to illustrate this is Jussi Niinistö, the Minister of Defence’s , proposal to abolish the right of Ålanders to be exempt from military service, and instead force the Ålanders who do not do military service to complete civil service. The proposal is a patriotic but hollow gesture, however one that has negative political effects which could potentially be somewhat troublesome.

This time, the elite of Åland will not stand by powerless. Instead, the Head of Government of Åland Katrin Sjögren and the Speaker of the Åland Parliament Johan Ehn give a powerful and objective defence. I quote:

“A connection is often made between demilitarisation and neutralisation on the one hand, and exemption from military service on the other, despite the fact that the regime was not originally intended for the sake of the Ålanders, but rather so that the Åland territory would not become a military threat to Sweden. Over time, however, the policy of demilitarisation and neutralisation combined with exemption from military service has been a strong contributing factor to the formation of identity, which has given rise to the concept “Islands of Peace,” and Åland has come to be an internationally acclaimed example of security policy. In the changing reality in which we live today, we Ålanders will continue to stand up for this successful solution. It feels reassuring that the Government of Finland and especially the President of the Republic are clearly doing the same.”

By way of introduction, I also touched upon civic Åland's approach to the peace movement, and work for peace in general. One current case is the so-called peace conference Åland 17 which was held in September of this year at Gregersö parish in Jomala. Representatives from a peace association in Stockholm and Russian intellectual peace activists participated in the conference. The way in which the media and a number of politicians related to the conference made me think about a whole host of unpleasantness from my own time as a peace activist. To my mind, opinions that categorically assume all Russians represent an authoritarian and aggressive superpower under Putin's dictatorship are prejudices, which were already being spread before the conference took place. There are opposition parties in Russia who really require support and respect. Prior to the meeting, Harry Jansson, the vice-chairman of the Jomala church delegation stated the following:

“Generally, as commercial leasers we do not get involved in activities so long as those hiring the space stick to the limits of the law. Of course there are limits as to what you can get up to in a church yard, but I find it difficult for the parish to take a political stance.”

The reason the Peace camp got such attention was because Finland's former ambassador in Moscow, Hannu Himanen, approached the media and warned that the peace camp would be used by Putin for the purposes of propaganda. The very same Himanen had just released a book in which he advocates Finland should immediately seek membership of NATO. Naturally he is within his full rights to do so, but can he be believed with regards to the propaganda value of the peace camp to Putin, or could it be that Himanen himself is using the Peace camp to underpin his opinion on membership of NATO? Has anyone seen anything in the Russian media about the peace camp, and in that case, what have they written? A follow-up is in place. In times when there is far too much “fake news”, it is important to find out the truth. That several Åland opinion makers jumped on the descriptions of Åland17 in the media without knowing all the facts is up for debate. It shows that work for peace still holds great importance, especially if it includes Russians and Russia. In itself, it is understandable but it should not uncritically overshadow other ongoing discussions around peace concerning the international role and status of Åland.

Åland, with its special conditions, should give the concept of peace a renaissance, and the Islands of Peace should consciously and determinedly live up to their epithet, which is indeed not outdated but even more relevant than ever. It is not childish to work towards and stand for peace. Quite the opposite, it is time to keep check on all the martial beliefs which dictate that conflict can be resolved with violence. Instead, Åland can show a different path - a path which is led by humanism and respect for all living things. Peace is a vital element to the realisation of a sustainable Åland, and the goal should be the absence of all forms of violence.

The work for peace on Åland would benefit from further intensive work during times of détente and good neighbourly relations. Not just when we have a difficult situation, but also when daily life and the future looks bright and secure. This development has gone in the right direction. But in order to carry forward the ambitions of earlier generations towards demilitarisation and neutralisation as an ongoing project, we should make more effort to integrate the vision of peace firmly into the Ålandic identity. People of the world do not long for war, but for peace. We can lead the way and be a living example to show that this is possible, and that there are alternatives to violence and outdated military notions. And how do we do that? Yes, a tried-and-tested method is to give further support and money to the Åland Islands Peace Institute, which can provide the society of Åland with inspiration and knowledge on how the Islands of Peace can develop into an example for the world.