

Statement by Mr Frank Belfrage, former Swedish state secretary for EU-affairs on the occasion of the celebration of the 25th anniversary of the Corfu EU Summit, 24 June 2019

The date of 24 June 1994, 25 years ago, marks the start of Swedish participation in the construction of the European Union. The then Swedish Prime Minister, Carl Bildt, here present, signed the accession treaty of Sweden to the EU here in Corfu under the Greek EU Presidency. It was, indeed, a historic day for my country. As chief negotiator of the treaty, I had the honor to be one of the Swedish co-signatories, a great and momentous event in my professional life.

For a long time the Swedish outlook on European affairs after World War II had been twofold:

- 1) avoid being drawn into the cold war confrontation between the two blocks on either side of the Iron Curtain: NATO and the Warsaw-pact and
- 2) as a highly internationalized economy avoid trade discrimination against Swedish goods and services on the markets of our European neighbors.

To achieve these two objectives, Sweden on *the one hand* strictly stuck to its policy of neutrality – no government should either fear or expect that Sweden in case of a military conflict in Europe would be siding with one or the other side. And on *the other hand* we worked hard for the establishment, as far as possible, of rule-based, free trade and market-economy principles globally and of course on our own European continent. The European markets absorb around $\frac{3}{4}$ of our exports, which in turn counts for more than half of our GNP. Trade is a vital dimension of the Swedish economy.

When the six founding member states created the European Economic Communities, the EEC, at the end of the 1950's to consolidate and strengthen the post WWII reconciliation process, Sweden could not join in view of our strict policy of neutrality. Instead we co-founded in 1960 EFTA a free-trade association between seven other European states. And in the early 1970's we developed bilateral free trade agreements with the EEC to avoid trade discrimination. But new threats against our trading prospects emerged when the EEC decided to finalize its internal market in the mid 1980's and thereby create new economic dynamics among its member states. The President of the European Commission, Jacques Delors, understood our dilemma and offered us and the other EFTA states to enter the big single market - provided we respected the autonomy of the European Institutions and accepted to remain at the outer periphery of their decision making process. The so-called European Economic Area, the EEA, was developed in that spirit. We thus avoided trade and economic discrimination but we had no real say in the further development of the single market rules. In the long run that was not an acceptable proposition for sovereign Sweden.

The Swedish conservative and liberal parties started in that light to revive the debate about Swedish membership in the mid 1980's – not least Carl Bildt who by then had become the leader of the Conservative party. In the context of one of the recurrent Swedish economic crisis, which had marked most of the 1980's, the Social Democratic government decided in 1990 to change tack and announced that Sweden would apply for full membership in order to strengthen the Swedish economy. And under the Dutch presidency of 1991 the then Swedish Prime Minister, Mr Ingvar Carlsson, submitted the Swedish accession application. But the task of achieving the goal of Swedish membership fell on the center-right government coalition led by Carl Bildt, which had won the parliamentary election in the autumn of the same year. Austria had already applied a few years earlier and after Sweden both Finland and Norway soon jumped on the enlargement band-wagon.

Having debated the membership issue for about 30 years and having come to the conclusion that we should join, we thought – probably somewhat naively – that we would be immediately warmly welcomed to the negotiating table with open arms. But that was not the case. The EEC was about to upgrade its institutions and to launch the deepening of its political, monetary and justice cooperation. Enlargement was not allowed to interfere in what was to become the Maastricht treaty and the transformation of the EEC into the EU. We had to wait until 1993 before we could start negotiations and we had to accept that the process could not be finalized until the Maastricht treaty had been ratified and had entered into force.

Sweden started the formal accession process on 1 February 1993. Given our membership in the single market through the EEA, we were able to finalize the negotiations in record time, 13 months. Bipartisanship between government and opposition was the successful basis of the Swedish accession process. Becoming a member state of the EU is about acceptance of the statute book of the Union, the so-called “acquis communautaire”, the 40 000+ pages of directives and regulations, which regulate the daily running of the Union from milk market prices to car emission constraints. As far as Sweden is concerned, we had to negotiate derogations regarding i.a. environment rules, which we didn't want to lower, regional policies which had to take into account the sparsely populated areas of northern Sweden, the continued use of tobacco snuff, restrictions on imports of alcoholic beverages, subsidies to agriculture in Northern Sweden, upholding of free trade with our Baltic neighbors and the lowering of the initial EU membership fees. The European Commission was of great help in this process and we could throughout the negotiations count on the unwavering support of our main sponsors Germany, Britain and Denmark. The Greek presidency then gave us the final end-game push over the finishing line.

When we arrived to Corfu for the signatory ceremony, I particularly remember the feeling, at first, of sheer exhaustion. We had been working day and night non-stop for 30 months. The warm and generous hospitality of the Corfu municipality changed all that. The beautiful weather, the historic sight, the magnificent view of the Mediterranean Sea, the solemnity of the occasion, all that created a spirit of true euphoria, which is now coming back to me, as I look around the familiar surroundings of today's 25 year celebration, a memorable day to remember.

The rest is history, as the saying goes. The European Parliament gave its approval after the Corfu signature and we then submitted the accession treaty to the Swedish voters. After a most animated referendum campaign, the “yes”-line had it on 13 November by a reasonably comfortable majority of 53 against 47 %. And on 1 January 1995 Sweden took its place at the Council table in Brussels.

What happened thereafter is another story. Today we recall that the final count-down towards membership started in Corfu 25 years ago, a process that significantly changed the structure of Swedish society and economy. Swedish public opinion is by now very positive to our membership, which enjoys a solid support in the polls.

We express our warm thanks to the municipality of Corfu and to the Albert Cohen Foundation for organizing this wonderful get-together filled with both emotions and remembrances of a truly historic day.