

The action of the University still causes my concern

by Li Bennich-Björkman, UNT, July 23rd 2007.

In April I devoted a review on this page to a subject which still causes my concern: the de facto dismissal of two professors at the Mathematics Department of Uppsala University.

Up to now there have been several comments, some defending the action of the University and others criticizing it. Radio Uppland has in a series of reports tried to find out what really has happened and why, and gave many of the involved persons the possibility to present their point of view about what Prof. emeritus Lennart Carleson recently has called "the biggest academic scandal in Sweden for 50 years".

Nevertheless it is not yet clear why those two professors, a female and a male, recruited by Uppsala University in the 1990ies from Russia and Germany, became so unbearable for the University management - and here I do not only have in mind the Vice Chancellor, but also the higher management in general - , that by their assessment the only possible solution left consisted in staging dramatic and immediate notices. For sure, there were no formal reasons sufficient for a dismissal, a fact the management was aware of, having withdrawn the matter from the University Disciplinary Board. Nor have there been presented substantial motivations in the investigation of the working environment. Quite to the contrary, there it is claimed that the problems at the department are of a collective nature and can not be solved by pointing out particular individuals.

Rather little (if anything at all) of what has been written or said during the months following the events of February has essentially clarified the reasons for their formal notice and de facto dismissal. Instead, from several sources it has been stressed that it was not related to the fact that they were strongly critical towards the employment of a new professor at the Mathematics Department. Nor to that they were bad researchers or teachers: Indeed, the Vice Chancellor himself has admitted that they are competent researchers.

But then, what remains that can justify such drastic measures? Nothing specific or concrete, the present head of the Mathematics Department says, instead rather their unacceptable behaviour in the most general sense. Slander and harassment of colleagues, according to others, but mostly by hearsay. Only few have read the offending e-mails which very often are referred to, but many claim to "know" that it is exactly like that.

Indeed, the absence of explicitly stated reasons is just what worries me. Is it this point we should concentrate on when looking at this matter from a more general perspective; and that there seem to be many people who do not consider it remarkable that the reasons are so vaguely formulated both towards the affected and in the following discussion? Why do not more people wonder, at least at the University? Is it the image of these two as "rotten apples", always absent and "impossible" and moreover not from Sweden, that prevents people from regarding the events as something concerning more than only the directly involved persons?

If somebody's professionalism, judgement and honour are questioned in such a way as has happened in this case, then some clearer reasons have to appear in a fair process. I write "fair", since formally they resigned themselves. It can not - should not - be sufficient that there are some rumours pointing in some direction. That reminds by far too much a political culture significant for societies with a form of government completely different from ours.

Finally: It is easy to dismiss criticism by saying that the critic has no discernment, does not really understand what the matter is about or has no connection with the case in question. I have never claimed that a professor may do whatever (s)he wants under the pretext of academic freedom.

Of course professors as well as anybody can commit a serious official misconduct, e.g. by refusing to work, and therefore have to leave. As well they can, as for example in the noteworthy case of the professor of History Dick Harrison at Lund, expose others to harassment and receive a warning, as Harrison did, from the disciplinary board for state employees.

But I did believe that even professors coming into a conflict with the University management would find themselves in Sweden in a society where individuals are treated with dignity and are offered real chances for a fair scrutiny. Maybe it is time for me to revise that comprehension. But if so, then it is with great grief in my heart.