



Welcome and introductory speech at the International Tenants Day, October 6, 2008, European Parliament Brussels

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(in her absence the speech was held by Mr Jan Johansson, Director-to-be at the SUT)

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Members of parliament, honoured guests, ladies and gentlemen.

As president of the Swedish Union of tenants it gives me great pleasure to have the opportunity to open this conference.

Our organisation takes an active part in the work done by the International union of tenants and this is the first time we come together in Brussels to speak about the situation in Europe and the basic and political conditions for decent and affordable housing in European cities. At least, the first time, in the form of a conference hosted by the International Unions of Tenants.

Ten years ago, we where convinced that the membership in the European Union should not include the Swedish housing policy and housing market. Today, the question about decent and affordable housing is of great importance and high up on the Swedish political agenda due to the European Property Federations complaint to the EU commission.

The claim is that the public owned companies in Sweden get financial aid in conflict with the European competition law and that the Swedish government therefore treats the private companies unfairly.

Before we joined the union we where told that housing policy not was an EU competence, that it was a question for the member states.
And maybe this is still the truth. We don't know anything yet about the outcome of the Swedish case or the outcome of the Dutch case for that matter.

We have to wait for the answer and we still hope that Sweden can form its own housing policy, also in the future. The complaint made by the private property owners has led to a sweeping investigation and debate in Sweden both about the role of the public utility companies and the relations to the European Union.

We should ask ourselves if it is good for the European Union if it becomes a common thing to use the European court when you are dissatisfied and have failed to get your political ambition to be realised in your own country.

Housing policy has played a major role in the development of the Swedish model. Under a long period of time the parliament stood behind this policy.

Housing is a social right and housing policy must create the conditions for everyone to live in decent dwellings at a reasonable cost as well as in a stimulating and safe environment within an ecologically sustainable framework. The housing environment

must contribute to equal and dignified living conditions and in particular promote a good climate for rearing children and for young people

The sitting government in Sweden has changed the housing policy and it is still unclear if the new wordings will mean any changes in reality.

Their new policy is focused more on markets than on people, more on supply meeting demand than on goals such as integration, social inclusion and decent and affordable housing.

Sweden faces a lot of challenges, as all European cities do. We share many of them, others differ. Every country has its own traditions and solutions.

One thing that differs is that the Swedish system does not include any social housing sector, this meaning that dwellings in municipal housing companies are available to all. Combined, there are housing allowances targeting low-income households.

One of the most crucial issues is therefore what role the public owned companies will be allowed play in the future. Today, they are very important when it comes to the struggle for decent and affordable housing. We have a system of rent setting where rents are established according to standard and quality. Rent levels set in municipal housing companies determine the rents in the private sector.

The Tenants Union negotiates for more than 90% of all rented accommodation with 203 municipal housing companies and 45 000 private landlords. 55% of all tenants in Sweden rent from municipal housing companies and 45% rent from private landlords.

But, we are right now in a fight to try to stop that a system with "markets rents light" is introduced and a proposal that the municipal housing companies are forced to act according to the principle of the private market investor.

The tools for being an active actor working for decent and reasonable housing will look different and be less sharp for the public companies if these suggestions come true. Several of the Swedish municipalities are selling public buildings.

It's a part of the sitting governments policy that people should own their homes. So they sell part of or the whole public company to private companies or transform them into tenant-ownership.

But the economic crisis we now face has rapidly reduced the interest among the tenants. Maybe, they were not that interested to start with either.

Post-war housing policy in Sweden was based on the idea of stimulating the demand for housing.

Today we face a situation where the demand for housing is rising and will continue to rise. We need to build 550 000 new dwellings in the period of 2020.

One million young people will enter the housing market in the coming 15 years. The generation born in the forties are tired of cutting the grass and want to move from their houses, the elderly want to go on living in their own home.

It is of highest importance to have housing that functions in terms of work, leisure, play and health care.

We have built towns divided, high rise areas separated from private homes. We can't continue to promote economic segregation, we can't continue to promote housing segregation and we can't continue to promote ethnic segregation.

The Swedish Union of Tenants has an important roll. We are more than a lobby organisation. We negotiate for more than 90 % of all rented accommodation. We discuss housing issues with the government.

All over Europe, the tenants unions should be a significant social partner in forming housing policy and in developing the housing market.

Active tenant participation, trust and satisfied residents brings lower costs for landlords, good standards and good services in the dwelling, in the house and on the estate. This creates the best conditions to reach our goal, decent and affordable housing for all.