

# Loyal employees should be silent at Uppsala University?

(UNT 30 April 2007)

In February of this year, scientifically-distinguished mathematics professors Oleg Viro and Burglind Juhl-Jöricke left their positions at Uppsala University. They had been employed since 1994 and 1997, respectively. On paper it was a voluntary resignation, but, in reality, it took place under highly remarkable, nearly incredulous circumstances.

During meetings with the Vice-Chancellor, a lawyer, and an employee of the personnel administration on February 8, a scene took place which – if one can trust the transcript of the tape recording subsequently posted on the Web – I at least would never have believed had a place in the working life in the open and democratic Sweden. Apart from the staging of their dismissals, which in reality this amounted, the element of surprise, the unwillingness of the university administration to support their accusations in a sensible way, giving an "offer you can't refuse" (a larger amount of money if the professors resigned the very same day, but which would only diminish were they to wait), and hints that otherwise the case against them would be taken to the university disciplinary board, wherein conditions would likely only become worse, there remain many deeply problematic and fundamental questions about how loyalty is understood (interpreted) within an organisation like the university – questions of a type that one feels are best discussed in public.

The primary accusation is one of illoyalty manifested towards the university administration. Over and beyond this, accusations of misconduct involving insult and absence from the workplace, too few publications, teaching too little, and having too few PhD-students are thrown in. But the main thing is that the professors behaved illoyally and did not respect decisions made at the management level. This recurs over and over again [in the transcript] and was also put forward at a personnel meeting held in the Department of Mathematics last November with the Vice-Chancellor, university lawyers, and department employees. On questions raised then concerning the meaning of the notion of loyalty the answer was, according to notes taken, "If you have such a question, then you have a problem at your department."

I have tried to acquaint myself as far as possible with the background to this deeply distressing conflict taking place at our university. This is never easy, especially when two different interpretations of reality are pitted against each other. Two basic conflicts, however, seem central in all of this. First, the professors were critical against the previous chairman of the department of mathematics, who after criticism from several quarters was forced to step

down in the Spring of 2006. This chairman was in turn strongly critical against Viro and Juhl-Joricke, and strived according to certain information to "remove them". The other conflict is of a scientific nature and concerns the filling of a [chaired] professorship at the Department of Mathematics, in which Viro and Juhl-Jöricke, but far from only them, were strongly critical to the recommendation (by a divided group of referees) of an individual not deemed to be a mathematician in the traditional sense, and who would thereby not be able to fulfil the duties that were specified in the job description. The appointment was appealed against from several sides, but remained. The illoyalty consisted of the fact that the two professors remained critical of the appointment. Seemingly, once a decision has been made, this must be the final word, and employees of the university must no longer question it. Perhaps even more remarkable is that persons who have distributed information about the action against the professors and the reaction of the surrounding world were exhorted to change their behaviour.

Universities have, during a long period in the West, been governed by principles of collegiality, with academic freedom as a basic norm. An institution of society which is to further creativity and the growth of new knowledge must be able to guarantee conditions enabling individuals to be non-conformist. The organisational culture has to be such that risk-taking and new thinking are encouraged. The breath of life should be marked by openness and possibilities to question, both outwards towards the rest of society, as well as inwards towards the organisation.

The university administration in Uppsala seems to have a different view. Loyalty is no longer shown by taking one's scientific mission seriously, for instance by taking a position on the question of how one's subject is best developed. Rather the loyal one stays silent.

Li Bennich-Björkman

---

Li Bennich-Björkman is Professor of Political Science at Uppsala University. She is author of several books, among them *Organising Innovative Research. The Inner Life of University Departments*, Pergamon Press: Elsevier Science, Oxford 1998. She received SULF's (Swedish Association of University Teachers) prize in 2005 for furthering academic freedom.