Distant Sweden

If, seen from the viewpoint of other Europeans, the Austrians are immersed in ignorance and the Finns clouded in mystery, then the Swedes are buried in misconceptions.

Not surprisingly perhaps since Sweden is a country where doors open outwards, bread has sugar in it, a free glass of water is served with every meal, parents are punishable by law for smacking their children, and cars drive around in broad daylight with their headlights blazing.

Of the three countries that joined the Union in 1995, Sweden is the largest, the wealthiest and, with 8.7 million inhabitants, the most populous. Also, despite the lack of the east-west pivotal position that the other two enjoy, it is the most influential diplomatically.

But the country has inherited an image problem, a massive accretion of misconceptions.

Many foreigners think that all Swedes look the same, flaxen-haired and gangling. Not so. Without taking into account the 10 per cent of the population that is now non-Swede, there are as many dark-haired people, medium-height or even small, as there are blond giants.

But even more bizarre are misconceptions about the psychology and lifestyle of the Swedes.

Some people think of Sweden as a country that refuses to commit itself - despite the fact that, with its decision to join the Union, it has shown that indeed it can. Its history of neutrality and non-intervention has left a more lasting impression on western minds than Austria's.

Others think of Sweden, rightly, as a social laboratory but then go on, wrongly, to equate this with permissiveness and lax morals. Even if the tales of au pair girls are true, Swedish sexuality seems pretty tame by today's standards, when you compare this Lutheran people with a Catholic country like Spain. In the words of the country's leading sociologist, Professor Åke Daun, "sexuality has been 'dedramatised', emptied of its earlier cultural and emotional content." Permissiveness reflects the emphasis placed on rationality.

Then there are some of us who, unduly influenced at an impressionable age by Ingmar Bergman's films, are still intrigued by what we see as a cultural dichotomy: a genteel veneer of exquisite taste and gracious living superimposed on a bucolic and colourful culture epitomised in the little red horses of Dalarna.

All of these misconceptions have their roots in reality, yet they are still misconceptions. Sweden is indeed a country that generally keeps out of trouble but it has been doing so instinctively, with the notable exception of the Thirty Years' and the Great Northern wars, since the age of the Vikings.

Sweden has indeed been a social laboratory and it has been so for just as long... and maybe already was in the age of the Vikings. Yet it is not as permissive as others would think, if you can believe the traditional Nordic bon mot: "In Sweden everything is prohibited that is not permitted. In Norway everything is permitted that is not prohibited. In Denmark..."

As for the charge of gracious living, the country does indeed still show traces of the 'Bergman veneer'. Bergman was depicting the Stockholm bourgeoisie of his youth, strongly influenced by a French culture imported by Gustav III - but these traces are increasingly thin as they give way to a more homogeneous culture which shows a strong and even growing attachment to the little horses of Dalarna.

All the most persistent misconceptions start from the fact that the Swedes are a naturally

democratic people: it is evident at many crucial events in the country's history. They have democracy built into them from birth, or even before. And our misconceptions take root precisely because the rest of us Europeans find it difficult to believe this. Sometimes we are even driven to mistrust Swedish motives.

Where the Finns repress - or occasionally express - their feelings, the Swedes seem to sublimate them. Some innate sense of caution, which helped them avoid major social conflict over the centuries, is now highly developed in the individual and institutionalised in the state. They are mutually reinforcing.

Of course some countries resent people who are so eminently sensible, which only helps to fuel the misconceptions.

Take the metro (the T-bana, the 'T' standing for tunnel) northwards from the centre of Stockholm and you could be excused for thinking that you are being given a lesson in Swedish upward mobility.

As you exit the central area, you reach 'Stadion' [Stadium]: this, you conclude, is the mecca of the masses though, as it happens, the masses go there to watch athletics and the popular Swedish variant of ice hockey, bandy, rather than football. In the words of a Swedish fan, "when you've got bandy, you don't need football." He also says it is the bandy supporters - most of them living in the northern half of Sweden and recognisable by their briefcases laden with brännvin-containing coffee called kask - who voted against accession to the European Union.

One stop further up the line and you move educationally and socially upwards at a station with the romantic name of 'Tekniska Högskolan' [Technical High School]. And one station further you have the self-explicit 'Universitet'.

Many things in Sweden will remind the foreigner of this country's sometimes frustrated urge to provide better opportunities for all.

Frustration is indeed the 'flavour of the decade', as the country copes with rising unemployment and the government searches for cuts in social expenditure to balance the national budget. Industry, spurred on by the devaluation of the krona in November 1992, is now faring well again but the outlook for the average Swedish family, compared with the glorious '80s, is bleak.

"There is somebody out of work in almost every family, a traumatic experience for people who have taken full employment for granted for the last fifty years", comments a government official. "It was almost exotic to know someone who was unemployed - and a disgrace for the person concerned." The Skogslänen, the forest counties of northern Sweden have always suffered from endemic unemployment but, in the south, it was rare.

Neutrality, not isolationism

Sweden's reasonable approach to solving society's ills goes back to at least the middle of the last century, if not earlier.

The result today is a country which has resolved most of the major issues that other European societies are still grappling with but - to the surprise of some and the Schadenfreude of others - is now paying the price. This must give great satisfaction to people like Auberon Waugh.

Sweden pioneered the ombudsman concept, an institution which dates back to 1809. There are

now six such offices: the parliamentary ombudsman, four government-appointed ombudsmän responsible respectively for consumer matters, equal opportunities, ethnic discrimination and children's interests, and a press ombudsman.

The country also instituted the principle of making all official governmental correspondence available for inspection on request by the media or the public. An ordinary citizen can check the Prime Minister's mail and the popular press is even known to ask to see ministers' expense reports when they suspect abuse of public funds. There are no grounds for denying such requests unless primarily issues of security or foreign relations are involved.

With such a tradition it is hardly surprising that, in the negotiations for accession to the EU, Swedish representations on the need for greater openness in government were particularly lively. Another matter, of great importance to younger Swedes who are trying to kick the smoking habit, was the issue of snus [wet snuff].

Sweden is also a pioneer in the creation of equal opportunities for women. At the time of writing, 44 per cent of the members of the Swedish parliament and half the cabinet are female, exceeding the figures for both Finland and Norway. Swedish feminists tend to be less militant than others, having achieved a respectable status in society, but activists are vigilant in ensuring that quotas are respected.

One of the hottest topics of the Cold War was Sweden's apparent pioneering of 'The Third Way': it was more apparent than real because it was a natural extension of the social course the country had embarked on in the 19th century.

Many western European nations resented what they saw as the moralising attitude of Swedes in vaunting the virtues of the 'Swedish Model' and spearheading Europe's halting social missionary work in the Third World.

Swedes will tell you that it was the others who took such an intense interest in what they were doing. They regret the fact that they earned an image as Europe's 'do-gooders'.

They would prefer to practise neutrality in international imagery as much as in international defence...

Neutrality, however, has not meant isolationism or even insularity as a culture. Throughout history, since the time of the Vikings (who, parenthetically, did not wear silly hats), Sweden has been open to the rest of the world and has maintained contact - sometimes aggressively, more often peacefully - with the other peoples of Europe. The country's accession to the EU is a natural conclusion to a long chapter of European history.

From German merchants to Greek restaurants

The roster of valuable and valued immigrants to Sweden includes German merchants trading through the Hanseatic League, Finnish pioneers, Walloon ironsmiths (who went on to achieve managerial and even ministerial rank), Dutch merchants, Scots mercenaries, German engineers, even a French general who was 'headhunted' for the throne. In the 16th century more than half the population of Stockholm was foreign.

The French influence was most evident under the rule of Gustav III who, at the end of the 18th century, came under the spell of the 'Enlightenment' and imported ideas, fashions, playwrights, artists and architects from Paris. It is this influence, particularly what is now known as Gustaviansk

architecture and furniture, that comes through in the films of Ingmar Bergman. But it also manifests itself in the rationalism that is the leitmotiv of Swedish society.

This French influence was supplanted, in the 19th century, by a German influence encouraged by the rational and highly organised example of the Kingdom of Prussia. “We are Germans in reserve”, says a leading Swedish industrialist. “Yet”, he concludes, “we differ in our attitude towards ‘instructions from above’. Only if we’re motivated will we make something work. If we’re not, we won’t.”

Today, the strongest foreign influences are evident in the catering trade. Restaurants offering traditional Swedish cuisine, simple and wholesome, have given way to French bistros and Italian pizzerias (the Italians who opened the latter have now sold out to Tunisians and Turks, and moved upmarket).

It is a sobering experience to venture into a forest-encircled town in the heart of Sweden and find that the only food available is either French, Italian, Greek or Maghrebian. Even the town of Piteå close to the Arctic Circle has two purportedly French restaurants facing one another in the main street. One, called ‘Le Montmartre’, is run by a Tunisian. The other, ‘Le Pigalle’, is run by an Algerian.

The democratic instinct

Like Austria, Sweden has a proud imperial past, though of shorter duration. There the similarity ends, for the Swedes have had had much longer to recover from their post-imperial trauma. They relinquished such ambitions in 1814 and thereby laid the foundations for a policy of peaceful neutrality which has assured them a relatively serene 20th century.

Where Austria has been marked by corporatism as the only practical solution to the troubled times of the first half of the century, Sweden has been slowly evolving a pluralistic society since the mid-1800s. By the turn of this century there were signs of popular activism which would do credit to any country today.

It is as if today’s Swedes have a democratic instinct inside them that functions like a gyroscope, keeping their minds and values on a level flightpath.

Many Swedes will tell you, with great conviction, that this democratic instinct has been evident throughout their country’s recorded history. Yet Professor Daun suggests that the objective and rational approach they apply to society’s problems is perhaps no older than 50 years.

Foreigners puzzling over the country’s democratic instincts will be more inclined to think of the Vikings who, from their point of view as foreigners, represent something of an entirely different kind. Yet the story goes that, when the Vikings besieged Paris before becoming ‘Normans’, the Frankish commander had great difficulty negotiating with them because he couldn’t fathom the hierarchy: they were all free men, so they had no leader in the French sense. Things haven’t changed all that much since!

At least it can be said that the Vikings ploughed (hacked?) a fairly steady course for a couple of centuries. They only really got a bad press when they started plundering the monasteries. Popular theory would have it that their excursions were prompted by population growth, but more weight can be attached to the fact that it coincided with the abandonment of Mediterranean trade routes at the time of Arab expansion.

Swedish Vikings navigated Russia's rivers to the Black Sea and the Caspian, and are reputed to have bequeathed their hallmark [rus = red-headed] to the Russians. They were as fast on their feet and with their horses, which they carried on board their longships, as they were with their oars.

From the time of the Vikings until the middle of the last century, Swedish history looks like a constitutional seesaw with Crown and aristocracy (and latterly government) continually challenging one another's authority. This did indeed prevent any single faction from getting the upper hand for too long, but the frequent contention by Swedes that, when challenged, those in power conceded defeat voluntarily and peacefully is not entirely borne out by the facts.

Sweden has as many bloodstains on its dynastic history as any other European country. Two of its greatest kings - Karl XII and Gustav III - were assassinated, the latter at a masked ball in his own opera house. The country's involvement in the 30 Years' War and the Great Northern War that followed was marked by a barbarity rivalling that of the Vikings. According to a Dutchman who travelled through the country in the early 18th century: "Nowhere in Sweden did I see a single young man between 20 and 40 years of age, only soldiers. The cruel war had swept away almost the entire youth of this unhappy realm... The whole kingdom to an unbelievable degree [has] run to seed."

And yet, nobler impulses shine through from time to time as portents of what was to come. In 1319, in what has been called Sweden's 'Magna Carta', the aristocracy swore absolute fealty to the new King Magnus Eriksson in exchange for his undertaking not to imprison anyone without due examination and judgment under the laws of the time. In 1655 the governor of the Swedish colony on the Delaware river rejected what he described as a 'despicable' proposal from his Dutch neighbours to wage common war on the Indians. In 1788 Swedish officers challenged a royal decision to mount an attack on Russia as 'unconstitutional'.

With the notable exception of the 17th century wars, much of Sweden's history has been lived at peace. For ordinary people, the only 'enemy' was the state itself and, even then, the population understood the values of loyalty and obedience. Sovereignty was synonymous with the freedom to advance your own interests within the context of community wellbeing. The 'Swedish Model' ultimately represented two not always compatible interests: economic growth on the right, social redistribution of this wealth on the left. It is this combination of demands that has produced today's dilemma.

Evidence of Swedish society's respect for the rights of ordinary people, particularly vis-a-vis the aristocracy, crops up regularly in the country's history. Compared with almost all other European countries, Sweden has always had a much higher percentage of peasant-proprietors. Even in the 16th century, 45 per cent of farmers owned their own land - though the situation was to change drastically for the worse with the population explosion of the 19th century, when nearly 350,000 Swedes left for America and elsewhere.

Feudalism, in the continental European sense, was largely unknown in large areas of Sweden outside the southern provinces under Danish rule and some areas around Lake Mälaren in the centre of the country - areas which were fertile enough to permit the emergence of large estates. Peasants, if they did not like the landowner they worked for, were free to move elsewhere since serfdom was unknown. It was this, as much as anything else, that contributed to the Swedes' innate sense of democracy and self-esteem.

Land ownership was an issue that cropped up regularly throughout Swedish history. The 'Great Reduction' of the late-1600s reduced the aristocracy's share of the land, much of it forest, mainly to the benefit of the Crown. Much of this land was then allotted to officers in the country's armed

forces for use in peacetime. But, in addition to buying land from the aristocracy, peasant farmers were able to purchase any Crown property they were cultivating at favourable prices. The result was that, by 1800, peasant-owned land represented over 50 per cent of the total exploitable surface of the country.

Emboldened by the convictions of the Age of Enlightenment and the French Revolution, and the example of a Swedish nobleman with the very unSwedish name of Rutger Maclean, the country embarked on two consecutive reorganisations of peasant land. These, the Enskiftet and the Storskiftet, were enforced in the late-1700s with the aim of modernising the country's farming industry. The traditional strip-farming system was abandoned to create individual lots of arable and grazing land.

In the 19th century the government took the ultimate step of decreeing total consolidation of properties, the Laga skiftet, leading to the typical Swedish landscape of today with its widely scattered farmsteads.

These radical land reforms, rigorously enforced by government, enhanced peasant productivity but inevitably destroyed villages and disrupted community life. In fact land reform, emigration and industrialisation combined to create a process of social disintegration in late-19th century Sweden.

Sweden became a nation, in the opinion of constitutional specialist Professor Olof Ruin, during the reign of Gustav Vasa in the early-16th century. And it was the emergence of parliamentary government during the so-called 'Age of Freedom' in the 18th century that helped the Swedish democratic spirit to develop.

One practical expression was the promulgation of Europe's first Freedom of the Press Act in 1766. This and related developments encouraged the French historian and sociologist Montesquieu to comment that "the beginning of freedom in Europe, and all freedom to be found among men, is to be found in Scandinavia."

Not unlike the current British system, but consistently enhanced in the 19th and 20th centuries, parliament languished under two kings: Gustav III (1771-1792), who opted for a system of absolute monarchy for which he lost his life, and Karl XIV Johan (1818-1844), the ex-general from Napoleon's army whose kingship drove any egalitarian impulses out of his head. He did however, uncharacteristically, improve further on the Freedom of the Press Act. He also had the unpleasant experience, for an elitist Frenchman, of having parliamentarians laugh at him when he tried to give his first - and only - speech in Swedish.

Karl XIV Johan's successor, Oskar I (1844-1859), had similarly authoritarian instincts. But he put them to better use by promoting the care of the poor, prison reform, equal rights for women and the abolishment of the unduly restrictive guild system.

The shaping of society

Sweden is unusual among European countries in having already developed a centralised state administration in the 16th and 17th centuries, a process initiated by Gustav Vasa and extended by Axel Oxernstierna who was himself a functionary.

One of the things on which most Swedes agree today is that the country owes the continuance of its democratic traditions to the existence of "a decent political class." As in other countries the criticism, if there is any, is most marked in the younger generations.

Any inclination by politicians to veer from the straight and narrow is inhibited by the mechanisms of open government, in particular the ombudsman system and the principle of public access to all official documents other than those relating to national security, foreign affairs or personal records. “This makes everyone aware that they are operating in the public eye”, says a senior ministry of justice official. “It encourages efficiency and the fair treatment of every case.”

Cabinet ministers are anxious to avoid any impression that they consider themselves different from the people they represent. They address their constituents - and expect to be addressed by them - with the familiar du. As a senior businessman puts it, “there is no possibility for a Swedish politician to think he is someone special.”

He should have added “she”. A female member of the cabinet (currently every other minister is a woman) habitually cycles from her home to the local railway station, takes the commuter train into Stockholm and walks from the central station to her office.

Though security has been tightened since the assassination of Olaf Palme, there is still a tradition of ‘government by walking about’. Where the British Chancellor of the Exchequer poses with his little red case in front of No 11 Downing Street and then plunges into a waiting limousine, the Swedish Finance Minister walks down the Drottningsgatan to parliament with his budget papers, tied with a coloured ribbon, in his hands. Everyone tries, despite difficult circumstances, to minimise the distance between government and the governed.

The political reality is that ministers and under-secretaries of state change with changes in governing parties - and this practice has extended recently to advisors and press secretaries. Parliamentary committees, including the one advising on European Union affairs, are particularly powerful.

Sweden enjoys a positive and stable bureaucratic tradition dating back to the reforms of the great statesman Axel Oxenstierna in the early-17th century. Officials are empowered to take decisions, but are fully accountable for them. Ministries are comparatively small by the standards of many other European countries. Much of the implementation is delegated, without right of interference, to government agencies.

The naive foreigner might be forgiven for thinking that, after decades of peaceful coexistence between Swedish government and big business, and with such a sensible and cut-and-dried approach to running a country, the government/industry interface would be frictionless. Yet a senior industrialist insists there is a ‘wall’ between the two estates of industry and government: “Our public administrations are competent and fully prepared to act on behalf of Swedish industrial interests, but our business people want nothing to do with them.”

A senior ministry official insists that the problem goes further: “There are two elite careers for the educated and ambitious Swede: business or public service. Over the years Social Democrat thinking has created a distinctive culture, and industry keeps its distance. There is even a problem in the public sector. Ministries tend to remain self-sufficient and anonymous, creating another ‘wall’ between them and the much larger agencies that implement the policies.”

An important feature of Swedish public life which goes back hundreds of years at the village level, and is as strong as ever today, is provided by the largely self-motivated and self-motivating interest or activist groups [folkrörelse]. The tradition originally established by the byalag, the village councils, extended in the mid-19th century to other aspects of public life: the Free Church congregations, the temperance reformers, the Cooperative movement, the trade unions, the sports movement and, latterly, the consumerist movement.

Following a largely unsuccessful government programme in the 1970s to encourage people to move south, the folkrörelse tradition has been given further momentum by an organisation called the Folkrörelserådet, which finances projects aimed at preserving community life in the provinces under the slogan “Hela Sveriga ska leva” [“The whole of Sweden shall live”].

Although Sweden thus shares a corporatist tradition with Austria, the Swedish version differs from the Austrian in projecting grassroots attitudes more than making decisions for the constituencies represented. Yet these activist movements are extremely, perhaps disproportionately, influential. In the words of one Swede, “parliament has a lot of religious people, a lot of non-drinking people. It is not representative of the public...”

In 1981, 32 per cent of the adult population participated in study circles covering such varied subjects as bookbinding, ceramics, Chinese cooking, languages, personal development and even labour market legislation. Local cultural associations also proliferate. “We like the memories and artifacts of the past without being exaggeratedly proud of our culture” says Åke Daun, who also points out that the tradition of such voluntary organisations has had an enormous impact on the structural development of Swedish society.

Sweden has acted as the world’s conscience on many aspects of global affairs, in particular by providing aid to developing countries and financial support for, and active participation in, the work of international agencies.

In its own immediate theatre, the country has been a vigorous member of the Nordic Council (the other members are Norway, Finland, Denmark and Iceland), setting an example to the rest of Europe with the establishment of a common labour market as long ago as 1954 and the abolition of passport controls within the area in 1957.

Sweden’s accession to the European Union automatically implied fundamental changes in the country’s relationship to the rest of the world and not just towards fellow-members of the Nordic Council. An ad hoc committee chaired by Professor Ruin was established to determine the constitutional implications of EU membership. This identified areas where European law would prevail and concluded that explicit reference had to be made in the Swedish constitution to the transfer of certain powers to Brussels.

One of the major subjects of negotiation on accession was the principle of transparency, with the Swedish government defending the practice of making official documents, including EU papers, available for public scrutiny.

The question of EU accession was put to the vote through a national referendum which produced a majority in favour of 52.3 per cent (compared with 66.4 per cent in Austria and 56.9 per cent in Finland). This was the fifth referendum in the country’s history. Although, in the words of Olof Ruin, “they are a brutal kind of decision-making”, referenda are likely to become a more frequent feature of the Swedish political scene.

Perhaps the most famous previous referendum was that of 1955, when the Swedish people rejected the idea of changing over to driving on the right. Eleven years later the government defied the people’s preference and made the change in any case. Despite some anxious moments this went smoothly, largely thanks to a very thorough public information campaign.

Sweden’s original parliament, established in 1435, comprised four chambers representing the ‘estates’ of the nobility, the burgers, the priesthood and the peasantry. This was replaced in 1866 by a two-chamber parliament, with the first chamber consisting of people elected by the county councils (län). This, in turn, was superseded in 1971 by a single chamber of 349 members elected

by proportional representation, with a threshold of only four per cent.

While, compared with a country like Austria, Sweden is traditionally a highly centralised country, a growing degree of autonomy is now accorded to local and regional administrations - prompted partly by the need to relieve pressure on the national budget!

This trend has gone hand-in-hand with a rationalisation of the administrative infrastructure: from over 2,000 in the 1950s, the number of communes and municipalities has fallen to some 300. The county councils (landstingen) are largely responsible for public health and, to a lesser extent, transport. The communes now have responsibility for the application of both social legislation and local taxation.

Deregulation, decentralisation

Higher education was the subject of a major reform that came into effect in 1993. The new deregulated system is designed to offer greater autonomy to the institutions involved and greater individual choice to the students. Currently more than 30 per cent of upper secondary school leavers go on to university within the following five years. There are three types of general degree: diploma or certificate (högskoleexamen) after two years' study, bachelor's degree (kandidatexamen) after three years, and master's degree (magisterexamen) after four years.

Sweden has seven central government-operated universities: Uppsala, Lund, Gothenburg, Stockholm, Umeå in the north, Linköping, and the University of Agricultural Sciences near Uppsala. In addition there are four major specialised institutions: the Karolinska Institute (medicine), the Royal Institute of Technology, Luleå University College and Institute of Technology in the far north, and the Stockholm Institute of Education. All these institutions provide research and development facilities for industry, with Lund University offering valuable support to Sweden's dynamic health care industry.

More than 50 other smaller universities and colleges are located throughout the country. Because of the remoteness of many communities from the main centres, particularly in the north, distance learning is also an important aspect of Swedish education.

Another significant feature is adult education. About half of the country's adult population pursues studies in one form or another. Such a high proportion can only be explained, at least in part, by the longstanding tradition of studies established by the folkrörelse movements.

English is now taught in all Swedish schools from the age of eleven, with German or French the second language. In the 19th century the French language and culture were the principal choice of the Swedish bourgeoisie. French then gave way slowly to German and, by the early-1900s, most families professed German as their first foreign language.

By any standards, the Swedes are a well-educated people. It is all the more surprising that some of them demonstrate a marked lack of interest in, or familiarity with, features of their own country and society.

Improvements in the country's already overworked transportation infrastructure are a priority concern with Sweden's accession to the European Union. Industry, all too aware of the country's peripheral location, looks for improvements but is reluctant to share the financial burden. Lack of funds and environmental concerns have hindered development of the modest motorway network and the modernisation of trunk roads. Maybe the authorities had this in mind when, in 1977, they introduced the requirement to use headlights in daytime - a measure that has led to a 10 per cent

reduction in collisions between oncoming traffic.

The most positive transport initiatives are the upgrading of main rail links for both high-speed trains (the ABB X2000) and high-capacity freight traffic, and the construction of the Öresund bridge link between Malmö and Copenhagen. Rail track and train services are run as separate operations.

The country is well endowed with telecommunications systems, boasting the world's second highest ownership of telephones (the highest being Monaco) and one of the fastest growth rates for sales of personal computers. Twelve per cent of Swedes and over 20 per cent of Stockholmers have mobile phones.

Sweden has had a housing policy since the 1930s depression, with non-profit municipal housing companies now owning about 50 per cent of all rented apartments in the country. Total accommodation is about four million units, of which slightly over half are in blocks of apartments. Approximately 30 per cent of Sweden's total population live in the three metropolitan areas of Stockholm, Gothenburg and Malmö.

Swedish TV and radio is currently in a state of flux. While the Nordic Council would like to create a common programme for all member countries, Sweden is facing up to deregulation and the inroads of commercial broadcasters. One of the hopefully permanent features of the Swedish TV scene is a mime called Roger, who has a slot on Channel 1 breakfast TV: his audience is children, but he entrances adults just as readily.

In early-1995 there were four Swedish TV transmitters: Channel 1 which is a national service, Channel 2, also state-controlled, which has the task of representing the rest of the country (40 per cent of its programmes are regionally oriented), Channel 3 which is a satellite-transmitted commercial programme, and Channel 4 which is a land-based commercial programme. Cable networks are growing fast: by 1992, these already covered 45 per cent of Swedish households.

State TV and radio have strict instructions on respecting minority interests, whether they happen to be audiences in the remoter areas of the country or minority groups in the cities. Radio services include programmes for the Sami (Lapps) and the Finnish-speaking minorities, as well as services in Albanian, Arabic, Greek, Iranian, Polish, Serbo-Croat, Slovene, Spanish, Syrian and Turkish.

Sweden, perhaps not surprisingly as a well educated and articulate country, comes close to having the world's highest per capita consumption of newspapers: over 90 per cent of the population read at least one daily paper. Swedish law explicitly prohibits the investigation or disclosure of a journalist's sources.

One last word on the media scene. One of the great institutions in Sweden, as in Finland, is 'Kalle Anka' - none less than Donald Duck. Over one million copies of this cartoon weekly are bought by Swedes and fellow-Nordics, young and old. Its parent magazine in the US sells only 40,000...

The art of living

Depending on where you come from, there's a fair chance you will perceive the Swedes as sullen, awkward, proud or permissive - or all of these things. In every case you will be wrong.

The minority makes the stereotype - in this case, with the help of Bergman's films, that of 'The Gloomy Swede'. Apart from the stories told about the Swedish Americans of Minnesota, there are

so many myths.

"We are a very serious people," says a senior foreign affairs official rather severely, "we take things seriously." Indeed the Swedes are a serious people, which is a long way from saying that they lack a sense of humour. It's just that, when a subject is serious, it is addressed seriously.

"Yet we are very quick to accept trends", the same person continues. "We are very open to new ideas and to new things." When a Swede buys clothes or a car, he or she may well be making a statement, but rarely indulges in conspicuous or ostentatious spending the way a Düsseldorfer or a Milanese might. This in no way prevents him or her from being every bit as stylish as an Austrian.

The Swedes are also an almost depressingly healthy race, despite foreign media reports of mass outbreaks of Seasonal Affective Disease (SAD) in the darker days of the year. Their long winter months may also help explain the Swedes' affinity with light, particularly the folkloric little flames of candles.

Light, in one form or another, has a symbolic role on many occasions: the candles of the Santa Lucia festival, the cemetery lanterns on All Saints' Day, the Advent Sunday candles, the ljusstake candelabra visible in almost every window during the Christmas season. Candles are a sign of welcome outside cafés and private houses when a party's on. In some of the more desolate parts of the country a light is left burning in the front window of every house simply as a signal to the traveller. Hardly surprising, then, that the Swedes are the largest consumers of candles in Europe!

Tradition, unlike the traditions of many other European cultures, evolves side-by-side with Swedish society. Some of the light-related rituals are of fairly recent introduction. Many of the old rural traditions disappeared along with the village communities that harboured them at the time of the 19th-century land reforms. Those that survived have become to some extent stylised. Åke Daun comments that "tradition as such has no intrinsic value for us. It has to prove its usefulness."

With the help of the country's beauty and these traditions, young or old, the Swedes counter the stereotype of seriousness with a friendly and welcoming attitude towards foreigners. Opinion polls conducted by Next Stop Sweden, the national travel and tourism council, consistently show that visitors give the Swedes a high rating for hospitality. They are described as 'open, extrovert and friendly' (some people would argue with the 'extrovert' bit).

Foreigners are impressed by the freedom of movement and right of access the country offers: no 'private property - keep out' signs. Highest ratings for friendliness and hospitality, including towards children, are awarded by visitors from Britain, Germany and Switzerland. Not altogether unsurprisingly, the Danes, Dutch, Italian and French are less impressed.

Despite their quirks, the Swedes are less complex than the Austrians. But, if anything, they are more difficult to understand. If we take the example of the Irish lady who thought the Austrians were like onions, we might say that the Swedes resemble a lightly boiled egg: a thin but brittle shell surrounding a soft and warm interior. Swedish shyness conceals a lot of human qualities: decency, concern and, yes!, even a sense of humour.

It is often said that creating empathy with a Swede is like trying to empty a ketchup bottle. At first nothing happens, then, all of a sudden, the contents splurt out all over the place (in the case of the Finns you first have to work out how to remove the cap). As somebody said, with typical Swedish understatement, "Swedes don't chat very much in bars with strangers." Also Swedes don't say "hello" to one another in hotel elevators, but may be persuaded to do so when they know there are foreigners in the hotel.

Coldness and consensus

Professor Hofstede's research (see page 46) gave the Swedes the lowest rating of all European countries on the masculinity/femininity scale, ie both sexes espoused feminine values like caring and consensus. Indeed the sex roles are less strict in Swedish society than elsewhere, the main aim of a couple being to achieve a close union and relationship.

At the same time, some foreign observers see a difference in gender attitudes. Jean Phillips-Martinsson frequently heard the comment from visiting business people that "Swedish women are warm, but the men are cold." Yet it is not the Swedish way to hug and kiss or even use terms of endearment a lot, even within the family.

Professor Daun makes the point that "Swedes find it difficult to console for example a workmate who has lost a close relative. Instead, 'consideration' is shown by keeping a distance or by acting as if nothing had happened." So the best recognition a frustrated foreigner may be entitled to is a warm commendation in an after-dinner speech.

This apparent coldness is, more often than not, a matter of shyness. Swedes try to explain this in terms of their environment. "We live in a land almost as big as France, yet we are less than nine million people", is one explanation. "Our problem is the transition from rural to urban life... Our manners are inherited from the land, we do not have the urban tradition" is another.

For the same reasons, 'coldness' cohabited with consensus. In the words of a leading Swedish industrialist, "if you couldn't choose anything but your own community, you learned the art of living together. The only exceptions to this rule were the village fool and the artist."

Both nature and history have taught Swedes to value their personal independence, despite the environment of a consensus-oriented society. People are cautious about establishing relationships and, as they see it, committing themselves. This pops up in telling little habits, like buying a cigarette off a colleague at work, or taking your own sheets when you are staying with friends.

Åke Daun identifies a curious inner tension within the Swedish psyche: "Swedes seem to need social autonomy strongly and not be dependent on other individuals, such as neighbours, employers and so on. At the same time, Swedes seem to need collective support for their opinions."

"Modernism and social engineering have complicated things for us," he continues. "We have no real roots yet in our society, we have to call in the experts. We still tend to look upwards for support and guidance. We don't yet have enough self-reliance."

A Swedish film producer who has lived a long time in France says, "where two Frenchmen will do anything to disagree, two Swedes will do anything to agree." For one thing, unlike the French, Swedes get little pleasure from talking for its own sake. For another, they only feel comfortable if they are sams (in agreement) with the person they are talking to. If they get to the point where they are osams (in disagreement), they may even break off the conversation. Conflict is unwelcome.

A Swede will quite often 'play possum' when his or her opinion is openly challenged by someone else. The laid-back instinct, a natural tendency to underplay issues, can be the cause of many misunderstandings with foreigners and is easily and falsely interpreted as indifference.

This was exemplified by the fuss over the first performance before the European Parliament of the new Swedish EU Commissioner, Anita Gradin. Confronted with a question to which she did not have the answer, she confessed "I don't know". Responding to other questions she, being a

Swede, declined to answer with ten words where one would do. And instead of recognising her succinctness, the European Parliamentarians dismissed her as “vague”.

This apparently low-key attitude that is so common in Swedes goes under the label of lagom är bäst - a phrase that in effect means “not too much, not too little, but just right!”. It explains the apparent lack of national pride, the world of sports excepted - though there is a strong sense of national self-esteem, based on what is perceived as the admirable modernity of Swedish society, and a growing interest in the question of what constitutes ‘Swedishness’.

It also helps explain what foreigners perceive as indecisiveness. There is an inbuilt tendency to forgo judgment, to give the other party the benefit of the doubt. The Swedish sense of democracy is expressed in this willingness to respect the other person’s point of view.

Evidence of this is provided by a diary entry by Tage Erlander, Sweden’s great prime minister who led the country for 23 years, quoted in Olof Ruin’s biography: “I remember that already as a child I became accustomed to the fact that, when a person who was badly spoken of had the opportunity to talk about his motives, the picture was different from the one you had heard before... There must be a motive for even the most foolish act; there must be two sides to every question - therein lies the root of indecisiveness.” Therein also lies the root of fairness.

In fact, Swedes consider emotional discipline to be an expression of both their humanity and their civilisation. This even extends to not drawing attention to oneself in public by talking loudly or behaving erratically.

Related to this is a reluctance - though not as marked as in the case of the Finns - to open one’s mouth and put one’s foot in it. Åke Daun comments that “most Swedes’ lack of experience in speaking loudly in public places helps to explain why an audience so unwillingly says anything in the discussion period following a lecture... Swedes appear to reflect more than many other nationalities on how others will react to what they are saying, about what is then suitable for them to say in each and every situation, what impression they are making on others, etc... Many Swedes’ relatively slow speech and numerous pauses in their speech can be explained by the importance placed on words - the fear of saying ‘something rash’.”

Closely related to this is the strong Swedish ethic of honesty - being honest both in what one thinks and what one says. There is a tendency to tell the truth in a very precise way. A European Values System study conducted in the early-1980s showed that 60 per cent of Swedish respondents considered lying “a bad thing”. The figure for Norway was 38 per cent, for Finland 22 per cent and for Danes 13 per cent!

Worship of nature

Perhaps the most striking feature of the Swedish psyche - shared by the country’s Nordic neighbours - is the affinity with nature (see box, page 144). A bright bowl of flowers is a common feature of Swedish front windows. Many Swedes spend their weekends walking or skiing through the forest, communing with the spirits and reflecting on life and its meaning. One in every two Swedes has a stuga, a summer house.

This affinity is hardly surprising, since nature is very close and often distinctively beautiful. Much of southern and central Sweden resembles an oversize rock garden interspersed with graceful juniper bushes and stands of oak and silver birch, all enhanced by the occasional little red house with its latticework fencing.

The Swedes have an almost religious relationship to nature. Worship is made easy by virtue of the right of common access - ‘Everyman’s Right’ - which allows anyone to roam more or less where he or she wants in the countryside. An unwritten and inviolable right rather than a legally enacted one, it reflects a degree of respect for other people’s property that you would have difficulty in finding in many other countries. It is also, together with the right to inspect official mail, the only condition absolutely insisted on in Swedish negotiations for entry to the European Union.

This affinity with nature is bred early in the average Swede. There are many allusions to the carefree days of childhood, both in personal memories and in the popular folklore of adventurous characters like Nils Holgersson, Kalle Blomkvist and, most famous of all, Pippi Longstocking whose creator, Astrid Lindgren, maintained that a happy childhood was a prerequisite for creating a better world.

Looking back, one is astonished at the difference in lifestyles of the older generations: in the big cities, it is hard to avoid running into a special race of Swedish grandes dames wearing startling hats as statements of some kind or another. It’s not that long ago that some of them could be seen drunk in the streets.

Looking ahead, one sees less and less evidence of a generation gap. Parent/child relationships are close, particularly in younger middle-class families. Parents are very even-handed in their treatment of children, allowing them the right to their own opinions and preferences. They participate with them actively in developing their sense of curiosity and discovery. Incidentally, it comes as a surprise to many foreigners to learn that Sweden now has one of the highest reproduction rates in Europe, twice that of Italy or Spain.

By contrast, and contrary to what many foreigners might expect, old and handicapped people are encouraged - and prefer - to live on their own. Yet the percentage of the population active in voluntary work is higher than in any other European nation.

As with the Austrians, there is an element of formalism in Swedish behaviour, even if informality is the flavour of the culture today (the Swedes used to be even more formal and reserved). But whereas with the Austrians, formalism tends to concentrate on the use of titles and similar obeisances, with the Swedes it emerges in social rather than professional encounters.

It is most evident in the speech [tack-talet] offered to the hostess by the guest of honour at a perfectly humdrum dinner and, even more, in the habit of saying ‘tack för senast’ [‘thanks for the last time’] when being invited for the second (or third) time round. Maybe this reflects surprise at being invited for the second (or third) time round.

The polite form of address, ni (the equivalent of Sie in German), was abandoned by most people in the 60s for du, but is now making something of a comeback. Egalitarianism has its limits!

Like all European cultures, the Swedish culture harbours internal contradictions. “I have never met a people so prone to self-criticism, and yet so nationalistic as the Swedes”, says an Englishwoman married to a Swede (maybe she should have said ‘conscious of their otherness’ rather than ‘nationalistic’).

“The Swedes are very self-focussed”, says a Dane. “They have a highly developed culture and they think highly of it. This tends to make them hypercritical towards other cultures. If you find someone complaining about the bill in an international business hotel, as likely as not it’s a Swede.” So they’re both self-critical and hypercritical about others, all at the same time? Indeed they are.

Another contradiction is the Swedish sense of democracy cohabiting with the demon of jealousy, den kungliga svenska avundsjukan or 'royal Swedish sickness' as it is known. Jealousy, it has to be said though, is most evident in small-town and rural life - as it is, for example, in Norway and Denmark (prompting Axel Sandemose's 'Law of Jante', which insists that no one should consider himself better than anyone else), as well as in the Netherlands and even in Spain (el vicio español).

An inevitable feature of such a highly structured society is a killjoy element which has to be viewed in context. One is surrounded by strictures like "no strong beer before 12" and "no smoking after 2". Swedes are not averse to finding ways around such Lutheran hangups, for example by taking to Baltic steamers and drinking and smoking themselves silly. Accession to the European Union affords some relief: the Systembolaget drinks stores no longer have an absolute monopoly on Swedish soil. Many harrowing tales are told about standing in queue - with a ticket of course! - on a Friday evening to stock up for a boozy weekend.

The Swedes - with some notable exceptions like ice-hockey hooligans and some of the more bucolic members of the tribe - are naturally reticent in establishing relationships. They tend to husband their friendships, keeping intimacy to a narrow circle of family and close friends. No one, least of all Swedes, will deny that alcohol can help ease the process of socialising, but that would be an oversimplication of their occasionally overwheening fondness for the demon drink.

As in most other countries of the so-called 'Slav-Akvavit Belt', there is a ritual attached to the business of drinking. In their case, a tradition of drinking songs evolved over the course of the 19th century, encouraged by the emergence of student guilds and male voice choirs. Lutheran inhibitions were progressively sublimated as the repertoire of lively, yet often self-conscious, songs and ditties grew ever larger.

A Swedish doctor specialising in the treatment of alcoholism says that "the Swedes do not have an alcohol problem as much as they have a problematic relationship to alcohol. When they drink, they do so chiefly to get drunk."

Professor Daun goes further: "It has been thought that alcoholism in Sweden serves the theoretically interesting function of legitimising behaviour which would otherwise be considered culturally unacceptable - that is, the type of behaviour which goes directly against what I have so far described as being typically Swedish - silence, seriousness, avoiding conflict and strong emotions, and oriented towards the rational. Even after an insignificant amount of alcohol, Swedes have the 'right' to act boisterously and joke more than usual, to become aggressive and emotional - cry and even use emotional arguments - without risking making fools of themselves."

A large country

If you were to put a pin in the southernmost tip of Sweden and swing the country around on its axis on the map of Europe, the northernmost tip would be on a parallel with Rome.

It's a large country and, with a total population of only 8.7 million spread over a surface of 450,000 km2 (175,000 square miles), there's room for regional variations. Moreover these local cultures are reinforced by the various dialects of Swedish, which vary substantially from province to province, and by a growing awareness of regional traditions.

As in so many other European countries, but for different reasons, the people in the north tend to look down on the people in the capital, whom they regard in the first instance as bureaucratic dissipators of the money they work so hard to earn.

Stockholm happens to be in the middle of the country so, in this case, the people of the industrial south also look up at the capital for much the same reasons.

The people in Stockholm tend to make jokes about the Gothenburgers - something to do with a couple called Karl and Ada, and a side-character with the unlikely name of Osborn - though the Gothenburgers have a reputation, even with the Stockholmers, for being witty and cosmopolitan but also very conservative. And everyone makes jokes about the krona-pinching people of Småland province.

In the words of a senior government official, “when you live in the north, you tend to look with suspicion at Stockholm. You equate the city with narcotics, criminality and politicians in that order” (though, as already said, Swedish politicians generally get a high rating for decency and for acting in the public interest). “People tend to think that, when Stockholmers come up-country, they either come as holidaymakers to get drunk or as businessmen to plunder natural resources.”

The street culture of Stockholm, catalysed by increasing joblessness, is something that worries many influential people. A film producer makes the point that, whereas any conflicts used to be conflicts of interest, they are now increasingly unmotivated. Violence for violence’s sake.

An article in late-1994 in Dagens Nyheter, the leading daily newspaper, featured the difference between a Friday night in Sveg, a small town in the Härjedalen region up north, and a Friday night in a central Stockholm area. The reporter paid visits to a police station and a hospital in both locations.

When the reporter arrived at the Sveg police station, the patrols were out verifying the whereabouts of the reindeer, just in case they strayed too close to the roads. Later that evening they were breathalysing snowscooter drivers: almost everyone makes their own brännvin schnapps in pot stills in the region.

A visit to the Sveg clinic produced nothing more alarming than a couple of young men with bloody heads and black eyes. When asked by a policemen if they wanted to bring charges, they retorted that “nobody ever died from a fair fight.”

By contrast the scene the following Friday at the Stockholm police station was like Chicago at the height of Prohibition, while the hospital was awash with blood from knife wounds and the like. But frightened foreigners should remember that 44 per cent of Swedes live in communities of less than 10,000 people, like Sveg.

The inhabitants of the industrial and mercantile cities of the Swedish south are, again, different from the people of Stockholm. Malmö, for example, has a Hanseatic culture. A Stockholmer speaks of the south generally as having “a Harley-Davidson and Hell’s Angels culture”, which he claims it shares with the Danes. Another type of culture is evident in the one-company towns like Karlstad and Falun.

Two distinct cultures are to be found in the regions of Småland and Dalarna. Småland is remarkable for its rugged geography and remote settlements. It was the region travellers feared most on their journey from the Continent to Stockholm.

This fierce and challenging region has generated a dogged self-sufficiency in its people. Respect for money and the virtues of cooperation at the community level, including lights in farmhouse windows, go hand-in-hand with the competitive spirit - which does not preclude subcontracting work to a local competitor. The result is, among other things, a vigorous small business culture. People speak of the Gnosjö-mopeds, the Mercedes-Benz’ of the typical factory owner of the area

and the only concession to snobbery. The boss will be there on Sunday singing in the church choir, conducted by one of his workers.

Further north lies Dalarna, the land of the little red horses and the sentimental heart of the country. The national attachment to this area and its traditions reflects the fact that some of its communities survived the effects of the 18th and 19th-century land reforms.

At the northern tip of the country lies Sweden's most distinctive culture: the Sami people, still known to many foreigners as Lapps, a word that the Sami consider derogatory. Out of a total of 50-60,000 people spread across Norway, Sweden, Finland and the Kola Peninsula of Russia, 17,000 Sami are now permanently established in Sweden. Of these, 3,000 are directly dependent on reindeer breeding and culling. Despite their distinct culture and language - a series of dialects from the Finno-Ugric family - most Sami now live like other Nordics.

One thing all Lapps seem to be united on is a dislike for the people further south. In the words of one of them, speaking of the Stockholm establishment, "they have felt free to take our resources from us but, when we want to develop them ourselves, they say: 'Savages, you don't know anything about business!'."

This dislike extends to Brussels and beyond. Almost all Samis - along with bandy supporters - voted against accession to the European Union. Swedish Samis even contemplated secession and union with Norway.

Yet another and less-known ethnic minority, a community of Finnish-speaking Swedes, lives in the Tornedalen region on the northernmost shores of the Gulf of Bothnia.

Despite these regional differences it has to be remembered that, in the final analysis, Sweden is a relatively homogeneous society when compared with the other member states of the Union. And one factor above all others unites Swedes: their innate sense of democracy.

'Humble Spirit'

A key element in the mental makeup of the Swede, as of all Nordics, is his or her affinity to nature. John Harper of the University of Sussex examines this aspect in a case history involving a Swedish company which expressed its philosophy in a slogan that translated into English as 'Humble Spirit'.

Apart from finding the whole idea hilarious, the company's British employees had difficulty in equating humility with what they saw as the high-handed, even arrogant, manner of their Swedish bosses. Shyness, hesitation in response, a tendency to avert one's gaze are common features of Swedish behaviour and tend to be incorrectly interpreted by foreigners as arrogance.

It required insight into the Swedish mind to understand the real meaning of this company's corporate philosophy. In John Harper's words, "for Sweden, the national environment is rich with beauty, with life-giving sources of energy, and is seen as good - and yet it is also perceived as dangerous and life-threatening. Harsh weather conditions, famines and poverty have been part of Sweden's 'bad' experiences of their natural environment. Swedish culture lays great stress on harmony, beauty, consensus, humbleness and simplicity. They can all be described as part of the Swedish respect for the 'spiritual' power of nature.

"How to reconcile a respectful attitude towards the natural environment, whilst at the same

time exploiting its wealth for economic gain, proves a dilemma facing all Swedish production companies. One way of resolving this apparent conflict of values is to place a high value on the notion that anything that is extracted from the natural world, eg from trees, water, plants, ore etc and exploited by man for gain must be given the best treatment, in terms of quality, safety and beauty in order to show humble respect for the spirit of nature.

"Thus, by this analysis, humble means being respectful of nature, and being in harmony with the natural order and achieving this by showing a continuous spirit of technical excellence, betterment and aesthetic beauty. 'Humble Spirit' requires company personnel to produce high-quality products, which are technically excellent and pleasing to the eye, and to carry out the business in a spirit of quiet respect and humbleness. All personnel should be 'ordinary' and not behave in ostentatious ways which might indicate a triumph over nature."

A corporate philosophy a Japanese company could be proud of!

(John Harper, CRICCOM Paper No 7, The Centre for Research into Cross-cultural Organisation and Management).

Big trees, no underbrush

Sweden has always been remarkable for the fact that, as a country with only slightly more people than Austria, it has generated a family of major manufacturing corporations which are the envy of the world: ASEA, Astra, Atlas Copco, Electrolux, Ericsson, Gambro, IKEA, Saab-Scania, Sandvik, SCA, SKF, Stora, Tetra Laval, Volvo and, as a joint venture with Swiss interests, ABB. Per capita, Sweden has the highest concentration of large corporations in Europe.

'Family' is the operative word, since many of these companies are linked with a family dynasty which is synonymous with Swedish big business, the Wallenbergs. The Wallenberg group (the family prefers to call it an 'association of companies') has, in the words of one business observer, "a mystique of success".

The Economist estimated, in 1994, that the family's interests accounted for some 40 per cent of the Swedish stock market. The paper spoke of "a concentration of economic power unequalled in Europe." Indeed the industrial scene, below the level of big business, looks rather bleak. In the words of a banker, "what you find is that Swedish manufacturing is like its forests - there are a few big fir trees, but there's no underbrush." Yet, surprisingly, what 'underbrush' there is is often as internationally minded as the 'big trees'.

An American CEO makes the point that "the basic Swedish business strategy is accretion. Yet," he adds, "Swedish business, with certain major exceptions, traditionally runs its international groups on an essentially decentralised basis. The attitude tends to be laissez-faire, subject to certain basic controls." Another American, working for Stockholm's City Hall, confirms this when he says that "Swedes generally think that the best way to profit from a business is to 'own a piece of the action'."

Despite the Wallenberg motto (see box overleaf) and in keeping with the principle of transparency applied in other areas of life, Swedish business is generally far less secretive than many of the other business communities in the European Union. Swedish financial reporting is among the best in Europe.

All the major Swedish companies (Wallenberg-owned or other) class as fully fledged multinationals, some of them with over a century's experience in international markets. Ericsson

had substantial interests in Russia before WWI, Atlas-Copco and Alfa-Laval were well established in the USA at the same time, even Rio de Janeiro's 'Christ' was built with Swedish cement.

Indeed Swedish industry and its foreign markets were founded on ample resources of raw materials - cement, steel, timber, pulp, etc. Engineering skills and high quality standards gave the extra impetus.

As world markets opened up to them, many emergent Swedish multinationals practised a policy of what might be called 'corporate colonialism', a phenomenon also evident in German industry - from which the Swedes at that time still tended to take the lead. Being cautious by nature, Swedish top management kept a tight hold on the reins: head office would send Swedes out on 3-5 years' tours of duty to oversee foreign operations.

This policy of rotating subsidiary managers, while it ensured good communications between fellow-Swedes and an innate understanding of shared objectives, did not necessarily contribute to operational continuity and was not always popular with local subsidiary employees. Even so it seems that the policy must have merits, since some Swedish companies - Electrolux, Ericsson and Tetra Laval included - are still practising it.

Today, more than half of all the people in the pay of Swedish industry are employed outside the country. Moreover, in many companies, foreign turnover contributes more than 90 per cent of total sales.

Unspoiled, accessible nature

Despite its reputation as a high-cost country, Sweden is increasing in popularity as a tourist destination although, compared with Austria, it has a long way to go. The industry earned over ECU 2 billion in foreign exchange in 1994. Ten years ago, 90 per cent of Swedish winter sports fans went to the Alps, 10 per cent stayed at home. Today, the situation is reversed and Continentals, particularly the Danes, are starting to discover Swedish slopes.

But summer tourism offers the greatest potential, even though the Swedish summer is a short one. Next Stop Sweden, the tourist promotion organisation, identifies a number of trump cards. First comes nature: "our nature is very unspoiled, yet very accessible. 'Ecotourism' comes naturally." The target audience is, by definition, upmarket and not unduly cost-conscious.

The second trump card is the welcome given by ordinary people to visitors: "Sweden is a happy country, we are a happy people." Swedes, despite the impressions of Auberon Waugh and some other foreigners, really enjoy life. An international survey found that twice as many Swedes claimed to be happy as the average for Europe. They are helped in achieving this level of contentment by their strong family and community relationships, and by their traditions.

The third card is the not insignificant question these days of personal safety and convenience. Sweden features a low crime rate, an excellent health service and a warm and imaginative reception for families with children. Cuisine is simple and tasty.

Sweden does not have the same symbiotic relationship between tourism and agriculture as Austria. With progressive rationalisation, both through the country's history and since 1991, the farming industry has become increasingly concentrated. Moreover only eight per cent of Swedish land is arable, 52 per cent is forest and the rest is urban, mountain or marshland. Today, less than two per cent of the working population is engaged in agriculture, including forestry.

Of the 90,000 farm units left in this huge country, two-thirds are still managed and worked by

part-time farmers. Most of these grow cereals or keep sheep. These part-time farmers generally find alternative employment in industry, with 'mechanical workshops' [mekaniska verkstäderna] and other manufacturing operations in most towns of any size. Of the full-time farms, two-thirds are engaged in dairy farming with an average of 25 cows.

The average Swedish farm has 30 hectares of arable land and some 50 hectares of forest. There are only 4,000 estates of more than 100 hectares, of which 1,000 in the southernmost province of Skåne, the rest mainly in the Lake Mälaren area.

Consensus and compromise

As with Swedish society, the leitmotiv of Swedish industry is the principle of consensus. What many foreigners would perceive as an exaggerated process of consultation and dialogue is used to reach mutually acceptable business decisions. This does not mean there is no room for dissent. After all, as a Swedish businessman says, "if everyone thought like the boss, there wouldn't be much thinking..."

A worthy principle, consensus is not always evident in practice. One of Sweden's top business journalists considers that the institution of the two-tier board system, with blue-collar representatives on the supervisory board, is essentially "window dressing". He insists however that co-determination is more evolved than in other European countries. Moreover compromise is in no sense regarded as a sign of weakness in Swedish eyes.

A Swedish management expert asserts that, whatever the appearances, many of the most important decisions are still made "up in the clouds" at boardroom level, before the consensus process starts. He also says that people running foreign subsidiaries often complain to him about the difficulties of getting through to Swedish top management. "There's an Old Boys' Network and, if you're out, you're out!"

The same person comments that, when decisions are taken by a group, there can be a mutual conspiracy to avoid identifying anybody in particular with the decision, in case something goes wrong. "You don't openly commit yourself, you leave yourself room to deny your responsibility, you make sure you have some alibis." Opinions are more suggestive than decisive.

But it is also part of the conspiracy that, if something does indeed go wrong, the 'passengers' avoid pointing fingers at the luckless individual who is perceived as the 'driver'. And there is rarely a postmortem. In the words of a Swedish businessman who has close contacts with France: "If something goes wrong, Swedes will immediately form a group to find a solution. The French will find a scapegoat."

This may sound aberrant to people steeped in either Anglo-Saxon or autocratic (eg French) management styles, but it somehow fits the Swedish psyche. In her book 'Swedes as Others see Them', Jean Phillips-Martinsson speaks about "the lack of a spirit of adventure, the fear to take risks, over-cautiousness and delay in taking decisions and meeting delivery deadlines..."

Many people comment that Swedish managers prefer to stick to proven methods rather than take chances. "They don't make decisions fast", comments the American CEO, "they're simply not natural gamblers. Sometimes they also factor social issues into their reasoning." The business journalist referred to earlier also makes the point that managers of Swedish foreign subsidiaries, who expect quick and effective head office decisions, rarely get them.

As cautious people, the Swedes show a natural reluctance to invite risk unless it is essential

to the proper running of a business, as in the case of long-term capital investments in the engineering industry. In this respect, Swedes stand on a scale close to the Germans and mid-point between the Americans on the one hand and the Japanese on the other.

Both stock market and blue-collar union attitudes favour the principle of long-term industrial growth. While these attitudes are reflected in a conciliatory mood towards big corporations, they unfortunately mean a lack of support for the young entrepreneur starting his own business. Evoking the image offered by the banker, in the absence of any significant venture capital initiatives, little is being done to create an industrial "underbrush".

Even so, Sweden's management schools are generating a growing reserve of young talent - in particular Stockholm's Handelshögskolan (sponsored by the Wallenbergs), Gothenburg University, Uppsala University, the Jönköping International Business School and the Swedish Institute of Management (IFL). The Handelshögskolan is the breeding ground for the Old Boys' Network mentioned earlier.

Much of this young talent is already climbing the corporate ladder, with the traditional engineers making way for economists and marketing specialists. At the time of writing Leif Johansson, the CEO of Electrolux, is in his late-30s and the company's chief comptroller is only 32.

It could be that a combination of youthfulness and shyness create the impression, in the words of a close observer, that "Swedish managers tend to be a bit socially and intellectually immature." Percy Barnevik of ABB is another example of a relative youngster made good - though as the same person, showing typically Swedish scepticism, queries, "where is the real man?"

Social skills, or lack of them, crop up frequently in conversation with foreigners. A French businessman comments bluntly that "it is very difficult to make conversation with a Swede." Small talk is indeed not a strong point. But, like the French, the Swedes tend to make a clear distinction between their professional and their private lives. Swedes find it completely natural not to socialise privately with colleagues, even if they have worked together for years.

Another Frenchman who runs a Swedish subsidiary comments that "my Swedish colleagues strike me as being very cold and matter-of-fact. I tell them my troubles and they say 'ja, ja' and seem to change the subject." In fact, they're not changing the subject. They've registered the problem, unemotionally, and have moved on to the next point on the agenda.

"Swedes are discreet people," comments the American CEO. "Much of what goes on is tacit - no wonder foreigners have difficulty in following them at times. Swedish management is level-headed to the point of being phlegmatic. But, if something goes wrong, they do tend to flap their wings."

Another French observer - the French coming from such an alien culture are sensitive to these things - comments that "there is a kind of shyness in a way, and aggressiveness in others, a kind of superiority complex in some cases, and inferiority complex in others." Many people comment on the shyness of the average Swede, often dissimulated behind a facade of courteousness but occasionally, when under stress, manifesting itself in an excessive self-assertiveness.

"The lack of a word for 'please' in the Swedish language", comments Jean Phillips-Martinsson, addressing the Swedish readers of her book, "means that you are inclined to exclude it even in English. This omission can well account for your reputation of being curt and giving orders." Elsewhere she makes the interesting observation that "in Swedish eyes, being honest means telling the truth and keeping your word. This means that [the Swedish businessman] is unlikely to give compliments as, in his eyes, it would be an exaggeration of the truth."

The experience of walking into a Stockholm bank and, as a naive foreigner, expecting service

by standing at the counter - instead of taking a ticket and watching for a number to come up - is echoed in another of Ms Phillips-Martinsson's comments: "... the interminable waiting. Waiting to be served in the shops, in the restaurants and waiting for the bill. Not to mention the hospitals! Are these the effects of a classless society, I wondered? Those in service had an incredible knack of simply not noticing my existence, or of being much too busy chatting with one another to care."

Opinions differ on Swedish negotiating skills. One observer says that "the Swedes are very good at negotiating. They do their research, and they expect written agreements." Another says "they are not easygoing but have a stiff, hard, businesswise attitude."

Jean Phillips-Martinsson maintains, on the one hand, that the Swede "is totally inflexible in negotiations. He doesn't negotiate at all. He says 'let's discuss my proposal', but has no intention of discussing anything, his mind is made up." Yet, she insists, they can be very patient in negotiations, using silence to "digest your questions, formulate their reply and to motivate their next move..." The pretence of not properly understanding your English can be a useful technique. Silent pauses are more common in negotiations with Swedes than with Germans.

Certainly the Swedes bargain hard but almost always correctly. Like other Nordics and the British, they prefer to avoid adversarial business relationships. Quite often, foreigners are surprised to discover that the Swedish side has already agreed with what they are proposing, but hasn't bothered to say so explicitly...

Foreigners frequently comment on the apparent reluctance of Swedish managers to reply to letters. "Strange bods, the Swedes", says a British businessman: "Been dealing with them for years but they never keep in touch once a sale has been made." The truth is that, being busy and a long way off, they prefer to communicate electronically if at all. In the words of one of them, "a letter is something that is outdated." Fax and E-mail may also suit their temperament as they're less personal.

Let us leave the last words on the subject to Ms Phillips-Martinsson, who conducted an opinion poll among 171 foreign businessmen to discover how the Swedish businessman is rated in the world. "In brief", she concluded, "the Swedish businessman was regarded as inflexible in his negotiations and behaviour - unwilling to discuss and adjust, slow to make decisions, avoids conflict, over-cautious, and a stickler for punctuality. Difficult to get to know, hard to work with and for, stiff, no fun, dull and conceited."

But they're not like that really. They just have an image problem!

'Esse Non Vidare'

The Wallenbergs, whose 'associated companies' are reputed to account for 40 per cent of the value of the Stockholm Stock Exchange, are discreet to say the least. The family's motto reads 'Esse Non Vidare' ['To Be, Not To Be Seen'].

Capitalism à la Wallenberg has been able to cohabit comfortably with successive Social Democrat governments. In the words of a leading business journalist, the latter have "found it relatively easy to deal with highly concentrated and institutionalised big business." Recent changes in the laws on voting rights have to some extent attenuated these massive concentrations of power.

The Wallenberg group counts 11 of Sweden's top 15 exporters. It has invested heavily abroad in recent years and, through various channels including its Investor holding company, now rates as

the second largest industrial group in Italy, without most Italians being even aware of the fact.

"The Wallenberg dominance is very dangerous because nothing develops without competition", said a senior Swedish businessman in late-1994 to the Financial Times. "When things get too intertwined, it's like a group of children playing - nobody sticks their neck out except one or two leaders. That will not lead to creative solutions which Sweden needs badly at the moment." This highlights the purported Swedish aversion to risktaking.

Richard Hill 1995

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rightly, as a social laboratory but then go on, wrongly, to equate this with permissiveness and lax morals. Even if the tales of au pair girls are true, Swedish sexuality seems pretty tame by today's standards, when you compare this Lutheran people with a Catholic country like Spain. In the words of the country's leading sociologist, Professor Åke Daun, "sexuality has been 'dedramatised', emptied of its earlier cultural and emotional content." Permissiveness reflects the emphasis placed on rationality.

Then there are some of us who, unduly influenced at an impressionable age by Ingmar Bergman's films, are still intrigued by what we see as a cultural dichotomy: a genteel veneer of exquisite taste and gracious living superimposed on a bucolic and colourful culture epitomised in the little red horses of Dalarna.

All of these misconceptions have their roots in reality, yet they are still misconceptions. Sweden is indeed a country that generally keeps out of trouble but it has been doing so instinctively, with the notable exception of the Thirty Years' and the Great Northern wars, since the age of the Vikings.