

Margot Wallström: European public sphere via European Community Colleges!

Finally, we seem to have reached the main aim of the Association for Community Colleges (ACC). We have brought the idea of developing a European public sphere by the help of European Community Colleges to one high peak of EU-power. Margot Wallström, vice-president of the EU-Commission, supports our ideas!

In the last weeks Scandinavian papers have referred to Mrs Wallströms plans to develop democracy through European citizens meetings of many kinds. The major plan, launched as Plan D, seem to mirror the "Action 6", the "Act on European Community Colleges", and whatever we have been campaigning for since 1999. It is meant to allow European citizens to meet and discuss issues of common interest and thereby develop the much demanded European public sphere. As an example Mrs Wallström has been quoted for saying that: "EU should and could support the building up of a pearl-chain of forums leading through Europe - a sort of Peoples Universities or Folk High Schools" (translated from Swedish - Svenska Dagbladet June 4th). This and many other examples quoted are almost identical with our texts. There is no doubt authors of Wallströms releases have taken our ideas and texts into consideration.

The suggestion of Margot Wallström, speaking about political process, is to include in the planned Whitepaper on EU-Communication a programme for EU's democratic challenges (Svenska Dagbladet June 4th). It still remains to be decided upon, of course, but no matter the result, our agenda is at highest level and can in worse case only be postponed! The very European situation backs it up in itself.

Danish politicians and NGO's that learned about the format of European Community Colleges (Folk High Schools dedicated to the European cause) during the Youth 2002 project are now heavily supporting the idea. Even those who were against considering the boarding school format an integrated part in the Youth 2002-project seem to have been using their contacts in Brussels to promote the idea. In some cases, politicians in Denmark even profile themselves on the idea. We remain in the hope that it will develop into a competition among Danish and Nordic politicians, who supports the ideas the most? It is the center-left wing politicians that now profile themselves on the idea, but bearing in mind that liberal and social-liberal politicians have been among the early supporters, and bearing in mind, that many of our members are as well active in liberal and social-liberal parties throughout Europe, there is a hope, that a competition could emerge not only in the Nordic countries - but throughout Europe. There is hope that everybody would support the idea in principle.

Moreover, the discussion about making it real should and could be about the top-down or the bottom-up approach to European dialogue as eventually framed within the Plan D. Who decides the contents of what citizens of Europe should debate among each others with EU support? Should this decision be centralised or decentralised? An article in Danish daily Berlingske Tidende (June 4th) makes the coming up discussion clear: Danish politician Sten Gade is quoted for an idea that again resembles whatever we have been working for: "There is a need for citizens [European citizens, ed] to be able to involve themselves and each others bottom-up. There is a need to contribute to the development

of a European public sphere". However, the headline of this article is: "Folk High Schools should sell the EU-idea", and make it seem like a top-down project. The word "sell" is a complete misunderstanding of Sten Gades point of view, supposing Sten Gade is in line with ACC. Moreover, the ACC still believes the European public sphere we should work for is a European public sphere, not necessarily limited to nowadays EU. These debates remain to be taken. We do hope the Nordic free school movements and the civil society of same tradition are going to take part in these debates.

However, no reason to keep the strategy of ONLY competing among Danish politicians and opinionmakers. It has, anyway, taken 6 (six) years to wake up this bottom-up-democracy-heritage of the Nordic countries to be seen in an EU/European context. We shouldn't forget, that the wake-up call came from all you people (members), who stubbornly have supported the ideas and who stubbornly have been working voluntarily (board and practioners). So, lets ALSO keep the initiative on European hands, it will serve the idea!

For the ACC as an organisation this new situation leaves us with a positive identity-challenge. Seemingly there is no longer need to prove the validity of our ideas. The proof (the beginning of a pearl-chain) has been delivered and taken into consideration. We have to ask ourselves the question, if there is still a need for young volunteers to work their brains out for this idea? Sure, there is a need for more pearls in the chain, but is this our role now? This will be an obvious discussion at the next General Assembly of the ACC. The call is on its way to the members. It will take place in Brussels on September 24th.

So far, those who delivered the pearl-chain of proofs; Campaigning for Community Colleges, Final Editorial Conference, Transylvania Community College 2001, Schools for Europe Community College I, Experimental Community College, Youth2002, European Charter Community College, Schools for Europe Community College II, Transylvania Community College 2003, Europe of Rights Community College I, Bridging Community Colleges I, Challenges of Enlargement Community College, Rural Development Community College, Europe of Rights Community College II and organisers of Bridging Community Colleges II next week + the programmes for this year. **YOU HAVE REALLY MADE A DIFFERENCE! YOU MADE IT POSSIBLE!** This would count as well for the founders who saw the potential of the transnational element of the so-called minority courses at Højskolen Østersøen in 1997 and 1998.