SWEDISH SCIENCE

Political Spat Threatens Funding for Basic Research

LUND, SWEDEN—Swedish scientists are watching tensely as a political squabble threatens to end decades of generous government support for basic research. The row is over a group of independent research foundations set up by the previous conservative government with public money. The Social Democrats, voted back into office last September, are considering savage cuts in government basic research funds to offset the money being spent by the foundations—a move that researchers fear could blunt Sweden's scientific edge for good. "Once you break the backbone of your research network, it's not that easy to rebuild," says physicist Ingolf Lindau of Lund University, director of the MAX-Lab national accelerator laboratory.

For a country of only 8.8 million people, Sweden does a considerable amount of big-league research, in areas such as immunology, cardiovascular research, microbiology, biochemistry, surface science, and condensed matter physics. Sweden maintains its high-quality science by spending more than 3% of its national income—about $6 billion—on research and development. Per capita, that is more than any country except the United States and France, according to 1991 figures from the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development. This largesse has made life pretty easy for Sweden's basic researchers, who generally receive adequate support from government research councils to do whatever interests them without being obliged to account for every penny—or even to use their grants for the projects described in their applications.

But that carefree state—the envy of scientists in other countries—is in jeopardy. The problem is a political tussle over $2.6 billion that Swedish corporations paid into a fund established by the socialist government in the early 1980s to help employees buy out their companies. When the conservatives took office in 1991, one of their campaign promises was to abolish this "Wage Earner Fund." After much debate and despite strong Socialist opposition, they dissolved the fund in 1993.

The conservatives used the capital to establish several foundations that will distribute $200 million worth of grants each year for strategic research to help Swedish industry to compete internationally. The foundations were made independent of government control so that their funding decisions would not be influenced by politics, says Per Unckel, who played a key role in their creation as minister of education in the conservative government (*Science*, 12 March 1993, p. 1536).

But this boon for applied scientists may have dire consequences for their colleagues in basic research. After the Social Democrats won last September's election, Carl Tham, the new education minister, began a personal crusade to either dissolve the research foundations or bring them under government control. Unckel says the conservatives worked hard to make them legally watertight, and so far, Tham has been unable to touch them. And in January, the foundations turned down Tham's formal request for a government say in their affairs.

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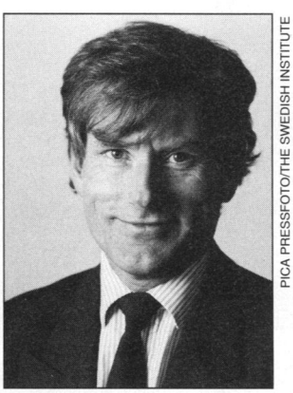

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At loggerheads. Education minister Carl Tham *(right)* and his predecessor, Per Unckel.

Although he can't control the foundations, Tham does have power over his own department's budget. "If we can't dissolve these foundations, then we have to take them into account in our planning," he told *Science*. "That money was stolen from the public purse. We can't afford such an enormous expansion of research funding in the present economic environment." To compensate for the extra money flowing into research from the foundations, Tham wants to cut government research council funding by 50%, or more than $100 million, in 1997. He first broached the threat in a pre-Christmas letter to the foundations and is expected to confirm it in an official proposal to parliament on 27 April.

Tham asked the foundations to work together with the research councils to make up for any cuts in government funding. They turned him down, because their charters specify the types of projects they can support, and they don't have the flexibility to simply jump into the breach even if they wanted to.

All government departments are under pressure to cut their budgets, so Tham can easily justify his actions on strictly fiscal grounds. The national debt stands at $178 billion, and government expenditure outstripped revenue by almost 50% in December's figures. But Unckel says targeting the government's basic research investment could force Sweden's most gifted scientists to take better offers in other countries. "Tham is a fool," he says. "He can hurt the system badly if he wants to. Small countries with high ambitions can't afford to make these kinds of cuts."

Basic researchers are alarmed that Tham is equating funds from the foundations with basic science support from the government research councils. "I'm surprised that our politicians aren't more aware of the difference between research and development," says Gunnar Öquist, head of the research council for the natural sciences. "If all the money shifts to targeted research, the individual scientist with a bright idea is going to find it hard to get funding."

Some Swedish researchers might be able to turn to another source: the European Union (EU). Sweden officially joined the EU on 1 January and now contributes $80 million a year to its science effort. The government expects Sweden's scientists to win back at least that amount in collaborative grants. But first they have to develop their grantsmanship skills. Many Swedes are daunted by the Byzantine application process, or cannot find their areas of interest among those targeted for EU funding, which is also heavily skewed toward strategic research. Torkel Wadström, a medical microbiologist at Lund University, has found half a dozen EU programs that could conceivably fund his research on how bacteria and viruses adhere to cells. But he is spending weeks on grant applications. "Things used to be easy," he says. "You sent in a grant once a year to [one of the research councils]. It took a week to write."

Basic researchers' best hope is that parliament will throw out Tham's plan. The conservatives will oppose it, and academics in Tham's own party are not likely to be supportive. And because the Social Democrats hold only 46% of the seats, Tham will have to muster support from smaller parties to get the simple majority needed to pass the measure. The vote is due in mid-May, and at least until then, coffee-room chat in Swedish labs is as likely to turn to politics as to science.

–Elizabeth Gardner

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