



Source: Uncle, 2 November 2004, Wikimedia Commons, photographer Magnus Fröderberg, Norden.org

UNCKEL, Per Carl Gustav

Swedish Conservative politician and eighth Secretary-General of the Nordic Council of Ministers 2003-2006

By **Tobias Etzold** · Version 13 April 2012

Was born 24 February 1948 in Finspång, Östergötland, and passed away 20 September 2011 in Stockholm, Sweden. He was the son of Herman Unckel, professor of technology, and Willy Vinell, senior post office clerk. On 16 June 1978 he married Christina Maria Lagerkvist, secretary. They had two sons.

Biography

Unckel's father was an authority on metal processing, who worked for the Swedish firm Metallverk as a researcher specializing in aluminium. Unckel went to Bergska grammar school and took his exams in 1968 after one year as an exchange student in the United States. He studied law at Uppsala University between 1968 and 1971, without finalizing his exams. During most of his professional career in Sweden he was a party politician. In 1971 he became chairman of the youth organization of the conservative Moderate Party (*Moderaterna*). In 1976 he was elected into the Swedish Parliament (*Riksdag*) for the first time and acted as the party's spokesman on energy policy (1978-1982) and education policy (1982-1986). Between 1986 and 1991 he worked as the party's secretary. From 1991 until 1994 he was Minister for Education in the conservative government of Carl Bildt, responsible for implementing reforms in the Swedish educational system he had promoted himself. These reforms, which revolutionized the system, meant that students could choose among local schools. When the

Swedish social-democratic party regained power in 1994 Unckel was re-elected into the Parliament, where he remained until 2002. Between 1994 and 1998 he was the Moderate Party's spokesman on labour policy and from 1997 until 2001 he was chairman of the campaign organization 'Sweden in Europe' that supported the euro. He belonged to the party's leadership as chairman of the parliamentary committee on the constitution (1998-2002), as the party's spokesman on constitutional affairs, and as leader of its parliamentary group (1999-2002). As chairman of the committee on the constitution he was involved in establishing an independent national audit office.

On 1 January 2003 Unckel became Secretary-General of the Nordic Council of Ministers (NCM). This organization was established in 1971 after a previous attempt at economic cooperation failed. The permanent Secretariat with a hundred staff members is based in Copenhagen, Denmark. The governments appoint the Secretary-General for a term of four years, with the option of extension for another two years. Unckel did not have a background in the organization, but had previously gathered some experience in Nordic cooperation in the fields of development aid and education. He wished to leave national politics and make room for younger politicians after his party's defeat in the national elections of September 2002 and the related severe criticism of the party's leadership. It was Sweden's turn to propose a national for the post of Secretary-General and the new social-democratic government supported Unckel's candidacy because of his long political experience. Unckel regarded being a newcomer in the organization as an advantage that gave him the opportunity to act impartially in a time when the organization was going through a critical phase. After the fundamental changes in its external environment in the 1990s (the end of the Cold War and the Soviet Union; regained independence of the Baltic states; and the European Union [EU] accession of Sweden and Finland), the NCM, as well as Nordic cooperation in general, had implemented various changes. The Nordic Council had introduced a three-pillar structure (Norden, adjacent areas [mainly the Baltic states], and Europe), which also affected the NCM. The NCM improved political coordination of joint actions by involving the prime ministers more closely and introducing a rotating Presidency. Its 1997 strategy project included improvements in the allocation of responsibilities and competences, further development of effective steering of agreements and the budget, and a reorganization of the Secretariat. The role of Secretary-General remained unchanged. Despite these efforts, the NCM had not managed to redefine its position within the regional system of cooperation. Aware of the challenge of the 2004 EU enlargement with ten new member states, Unckel took an active and open stance towards changes, attempting to contribute to the renewal of Nordic cooperation by being forward-looking and change-oriented. The NCM staff described him as a reformer (Etzold 2010: 259).

Unckel extended his view towards Brussels and the Baltic states. With his European approach to Nordic cooperation, he actively contributed to its internationalization and modernization. Under his leadership the Arctic and the Baltic Sea region moved into the focus of Nordic cooperation. Uffe Elleman-Jensen, the former Danish Foreign Minister and founder of the networking organization Baltic Development Forum, described him as a true friend of the Baltic Sea region who showed strong engagement in Baltic Sea cooperation. The reforms of the organizational and administrative structures in 2005, particularly the reduction of the number of Ministerial Council bodies from 18 to ten, were initiated and driven by the then Danish Presidency. Nonetheless, the Secretary-General and the Secretariat generally backed the reform process, as Unckel understood that change was possible only if the Secretariat's plans did not contradict those of the governments. Unckel described his role as follows: while the governments had to define the NCM's role within the European context, the Secretary-General had considerable room for manoeuvre within this framework if willing to work for it. He managed to act as a driving force by making frequent use of the Secretary-General's right of initiative. His credo was that successful Nordic cooperation required a strong Secretary-General and effective cooperation between the Secretariat and the rotating Presidency. In order to be effective both should have the same agenda and cooperate closely, rather than fight each other. However, some national civil servants perceived the Secretariat as too powerful, acting without full authorization by the Presidency when making international contacts, issuing proposals or even when implementing them. Afterwards Unckel was critical of the scope of the reforms and their actual

implementation. In spite of his previous support he found that they were not based on a thorough analysis of the capabilities of Nordic cooperation, did not go far enough, and had limited effectiveness (Ottosson 2008: 20). That Unckel seemed to want more than the governments implied a certain potential for conflict, because traditionally the Nordic countries' governments and parliaments are critical of too much simultaneous change in Nordic cooperation.

Nonetheless, Unckel's work as Secretary-General was highly valued. His successor, Halldor Asgrimsson, called him 'an energetic person who showed that entrepreneurship, education and research were crucial for the Nordic countries' and confirmed that Unckel 'took the Nordic Council of Ministers into the global world and, even after his time at the Council of Ministers, showed a strong commitment to Nordic co-operation' (NCM 2011). The Finnish Minister for Nordic Cooperation, Alexander Stubb, called him an 'innovative and proactive Head of the Secretariat in Copenhagen', who gave it a new profile. During his time co-operation in the Council of Ministers 'was reformed and extended to include much more of the entire Baltic Region and Belarus' (NCM 2011). Unckel played a leading role in promoting the creation of the European Humanities University (EHU) in Vilnius, Lithuania (established in 2007). For Teppo Heiskanen, former trust fund manager of this Belorussian university in exile, Unckel was 'the kind of person you would want to be in charge when things get really difficult' (EHU Trust Fund 2011). Unckel's term as Secretary-General ended on 31 December 2006. After the Moderate Party's election victory of September 2006, Prime Minister Fredrik Reinfeldt appointed Unckel Governor of Stockholm County. After four years of commuting between Copenhagen and Stockholm, where his family had remained, Unckel was happy to move back to Sweden (Nilsson 2006). He remained committed to Nordic cooperation and the Baltic Sea in his new job and contributed to establishing the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea region. He remained in this position until his death after a short illness in September 2011.

Publications

- Framtid i Frihet [Future in Freedom], Stockholm 1984
- Kunskap som egen investering [Knowledge as a Personal Investment], Stockholm 1998
- Ingen åt sitt öde: kunskapsreform för en bättre framtid [No One Left Behind: Educational Reform for a Better Future], Stockholm 2002
- (Ed.) Cross Border Cooperation in the Nordic Countries, Copenhagen 2003

Literature

- Nordisk Ministerråd, Verksamhetsberättelsen 1997
- M. Crofts, 'Unckel tackar för sig' in Dagens Nyheter (DN.se), 18 September 2002, www.dn.se/nyheter/politik/unckel-tackar-for-sig
- 'Unckel beredd ta Nordenjobb' in Dagens Nyheter (DN.se), 30 October 2002, www.dn.se/nyheter/politik/unckel-beredd-ta-nordenjobb
- S.-Å. Olofsson, 'Samarbetet som aldrig riktigt ville sig' in Helsingborgs Dagblad online, 27 December 2003, http://hd.se/ledare/2003/12/27/samarbetet_som_aldrig_riktigt_sig
- S. Nilsson, 'Per Unckel ny länshövding i Stockholm' in SvD Nyheter, 27 October 2006, www.svd.se/nyheter/inrikes/per-unckel-ny-landshovding-i-stockholm_365300.svd
- S. Ottosson, Nordiska ministerrådet - fortsättning på reformen, Rapport 2008-12-02, Regeringskansliet Utrikesdepartementet, www.norden.org/da/publikationer/publikationer/2008-428/at_download/publicationfile

- T. Etzold, Live and Let Die: Adaptability and Endurance of Regional Organisations in Northern Europe, unpublished Doctoral Thesis, Manchester Metropolitan University 2010
- Baltic Development Forum, In Memory of Per Unckel, 2011, www.bdforum.org/in-memory-of-per-unckel
- EHU, In memoriam: Per Carl Gustav Unckel, 2011, <http://en.ehu.lt/news/news/0020388/>
- EHU Trust Fund, News: Per Unckel Remembered for His Tireless Efforts for EHU, 2011, www.ehustrustfund.org/main/news?id=18674
- Länsstyrelsen i Stockholms Län, Landshövding Per Unckel avliden, 2011, www.lansstyrelsen.se/stockholm/Sv/nyheter/2011/Pages/landshovding-per-unckel-avliden.aspx
- NCM, Per Unckel has died, 2011, www.norden.org/en/news-and-events/news/per-unckel-has-died
- L. Röstlund, 'Per Unckel död' in Aftonbladet online, 21 September 2011, www.aftonbladet.se/nyheter/%20article13657304.ab

(all websites accessed on 20 February 2012)

How to cite

Tobias Etzold, 'Unckel, Per Carl Gustav' in *IO BIO, Biographical Dictionary of Secretaries-General of International Organizations*, edited by Bob Reinalda, Kent J. Kille and Jaci L. Eisenberg.

<https://sandbox.zenodo.org/records/506609> (sandbox preview)

Text © the author(s) and IO BIO, licensed under [CC BY-NC-ND 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/). The portrait is excluded and remains under the rights of its credited source. We have tried to trace the rights holder to obtain permission for the use of the portrait, but contact us in case we have failed.