

Anna Lindh: Sweden's pro-Europe voice on the world stage (1957 – 2003)



Active in politics from a young age, Ylva Anna Maria Lindh was one of the most influential figures in modern Swedish politics.

Born in 1957, Lindh studied law at Uppsala University before winning a seat in parliament in 1982. Her first cabinet post came 12 years later as minister for the environment. She later achieved international recognition as Sweden's outspoken and committed foreign minister.

Staunchly pro-Europe, Lindh rose to wider prominence during Sweden's presidency of the European Union in 2001 when her diplomacy help to avert war in the then former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. She led the Swedish government's 'Yes' campaign in the referendum to join the euro in 2003, but was murdered just days before the vote took place.

Early life

Ylva Anna Maria Lindh, the daughter of an artist and a teacher, was born on 19 June 1957 in Enskede, a suburb of Stockholm. Her life in politics began when she joined the Social Democratic Youth at the age of 12 before becoming spokesperson for its local chapter at 13.

She remained active in politics throughout her time at Uppsala University where she studied law. After graduating and working for six months at a district court, Anna won her first seat in parliament for the Social Democrats in 1982 and became the first female chair of the Swedish Social Democratic Youth in 1984.

After serving as a city councillor for culture in Stockholm from 1991 to 1994, Lindh was appointed minister for the environment. It was in this post that she began making her name not only in national politics but also on the world stage. She was a fearless campaigner and took many international companies to task over their environmental records.

On the world stage

A rising star in Swedish politics, Lindh was appointed foreign minister in 1998 in Prime Minister Goran Persson's cabinet. The media nicknamed her "Persson's crown princess" as it was assumed that the Swedish leader was grooming her to be his successor as both head of the party and eventually the country.

Anna had a reputation as a straight talker and an outspoken critic of other countries, including some of Sweden's allies, specifically when it came to human rights. In Moscow, she severely criticised Russian actions in Chechnya; she was a forthright supporter of the two-state solution in the Middle East and a fierce opponent of then Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's policy towards the Palestinians.

She once famously described President George W. Bush as a 'lone ranger' for going to war with Iraq, opposing the war on the grounds that the United Nations had not sanctioned it. She also

castigated the United States while in Washington over the treatment of prisoners at Guantanamo Bay.

‘A person can be killed, but ideas cannot’

From Anna Lindh's eulogy for Olof Palme at his funeral, 15 March 1986

Campaigning for the euro

It was the issue of Europe that really fired Lindh's political passion. She played a major role in developing Sweden's presence in the European Union as she chaired meetings of foreign ministers during the Swedish presidency of the EU in 2001. When conflict was looming in 2001 in the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (now North Macedonia) Anna Lindh, as Europe's chief envoy, was instrumental in bringing together the strands of the EU's usually disparate foreign policy in a harmonised action that helped avoid war.

Lindh remained staunchly pro-European throughout her career, while serving a country that has sometimes been sceptical of the EU. She was a leading campaign figure in Sweden's

referendum in September 2003 on adoption of the euro. Lindh worked the campaign trail almost fulltime, delivering impassioned speeches, and even persuaded her Greek and German counterparts, George Papandreou and Joschka Fischer, to come to Sweden to add their voices to the pro-euro campaign.

Tragic death

Tragically, she was attacked on 10 September 2003 by a knife-wielding assailant while shopping in a central Stockholm department store, the day before she was due to take part in a televised debate on the referendum, and three days before the referendum took place. She died the next day.

In the end, Sweden rejected the euro with 55.9% voting against adopting the single currency and 42.0% voting in favour.

Anna Lindh's legacy lives on through the initiatives and programmes established in her honour. These include the Anna Lindh Euro-Mediterranean Foundation for the Dialogue Between Cultures, a network of civil society organisations dedicated to promoting intercultural dialogue in the Mediterranean region. The Anna Lindh Prize is awarded each year to a person or institution with 'the courage to fight indifference, prejudice, oppression and injustices in order to promote a good life for all people in an environment marked by respect for human rights'. Previous recipients include US politician and diplomat Madeleine Albright, and Eren Keskin, the Turkish human rights lawyer working on LGBT+ issues, and women's and refugee rights.