

## **PREPARED REMARKS OF PER JOHANSSON**

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I am very proud to receive the John P. McGovern Award here today. I am particularly happy that my long-term affection for the United States and my anti-drug work has come together like this. I was an exchange student in Mancelona, Michigan 40 years ago and since then it's always been a great pleasure for me to return to America. I am especially happy that my two best friends from my Michigan days, Mark Johnson and Dan Edson, are here tonight.

I became involved in drug-prevention in the late 1970s. For many years I was a volunteer activist but for over 15 years now it has been my profession. Early on this was an activity in Sweden only. Gradually my work has become more international. I've been involved in projects in former Soviet Union countries and also because Sweden since 1995 has been a member of the EU, I've had many more contacts within Europe. A few years ago back I was involved in founding the World Federation Against Drugs, WFAD, as it is called, is a growing global network for non government organizations (NGOs) that advocate for a balanced and restrictive drug policy.

In the mid-70s as a young man I worked at a mental hospital and met drug addicts there. I was intrigued and confused. Why do people do this to themselves when it is obvious that they suffer so badly from it? In the media there was a heated debate going on and it just kept getting hotter. At the end of the 70s through a friend I got in touch with the RNS (National Association for a Drug-free Society) and its founder Professor Nils Bejerot. I was hooked from the start.

I had heard of Nils Bejerot already at the mental hospital where people spoke badly of him, saying he was "inhumane" and "cruel". "Not my type of guy", I thought to myself. After I quit working at the hospital I kept still following the drug policy debate in the media and so I read an article or two by Nils Bejerot. "This man knows what he's talking about", I thought to myself. "Just maybe he is my type of guy".

So in late 1979 I became active in RNS and came to know Nils Bejerot. He was truly one of a kind and I feel very fortunate to have known him. He was what I would label a true intellectual, a free thinker. He was also very funny. I'm not so sure he was a good husband and father because he devoted himself almost totally to the drug problem, as a doctor, as a scientist and as an activist. It's pretty much because of him that drug policy became my life's passion.

So what did Nils Bejerot do, besides that he was a fun person to be with? When the modern drug epidemic surfaced in Sweden around 1964 very few people, of course, had any experience of drug addiction. Nils Bejerot was one of the few. He had diagnosed the first intravenous "street addict" back in 1954 and after that had come across patients every now and then that injected drugs.

In 1965 the media got on to the drug problem and “everyone” started writing about it. The debate over drug policy started as an op-ed debate in the largest newspaper, The Express, with headlines such as: “Drug addiction a forbidden disease” and “Save the drug addict from the police”. These arguments against taking drug addicts to court caught on strongly with decision makers and were adopted as our drug policy.

So the police concentrated on smuggling and drug dealing and the prosecutors waived prosecution for possession aimed at personal use. In practice pushing drugs in small quantity became legal since the police did not bother about it. Between 1965 and 1967 a program in Stockholm made it possible for addicts to get drugs of their own choice prescribed by doctors. We had a harm reduction policy before anyone had even come up with that name for it.

In 1965 Nils Bejerot put everything he had on his desk aside and engaged himself in trying to change the direction of where our drug policy was going. Very soon he realized that although he was one of the very few in the nation that had experience and at least some theoretical knowledge he was not being heard. Seldom has the phrase “the media is the message” been more true. Nils Bejerot came to the conclusion that he could not get anywhere without a support group of some kind. So he decided to build one of his own. Together with a handful of young people from IOGT, the largest temperance organization in Sweden, he founded RN in 1969.

Nils Bejerot wrote and published many books about the drug problem. The first one, Addiction and Society written in 1968, was a counter-argument to Alfred Lindesmith’s writings. Lindesmith’s most important work was The Addict and the Law published in 1965. He was a sociologist at the University of Indiana who argued that the problem with drug addiction was the law. If drugs were legal, addiction could be treated as a disease and thus cured. Some of those behind the beta-version of harm reduction in Sweden had read Lindesmith and supported his line of thought.

One theme in all Nils Bejerot’s publications was that an effective drug policy has to concentrate on the consumer, since it is the demand from him or her that fuels the drug market. Production, smuggling, dealing, financing etc are all responses to meet the demand from the consumers. He argued that a policy concentrating heavily on the supply side of the market would be doomed to fail. A policy oriented only towards treatment would fail also since motivation to go into treatment usually comes after many years and during those years the drug user will have introduced others to drug use: school friends, workmates, sex partners and so on. The key to success would be to stop young people from being recruited to the market.

It took several years for Nils Bejerot and RNS to have an impact on the drug debate. But at the end of the 1970s there was a very important shift. Public opinion got involved in a way that it had not been involved before. Nils Bejerot had traveled around the country to give lectures to parent groups, school nurses, local police, social workers and anyone else who was interested. The voice of RNS was heard more often in the media and when the 70s turned into the 80s a different mainstream had been established.

Step by step a policy pretty much in line with Nils Bejerot’s point of view was established. The idea was that every person should be held legally responsible for their illegal drug use. So since 1980 even those who committed the smallest crimes were taken to court and sentenced, but normally with quite mild

consequences. At the same time treatment became more accessible – and popular.

The result of the new balanced and restrictive policy was tremendous. All the statistics went the right way and by the end of the 1980s the use of illicit drugs among the young was at minimum level, and even became difficult to measure in drug use surveys among teenagers. We've had some set-backs since then, but if one compares Sweden to other countries in Europe we come out very well.

Sweden is a small country of 9 million people, many of whom have immigrated there from other countries. We rely heavily on exports to countries all over the world. Small as we are, and half way to the North Pole, we still are still very dependent on what happens in the world at large. This is a situation more and more countries are moving into as a result of globalization, which is all for the best. I like globalization! It's good that we need each other, but that also means we need to take care of each other more.

Twenty years ago it was still possible to speak about the countries that produced illegal drugs and the countries that consumed them. That is not true any more. There are large problems with drug use in producing countries and large scale production in consuming countries. We must redefine the drug problem and label it as a common problem. There is no "us" and "them" anymore. There is just an "us" and we need to find ways to solve this together. This is exactly what the World Federation Against Drugs, WFAD, is all about.

WFAD aims to be a meeting place for grass-root organizations from all over the globe. These are people that want to build on the UN Conventions. As you know, there are a number of very well-funded organizations that want to weaken these UN Conventions. We have a Board of Directors with members from all six continents. We have a platform based on three of the UN conventions on drugs: including the Convention on Illegal Drugs and the Convention on the Rights of the Child. This latter Convention is very important. It is one of 8 international human rights conventions but it is the only one that mentions drugs. In article 33 it states that children have the right to be protected from illicit drug use. One of the main tasks of WFAD will be to put article 33 of CRC in the center of the international drug debate.

WFAD today has member organizations in 18 countries representing all continents, with hardly any recruiting. We have held two international meetings in Stockholm gathering around 1000 people from around 80 countries. I am very confident that we have great capacity for growth. We are in the process of planning for our third Forum which we hope to have in Mexico in 2012.

What we don't have is money. Our opponents are extremely well funded and we can't come even close to them. But we do need to come up with the financial resources to support a small office staff, finance regional work shops in various parts of the world, publish position papers, take part in the conferences of the relevant UN agencies and offices, plan for a third meeting of the World Forum Against Drugs. Etcetera, etcetera.

But more important than money are good ideas and good people. These we do have in abundance, and I am fully convinced that this fight is no different that those in the old Western movies: The good guys always win at the end!