

## October 12-16, 2009

This year marks the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the appointment of the first government ombudsman in Sweden. Since then, hundreds of ombudsmen have been appointed all over the world and have been promoting and protecting fairness for the people they serve.



*Interior of the Swedish parliament, 2009.*

### Swedish roots

In 1809, the Swedish parliament appointed the first government ombudsman. At that time, Sweden was fighting a war with Russia, and the Swedish king had been taken prisoner.

The ombudsman's job was to protect the rights of citizens against unfair or oppressive decisions of the bureaucracy. His name was Lars Augustin Mannerheim.

While this was the first time a parliament had appointed an ombudsman in Sweden – or anywhere else in the world, it was not the first time an ombudsman had been appointed.

In 1697, at the age of 15, Charles XII became King of Sweden. For the next 17 years, however, Charles was out of the country fighting in wars. During this time, because he was away from the country, Charles signed a law creating an office called the King's Highest Ombudsman. The job of the King's Highest Ombudsman was to make sure that while the king was away, the government workers, judges, and the military were acting properly and following the rules the King had left for them.

When the wars were over and the King returned to Sweden, the office of the ombudsman disappeared for several decades, and was then revived in 1809. The difference was that the ombudsman was now accountable to Parliament as a protector of fairness, rather than as a representative of the King.

The appointment of Lars Augustin Mannerheim in Sweden in 1809 is generally regarded as the birth of the modern ombudsman. Most of the public or parliamentary ombudsmen around the world are modeled on what happened in Sweden in 1809.

### Were the Swedes really first?

While the Swedes are generally credited with introducing the concept of the parliamentary ombudsman to the world, there are other cultures and traditions where an ombudsman-like role was not at all uncommon. In first nations communities in North America, for example, disputes would often be resolved by an elder – someone who knew the people and could make decisions that would be fair on an individual level.

Some other examples – each with their own name for the function or the person who performed it – include:

- Muslims – The Mohtasib
- China – The Censorate
- Guam – The Suruhanu
- Hawaii – Elders used a practice called Ho'oponopono.



*In Hawaii, a lei made from the fruit of the hala tree completed the Ho'oponopono ceremony.*

## An idea takes hold

Despite Sweden's early use of the ombudsman concept, it would be over 100 years before another country adopted the idea, and not until the 60s and 70s that it really began to take hold internationally. The International Ombudsman Institute reports that in 2004, there were about 120 countries in the world with a national ombudsman.

Here are just some of the dates when ombudsman offices were established.

1809 – Sweden  
1919 – Finland  
1955 – Denmark  
1962 – Norway, New Zealand  
1967 – Jerusalem,\* Hawaii, United Kingdom, Alberta\*\*  
1968 – Tanzania  
1971 – Israel  
1977 – Puerto Rico, Australia (federally)  
1973 – France  
1975 – Portugal  
1979 – South Africa (an ombudsman-like office)  
1981 – Spain, The Netherlands  
1990 – Namibia  
1997 – Thailand  
1998 – Ukraine  
1999 – Albania, Czech Republic

\*First city ombudsman

\*\*First North American ombudsman

## Here in Canada...

The first ombudsman in Canada was George Brinton McClellan, provincial ombudsman for Alberta, appointed on April 6, 1967.

1967 – Alberta (April) & New Brunswick (May)  
1969 – Québec (Protecteur du citoyen)  
1970 – Manitoba  
1971 – Nova Scotia  
1973 – Saskatchewan  
1975 – Newfoundland & Ontario  
1979 – British Columbia

## An ombudsman by any other name...

Ombudsman all over the world have different titles – and often different responsibilities. In some places, for example, the ombudsman is also a human rights champion. Here are just some examples of what you might call your ombudsman if you lived somewhere else.

- Defensor del Pueblo – Latin America
- Médiateur de la République – France, Gabon, Mauritania, Senegal
- Public Protector – South Africa
- Volksanwaltschaft – Austria
- Public Complaints Commissioner – Nigeria
- Provedor de Justicia – Portugal
- Difensore Civico – Italy
- Investigator- General – Zambia
- Wafaqi Mohtasib – Pakistan
- Lokayukta – India
- Control Yuan - China
- The People's Advocate – Albania
- Chancellor of Justice – Estonia
- Ouvidor – Brazil

## What is an ombudsman?

A common and current definition of a parliamentary ombudsman describes her or him as “a public official appointed by the legislature to receive and investigate citizen complaints against administrative acts of government”.

Parliamentary ombudsmen are also known as public, legislative or classical ombudsmen.

Another type is an executive ombudsman, often appointed by and accountable to the CEO of a company.

## No strings attached

An ombudsman should be independent and impartial – at arm's length from the organizations within her or his jurisdiction.

In the case of parliamentary ombudsmen, that means they are not on the side of government, nor on the side of individuals. When ombudsmen review complaints, they determine whether the government was fair and if it was not, make recommendations for change.

## Did you know...?

- Ombudsman is a gender-neutral term and means “citizens' representative” in Swedish. It is widely used by women and men who hold the office. Some, however, prefer the term “ombudsperson” or even simply “ombuds.”
- In Canada, four out of the ten provincial ombudsmen are women.
- In Canada there are ombudsmen for a wide range of areas including universities, banking, corrections, the military, victims, veterans, and organizations like Canada Post and the CBC.

## Sources of information:

*Canada's Firsts* by Ralph Nader  
Forum of Canadian Ombudsmen  
International Ombudsman Institute  
Ombudsman Saskatchewan  
Toronto Ombudsman  
[www.wikipedia.org](http://www.wikipedia.org)