

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

BWB-19
Swedish Youth--What's to
Complain About in Utopia?

Im Rosental 96
53 Bonn
West Germany
6 May 1970

Mr. Richard H. Nolte
Institute of Current World Affairs
535 Fifth Avenue
New York, N. Y. 10017

Dear Mr. Nolte:

I gathered the material for this report some two months ago, and the paragraphs with which I planned to begin the newsletter then--about an exciting 29-hour drive from Bonn across snowy highways in Denmark and Germany, crunching through the icy Baltic sea on a ferry, then plunging through a snowstorm that forced even most Swedes off the highway--seem very dated now, with the birds twittering and the fresh delicate green of the budding willow tree outside my window. In the meantime I took my notebooks and papers along to New York on a trip--but there I was busy getting reacquainted with the city and old friends, and despite my good intentions I didn't get a chance to write about Sweden.

While pondering my impressions in the interim I've come to accept a journalistic truth--that even those of us who try to be "objective reporters," who believe in and practice the traditional style of news-writing as opposed to the more "editorialized" personalized style of reportage, can only be objective within the confines of our own personal experiences and knowledge.

Rereading Susan Sontag's "A Letter from Sweden" in the July 1969 issue of Ramparts, I see that she found the Swedes self-critical, conciliatory, reserved, suspicious and with it all "a perfect case of the tolerant society." Her impressions, she admits, were local and specialized. But Miss Sontag describes a left-liberal society (not a left-radical one) that agrees more with what I saw there than with a friend's more recent account picturing Sweden as "increasingly polarized and ideologically divided." This reporter and I were in Sweden at the same time, but we talked to different people, and brought different criteria to our analysis of each conversation. He wrote of a Swedish press dominated by the radical left, of a pervasive left-wing militancy even in the nation's institutions. I found a Social Democratic press, reformist but not revolutionary, a youth that is just beginning to discuss "participatory democracy," high school and university student governments which had a brief fling at left radicalism and have swung back to conservatism, and students who are neither as volatile nor as radical as many I have met in Germany, England and the United States. Admittedly every Swede I met was opposed to the U. S. position in Vietnam (or should one now say Indochina?), but it takes more than that to make a radical left.

My first conversation partner in Sweden--at a dinner party given by a Swedish diplomat friend for his young foreign office trainees--assured that, relatively speaking, Sweden's reputation as a social and economic paradise is true. The eight million Swedes have the highest standard of living and the highest industrial wage in Europe. One of every four owns an automobile, 700,000 Swedish families have a weekend house in the country, 750,000 families own a boat. The suicide rate is 20.1 per thousand population, lower than that of West Germany and Austria; the divorce rate is 1 in 6 marriages, as compared to a U. S. rate of 1 in 3; the people of France and of the United States consume more alcohol per capita than the people of Sweden. Swedes last fought a war in 1814, against Napoleon. Although 95 percent of the economy is owned privately--so talk of a socialistic economy in Sweden is nonsense--the tax and social welfare program is so broad that it demands 41 percent --more than any other nation--of the gross national income. A family with income of more than 73,340 kronen (about \$15,270) pays up to 65 percent income tax. Citizens who earn less than 1,000 kronen per month (about \$193) pay only one quarter of the taxes but receive 60 percent of the state-financed social benefits, such as health insurance, free education, old age pensions, family allowances.

But the fresh-faced young diplomat agreed that utopia can have its drawbacks. "There's really not much to get excited about here," he told me cheerfully. "Our universities were never in as bad a shape as the French, and when students protested about the university reform that's just been put through, some changes were made. You can't sustain a revolutionary attitude when the government gives in, or sometimes gets there first with the reforms."

Others around the table agreed that the students and universities were quiet, but when the topic changed to the wildcat strike then underway at Kiruna, far to the north of Stockholm and 125 miles within the Arctic Circle, the diplomatic voices lost some of their placid self-confidence. The Kiruna iron-ore miners had been the latest, and by far the toughest, group of Swedish workers to demonstrate their dissatisfaction with a traditional union-negotiated contract. Kiruna meant particular trouble for the governing Social Democratic party since the unions support the party, the party represents the state, and the state owns the Kiruna mines. Labor and management, in terms of their negotiating voices, were actually the same; and the workers protested they weren't represented at all.

Surprisingly, in a nation where labor and management relations have been harmonious for decades, the Kiruna strike produced a groundswell of support among the Swedish population. A survey by Sveriges Radio showed that 70 percent of the Swedes backed the strikers' position, and donations totaling nearly one million dollars were sent to the miners to support their wildcat rebellion. Such enthusiasm for an anti-union/anti-government action seems to indicate a resurgence against the impotence that many Swedes feel in their relations with Father State.

During the week I was in Stockholm, the pros and cons of the Kiruna strike were the main conversation topic for students at Stockholm University, particularly after an early-morning meeting of the student council, in which a left-liberal minority maneuvered the students' conservative-ruled governing council into voting five kronen (about \$1) from each student, 10,000 kronen in all, to be sent to the miners.

"This is the hottest event at the university since 1968 when students occupied the student union building in protest against UKAS (the university reform law)," Sven Nylander, a lanky blond economy student said. The proposal for solidarity and financial support of the wildcat strikers had come from the left, and the conservative majority flustered that it was put forth too late in the meeting, that council rules clearly state that nothing controversial may be discussed after midnight.

"The left saw that the conservatives had gone home and then they proposed the motion," complained Eva Christina Cederlöf, vice-chairman of the student council. "The decision was made in slippery fashion. It's quite clear it would have gone another way if all had been there."

But the council decision stood. That afternoon as I talked with Anders Wijkman, chairman of the 5,000-strong conservative students (Förbundsordförande i Fria Moderata Studentförbundet), he made an interesting slip of the tongue. "I think 95 percent of the students disagree with the methods of the strikers in Kiruna," he averred angrily. "Most of the people in this country disagree with strikes as a principle." When I reminded him that strikes are a legal method of protest, he backtracked. "Oh, wild strikes, I mean. And this decision of the council wasn't made according to the rules. I think it can be overturned."

Wijkman, a nattily-dressed handsome young man who said he would be running for election to the Riksdag (the parliament) in the fall, was the liveliest and most intense among the young people I met in Sweden. Other Swedes with whom I talked were subdued and curiously dispassionate, and I had the feeling later that we'd never gotten down to the nitty-gritty.

"They're dispassionate because they have to conserve their energy in that cold climate," a friend offered as explanation. "The endless dark winter shapes their outlook." Perhaps the climate engenders the national trait of a reserved and suspicious nature that Miss Sontag mentioned; perhaps the young Swedes, for all their support of North Vietnam, are also just beginning to rouse themselves to study some internal problems that are worth getting excited about.

One of the first young Swedes I interviewed was Per Garthön, a sociology student who is chairman of the 19,000-member Liberal and Radical Youth (Folkpartiets Ungdomsförbund), a young man who struck me as low-key, almost disinterested, but a woman in the foreign office

press department described him as "the most exciting young Swede today" and another acquaintance called him "dangerous." He told me there are "a lot of problems if you look below the surface in the welfare society": the widening gulf between those who govern and those who are governed, the distribution of foreign aid, backward attitudes toward prison reform and mental health, the shabby handling of "left-behind groups" such as narcotics addicts, alcoholics, paroled criminals.

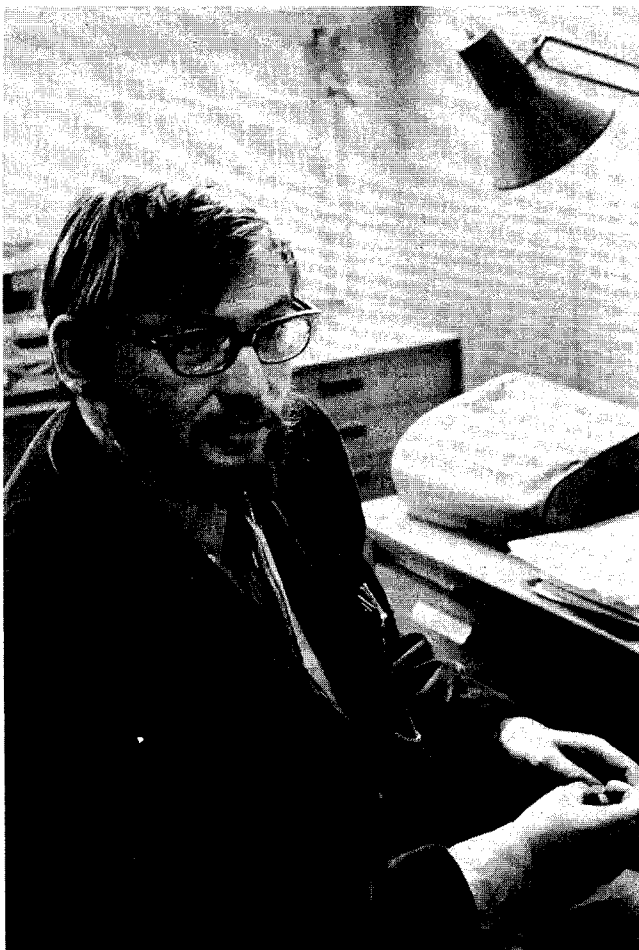
Most young people didn't start looking until 1968, when the national temperament became politically aware through opposition to the Vietnam War, and a government subcommittee presented a proposal for university reform which would revamp universities along American lines (with units, prerequisites, fixed course combinations, restricted admission and stricter standards for rapid results). Students protested that the UKAS reform would lead to a decrease in study motivation, student democracy, freedom of choice and to increased conformism. Stockholm University students occupied the student union building for one night, and Olof Palme, then Minister of Education and now successor to Tage Erlander as Prime Minister, rushed over to talk to them in the middle of the night. Because of heavy student opposition the proposal was modified, and given the name PUKAS (Palme plus UKAS).

There has been little opposition to the PUKAS reform this year among the nation's 130,000 university students, but a socialist student at Stockholm told me that he feels university instruction "still is not the right kind. PUKAS or UKAS speeded up the student turnover, but it didn't further the goal of educating people. The university should give students an opportunity to question, not just to learn facts."

The Swedes seem to be making more progress in the elementary grades. The latest Swedish compulsory comprehensive school reform--for grades one through nine--encompasses many ideas put forward by German education reformers: focusing on the student as an individual, cooperating instead of competition-based instruction, abolishing grading in certain classes, internationalized instruction "avoiding biased national and Western European perspectives," and emphasis on "the same social expectations" for both sexes...in other words, sexual equality taught at an early age.

Although the student movement is silent at the moment, said Garthon, other parts of Swedish society have begun to react against "the authoritarian structures." Mentioning the Kiruna strikes, he said he believed the workers had decided to take the initiative themselves because "the Social Democratic government, which is supposed to represent labor, has been in power so long that they're closer to management. The trade unions also are so close to management that they don't want to understand why the workers could demonstrate against trade unions and a workers' government."

Garthon's Liberal Youth want Sweden to adopt a worker-management system similar to Yugoslavia, but without state ownership. "We want



Boleennart Andersson (left) and
Bosse Sundling above.



Left: Per Garthon

employees to have a 50 percent vote in factory councils, but the trade unions don't like this decentralization. They don't like a system where the workers are represented by workers and not by functionaries."

A new trend toward do-it-yourself government exists on the community level. Garthon sees the formation of byalag community groups who pressure the city authorities into local planning reforms--child-care centers, traffic regulations changing certain blocks into play streets or pedestrian malls--as indicative of the average Swede's mounting dissatisfaction with "government from above."

"Sure, we have the right to vote," he said, "but this doesn't make any difference in daily life. The authoritarian structure is so well entrenched, the Social Democrats have been in power so long... we really thought we were achieving economic equality. The government said they are making the incomes more and more equal, but we know now the trend is not there." Despite a lavish cradle-to-the-grave welfare system, Garthon complains that "great gaps remain between the social welfare majority and the people who fall below, who are out of the system."

A growing body of working youth, students and intellectuals have become concerned about just these forgotten groups. Garthon, for example, belongs to an organization called KRUM which is attempting to liberalize penal codes, and Garthon and his fellow students in Lund invite paroled prisoners to live with them as a halfway-house attempt "to let these people come into new circles, to let them get the feeling that they are valued human beings." KRUM's long-term goal is to abolish prisons ("these new big prisons with 7-foot walls and TV cameras watching the inmates," Garthon said disgustedly) and to educate the public that crime is induced by failures of society.

Young people are also in the vanguard of the pollution fighters in Sweden, where environment control was broadly discussed and measures taken--such as the banning of DDT--months before it became a popular topic in the U. S. "Since sex is no longer an issue among Swedish youth--we all take sex education for granted--the milieu problems have moved into the foreground," explained sandy-haired, pipe-smoking Bosse Sundling, a political science student at Gothenburg who is international secretary of the SSU (Sveriges Socialdemokratiska Ungdomsförbund), the Social Democratic Youth organization of 25,000 members. "Young people want more influence, more direct contact with the government on this question. SSU groups have made local investigations of factory pollution and sent the findings to the Interior Ministry. Now we're waiting to see if the factories install the needed filters." (Reform guidelines for the elementary schools also include a statement about instruction in "environment protection," in which the pupils learn about natural resources and the biological relations of nature, with the aim of making youngsters "wish actively to participate in the caring for nature and in helping to curb destruction.")

Just to include a word about sex...which usually comes up among the Swedes when prudish Americans broach the subject. Garthon told me, and Sundling later concurred, that "one of the really good things in this country is sexual liberalization. Five years ago there was intense debate about sex and all tabus were cut down. For a while it was too much, but now it's leveled out. People here don't talk sex, they do it."

"We haven't eradicated the problem (of sexual hangups) in that we've made all people sexually happy in two or three years," Garthon said, "but in the next generation they may be." He told me proudly of one survey in which 16 and 17-year-olds were asked if they had experienced sexual intercourse. Most said yes. But it was a question about who took the initiative which impressed Garthon; of those who had experienced sex, the same percentage of girls as boys answered they had made the first move. "That means there is almost complete equality."

Ernst Lind, of the State Youth Council (Statens Ungdomsråd)--an organization which coordinates cooperation on youth questions among 55 youth organizations all over the country--offered an interesting explanation for Sweden's sexual freedom. It developed over the years through the migration of farmers into the cities, he said. "Among the farmers in the north, if a boy took a girl home after a dance, it was natural that he stayed overnight. The distances are great, and nobody had cars. If she got pregnant, they were married, but there was nothing immoral about pre-marital sexual relations. When these country people moved to the city, they brought their morals with them. Gradually it was accepted by all."

"Young Swedes don't feel like Europeans," one student told me. Perhaps because of their lack of involvement with continental Europe, perhaps because of their sea-faring tradition, the Swedes have an over-large interest in foreign aid to developing countries, an interest shown more in words than in material gifts. Among the industrialized nations, Sweden earmarks relatively little of its national income for foreign aid--about 800 million kronen (roughly \$160 million) now, but the government plans to step that up to one percent of the national income or 1,500 million kronen by 1974.

Liberal, conservative and the majority Social Democratic youth favor channeling the government's gifts to national liberation movements in Cuba, South Africa, Latin America and Vietnam. Garthon speaks of asking parliament to ship Swedish-made weapons to the blacks in South Africa, but Sundling told me that the Social Democratic youth organization draws the line at guns. "We want foreign aid to be used for humanitarian help...building schools, buying books and medicines." But Bolennart Andersson, secretary general of the National Council of Swedish Youth (Sveriges Ungdomsorganisationers Landsråd), said that his organization, representing 1.4 million young people, holds seminars in which the question of weapons for liberation movements are at least considered. "Why not? The big powers supported Biafra and Nigeria."

The verbal emphasis on charity abroad, while shrugging off some problems of urbanization and the de-humanizing trends in advanced industrial society leads an outsider to wonder if the Swedish sympathy for the underdog, particularly the one in a warmer climate, is not one way of externalizing his own frustrations. After several beers on a cold winter night, maybe it's more pleasant to think about helping a brother in Latin America or Africa than the local bum.

Andersson, at 31, believes that Swedish youth is less separated from the remainder of society, that there is less of a generation gap in Sweden than in other nations. He recommended a new Swedish film called "Harry Munter" in which the understanding between youth and age is well expressed. Certainly the traditional tolerance has obligated older Swedes to show less indignation than might be evident elsewhere at the hippie styles of young people. Ernst Lind, who is probably five to ten years older than Andersson, commented, however, that "many parents feel disquieted by the education of their children today. They see that their children know more than they do, and that youth in a group does things differently from how they think things should be done." In a philosophic and resigned tone he added, "But these problems existed before Christ, with Socrates." A journalistic observer of Swedish youth told me she feels the generation gap is most evident in politics. Per Garthorn concurs: "We (the Liberal Party youth) usually attack the government from the left, but my party usually attacks from the right."

Observers of youth, and the youth themselves, agree that a new political consciousness is the most remarkable change that has come over Swedish youth in recent years. Ula Magnusson, 30, a perky radish-coiffed reporter at Sveriges Radio who covers the education/youth beat, told me that this has led at the moment to a swing toward conservatism in student circles, both on the university and high school levels. "A couple of years ago it was the radical students you heard about and the rest thought they were unpolitical," she recalled. "When I was in the university most kids paid no attention to politics. Now nothing is unpolitical, and you're expected to have opinions. The conservatives have profited from this." A winning slogan for a recent student council candidate at Stockholm University was "Know the Devil-- Keep Out the Left."

"The new generation is less uptight," she continued, "and I think the Social Democrats are partly responsible through their recent campaigns for social awareness. But I don't think the results--say, that 70 percent of the Swedish people support the Kiruna strikers--are quite what the government expected."

The trend among young people toward conservatism was also unexpected. Several students at Stockholm University, for example, told me they didn't approve of the new Prime Minister Olof Palme. "He's too much of a socialist for me," said Eva Cederl8f. "We need a lot of changes but there are better ways of getting them than going out on the street for more demonstrations. We're educating more and more students and how are we going to get a job? The labor market situation

is too up and down today."

Wijkman, also a conservative, complained that the government "doesn't work with democratic methods in the Riksdag. They give the opposition only one week's time to consider a proposal. They are building up a power state where influence for the human being is equated with influence for the Social Democratic party. They're building up a society with machines and not with human beings."

Wijkman, who said he favors a welfare state, nonetheless accused the Social Democrats of "failing to put up something other than materialistic goals."

Peter Mathis, a medical student at the University of Stockholm and an earnest socialist who received his early Marxist education at Clarté (an international leftist organization) meetings in the early sixties, would probably disagree with Wijkman's alternatives, but not with his complaints about the Social Democratic system. Proud of their success in leading the anti-Vietnam movement in Sweden, the FLN (Front de Liberation Nationale of South Vietnam) groups of which he is a member now are trying to initiate more public debate on the evils of monopoly capitalism in Sweden. "The FLN effort is more and more directed against the Social Democratic government," said Mathis. "The anti-imperialists and the students were the first groups in many years in Sweden who took up the interests of the people in the struggle against the state. This has certainly influenced the young workers in Kiruna and the self-initiative shown in the byalag."

Unlike German leftists, who used a scattershot approach and protested against the Vietnam War, for university reforms, against the emergency laws, for judicial reforms, against NATO, for broader use of conscientious objection to avoid military service, the Swedish FLN groups began concentrating on the Vietnam issue in 1965 and continued to push with demonstrations and discussion groups and pamphlets until the Swedish government adopted their position.

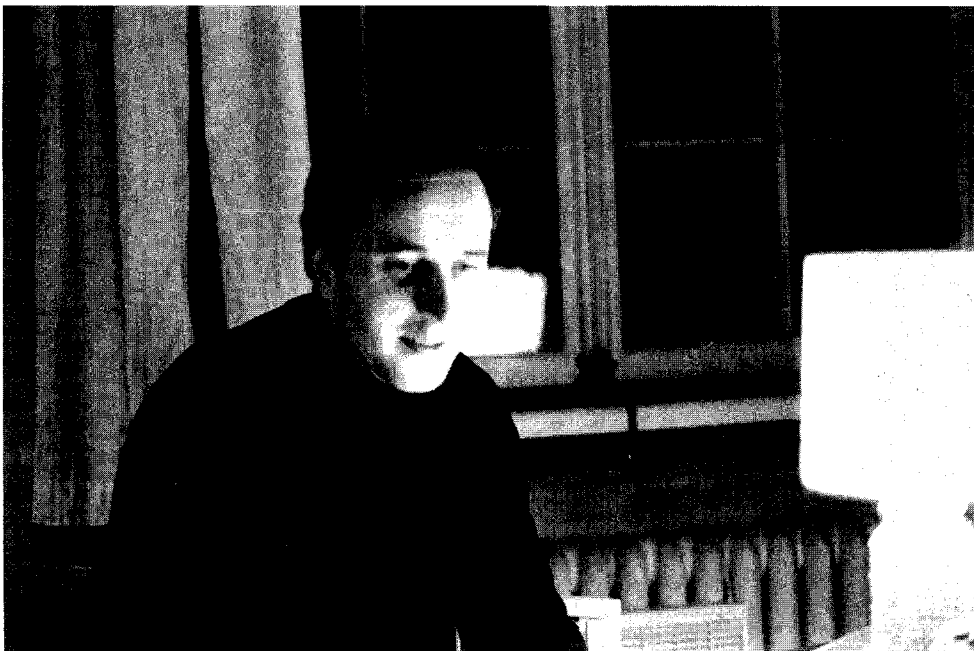
"When Johnson sent troops into Vietnam in 1965, we had protests in front of the U. S. Embassy in the spring and summer. We also started to print up pamphlets and distribute the Vietnam Bulletin. The Swedish police beat up demonstrators, and for a while we had difficulty gathering forces because of police violence. But by distributing propaganda material and starting discussion groups in homes and on the streets--all of which is fully legal--we increased the knowledge about Vietnam in Sweden."

The FLN groups at that time "were fully isolated," recalled Mathis. "From the Communist Party to the Social Democrats to the right, there was no idea of taking up any struggle against the U. S. forces. The government talked then of a cease-fire, because they thought the Vietnamese people had no future in the struggle."

But the small group of FLN supporters, a hundred or so at first, grew quickly. "We had successes. Young people from 16 to 25 joined us. Newspapers wrote about us. By 1966 when the youth and political



Anders Wijkman



Peter Mathis

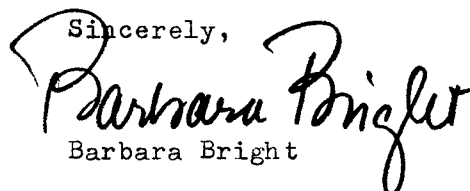
organizations saw our success, they were afraid we'd take the initiative away from them. So the establishment groups joined together for a campaign--a national collection for Vietnam, to collect money and divide it between the puppet government and the FLN in South Vietnam. The appeal was made as if war were a natural catastrophe, like an earthquake. They ignored the question of who was the aggressor and who was the victim, which we'd pointed out in our pamphlets."

The establishment forces, Mathis said, "joined to crush our struggle. They had the media support and the bureaucratic machinery, but our strength was still the people in the streets"--more than a thousand at a 1966 demonstration in Stockholm, and separate propaganda teams in twenty towns. The FLN supporters continued to put up posters ("illegally because we have no money for advertisement"), to paint slogans on bridges (also illegal)...and the Communist press--angered by the anti-establishment tactics--offered a prize for finding the culprits. The FLN refused to be integrated. "Now our political demands have been taken up by other organizations. Up to now 2½ million kronen collected from a half million Swedes have been sent to the FLN in South Vietnam. Fifty thousand copies of the Vietnam Bulletin are now circulated, and we have local groups in 120 towns. In 1968, 80 percent of the Swedish people said they agreed with the slogan: 'U. S. Get Out of Vietnam.'"

Peter Mathis is optimistic that Sweden's social democracy can be turned into socialism. "The success of the anti-imperialist groups in some demands has given people the correct idea that if they put away bureaucracy and do it themselves, that they also will have successes. It's difficult to know how broad the consciousness is, but Swedish radio found that 70 percent of the Swedish people supported the Kiruna demands."

The impressions I gathered there lead me to doubt Mathis' analysis. For one thing, the nation is organized to a fare-thee-well and only a small minority of youth ever break out of the establishment infrastructure. "You certainly may change society but your organization may be changed," said Bollenart Andersson. Which means that Sweden will certainly continue to change, but in terms of reform, not a revolution. And any reform which cuts into the scheme of private ownership just doesn't have that much support, even among the youth. "I think Swedish youth approve of the welfare state even if we criticize parts of it," said Per Garthou. "There are some who criticize because it prevents a socialist state. But I think it is a good foundation. It combines a concentration on effective production with welfare for the majority. What we need is welfare for all."

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, reading "Barbara Bright". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Barbara" being more prominent and the last name "Bright" following in a similar style.

Barbara Bright