

A Meatball by Any Other Name

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ABSTRACT

After considerable debate, the International Ombudsman Association (IOA) chose to use the word ‘ombudsman’ in its name when it was formed in 2005. This word has Old Norse origins and was used by King Charles XII when he formed the first Ombudsman office for his government in Sweden in 1713. King Charles’ model for the ombudsman office was inspired by the Mohtasib, a similar position that existed in the Ottoman Empire. The organizational ombudsman profession originated in the 1960’s in America, and even though this new role departed in several significant ways from King Charles’ vision, the title ‘ombudsman’ was still widely adopted by organizational ombuds offices. There have been concerns raised along the way that the ‘man’ suffix of the word is unnecessary and gendered. Recent cultural movements, such as #metoo, have brought increased attention

to issues related to gender inequity within our culture and institutions, and many offices and organizations have already elected to use alternative titles for their offices such as ‘ombuds’ or ‘ombudsperson’, to make the title gender neutral. The author suggests that now is a good time for the IOA to drop the ‘man’ and use a non-gendered term like ‘ombuds’ in our title that better suits our current moment in history.

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ombudsman, ombuds, International Ombudsman Association, Swedish meatballs, Mohtasib, King Charles XII

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I was intrigued to learn from a recent New York Times article that the recipe for Swedish meatballs did not originate in Sweden (Yeginsu, 2018). It was imported from the Turkish Ottoman Empire in the eighteenth century by King Charles XII, a Swedish monarch who lived in exile there from 1709 to 1714. He evidently enjoyed the meatballs (*kofte*) in Turkey, and brought the recipe back when he returned to Stockholm. The current Swedish Parliament created an international stir recently, when it released a public statement acknowledging this hitherto suppressed truth about the Turkish roots of one of the most internationally celebrated dishes of Swedish cuisine.

In addition to rebranding *kofte* as the Swedish meatball, King Charles XII also brought enduring recognition to his homeland by establishing the first ombudsman office. However, very few people are aware that the recipe King Charles used for his ombudsman office was also a rebranded import from Turkey.

During his exile with the Ottomans, King Charles XII learned from the Sultan about an official that existed in the Ottoman Empire, the *Mohtasib*, whose purpose was to ensure that the laws of the Empire were implemented correctly and fairly (Organization of Islamic Countries, 2014). The *Mohtasib* had a great deal of autonomy to investigate complaints about government officials suspected of wrongdoing. King Charles decided to create a similar office in his homeland, but he gave it a Swedish name, the *High Ombudsman*.

Ombud is a word that has Old Norse origins, meaning “agent” or “representative” (Lang, 2011). When King Charles XII established the High Ombudsman role in Sweden in 1713, he enriched the meaning of the word. The High Ombudsman was granted the authority to investigate complaints and ensure that judges and civil servants were carrying out their duties in accordance with the laws of the land. Certain aspects of this understanding of the word endure, though now there are many and varied uses of the term. In 1809, the Swedish Parliament absorbed the function and the *High* was dropped from the name of the office in favor of simply *Ombudsman*.

King Charles may not have been history’s most original thinker, but he did have a talent for recognizing and claiming a good idea when he saw one. His actions in the eighteenth century have significantly enhanced Sweden’s global reputation for both meatballs and the ombudsman. In the West, neither Turkish *kofte* or the *Mohatsib* are mentioned much anymore, but various versions of Sweden’s modern brand of the ombudsman function have been adopted world-wide by many governments. It is interesting to note that even the Turkish government, which had closed its *Mohatsib* office in 1924, recently established an ombudsman office, based on the Swedish model (Karasoy, 2015).

Within the past century or so, an ombudsman function of one sort or another has been established by numerous governments, international organizations, corporations, educational institutions, non-profits, advocacy organizations and other groups. A number of different titles for this role are in use internationally, but in the USA and Europe, ombudsman, ombuds and ombudsperson are most common. When the first organizational ombudsman offices in America were created in the late 1960s, the ombudsman title was utilized, even though the organizational role was structured quite differently than the classical Swedish model.

When I began my ombuds career in 2004, there were many passionate discussions taking place during the merger process of the University and College Ombuds Association (UCOA) and The Ombudsman Association (TOA). One issue of debate was what the new, combined, organizational ombudsman professional association should call itself. As part of this discussion,

the question arose about whether the new organization's name would keep the *man* in *ombudsman*.

Those in favor of keeping the *man* contended that this name would match the Swedish word, which had already been adopted by several other countries and organizations. They felt using the word *ombudsman* would better position the organization for international acceptance and growth. It was claimed that because *ombudsman* is a Swedish word, we should not attach the same meaning to the *man* suffix as we do in English, because it was gender neutral.

Arguments against the title *ombudsman* were focused on the unnecessary and gendered ending of the word. In particular, some women ombuds felt the title did not represent them appropriately, and symbolized obsolete, patriarchal, and repressive cultural traditions that should be replaced. By this point in American history, a number of professions (police, fire, mail, etc.) had already dropped their male gendered suffixes for this reason. In fact, UCOA and several organizational ombuds offices had already decided to drop the *man* to make their title gender neutral.

When UCOA and IOA merged, this issue was eventually resolved in favor of keeping the *man*, and the new organization was named The International Ombudsman Association. While there was not unanimous agreement about this decision among the membership, the controversy about the name has drifted into the background as a flurry of other concerns emerged for our young profession.

Is there any reason to bring the *man* conversation back to the forefront of issues for the IOA to consider? I believe there is.

I've been told by more than one person that because *ombudsman* is a Swedish word, the *man* in *ombudsman* doesn't mean the same thing it does in English. I've since learned from native Swedish speakers that *man* does mean the same thing in Swedish as it does in English. It means man. It refers to the male gender. *Ombudsman* is a gendered term in both languages.

In any event, *ombudsman* is now an English word, and even if it wasn't a gendered term in Swedish, it is in English, which is the primary language of most IOA members and constituents. Imagine what would have happened if King Charles XII had created a position called *ombudswoman* in 1713. Would our organization have embraced the word *ombudswoman*, as it has with *ombudsman*? No. Even if *woman* in Swedish didn't mean what it means in English, *ombudswoman* would not have survived the cut. This is because the men in the profession would never have accepted a title with a female-gendered suffix. So why do we expect women in the IOA to accept the opposite scenario?

I suspect that it never crossed the mind of King Charles XII that a woman would ever be appointed to the office he was creating. For him and his century, naming the position *ombudsman* undoubtedly generated no controversy whatsoever, because there was no possibility of a woman serving in the role. Times have changed.

As recent cultural movements like #metoo have powerfully demonstrated, there has been a centuries-long oppression of the rights of women in numerous realms; including under the law, in education, and at work. Keeping the *man* in *ombudsman* leaves our organization behind the curve of this important cultural awakening and evolution. In addition, there is a growing societal awareness of the need to broaden the categories for gender identity beyond male and female. Many forward-thinking institutions are making changes to actively acknowledge and support previously marginalized or persecuted individuals. These are individuals who one would hope would feel comfortable seeking assistance in ombuds offices about concerns related to fairness, bullying, discrimination and inequity. The IOA should be leading efforts to improve access and

acceptance of ombuds offices as a valuable resource for transgendered and other marginalized populations. By continuing to embrace the word *ombudsman*, the IOA's name remains incongruent with those efforts and unfortunately demonstrates a lack of sensitivity to women and other groups experiencing gender related inequities.

All of our corporate, educational and governmental institutions have a long history of being male dominated. In our role as organizational ombuds, we often work with complaints involving subtle or blatant gender discrimination and harassment, and in the vast majority of these cases, women are raising complaints about how men are treating them. *It is ironic and unfortunate that the international association that created and oversees the ethical standards for the offices these women turn to for help, is aligned with maleness by its name.*

One easily implemented resolution is the use of the terms *ombuds* or *ombudsperson* as alternatives to *ombudsman*, and many organizational ombuds offices already do this. The American Bar Association has an *Ombuds Committee* and the Association of Conflict Resolution has an *Ombuds Section*. I prefer *ombuds* over *ombudsperson*, as I see no need for adding a suffix to alert us that the ombuds is also a person. For example, we don't feel a need to use terms like *lawyerperson*, *teacherperson* or *doctorperson*.

Unfortunately, *ombuds* is not an easy word to use in English and people often get a confused expression on their face when they hear it. It is mispronounced frequently, and people new to the word usually mumble "omsbud" sheepishly when they try to say it. Another problem is that *ombuds* is a singular noun that ends in "s". None of the options for making it plural, possessive or plural possessive seem fully satisfactory. Despite these hassles, the newness, challenges and confusion around the word are not insurmountable barriers, and somehow these challenges appropriately mirror the current dynamic state of the organizational ombuds profession.

If the IOA left *ombudsman* behind, and changed its name to the *International Ombuds Association*, it would signal a developmental shift for our profession as we adapt to a new age. It behooves us to remember that as organizational ombuds we are a young, emerging profession that was initially inspired in certain ways by its Swedish predecessor, but that has since evolved its own unique identity. And while there would be predictable hassles connected with altering the name our association has used proudly for the past several years, a shift to the *International Ombuds Association* would still use the acronym *IOA*, and I don't believe there would be significant confusion within or outside of the profession about the change.

It's time for the International Ombudsman Association to take a lesson from King Charles XII's playbook and rebrand its meatball. It is possible to honor the roots of our profession and also honor the emerging realities of our present moment in history. I see this as an option that has been on the table for a long time, and needs to be considered seriously again. My recommendation is that the IOA board solicit input from the membership on this issue through a vote or survey, and take action in accordance with the majority opinion.

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