



Notes on the 2010 Swedish Election

As requested by a number of correspondents, here are a few observations on the outcome and implications of the Swedish parliamentary election that took place on September 19th, based on my somewhat sporadic attention to the campaign and related matters.

The diagram above shows the final vote percentages — the figures and solid colours representing the recent election, and the shaded background colours the 2006 election.

The traditional left-right axis has been reversed in this case, with the four parties of the centre-right coalition shown on the left: Conservatives (“Moderate”), Centre, Liberal (“FP”) and Christian Democrats (“KD”). The coalition has 173 seats in parliament, two short of a majority and will have to negotiate successfully with at least one of the four other parties in order to pass legislation or survive a no-confidence vote (failing the latter would occasion a new election). Conservative Prime Minister Reinfeldt began flirting with the Greens the day after the election, partly to avoid dependence on the Sweden Democrats (see below) and partly in a thus far unsuccessful attempt to split the “red-green” opposition.

Next, the three parties of the opposition: Social Democrats, Left (“V”) and Greens (“MP”). The red-greens ended up with 156 seats, far short of a majority, and the cohesive strength of their coalition is subject to question for a variety of reasons.

This election was the first in which the Sweden Democrats (SD) climbed over the 4% threshold for representation in the parliament. The 20 seats that SD gained with its 5.7% of the vote are enough to make or break the centre-right government, unless Reinfeldt & Co. succeed in making other arrangements.

Founded in 1988, SD has been alternately demonized and dismissed as racist, xenophobic, fascist and other bad things, which may well be true of its early origins. But it has now become a more diverse hodgepodge — among its members and representatives are quite a few swarthy immigrants with strange-sounding names, for example — and has just entered the parliament for the first time. So there is considerable uncertainty — quite possibly even among themselves — concerning the forthcoming parliamentary behaviour of the Sweden Democrats.

Presumably, the trick for the Reinfeldt government will be to draw upon the votes of SD while conveying the impression that it really doesn't want to but has regretfully compromised its principles "for the good of the country". SD could choose to collaborate in such a charade by allowing a few of its members to "break ranks" and vote with the government, while the majority vote with the red-green opposition and the leadership proclaims, "We reject the tyranny of party discipline! We encourage our MPs to vote with their conscience, as in the U.S. Senate." (Anything that can be certified by reference to the United States is certain to be approved by a large number of Swedes.)

Demise of the Swedish model

The media reaction to the election outcome — both in Sweden and, as far as I have seen, to an even greater degree abroad — focused on the success of the Sweden Democrats. Much of the foreign press pronounced that Sweden had thereby become a racist society or something like, while the groupthought of the Swedish media is that SD's accession to the parliament represents a profound threat to fundamental values of tolerance and international solidarity.

There are, of course, numerous variations on those two themes, and both of them are excessively alarmist in my view. More on that below; but first, a few notes on what I consider to be a far more important outcome of the election — the continuing steep decline of the Social Democratic Party, which experienced its worst result since 1914, and the corresponding ascent of the Conservatives.

The relative success of the Conservative-led coalition marks the first time in roughly a century that such a constellation has been able to govern for two consecutive terms. If it survives the next scheduled election in 2014, which at this point seems likely, that will confirm what now appears to be a fact — the end of Social Democratic dominance in Swedish politics and, consequently, the demise of the Swedish model of society and foreign policy.

No doubt the decline of the SDP has many antecedents. But it began to become evident in 1986, shortly after the assassination of Olof Palme, when Finance Minister Kjell-Olof Feldt carried out a policy coup by deregulating both the domestic financial market and the currency exchange system. Among other things, that greatly reduced the government's ability to regulate the economy, and shifted a large measure of power from the labour movement (the original source of the SDP) to capital a.k.a. big business.

Having completed that work, Feldt and his little band of acolytes in the Finance Ministry departed for richer pastures in the corporate world, not least within the financial sector that they had liberated from the chains of social democracy. Since then, Feldt's principle contribution to politics has been to sabotage SDP election campaigns with various criticisms that have been enthusiastically propagated by the mainstream media as pearls of wisdom that confirm the political bankruptcy of social democracy.

Next came the abandonment of full employment, another pillar of social democratic policy, in order to conform with the “convergence rules” of the European Union, to membership in which the SDP was at that time officially opposed. This, too, had the effect of weakening the labour movement. The finance minister and prime minister responsible for this act of conformity, Alan Larsson and Ingvar Carlsson respectively, assured the faithful that strict adherence to EU limitations on the national debt and inflation rate would in no way compromise the party’s traditional commitment to full employment. They were lying — perhaps first to themselves, but then certainly to everyone else.

These and other autocratic decisions, by the leaders of a party that owed its extraordinary record of success to a vital grassroots movement, prepared the ground for the decision to apply for membership in the EU — announced in passing by Ingvar Carlsson as a minor footnote. The embrace of market liberalism and the abandonment of social democratic principles were thereby complete.

Another betrayal of social democracy, with the emphasis on democracy, came a few years later with a new pension system that was imposed on the grassroots against the will of a large majority. The new system includes such a heavy component of speculation and market logic that it has been hailed as a model for emulation by the kinds of reactionaries in the United States who have previously condemned Sweden as a cesspit of socialism.

EU vs. labour

EU membership has turned out to be precisely the disaster for the labour movement that was predicted by sceptics and opponents. Not included among the latter were leaders of some of the most powerful unions, who also exert strong influence on SDP policy. They chose to accept assurances that entry into the EU would not weaken the bargaining position of labour unions or their members — assurances given by the centre-right government that succeeded Ingvar Carlsson’s for one term and thus became the one to negotiate the terms of EU membership (tending to nullify Carlsson’s stated ambition to remake the EU in the image of traditional social democracy).

It turned out that the assurances of undiminished labour bargaining power were not worth the paper they were written. In fact, they weren’t even written on paper, at least not on any document signed by an official of the EU. Thus, the Union’s supreme court was able to ignore any such assurances with its ruling in the Laval case, which declared that Swedish unions could not prevent the hiring of foreign workers under conditions less favourable than those guaranteed by labour contracts negotiated in Sweden. That would constitute restraint of trade, the most terrible sin against the EU ethos, ruled the court. In addition, the Swedish union involved in the Laval case was ordered to pay heavy damages to those affected by its blockade of the building site at the centre of the conflict.

Prior to the Laval ruling, influential Swedish labour leaders had warned that, if it went against them, they would have to “seriously reconsider continued membership in the EU”. But when the ruling did indeed violate their interests and the phantom assurances which they had chosen to believe, they changed their tune completely and tried to pretend that it really wasn’t so bad after all, that the problem could be fixed by revising Swedish labour law, etc.

The main rationalization now is that the Lisbon Treaty, the new EU “constitution”, has resolved the difficulty by restoring the balance of power between labour and capital. That’s news to those who have attempted to divine what, exactly, the Lisbon Treaty has to say about that or anything else. As its framers have openly admitted, the treaty was purposely contrived to be incomprehensible. But one thing seems fairly clear: It represents a significant further consolidation of market liberalism in favour of big business and to the detriment of labour.

As in most other EU countries, public opinion in Sweden was overwhelmingly in favour of a referendum on the Lisbon Treaty. Although in opposition at the time, the SDP and its allies possessed enough political strength to demand such a referendum. But under its new leader, Mona Sahlin, the SDP collaborated with the centre-right government to deny the people that right. The treaty was whipped through the parliament with only a handful of votes against.

A similar and closely related process of decline has taken place with regard to foreign policy, especially during the ten-year reign of SDP Prime Minister Göran Persson which ended in 2006. For details see [From Neutrality to NATO](#).

Better than anyone else, Persson exemplifies the transformation that has befallen the Social Democratic Party since the murder of Olof Palme. After losing the 2006 election, he became the Swedish equivalent of a country squire and devoted himself to making pots of money. For that purpose he joined a PR-firm closely linked with the Conservative Party, the arch-enemy of the SDP. From that and other sources, Persson receives hefty “consulting” and speaking fees in what may perhaps be regarded as postponed compensation for services rendered to big business and its political allies. Persson thus follows a lucrative path trodden previously by Kjell-Olof Feldt and his acolytes, more recently by a war criminal and limousine Labourite for whom Persson has expressed great admiration —Tony Blair.

The reaction to Persson’s new career may serve as an index of the change he has wrought in the SDP. For any of his predecessors, such a transition from party leader to PR poodle of the Conservative establishment would have been unthinkable. But after ten years with Persson in power, the decision to harvest the financial fruits of his term as prime minister by exploiting it in the marketplace of right-wing ideas occasioned some comment but no great surprise.

This is a very brief summary of the Swedish SDP’s decline during the past 25 years. More detailed information on these and related matters is available in the following linked items:

[*The Price of Everything*](#), especially “The Return of *Laissez-Faire*” and “The Politics of Self-Delusion”

[*The Legacy of Olof Palme*](#), especially “Things by Their Right Names”

[*Great European Expectations*](#)

[*All Quieted on the Word Front*](#), “O Sweden, Where Art Thou?” (p. 47 ff.)

[*The Market for Social Insecurity*](#) (pension reform)

[*Sverige: Folkhem eller röningskåk?*](#) (Swedish only)

Self-inflicted dilemma

The decline of Sweden's SDP reflects similar processes that have affected virtually every other social democratic party in Europe. The question is whether that is the result of some "natural" process of organizational decay, has been helped along by antagonistic interests, or both. To that question I have no ready answer, and have yet to meet anyone who does.

But the consequences are sadly evident. Sweden, which during the time of Olof Palme was a source of hope and inspiration in much of the world for its enlightened domestic and foreign policies, has now become a bastion of ego-centric market liberalism and a vassal-state of the U.S. empire via the EU and NATO.

The decay of the SDP is the key factor in that process, as it was the principal architect of the Swedish model that has now been largely abandoned. And since it remains the largest opposition party, there is no effective obstacle to the centre-right government's ongoing efforts to dismantle that model. In fact and as noted, the SDP has often collaborated in those efforts.

Little wonder, then, that so many voters have abandoned the pathetic remains of the SDP, with its systematic disdain for the grassroots that built it. As author and long-time Social Democrat Sven Lindquist has observed: "The decision comes first, and the discussion afterwards. When it comes to such minor matters as giving up Sweden's independence, abandoning its neutrality, replacing the krona with another currency, and sacrificing full employment for the sake of a fixed exchange rate — on such occasions, no one is interested in our opinions."

In the recent election, most of the nine per cent that switched votes from the SDP gave them to the Conservatives — a migration of no great political distance, now that the previously clear distinction between the two parties has been blurred. Their convergence has gone so far that the Conservatives have been emboldened to market themselves as "the new party of labour", when in fact it would be far more appropriate for the Social Democrats to present themselves as "the new party of capital".

Somewhat oversimplified, it could be said that the Conservatives have attracted voters by sugar-coating their rhetoric while retaining their basic policies, whereas the Social Democrats have repelled voters by intoning their traditional rhetoric while discarding their basic principles.

In terms of voting share, the two parties are now equal with roughly 30 per cent each. With a bit of luck and the continuing decline of the SDP (which seems likely), the Conservatives are poised to leap ahead in the next election and become the dominant force in Swedish politics for the foreseeable future.

The great mystery is why the SDP leadership has stubbornly continued along its self-destructive path, despite the predictable and often predicted consequences that are reflected in the outcome of the recent election. But having done so, it is exceedingly unlikely that the current leadership will be able to summon the will or the wit to extricate itself from its self-inflicted dilemma.

To begin with, that would require acknowledgement of the catastrophic errors of the past 25 years, including but not limited to: rejection of grassroots democracy in favour of elite rule; the embrace of market liberalism; the deceitful and manipulated entry

into the European Union; and the abandonment of nearly 200 years of peaceful neutrality for incorporation into the USA/NATO war machine, including its wars of aggression in the Balkans, Afghanistan and wherever next.

It is highly unlikely that Mona Sahlin and her collaborators will allow themselves to think such thoughts, let alone act upon them. The changes announced thus far in response to the recent disaster have been largely cosmetic, and there is no reason to expect any fundamental revision of SDP policy before the next election. At this point, the best that the Social Democrats can hope for is not to lose more ground.

Pocketbook politics

The prospects of the Conservatives and their allies are considerably brighter, and they may be expected to continue chipping away at the foundations of the Swedish model. Among other things, that means further reductions in the taxes that are the lifeblood of the general-welfare system and the well-developed public sector, more privatization, increased poverty and socio-economic divisions, etc., all in the name of greater individual freedom.

That in turn is likely to accelerate the ongoing dissolution of the egalitarian ethos and strong social cohesion that are fundamental preconditions and consequences of the Swedish model. In myriad blunt and subtle ways, citizens are increasingly being encouraged to consider not what politics can do for society and humanity as a whole, but what it can do for them individually and perhaps their families.

That tendency was apparent in the recent election campaign, as some commentators have pointed out. One of them is Eva Franchell, an editorialist at the somewhat social democratic daily *Aftonbladet*, who notes that:

“In 1968 the Social Democrats received over 50 per cent of the national vote, and Olof Palme became prime minister the following year. Swedes were actively engaged on behalf of children in war-ravaged Biafra. The Vietnam anti-war movement began to take form, and Swedish youth demonstrated in support of Chile, Argentina, Spain, Greece and South Africa. They revolted against the wastefully affluent society and demonstrated their solidarity with the afflicted of the world.... [The recent election campaign was] dominated by the pocketbooks of the Swedish middle class.”

For the reasons noted above, the future appears to hold much more of the same. Is that likely development inevitable? Probably not. But at present I cannot detect any political force or constellation of forces with sufficient strength, coherence and dedication to reverse the current trend.

Immigration hysteria

I am no expert on the Swedish Democrats, but their [Wikipedia profile](#) provides what appears to be a useful introduction which conforms with the little that I do know about the upstart party. There, one can for example learn that:

“For the 2010 election in the municipality of Södertälje (Stockholm County), SD was the only party with a majority of immigrants on its electoral list, mostly Chaldean Christians from the Middle East. Polling 7.31 % (3,447 votes), SD's municipal list in

Södertälje got 5 of the 65 municipal seats. Nader Helawi and two other Swedes with immigrant origins will sit as municipal councillors....

“The party dissociates itself from all forms of totalitarianism and racism and states that it considers the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights a fundamental component of its politics. Furthermore, the party says that its fundamental goal is to combine the principle of social and economic justice with traditional conservative values.”

Assuming that this information is correct — and at present I have no reason to believe otherwise — it offers a sobering perspective on the hysterical reaction to SD’s breakthrough in the recent election. True, the party is highly critical of current immigration policy, for reasons that it shares in common with a large segment of the general population. But it is not xenophobic in the correct sense of that term, and the ethnic/racial component of its membership is difficult to reconcile with the epithet of “racist” that has been routinely applied to the party.

The sizable discrepancy between SD’s stated platform and the distorted interpretation of it is clearly related to the taboo on open discussion of immigration that has been rigidly and often rabidly enforced by thought police who dominate the media and other channels of opinion-making. For violating the taboo by raising forbidden questions and uttering forbidden opinions on various aspects of the subject, I have myself been labelled a racist on several occasions — despite a social network that includes individuals of every imaginable shading from all corners of the world.

Many, many others have been likewise condemned — including Nyamko Sabuni, a dark brown immigrant from Burundi and a Muslim family who happens to be the current government’s Minister for Immigration. She has earned the title of racist by, among other things, insisting on the primacy of Swedish laws and norms regarding gender equality, even for immigrants from strictly patriarchal societies.

*Nyamko Sabuni, Sweden’s
racist Minister of Immigration*



As for the notion that SD’s electoral success signals the onset of a racist and xenophobic trend in Sweden, the available evidence indicates otherwise. According to opinion surveys on that issue, the attitudes of Swedes in general have become more favourable to immigration in recent years, not less.

It appears, however, that SD’s critique of current immigration policy resonates with a much larger segment of the population than its 5.7 per cent of the vote suggests. A survey taken during 30 September – 7 October, i.e. shortly after the election, found that 73 per cent of those polled felt that “integration and immigration constitute a major problem”. The survey also disclosed equally widespread doubts about the validity and neutrality of the research findings and analyses of Swedish experts on immigration.

Growth potential

For the moment, the popularity of the Sweden Democrats appears to have subsided. A poll taken two weeks after the election found that their support had dwindled to 3.4 per cent, i.e. below the parliamentary threshold. That decline may be due wholly or in part to the ferocious response by the media and the political establishment to SD's election success. What they are now experiencing looks and sounds very much like a witch hunt.

Despite the concentrated abuse, it is not impossible that the Sweden Democrats will be able to expand their base of support, now that have achieved a measure of legitimacy, a more visible public platform and, not least, the comparatively large sum of money that comes with representation in the parliament.

Among the party's other assets is a young and articulate leader, Jimmy Åkesson, who conveys a calm and reasonable impression in televised and other public forums. He and his associates will now have much greater opportunity to convey their message in their own words, in sharp contrast to the pre-election past when the principal strategy of their many opponents was to ignore, stifle and misrepresent them.

The saga of the Sweden Democrats in Swedish politics has probably just begun.

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Needless to say, these issues deserve a much more thorough treatment than they have received in these few pages, but this is all that I can manage for the moment. For those who are eager for more details, I will try to supply them via the e-mail address noted below. Comments, criticisms and corrections are also very welcome.

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17 October 2010

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