

Trouble in social democratic paradise – the Swedish model crumbles?

by **HANNAH BRADBY** Dec 5, 2014



Image: Sweden Grunge Flag by think0 from deviantART

I live in the social democratic paradise that a generation of British-lefties admired as the good society: Sweden. Radical social reforms undertaken from 1932 to 1976 (when the Social Democratic party governed continuously), engineered a system that lived up to the promise of welfare from cradle to grave. Despite the economic crisis of the 1990s and the subsequent retraction of the welfare state, Sweden remains a generous and inclusive welfare state compared to other Western social democracies. But now there's trouble in paradise and the model welfare state is in **political crisis**.

The benefits of living in Sweden include: paid parental leave from employment (with incentives to share the leave between parents); subsidised pre-school day-care (located in residential neighbourhoods), for all children from the age of 12 months; free education from 6 years of age, up to University. There's no question of paying out for school dinners, trips to the local museum or even bus travel to school and there are financial benefits (as well as loans) available to support students at Universities that do not charge fees. Personal assistance for people with disabilities and care for the elderly supports independent living as long as possible. Health care that is almost free at the point of delivery (with nominal fees that are capped annually, applying for those over 19 years).

What more could one ask?

More than any other welfare system, the Swedish model has emancipated the individual from family obligations. In particular, women are released from responsibilities to care for the young, old, and the sick, making high levels of female participation in the work place possible. The cost of providing universal healthcare and welfare relies on most of the population paying significant income tax, so there is a strong expectation that adults are employed.

However, more recently, this expectation has clashed with another of Sweden's merits: its generosity in accepting migrants and refugees. With a rate of immigration among the highest in Europe, integration of incomers has relied on 'the workline' – getting a job and paying taxes. Where refugees and asylum seekers have found it hard to get into the labour market, but nonetheless receive benefits, this has proved to be a breeding ground of resentment from the longer-resident population.

Alongside pressures on the welfare state's ability to provide for an ageing population with high health expectations, support for right wing populist politics has grown. The elite political class's neglect of rural and small town politics has left space for a toxic populist mix of anti-Islam and anti-immigration sentiment to develop, fuelled by nostalgia for the **glory days of the Swedish model**. Riding this

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populist wave are the 'Sverigedemokraterna' or Sweden Democrats (not to be confused with the Social Democrats) who are attracting increasing numbers of votes. Eight hundred thousand at the last election.

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Sverigedemokraterna have grown from their neo-Nazi roots to sit at the heart of government, as the third largest party. The other main parties have resolved not to cooperate with them politically. However, such non-cooperation has consequences in a minority coalition government. Earlier this week (3rd December) the current Swedish government **called a general election for March 2015**, even though they were only elected in September 2014; this was because they failed to get a **national budget agreed by parliament**.

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Sverigedemokraterna, Sweden's UKIP-equivalent party, would not let a budget pass without a commitment to a 90% reduction in immigration. Another minority party with a growing voter-base – The Greens – in coalition with the Social Democrats, will not contemplate such a cut to immigration. This has forced immigration onto the central political agenda, an issue which the **main parties have ignored** for too long. Is this blackmail from neo-Nazis? Or is it a wake-up call for the main political parties to listen to the 800,000 discontents who voted for Sverigedemokraterna?

The last three decades have seen Social Democratic parties **'bleed support'** in Germany, Austria, Scandinavia, Australia and New Zealand and even France. Minority parties of right and left have been the beneficiaries. But does this change make the solidaristic, universalist welfare system a doomed species?

Not so long ago, the Swedish model presented a significant threat to the American political administration. In the 1960s, not only did Sweden take in 'draft dodgers' from the Vietnam war but it was also providing both good quality employment and welfare, while avoiding the evil of communism. Such was the perceived threat of the Swedish model that President Eisenhower, in a successful and long-lasting bit of spin, described the generous Swedish welfare system as resulting in 'sin, nudity, drunkenness and suicide'. The speech is credited with starting the persistent and widespread **myth of Sweden's excessive suicide rate**. It also helped fuel other, gendered myths that attracted a generation of young men to Sweden.

The Swedish model doesn't pose such a threat now.

As we enter the build up to another general election, the fear of being held hostage by a politics of right-wing anti-immigration populism looms large, in Sweden as in the UK.

British-lefties may not be looking admiringly to the Swedish model any more.

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