

The Social Democrats are due to recover power in the legislative elections on 14th September in Sweden.

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Analysis

Abstract :

2014 is a major electoral year for the Swedes. Indeed on 25th May last they elected their MEPs, as did all European citizens; on 14th September they will be electing the 349 members of the Riksdag (the Swedish parliament) as well as the local representatives (town councillors and county councillors). Swedes living abroad are allowed to vote in the general elections. In 2010 one quarter of them were registered on the electoral rolls but only one fifth of them turned out to vote.

The change in the electoral law in November 2010 now obliges the person nominated to be Prime Minister to win Parliament's approval and to form a majority within 2 weeks following the general elections. The law also reduced the threshold that independent candidates have to reach within the constituencies to be elected (from a previous 8% down to 5%). Many analysts believe that this change will lead to the election of more independent MPs.

After 8 years in office, a first in the Scandinavian kingdom for a rightwing government, the parties in the coalition (Moderate Assembly Party (M), the People's Party-Liberals (FpL), the Centre Party (C) and the Christian Democratic Party (KD), led by outgoing Prime Minister Fredrik Reinfeldt (M), are, according to the polls, due to return to the opposition benches and make way for a left alliance led by the Social Democrats and Stefan Löfven (SAP).

The right has suffered the passage of time and Swedes are now showing they want change. Although the social democrats are due to win on 14th September the issue of their future coalition partners remains. Their programme does not differ much from that undertaken by Fredrik Reinfeldt's government; the upcoming election will depend more on the personalities of the leaders and therefore the potential Prime Ministers, rather than on a true political change or the manner of government.

The leftwing (Social Democratic Party, the Environment-Greens Party (MP) and the Left Party (Vp)) have led in the

polls since March 2012. They won the European elections with 46% of the vote, in comparison with 36.1% for the parties in the government coalition. The Social Democratic Party won 24.4% of the vote and five seats. The ecologists came second with 15.3% (4 seats) ahead of the Moderate Assembly Party (13.6%, three seats). The populist Democrats (DS) won 9.7% (2 seats). Just over half of the Swedes turned out to vote (51.01%).

Feminist Initiative (FI), led by the former chair of the Left Party (Vp) (1993-2003) Gudrun Schyman, won 5.3% of the vote and one seat. After the European election some polls forecast the party's entry into the Riksdag on 14th September but voting intentions in its support have declined rapidly. The most recent SIFO poll, published mid-August credited FI with 2.6% of the vote.

The left leaning party declares that it is open to cooperation with all of the other parties. On 14th June it adopted an electoral platform asking, amongst other things, greater access to housing, a more equal wage policy, a reduction of the defence budget, a wage guarantee for workers who are sick or unemployed and the establishment of a residence permit for those without papers.

WHAT OF THE SWEDISH MODEL?

The Swedish model is a one of regulated capitalism within a liberal society: social progress (universalist social policy,

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progressive taxation, tradition of wage negotiation, investment in citizens' well-being), pragmatism and the spirit of reform. The Swedes enjoy the benefits of a generous Welfare State (Folkhemmet) and live in one of the most equal societies in the world. "The Swedes appreciate their autonomy and have a strong sense of equality. This combination means that instead of being dependent on the family or their friends they want to protect their independence by allowing the State to provide a safety net. The price for this – and they agree to pay it – lies in their taxes," maintains Ulf Bjerfeld, a professor at the University of Göteborg.

The idea of Folkhemmet (literally – "home for the people") was created by the conservatives in a rural and community based Sweden. The term "people" should be interpreted as a homogeneous collectivity which shares a similar history and culture. Very quickly (and successfully) the social democrats used the idea to assert their reform policy to the point that over time, social democracy no longer appeared as a partisan ideology but became an integral part of national culture.

The Swedish model illustrated its resilience during the most recent economic crises of the 1970's, 1990's and at the end of the 2000's. It has run into some difficulties however. The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) has pointed out that over the last 25 years Sweden has been the developed country in which inequality has increased the most: the Gini coefficient, which measures a country's income inequality, has grown by 25% over one generation.

The economic crisis has made the integration of new arrivals difficult (refugees or immigrants) in a country that was homogeneous for many years. The Swedish Democrats, a populist party created in 1988, led by Jimmie Akesson, has been quick to seize the idea of Folkhemmet and to stand as the defender of Swedish identity and the country's model in the face of globalisation and multiculturalism.

Sweden has a tradition for its reception of political refugees, which dates back to the 1980's and 90's, but immigration is a recent development (Stockholm did open its door to many immigrants from Turkey and Pakistan in the 1970's). 15% of the population was born abroad. Last year 27,000 asylum seekers, including 12,000 Syrians were accepted by Sweden according to the figures published by the Migrations Council. On 19th May 2013 riots erupted in Husby – a town to the north west of Stockholm - after the death of a 69 year old man in his apartment 6 days previously. The towns of

Ragsved and Malmö (south) were also subject to violent incidents. In 2009 riots had taken place in Rikesby and in the suburb of Rosengård in Malmö in 2008 and 2010.

There are many housing blocks in Husby that date back to 1960's and 70's, which now need to be renovated. 85% of those living in the town are of foreign origin and one young person in five is unemployed or has dropped out of school. Children growing up in the poorest suburbs generally have less access to high school and as a result to university than their counterparts living in wealthier areas. Moreover the number of social workers has decreased.

Fredrik Reinfeldt's government and the social democrats refuse to interpret the riots in Husby as a failure of the Swedish model and maintain that the problem was of an ethnic nature. The Swedish Democrats then found it easy to suggest that the riots illustrated the failure of the government's immigration policy and multiculturalism. "What is happening in our suburbs is the direct result of an irresponsible immigration policy and pumping in more money will not settle the problem," declared Jimmie Akesson.

The crisis Sweden faces seems to more of a social nature than being one of community. Indeed the most qualified amongst the population are struggling to find work and therefore to fit into to society. The riots are the sign of a rejection of inequality, with the idea of equality remaining as the foundation of Swedish culture.

According to a recent Eurostat study Sweden is one of the Member States where non-European immigrants find it hardest to get a job. The employment rate is 50.2%; the national rate totals 81.3%, the country is the EU country in which the difference between these two employment rates is the highest. Eurostat notes that Sweden hosts 1.9% of the European population and accepted 9.5% of all asylum seekers in 2013 (26,000), i.e. the highest percentage in the Union. Moreover it notes that the country has the lowest difference between the highest and lowest incomes, which affects the flexibility of its labour market.

The five party Nordic model structured the Swedish political landscape for many years: the working class was divided between revolutionary radicals and moderate reformists whilst the bourgeois electorate was split into three: agrarians, conservatives and liberals. The political parties were extremely structured for a long time and their electorates were stable. But Sweden, like many European countries over the last 30 years has experienced electoral erosion. The

social democrats, who dominated the scene for many years won 30.66% of the vote in the last general election on 19th September 2010; they won 45.6% in 1982.

Over the last few years new subjects – like the environment, secularity, the cost of the Welfare State, immigration – have transcended the traditional lines of division and have given rise to new parties: ecologist, far left and populist.

THE RIGHT THREATENED BY THE DESIRE FOR CHANGE

In its campaign the centre right is promoting its economic results and the way it has managed the crisis. "Sweden is doing well, better than its European counterparts," repeats the government. Growth totalled 2.8% last year and is due to lie at 2.7% this year and 3.5% in 2015 according to all forecasts. The budgetary deficit was close to 0.5% in 2013 and is due to rise to 1.2% in 2014, i.e. below the maximum threshold of 3% set by the European Stability and Growth Pact. Unemployment remains high (8.2%) notably amongst young people with the highest rate in the Scandinavian countries. According to the government unemployment should decline to 6.7% by 2016.

Outgoing Prime Minister Fredrik Reinfeldt believes that Sweden's budget will be balanced in 2016. Healthy public finances are an asset. "Our public finances are better than those in other countries and that is our base. This means that there will be no further tax reductions in 2015 and 2016," he declared indicating that he would privilege investments in education.

The head of government, who has reduced income and corporate tax (as well as social charges) five times since he entered office in 2006 (Sweden's tax revenue totalled 51.5% in 1999 and represents 44.3% of the GDP), has interpreted the polls which all show that most Swedes are concerned about the deterioration in the public services and that they are against further tax reductions. A poll undertaken in July last shows that education is the most important issue for one third of the Swedes in these general elections (34%). 28% mentioned unemployment, 24% of healthcare and 17% of the environment.

The Swedes have witnessed a decline in their country's results in the most recent PISA survey (Program for International

Student Assessment), a three yearly study undertaken by the OECD of the performance of the education systems of several countries. The results of Swedish pupils aged under 15 fell below that of the OECD countries' average. In 2012 Sweden came fifth in the ranking whilst it was second in 2006 when Fredrik Reinfeldt's government entered office. Finance Minister Anders Borg (M) indicated that taxes would increase by 5 billion crowns next year (and by 8 million in 2018) to enable investment in education. But the government's announcements have undoubtedly come too late.

Although most Swedes trust the outgoing Prime Minister as far as economic issues are concerned the question of education, healthcare, care of the elderly forms the core of the electoral campaign, a situation which is more to the advantage of the parties on the left.

Fredrik Reinfeldt has set himself the target of increasing the number of people in work by 350,000 by 2020. His party is offering to build 20,000 new student flats, a project that would create 13,000 jobs. His programme includes the construction of 100,000 new houses to a total cost of 400 billion crowns (this project called Sverigebygget, is due for completion in 2035) and the launch of new metro stations in Stockholm (the cost of which is estimated at 1.2 billion crowns). Fredrik Reinfeldt is also planning to devote 88 billion crowns to the integration of immigrants. The latter are also due to be able to access Swedish lessons more easily, a measure estimated at 50 million crowns per year.

Fredrik Reinfeldt can count on the union of his majority. The polls show that the Centre Party (C), led by Annie Lööf, and Göran Hägglund's Christian Democratic Party (KD) will find it hard to rise above the 4% of votes cast nationally (or 12% within a given constituency) which is vital in order to win seats. Both parties are fighting for their survival.

THE RETURN OF THE LEFT

After eight years on the opposition – their longest period out of office over the last hundred years, the social democrats should, according to the polls, recover power on 14th September. The party has not made any real ideological changes after its two successive electoral defeats: the report

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written by the committee responsible for assessing the electoral failure of 19th September 2010 was very quickly laid to rest.

Stefan Löfven took over as head of the Social Democratic Party on 27th January 2012. He succeeded Hakan Juholt, who was forced to resign in the wake of his involvement in a series of scandals. Löfven, a former member of the metal industry union (he has chaired IF Metall since 2006) and from a working class background, embodies the traditional social democratic leader.

The social democrats accuse the present government of wanting to continue the reduction of taxes and therefore to shrink the Welfare State. They stand as the defenders of the Swedish model, "which has been broken by the outgoing government and has to be repaired," says Stefan Löfven. The latter is against any further tax reductions and privatisations and is planning to increase bank taxes to be able to invest in nurseries and kindergarten. Magdalena Andersson, who may become the next Finance Minister if the left wins, announced that a new tax totalling a yearly 4 billion crowns would be created (as much as the financial establishments earned with the reduction of taxes in 2013). "The level of taxation is adequate ; now we have to focus on protecting our Welfare State and improving schools and employment," she declared.

The social democrats also want to increase social allowances. They are promising to reduce existing wage disparities. Stefan Löfven announced that he would reduce pensioners' taxation, who are penalised in comparison with those in work. The cost of this measure is estimated at 4 billion crowns over the period 2014-2018.

Finally the Social Democratic Party is promising to create jobs and wants Sweden's unemployment rate to be the lowest in the country's history by 2020. On 4th August the social democratic leader announced that he wanted to devote 2.8 billion crowns to the employment of 20,000 young people in the sector of care for the elderly and for the handicapped. In his opinion this plan would solve three problems: the lack of workers in this specific area, youth unemployment and the inter-generational gap. Any young person who has finished his secondary education and who has not worked over the last three months will be able to join this programme.

The social democrats, who have set the goal of winning

35% of the vote on 14th September (a result they achieved 26 times in a row between 1921 and 2006) have never governed alone. The Environment Party-Greens (MP), represented by its two spokespeople, Gustav Fridolin and Asa Romson, is their natural partner. Encouraged by their result in the European election (15.3% of the vote and four seats), the ecologists, who lie more to the left than before and who support a policy of degrowth, have been extremely determined and ambitious as far as their participation in a social democratic government is concerned. They support a 35-hour working week and are asking for the closure of the country's two nuclear reactors within the next four years (nuclear power provides Sweden with half of its electricity). They want to close Bromma airport which lies 9 km from Stockholm through which 1.3 million passengers transit yearly – and it wants to prevent the construction of a ring-road around Stockholm. Finally they are asking that asylum be granted automatically to anyone who has lived in Sweden for two years and for programmes in support of women in education and the professional world.

The Left Party (Vp), the former Communist Party, led by Jonas Sjöstedt, wants to increase taxation on the wealthiest and also on companies. It disagrees however with the social democrats regarding private businesses being able to take over some public services. In view of its positions some analysts say that the Centre Party and the People's Party-Liberals (FpL) might become the best government partners for the social democrats rather than the Left Party which would not support a government in which it has no participation.

Can the populists prevent the formation of a majority?

On 19th September 2010 Sweden opened the Riksdag's door to the populists. The Swedish Democrats are due to remain in parliament notably because of the proportional voting system and the low entry threshold. The result they achieve is one of the major stakes in this election. The party aims to become the third most important in the kingdom.

The party mainly attracts those disappointed by social democracy, i.e. the poorest and many young people who find it hard to fit into society. Since their congress in November 2011 they have stood as a social-conservative party and have tried to tone down their image as a nationalist party. In November 2013 Jimmie Akesson said that the party wanted to promote themes other than immigration (such as the lack

of workers in certain sectors or working hours) in order to improve the party's visibility and its influence.

Created in 1988 in replacement of the Party of Sweden (SvP), the party's origins are to be found in the far right. The Swedish Democrats relinquished its Nazi doctrine in 1999. In 1999 Jimmie Akesson replaced the torch, which had been the party's symbol until then, with a "less aggressive" blue anemone. The words "culture" and "Swedishness" have replaced "race" and "ethnicity" in the party's discourse. Members who were openly racist have been excluded from the party.

Jimmie Akesson is promising to reduce immigration by 85%. His programme includes the increase of spending in the areas of employment and healthcare; it is also planning for free medical care for the over 85's. It believes it can keep these promises by reducing spending on immigration and the aid that Stockholm gives on an international level. "People are linking the problem of immigration with the increasing cost of the Welfare State, the deterioration of school results etc," maintains the populist leader who qualifies Islam as "the modern Nazism and Communism," and he recalls that Sweden was built on Christian principles.

In 2014 44% of Swedes said that their country counted too much on immigrants (37% in 2013). "People are not necessarily less tolerant but they watch television and believe that limiting or doing away with immigration would be the best way to settle certain problems," stresses Anders Hellström, a political science researcher at the University of Malmö.

THE SWEDISH POLITICAL SYSTEM

Sweden's parliament, the Riksdag, is monocameral comprising 349 members elected every four years in a proportional election. In the legislative elections the country is divided into 29 electoral constituencies, electing 310 MPs (11 on average). The biggest of these constituencies is Stockholm which elects 38 MPs. The electorate's votes are divided according to a modified Sainte Lagüe method according to a first divider of 1.4.

The remaining 39 seats, called compensatory seats, are attributed to different parties in order to guarantee the best possible level of representativeness nationally. To take part in the distribution of the compensatory seats a party has to

have won 4% of the votes cast nationally or 12% within a given constituency.

The electorate can vote for a party or make a preferential vote in support of one of the candidates that feature on the lists they are offered by the parties and as a result influence the distribution of the seats. During the counting the number of seats won by each party is decided before the candidates on each list who have personally rallied the greatest number of votes are announced.

8 political parties are represented in the Riksdag at present:

- the Social Democratic Party (SAP), the main opposition party founded in 1889 and led since 27th January 2012 by Stefan Löfven, dominated Swedish political life for over 70 years. It has 112 seats;
- the Moderate Assembly Party (M) a liberal party created in 1904 and led by the outgoing Prime Minister Fredrik Reinfeldt with 107 seats;
- the Environment-Greens Party (MP) created in 1981 and represented since May 2011 by Gustav Fridolin and Asa Romson, with 25 MPs;
- the People's Party-Liberals (FpL), founded in 1934 whose leader is the outgoing Education Minister Jan Björklund, with 24 seats;
- the Centre Party, (C) the former agrarian party created in 1913 and led since 23rd September 2011 by Annie Lööf, with 23 seats;
- the Swedish Democrats (SD), a populist rightwing party founded in 1988 and led by Jimmie Akesson with 20 seats;
- the Christian Democratic Party (KD), a conservative party founded in 1964 and led by Göran Hägglund, with 19 MPs ;
- the Left Party (Vp), led since 6th January 2012 by Jonas Sjöstedt, with 19 seats.

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Reminder of the general election results of 19th September 2010 in Sweden

Turn out: 84.63%

Political Parties	No of votes won	% of votes won	No of seats won
Social Democratic Party (SAP)	1 827 497	30,66	112
Moderate Assembly Party (M)	1 791 766	30,06	107
Environment-Greens Party (MP)	437 435	7,34	25
People's Party- Liberals (FpL)	420 524	7,06	24
Centre Party (C)	390 804	6,56	23
Swedish Democrats (SD)	339 610	5,70	20
Left Party (Vp)	334 053	5,60	19
Christian Democratic Party (KD)	333 696	5,60	19
Others	82 023	2,12	0

Source : <http://www.val.se/val/val2010/slutresultat/R/rike/index.html>

The most recent poll by SIFO published mid-August forecasts the absolute majority to the three leftwing parties which together are due to win 176 seats against 141 for the four parties on the right. The Social Democratic Party is due to win 30.3% of the vote, the ecologists 11.1% and the Left Party 7.9% (i.e. 49.3% of the total); the Moderate Assembly Party is due to win

24.6% of the vote, the People's Party-Liberals (6.7%). The Centre Party (3.8%) and the Christian Democratic Party (3.4%) would be below the 4% of the vote. Together the rightwing is due to win 38.5% of the vote. Finally the Swedish Democrats are due to win 10.1% and 32 seats.

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