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by Håkan A Bengtsson

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The Red Green Coalition in Sweden

by Håkan A Bengtsson

In 2010 Sweden is facing a decisive general election. The question is if the bourgeois alliance which is now governing the country will get a second term. The fact is that Sweden since the 1930s has only had bourgeois governments between 1976-1982 and 1991-1994, and now since 2006 when Fredrik Reinfeldt became Prime Minister of a right-wing coalition. Social Democrats are in a way still considered as the party of power. However, the general view is that the Social Democrats might lose this role if the conservatives stay in power and win the next election.

Social Democrat support among the Swedish voters has diminished over time. Even though the Social Democrats remain the biggest party, it does not occupy the same position as it did during the period of the Social Democrat hegemony between the 1940s and 1960s. In the 1940s the Social Democratic party on average got support of almost 49% of the voters. With passive support from the Communist Party, there was a strong left leaning majority. In the 1950s Social Democrats gained 45%, and in the 1960s over 48% of votes. During the 1970s and 1980s the party only got between 43-45% on average. In the 1990s their support was only 39%, thereby going under the 40% mark. The first decade of the 21st century saw it slump to 37% on average, with a new low being registered in 2006 of 34%. The worst since 1914.

One aspect of this is that Social Democrats mostly have governed alone, very seldom with a majority in the parliament. Mostly it formed minority governments, with passive support from the old Communist Party before 1989 but also sometimes with support, and in

coalition (in the 50ths) with Centerpartiet (the Farmers Party) and lately in close cooperation with the Green Party and the Left Party (formerly known as the Communist Party), but not yet in a formal government coalition. The political landscape in Sweden has now changed dramatically.

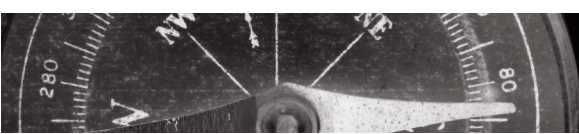
The Green Party has established itself a serious political party. They don't want to accept the classical class- and left and right dimension in politics. But of course most of the issues the Green Party cares for makes it easier for them to look to the left. The Left Party abandoned communism at the beginning the 1990s. There had been a long battle within the party, between traditionalists and renewers, just as in the Social Democratic Party. Some leading figures in the party still consider themselves as communists. The party leader, Lars Ohly, regarded himself one until renouncing this a couple of years ago. But if you look at the party programme or the concrete political proposals, it is clear that the Left Party is now a left-socialist or left-social democratic party.

The election defeat in 2006 was paradoxically both a surprise and expected at the same time. The Swedish economy was in good shape. Unemployment was low compared to other European countries. The economy was expanding. But at the same time it was clear that there was a underlying fatigue with the Social Democrats and their leader Göran Persson. The government gave the impression that four more years with him meant "no change". The party had by then been in power for twelve years. Göran Persson himself had been Prime Minister for 10 years, and before that Finance Minister. He ruled the party more or less on his own, to be quite frank. He was a very strong leader, an excellent speaker and a good communicator, however he was considered by many as authoritarian in style. Maybe there is some similarities between Göran Persson and the general picture of Gerard Schröder in this respect.

Göran Persson's big achievement was that he saved the Swedish economy and the welfare state in the 1990s, which at that time was in a deep crisis, with a very bold economic policy. This created a large degree of discontent among many Social Democratic voters. The party suffered in the election 1998, but stayed in power. In 2002, when the economy was in a better shape and unemployment was lower, Göran Persson performed very well, getting 40% of the vote in the election of that year. But in 2006 it was all over.

An important explanation to the Social Democratic defeat is that the big right-wing party managed to use the momentum for change, and at the same time altered their own image. The paradox is that the left in opposition have to act as a government, but in government has to be its own opposition. In this aspect the Social Democrats not only lost the election, but also lost the power to dictate the political agenda during the first decade of 21st century.

The big conservative party (Moderaterna) did a sort of "New Labour remake", and started talking about themselves as the "new moderates" and even claimed they were the workers party. In 2002 they were damaged because of their neoliberal program and demands for big tax cuts, losing one third of their voters in the process. But in 2006 they made an amazing comeback. They also incorporated classical left leaning political language and gave them a more bourgeois meaning. This gave the facade that the right had moved to the middle. Which was not true in all aspects, and at the same time some of the other bourgeois parties moved to right! But sometimes image is quite essential. All this made it hard for the Social Democrats to get a real grip on the new bourgeois alliance. To sum up: It was not a landslide. The right wing alliance won a majority of 2%. The Social Democrats, the Left Party and the Green Party became the new opposition, and soon started to act as they together were an upcoming government.



On the election night, Göran Persson had already declared that he would leave politics after ten years as Prime Minister. The process to select a new party leader, which started right away, sent very clear signals that the party wanted a new kind of leader and another kind of leadership. It was actually a very open process and not a top down way of doing things. It involved the local organisation and their members. All the local regional organisations collected opinions from members and local party meetings. The national select committee interviewed the different possible candidates. After a while it was clear that some candidates were not available and that Mona Sahlin had the broadest support among the remaining candidates. All this marked a cultural shift. After all, she was the first woman to become party leader in the Social Democratic Party; in itself a big change for a party dominated so long by men.

When she actually was elected party leader in spring 2007 she made some outspoken remarks that she would run the party in another way than Göran Persson. She expressed clearly that it would be a more open party, and she talked about not repelling the loving critics of Social Democracy.

Furthermore, her strategy was not to give answers to all main political issues from the beginning. The party needed time to regain strength and some time to mourn. Only after this could it find a new direction. After all, this seems to have been Mona Sahlin's approach. In some areas she followed through with what she said, in some issues she did this in conflict with a majority within the party and some of the old dogmas. However, she also introduced the so-called "consultations" (in Swedish: "rådslag") in the main political fields, the members and local organisation were asked to respond to and answer very open questions.

This strategy was criticised by some. It meant that some questions were left open. The critics meant that this created a vacuum in the party and the opposition. In some ways this may have been true. Many

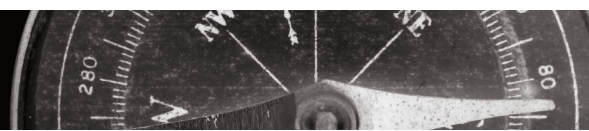
issues waited for a final decision and answer. What was the actual policy of a future government led by the Social Democrats? Lately this seems to have been a growing problem for Mona Sahlin. But the party congress in October 2009 gave a more positive picture and final verdict for this strategy. It actually looked like a success, at least from an internal party perspective. Mona Sahlin won all the important issues on the congress. Over all, she came out of this very well. The open process showed that she had read the party quite well, listened to different positions and showed her ability to compromise. A big majority supported her on all the central political fields. She did not need to challenge and confront the congress head-on. It was a more united party now than before, a party more at ease with itself. This open process with its more deliberative approach could very well mark an interesting cultural shift in the Social Democratic tradition, a move away from its well known authoritarian tendencies.

In one aspect Mona Sahlin was clear from the beginning. Because the right wing parties have formed a strong alliance, the Social Democrats had to respond in some way. She said that it was important to form an alliance and in the future consisting of the Greens and the Left Party most likely. They – the red-green – should go together 2010. Before the election 2006 the Social Democrats had declared that it would not seek support for a Social Democratic government. End of story. In reality this was not an option. The Greens demanded to be part of a future government. The same message came from the Left Party, even though they were not as outspoken. But the right won the election of 2006. And you have to remember that there had been a close cooperation between the Greens and the Left Party for several years. They have been allowed to place "observers" in some departments in a government led by the Social Democrats. All the main political issues and decisions were negotiated between the three parties. This has paved the way for what was to come.

The bourgeois alliance that was formed before the election in 2006 changed the structure of Swedish politics. The split between left and right has always been fundamental. But there has not been a formal alliance before the election on either side of the political spectrum. The forming of the alliance seems to have a decisive role in the bourgeois election victory of 2006. This made the Social Democrats regroup and reconsider their old strategy. Mona Sahlin has now formed a more formal cooperation between the Greens and the Left Party. They have already presented almost 50 concrete common political proposals. More will come. On several fields the three parties have common working groups which will present policies in spring 2010.

This means that Swedish politics has definitely entered a new era. It is not a two party system, but a two bloc system, where these two blocs are bound together in a deeper way than ever before. This is a paradox. Like in many European systems we see a disintegration of the old political system created during the 19th and the 20th century. Some of the old parties are weaker, and new parties have entered the political scene. This creates on the other hand a demand for clear governmental alternatives.

The creation of the red-green alliance was not an easy task. There was initially deep rooted mistrust within the Social Democratic Party. Some were very sceptical towards the Greens, and others disliked the Left Party. In a way it was easier with the Greens. They don't compete with the Social Democrats over their traditional voters and values. But on the other hand the Greens now win many middle-class voters (which formerly voted Social Democratic) in the urban areas. For a long time the Greens have been part of local and regional political coalitions, mostly with the Social Democrats and the Left Party. They have abolished the demand that Sweden should leave the EU. All this has been good for the Greens. In the opinion polls the recent years the Greens have risen to the third party.



The left is another thing. It was formed as a split from the Social Democratic Party (like in so many other countries in Europe) in 1917. There have been a strong competition (and hate) between the Social Democrats and the Communist Party, and at the same time they have been very close in a cultural sense. Over the years there has been defections in both directions. Ylva Johansson, one of the leaders in the Social Democratic Party, started as a parliamentarian for the Communist Party. One of the left parties members of the European Parliament once was a Social Democrat, and so on. It has also been harder for the Left Party to join the red-green alliance. They are the smallest party in the alliance, and will probably have to compromise more than the others. Even though it is an old party with 80 years in the parliament it has not reached government. In Norway the Left Party have lost many voters in the red-green coalition, which was re-elected in 2009.

So, after some turbulence there now is an red-green alliance. First it seemed to be only an alliance between Social Democrats and the Greens. This created internal discontent within the Social Democratic Party and Mona Sahlin, the left in the party demanded that she had to take the Left Party on board. After this the Left Party was more willing to joint than before. At the same time the opinion polls started to fall for the Social Democrats, after an overwhelming majority for the red-greens in the polls for a couple of years post the election of 2006. But still the red-greens have a lead over the bourgeois parties in the opinion polls. So the red-green cooperation has not been an immediate success, but everything will be decided next year. Its the election that counts. The cooperation between the red-greens will deepen. They will present a clear alternative to the bourgeois government.

Another thing is if the red-greens, and specially the Social Democrats, have a narrative for the future and a strategy for more than four years. This depends on if

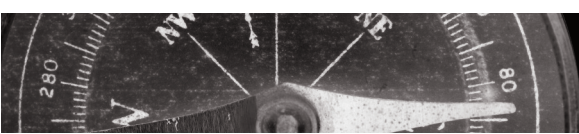
they can formulate a policy to handle the financial crisis, and challenge orthodoxies on labour markets - an issue facing all radicals and progressives in Europe in the coming years; whether they can develop the welfare society for the 21st century; stop the right wing xenophobic party Sverigedemokraterna (Sweden Democrats) from entering the parliament; and if they can formulate a Social Democratic vision for both equality and life opportunities for all. To do these the left has to act as government in opposition, and in government as its own opposition.

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Håkan A Bengtsson is an author and a journalist working in Sweden. In the late 80s he was chiefeditor of *Tvärdrag*, the theoretical magazine for SSU (Social Democratic Youth League), during the time Anna Lindh was chairperson of SSU. In 1993 he founded the political magazine *Arena*. Today he is CEO of Arenagruppen. Arenagruppen among other thing consists of *Arena*, the daily website *Dagens Arena*, the publishing houses *Atlas* and *Premiss*, the think tank *Arena Idé*, seminars, courses, educations and studytravels in *Arena Program* and *Arenauniversitet*.

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