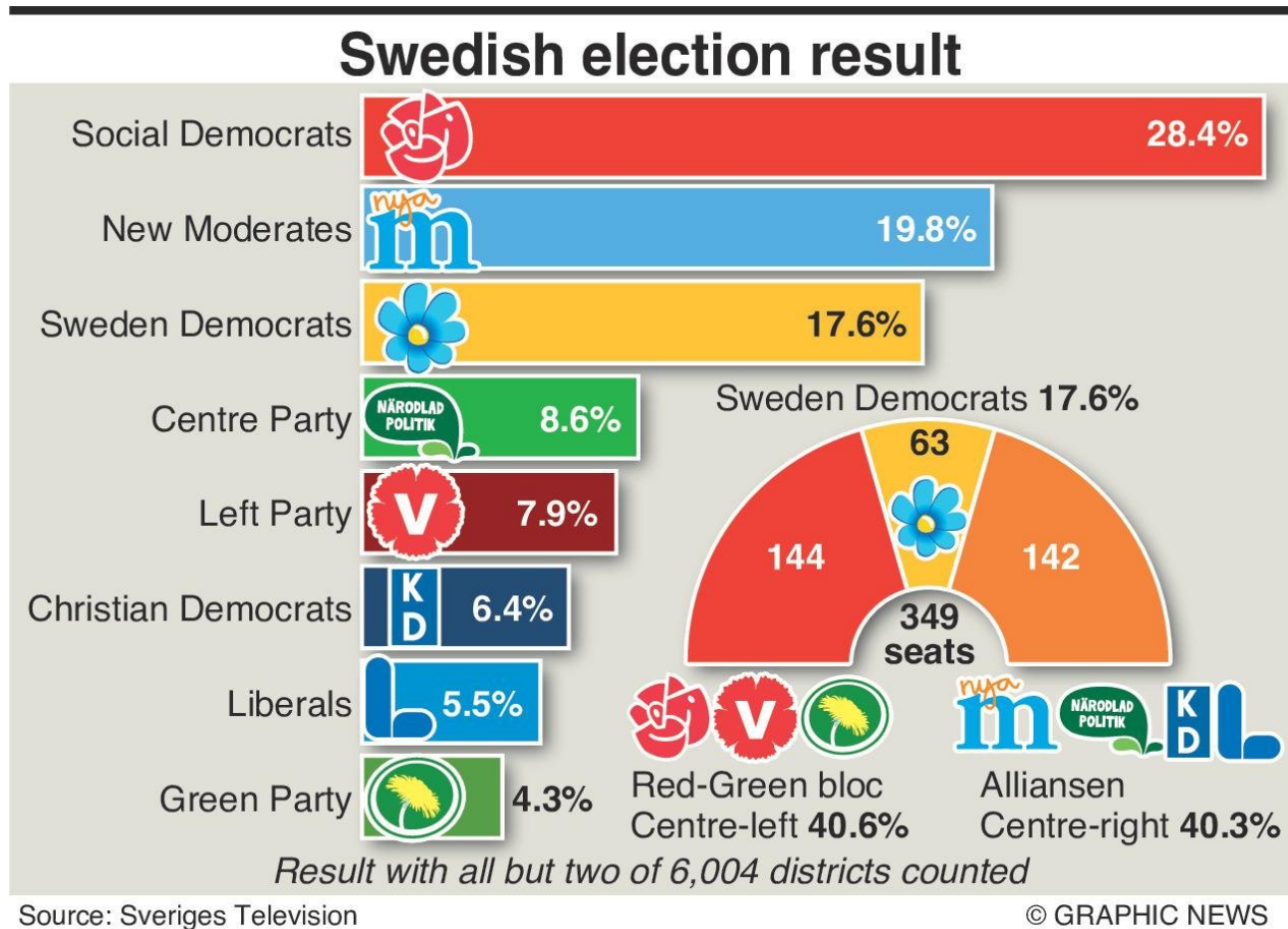


Sweden, the Far-Right Did Not Win

by Michael Curtis



Don't know why, there's no sun up in the sky, stormy weather. The concern about an increase in the popularity of the far-right political party and national populism was the theme song of forecasters and commentators of the parliamentary general election on September 9, 2018 in Sweden. The general belief was that the far-right Sweden Democrat party, anti-immigrant and anti-establishment, would increase its share of the vote, perhaps to about 30% and become the leading party in the country. The forecasts were only partly correct. The party did increase its share of the vote by 4.7% but obtained only just under 18%. Different conclusions may be drawn, but the optimistic one is that Sweden only partly followed the path of

far-right parties in other European countries in recent years.

Far-right populist movements have grown in strength in European countries, in Italy, Poland, Hungary, Czech Republic, and sizable amounts in Germany, Denmark, Netherlands, Austria, and France. The biggest threat to mainstream democratic systems comes from Viktor Orban, prime minister of Hungary who has ended check and balances in the country, restricted press and academic freedoms, and non-governmental organizations, limited judicial independence, refused to accept EU refugee quota arrangements and challenged the leadership of EU. Orban has been rebuked by the European Parliament which approved a report that he had threatened the rule of law by hampering press and academic freedom, and then voted to censure Hungary.

Nostalgia isn't what it used to be with the arrival in Europe of immigrants bringing uncertainty and often violence. Sweden, if no longer a socialist utopia, with its broad liberal consensus, generous welfare state, and social peace, ruled for long periods by Social Democrats had seemed to typify Newton's law of inertia, an object at rest will stay at rest. For most of the world, Sweden is a country best known for Nobel Prizes, Abba, the pop group quartet, who started in 1972, Ingrid Bergman who left Humphrey Bogart in *Casablanca*, film director Ingmar Bergman, playwright August Strindberg, for Ikea founded by a 17 year-old in 1943, the firm of modernist designs appliances and furniture and now the world's largest furniture retailer, delicious meatballs and pickled herring.

Sweden is an affluent and progressive country with a strong welfare system, high tax rates, and policies to reduce inequalities, low unemployment of 6.7% compared with France 9.4% and Italy 11.2%, wealthy with GDP per capita of \$43,000 (Germany \$35,000, France and UK \$32,000 and Italy \$26,000). The country spends the second highest amount in the EU countries on education, and is active in environmental issues such as CO₂ emissions.

The country is now also one of fragmented political landscape and voter volatility.

At the general election on September 9, 2018, about 41% of voters said they voted for a different party than in 2014. In a high turnout of 84% the result was inconclusive, with eight parties being represented in parliament, leaving the country in political uncertainty about the formation of a coalition government with the two major blocs almost equal, and the far-right Sweden Democrats an outsider. One bloc is Center-Left (consisting of Social Democrat, Left, Greens), getting 40.7% and 144 seats, and the other is Center-Right (Christian Democrats, Moderate, Liberals, Center), getting 40.3% and 143 seats. The Sweden Democrats, the far-right party outside the blocs, who got 6% in 2010, got 17.6% of the vote, in 2018, the third largest proportion, and 62 seats.

Both of the two blocs are short of a majority, and any government will need support from the opposite bloc for policy approval since neither wants support from the Sweden Democrats. The major parties all lost votes and seats in the new Riksdag of 349. The Social Democrats, the largest party among men, often got 45% of the vote in the past, this time received only 28.4% of the vote, down 3% since 2014, and won 101 seats, though it is still the largest party. The opposition Moderates, who adopted some of the far-right ideology, had 30% of the vote in 2010, but now with 19.8% lost 3.5%, and got 70 seats. Thus, there was less support for mainstream politics and parties, in spite of the fact that they had accepted a moratorium on asylum seekers, the deportation of illegal immigrants, and stronger rules for citizenship.

The Sweden Democrats did better, though its increase was less than the rise of 7.2% between 2010 and 2014, but less well than expectations. What then explains the rise in Far-Right support, the increase in populism, the dislike of globalization? A number of issues disturbed the country:

shortage of doctors, teachers, police; violence in the city of Malmo, especially in the foreign populated Rosengard area, that some regard as a no-go area, with its violent antisemitic outbreaks, general lack of safety, increase in gangland shootings, crime, rape and murder. In 2017 there were 320 shootings and 7,226 rapes, over half committed by foreigners, the immigrants.

The key is immigration, stress on identity politics, and concern about crime and lack of law and order. One fifth of Sweden's 10 million have foreign roots, and many are not well integrated. Unemployment is 4% among natives, but 16% among foreign born, and 23% for non-European immigrants who are accused of a disproportionate number of crimes, terrorism, lack of Swedish values of tolerance, and openness.

Clearly the most important factor is criticism of immigration. In 2015 Sweden admitted 162,000 immigrants, the second largest number of migrants per capita of any EU nation. As a result of public criticism, the number dropped to 26,000 in 2017.

The Sweden Democrats, founded in 1988, is led by 39 year-old Jimmie Akesson, charismatic speaker, usually casually dressed, college drop-out, and heavy gambler.

He has never been personally linked to neo-Nazism, but the party has roots in fascism and neo-Nazism and white nationalist movements (Keep Sweden Swedish). It entered parliament in 2010 with 5.7% of the vote. Akesson has tried to limit those with racist views, but the party is strongly opposed to outsiders, to immigrants, as well as to the existing political elite.

The dilemma remains, for a period of negotiation, and the evidence is mixed because of the relative weakness of the mainstream parties which must now deal with the immigration issue. The country now has a fragmented legislature, and possibly weak government. It will take some time to agree on a

new coalition government. Already the present prime minister Social Democrat, Stefan Lofven, PM since 2014, has rejected a demand from Ulf Kristersson, leader of the opposition center right Moderates since 2017, to help form a coalition.

One problem is that if the two blocs joined in a grand coalition the Sweden Democrats can claim they are the only opposition group. But this does not indicate that the far-right will play a role similar to that in other European countries. Its leader since 2005 Jimmie Akesson still insists that the Muslim population is the biggest foreign threat to Sweden since World War II. With the existing concentration on immigration and opposition to refugees and migrants, the far-right will have some influence until the mainstream parties will deal with the issue. Sweden faces the problem. Will the mainstream parties, after agreeing on a government, try to appease the far-right on the key issues, as well as balance economic efficiency and social justice?

It is gratifying that the Sweden Democrats did not do as well as some had feared. The question for the country is whether the glass is half full or half empty. When the worst are full of passionate intensity, for a healthy political system the center must hold. As Mark Twain once wrote, if your job is to eat a frog, it's best to do it first thing in the morning.