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'The happiest party wins the day!'

With a month left until the Swedish elections, the Social Democrats try to counter the rise of right-wing Sweden Democrats

Read this interview in German.

On 9th September, Sweden will elect its local, regional, and national governments for a four year period. Leaving the 2014 elections with 34% on a national level, the Social Democrats (Socialdemokraterna), led by Stefan Löfven, were the largest parliamentary party, yet remained unable to build a majority coalition in the Riksdag; they went into minority government with the Greens (Miljöpartiet), relying on confidence and supply from the Left (Vänsterpartiet) and some support from other parties to govern.

As campaigning starts in earnest after the summer break, the Social Democrats are languishing at around 25% in the polls, while the Greens are perilously close to the 4% minimum share of the vote for representation in the Riksdag. With the core centre-right party, the Moderates (Moderaterna), also way under 30% and one their traditional parliamentary allies the Christian Democrats (Kristdemokraterna) looking unlikely to make the 4% threshold, the hard-right anti-immigration outfit Sweden Democrats (Sverigedemokraterna, set up in 1988 out of the country's neo-Nazi movement) may well become the largest party.

Brian Melican spoke to AnnSofie Andersson, Head of Östersund City Council. First elected in 1985, she has been at the forefront of politics in the city ever since, where Social Democrats have headed municipal governments since 1994 and are confident of retaining control this autumn. In this interview, she shares her on-the-ground experience from the campaign trail thus far – and makes the case for an upbeat finish in which Social Democrats set the agenda and stand on their impressive record.

Social Democrats have been in power in Östersund for a generation and the city is flourishing, with the lowest unemployment for 20 years and a growing population. On a national level, too, the Social Democrat-led government has presided over strong growth and falling unemployment since 2014. Do you think voters will reward this record?

It is all too easy for voters to become accustomed to things going well, so our job is to get out there and remind our fellow citizens of the strength of our position. There is more to it than that, though, because voters will – quite understandably – want to know what we have planned for the future. We should never, ever take power and trust for granted. As a party, we need to go out there with concrete goals and knock on a lot of doors!

Sweden has the peculiarity that all three levels of government are elected on the same day. To what extent do you think that voters differentiate at the ballot box?

Well, we've managed to retain control of the council here even during right-of-centre national administrations, so voters do make distinctions. What we try to do, however, is show them how local and national policy interact: although, as municipal administrations, our greatest source of income is council tax, we are also dependent to a great extent on the grants central government makes to areas such as education, pre-school, and elderly care. During this Social-Democrat-led national administration, for instance, we got a "new-build bonus" from central government for completing new housing projects – 23 million Krona (€2.3m) in one year.

So local issues are often national and vice-versa?

The biggest issues most certainly are. One of the central questions in this campaign is profit-orientated public service provision. Simply put: can it be right that private companies make money from providing services funded by general taxation (and then siphon off money to tax havens)? We're not against private sector providers per se – in fact, we as local government bodies can learn a lot from them – but should a company providing care or education take profit first and invest in service quality second? According to most surveys, 70% of Swedish people agree with us that that is wrong.

But even if they agree, isn't it difficult to get that message across to voters who want to talk about immigration?

Yes, and we on the left have to ask ourselves if we didn't spend too long not talking enough about high immigration and the challenges it entails – only to talk far too much about it now. Our Prime Minister Stefan Löfven is now managing to get other issues back onto the agenda, like the profit motive in public services, but we have to be frank: even if 70% of Swedes agree with us, they're not going to give us an absolute parliamentary majority.

Is the Left Party sapping away Social Democratic support?

Being in government and taking responsibility can cost votes. The Left weren't involved in this last national administration and so are on 9%; the Greens were in government and could potentially end up below the 4% parliamentary threshold. What is more, many of our voters in rural areas around Östersund are furious that national government put through a rise in fuel tax – not just furious with the Greens, but with us. What I say to them is that was no other option: we were in a minority administration and had to make deals to get social democratic policy implemented.

With less than one month to go until the election, how do you think the campaign should proceed?

Since we went into government in 2014, the Swedish economy has created 300,000 new jobs, unemployment is near an all-time low, and we've been reducing the national debt. At the same time, we've spent billions on public services and infrastructure investment. We managed to implement most of our manifesto even though we didn't have a majority. We have nothing to be ashamed of and every reason to run a positive campaign. The happiest party wins the day! That might sound corny, but all I can say is that our campaign launch in Stockholm was fantastic.

Yet a second Red-Green government – even a minority administration – is looking increasingly unlikely.

As a party of government – but one that is not going to get more than 50% of seats in Stockholm – Social Democrats have to be willing to look at alternatives, just as we do at the regional and municipal level, and just as we did in 2014. We will ask a simple question across the political spectrum: 'Who else is willing to take responsibility for Sweden's future?' During this parliament, we have already achieved cross-party consensus about our long-term energy policy, for example, and I can see this kind of cooperative approach being applied to other issues such as integration.

Speaking of integration: as migration is an issue in this campaign, how should the Social Democrats approach it? Trying to beat the far-right Sweden Democrats (Sverigedemokraterna) at their own game can't be an option.

We need to be able to talk about it – to talk about problems, but also about what we want to achieve. And we need to take a didactic approach to counter all the fake news and rumours out there about the benefits refugees are entitled to, increases in crime, etc. We have to

show how people in Sweden can get their children the education they need to build their lives – regardless of their place of birth. We're talking about nothing more or less than The Swedish Model here. We provide the help we can afford to, and anyone who earns a little more, pays a little more.

What about voters who are flirting with the idea of voting for the Sweden Democrats: are they are lost cause?

I find it unsettling that every fifth voter says they would be willing to vote for the Sweden Democrats – with everything they stand for: "Shut the borders! Send them back! They're not Swedish!" A journalist quite rightly pointed out that Zlatan Ibrahimovich could dance around a midsummer pole singing the Swedish national anthem until he's blue in the face: as far as the Sweden Democrats are concerned, he'll never be Swedish. It's horrid that so many people are willing to vote for that kind of party.

Not everyone thinking of voting for the Sweden Democrats is a lost cause, though. One thing I've noticed out campaigning is that lots of people are actually looking for good arguments – possibly to use on their friends and family or on their colleagues. Often, the discussion starts with: 'The Sweden Democrats say that…' They want to know whether that really is the case. That kind of voter is looking for orientation.

The Sweden Democrats are fear-mongering: the foreigners are coming for your job! At the same time, the very high level of protection employees have in Sweden was achieved by the unions and by Social Democrats. Voters mustn't take that for granted. And in fact, the Sweden Democrats' voting record since they came into parliament has been against workers' rights, and they joined the centre-right to vote down initiatives to cut private profits from public service contracts. That's the message we have to get out to voters – voters who we know to be against profit-orientated service provision.

And we have to get them to come out to the ballot box! Right-of-centre parties have always done well when turn-out was low.



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