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Screaming 'Fascists!' is not enough

Progressive parties need to debate radical right-wing policy and make a convincing counter-offer. A lesson from Sweden

Read this article in German.

In a democracy, any party which manages to triple its support within eight years of first entering parliament should be taken as a political opponent to be reckoned with – all the more so when established parties lose so much support in the same timeframe that they can no longer form majority administrations. This is precisely the situation facing Sweden in its elections on Sunday, 9 September 2018. While the far-right Sweden Democrats (SD) are expected to take 17 per cent to 20 per cent of the vote, the Social Democrats (SAP) are likely to only just come in ahead, with 25 per cent; the conservative Moderates are predicted to stay south of 20 per cent.

This is set to make forming a government as tricky as it was in Germany after the 2017 election. What is more, it is not beyond the bounds of possibility that the Sweden Democrats (SD) will be involved, even if only to back a minority right-of-centre administration. This raises the question of how, despite Sweden's solid economic performance in recent years, the established parties have lost so much trust, allowing the hard-right to become the second-largest party in the *Riskdag*.

'We're facing an identity crisis as deep as that affecting America when Trump won the presidency,' says Åsa Linderborg, head of the culture desk at *Aftonbladet*, a major left-wing tabloid with historic ties to unionism. The SD manifesto would see Sweden refuse to accept any more asylum seekers. The party is also in favour of leaving the EU and would offer a referendum on the issue, even if the majority of Swedes is for remaining in the multilateral grouping.

Less foreigners, more welfare

Yet the Sweden Democrats are no one-trick-pony, and their manifesto,

posters, and speeches now range into various other policy areas such as education and health. 'What the party does is to link these social welfare questions with migration,' explains Tobias Etzold, an expert on northern Europe at the German Institute for International and Security Affairs (*Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik*, SWP).

This means that other parties have to make clear where and how the deceptively simple equation 'less foreigners means more welfare state' fails to function: in healthcare, for instance, Sweden actually needs immigrants to do the jobs people born in the country would now rather avoid; neither would a stricter stance on immigration reduce crime to zero.

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At the same time, it is extremely important that established parties are frank about the fact that immigration frequently causes problems. There is simply not enough debate on how to integrate new arrivals better: Sweden, too, has immigrants who, even after decades, remain unable to speak the language of the country they live in. This lack of language skills makes it harder for them to find well-paid employment. Sweden should not be afraid of making clear demands of immigrants, and doing so might help to limit the eruptions of violence which mark the country's deprived suburban areas again and again (burning cars, gang shoot-outs and so on).

Demonising the SD does not help

On the subject of violence: for all their current ostentatious conservatism, the Sweden Democrats trace their lineage back to troops of extremist, racist thugs. 'The SD was born of brownshirts: that can't be stressed often enough,' says journalist Linderborg. 'Yet simply screaming 'Fascists!' isn't a sufficient response; anyone against racism must also be willing to critique the party's policy platform.'

Seven years back, Anders Hellström, a political scientist at the University of Malmö, coined the term 'moral panic' to describe the reflex recoil to the Sweden Democrats' rise, who, with 5.7 per cent of the seats, had then only just made it over the 4 per cent threshold into parliamentary representation. In Hellström's view, the established parties failed to come up with a political response to the party's manifesto and analyse why voters had opted for them. Instead they preferred to demonise the Sweden Democrats and style themselves as 'the good guys', leaving

nothing for those caught in the middle.

Neighbouring Denmark shows just how this kind of black-and-white approach can actually help the far right to accrue support. For many years, the Danish People's Party (*Dansk Folkeparti*, DF) was considered taboo; now, it is the second largest parliamentary party and tolerates a conservative minority administration. 'DF is now a powerful force whose ideas are taken on by other parties,' says Etzold. And, it should be added, not just by right-of-centre parties, either, but by the country's Social Democrats, too. The two parties have, in fact, become ever more similar in recent years, both in terms of rhetoric and policy.

Instead of demonising the voters who switch their allegiance to the far right, parties committed to the democratic order must be willing to debate radical right-wing policy.

Under Helle Thorning-Schmidt, the Danish Social Democrats went into the 2015 election with the following slogan: 'If you come to Denmark, you've got to work.' Not even 'You'll be able to work' or anything positive like 'Everyone should have access to the welfare state – and have the opportunity to finance it'. No, the Social Democrats decided to stigmatise foreigners – who, of course, were not allowed to vote, making it all the more absurd that the electioneering addressed them directly. With Mette Frederiksen now at the helm, the Social Democrats and the DF have developed such close personal ties that parliamentary cooperation between the two is no longer unimaginable.

This shows how naïve it is to assume that voters will become disenchanted with hard-right parties as they gain in influence or go into government. In Norway, for instance, the Progress Party (*Fremskrittspartiet*, FP) did indeed lose support after entering into coalition for the first time, but only temporarily; it is now polling well – and in its second term in government. Nevertheless, the party's political platform and rhetorical style, as well as its background, are considerably more rooted in liberalism than either DF or, especially, SD.

Make a convincing counter-offer

The most sensible approach to the rise of the Sweden Democrats would be to examine why voters are turning away from the established parties who compete against each other in a rules-based democratic system. Instead of demonising the voters who switch their allegiance to the far right, parties committed to the democratic order must be willing to

debate radical right-wing policy – and be able to make a convincing counter-offer.

However, they must do this without accepting or adapting extreme rhetorical stances, as doing so can turn alarmism into a self-fulfilling prophecy: 'The stigmatisation of foreigners, both in terms of vocabulary and symbolism, leads to an increasingly intolerant climate in which outsiders are considered a problem – and in which the actual specific issues created by immigration are no longer tackled,' explains Knud Lindholm Lau, who has analysed the use of language on the Danish far right. He takes Inger Støjberg, Danish minister for integration for the purportedly liberal party *Venstre* (named 'Left' for historical reasons), as an example: on announcing the 50th time laws specifically applying to immigrants were tightened, she celebrated with a large cream cake – iced with the Danish flag and the number 50.

If you're reminded of German Interior Minister Horst Seehofer's recent tasteless joke – 'On my 69th birthday of all days, 69 people were deported back to Afghanistan. Not that that was a birthday wish, of course!" – you've every reason to be.



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