



## Sweden's Pariahs

Lily Lynch

September 24, 2022

The runup to Sweden's parliamentary election, held on 11 September, read like a Houellebecq novel. A party with roots in the neo-Nazi movement is surging. In Muslim neighbourhoods, a far-right Danish politician accused of soliciting sadomasochist sex from teenage boys is livestreaming himself burning the Quran. Riots break out across the country. Indolent centre-left politicians issue limp pleas for tolerance. The Social Democrats, having been willingly cannibalized by NATO and financial markets, fail to rally support. Meanwhile an insurgent Islamist party is making inroads in immigrant neighbourhoods once considered strongholds of the left. Mainstream conservatives, who for years positioned themselves as a bulwark against the far-right, realize that the clearest path to power involves joining forces with it. All this with unrest already on the rise, a war in Europe and a winter energy crisis looming.

But this wasn't fiction. A few days after the election, Social Democratic Prime Minister Magdalena Andersson resigned and the right-wing coalition declared a narrow victory. In the final count, the left-wing bloc of the Social Democrats, Left Party and the Greens netted 173 seats in the Rikstag. Its rival grouping, made up of the far-right Sweden Democrats, conservative Moderates and the Liberal Party, secured a total of 176. But the biggest victory belonged to the Sweden Democrats. Political pariahs until recently, they are now the second most popular party in Sweden, with 20.5% of the vote. Only the outgoing Social Democrats, who campaigned primarily on not being the Sweden Democrats (while also parroting some of their rhetoric), received a larger vote share, 30.3%. But in the end, it was not enough.

Now, Moderate leader Ulf Kristersson has been tasked with assembling a new government. In a historic overture to the far-right, Kristersson has included the Sweden Democrats in these talks. Jimmie Akesson, the party's studiously bland leader, says that a coalition including his party would faithfully reflect the country. He may not get his wish, but whatever happens he will wield considerable power. It appears likely that Kristersson's Moderates will form a minority government with the Liberal Party and Christian Democrats, with the Sweden Democrats providing external support via a confidence-and-supply agreement.

The election concludes eight years of Social Democrat-led governance. For much of the twentieth century, the party enjoyed near unrivalled power in Sweden. But in recent years it has

been challenged by the liberal centre and mainstream conservatives – who have now given legitimation to the far-right. Back in 2018, Moderate leader Ulf Kristersson met with Swedish Holocaust survivor Hedi Fried and solemnly pledged before the media that he would never collaborate with the Sweden Democrats. After Kristersson changed his mind, the Moderates sought to deflect criticism by purchasing Google ads with the keyword ‘Hedi Fried’, which led to a page explaining that it was all a misunderstanding: the Moderates, they said, had merely promised that their previous coalition ‘Alliance for Sweden’ would not work with the Sweden Democrats for the 2018 election. Now, four years later, this promise no longer applied.

Founded in 1988, the Sweden Democrats capitalized on the upsurge in far-right extremism generated by the financial crisis of the early nineties. In 1991, the Moderate-led government of Carl Bildt began to administer a series of predictably disastrous neoliberal reforms – following on from the Social Democrats’ dismantling of the Keynesian infrastructure that undergirded the Swedish welfare model during the previous decade. Amid the deregulation of credit and capital markets, unemployment more than quadrupled, from 2% in 1990 to 10% in 1993. GDP fell by 4%, and it cost another 4% of GDP to bail out the banks. This economic downturn coincided with a wave of neo-Nazi street violence, including bombings and targeted attacks on political opponents: trade unionists, journalists, left-wing activists, the Stockholm gay pride parade.

Back then, the links between the white nationalist movement and the Sweden Democrats were explicit. Founding members came from the fascist Bevara Sverige Svenskt (‘Keep Sweden Swedish’) organisation. The Sweden Democrats’ first chairperson had been an activist in the Nordic Realm Party, and their first treasurer had served as a translator and propagandist in the Waffen-SS. But when Akesson became party leader in 2005, he embarked on a thorough rebranding aimed at making the party more palatable to mainstream voters. They redesigned their logo, ditching a flaming torch in the colors of the Swedish flag for a hippie-ish anemone. They dropped the slogan ‘Keep Sweden Swedish’ and swapped pseudoscientific racism for national chauvinism.

Few were convinced. Major media outlets remained wary, and the postal service reportedly refused to deliver their leaflets. This outsider status would turn out to be something of a mixed blessing. With fewer traditional channels of communication open, the Sweden Democrats turned to then-nascent social media platforms. A few years after Akesson became leader, the Sweden Democrats had a Facebook presence more than eight times the size of the Social Democrats. Ahead of this month’s election, a massive online troll army, reportedly funded by the party’s communications office, helped shape the online discourse on immigration and crime.

Two additional macroeconomic shocks aided the Sweden Democrats’ ascent. In 2006, the Alliance for Sweden – also led by Bildt’s Moderates – implemented a package of austerity and tax cuts designed to ‘make work pay’. This sparked a significant rise in inequality: the largest in any OECD country. One study found that during this period, ‘incomes continued to grow among labour-market “insiders” with stable employment, while cuts in benefits implied a stagnation of disposable incomes for labour-market “outsiders” with unstable or no jobs.’ By 2008, however, even the ‘insiders’ had been precaritized by the effects of the financial crash. A new layer of workers began to emerge who remained in stable employment, yet were hit by stagnant wages

and the threat of automation. These two marginal groups – labour-market outsiders and vulnerable insiders – are overrepresented among the Sweden Democrats’ politicians. The party also gained the most votes in areas where the incomes of ‘outsiders’ had dropped the most relative to ‘insiders’, and among the long-term unemployed. Their strongest base was in the country’s provincial south, as one might guess from Akesson’s distinctive drawl, redolent of a humble farmer from Scania.

The Sweden Democrats also enjoy striking levels of support among those that depend on social insurance. And not without reason. During the leadup to the 2014 election, the Social Democrats criticized the Alliance’s restrictions on sickness and disability benefits, vowing to rebuild the welfare state. Yet, once in power, the exact opposite happened. The Ministry of Social Security vowed to reduce the number of people reliant on sickness benefits. Over the next four years, we saw a five-fold increase in rejections for long-term sickness benefits. For those with disabilities requesting personal assistance, the rejection rate rose to 90%. Facebook groups sprung up in which people posted about friends and relatives who had taken their own lives as a result of these restrictions. The Sweden Democrats’ representative on the Riksdag’s Committee on Social Insurance began to leave posts and comments, becoming a regular presence on these platforms.

The Sweden Democrats claimed the government had cut sickness benefits to free up resources for immigrants. At the centre of their ideology is nostalgia for *Folkhemmet*, or ‘people’s home’, a concept coined by the Social Democrats’ Per Albin Hansson in 1928. For the Sweden Democrats, the welfare state is a zero-sum social good that is threatened by globalization, the EU and immigration. They have pilloried the Social Democrats for betraying their own legacy by serving globalist elites instead of ordinary Swedes.

Perhaps unsurprisingly then, the Sweden Democrats have managed to poach voters from their centre-left opponents. Support for the party has even grown within the Social Democrats’ own union, the Swedish Trade Union Confederation, or LO. A recent survey indicates that among LO members, the Sweden Democrats and Social Democrats now enjoy similar levels of support – with the former beating the latter among male members. (This mirrors trends in broader society: if only men voted in 2022, then right-wing and nationalist parties would have gotten nearly 60% and the Sweden Democrats would be the largest party).

This can be partly attributed to the Sweden Democrats’ success at foregrounding immigration in public discourse. For decades, Sweden was a European anomaly, experiencing waves of inward migration with minimal pushback. In 2011, the year after the Sweden Democrats entered parliament for the first time with 5.7% of the vote, only 8% of Swedes believed that migration was the most important issue facing the country. But as the effects of austerity began to bite, and as the Social Democrats lay supine – providing no effective opposition to the Alliance government – support for the Sweden Democrats rose steadily. Then came the 2015 migrant crisis, when more than 162,000 asylum seekers arrived in Sweden, at which point support for the Sweden Democrats jumped to 20%. The following year, the number of Swedes who cited immigration as the most important issue rose to 44%.

But the pivotal moment came a few years later, when the Moderates decided to make immigration the central issue of the 2018 election, setting the tone for all other bourgeois parties. When riots flared up in several Swedish cities after Rasmus Paludan's public burning of the Quran, even Prime Minister Andersson attributed the unrest to the 'failure to integrate' immigrants and 'the creation of parallel societies'. These riots offered the Sweden Democrats a critical boost ahead of the election. At the party's election night celebration, one prominent Sweden Democrat posted a photo with the editor of a right-wing publication on Instagram with the caption 'the Quran riots did their job', plus a winking emoji. This prompted the more conspiratorially-minded to wonder whether the party may have orchestrated the Danish provocateur's activities.

A small Islamist party – Nyans (meaning 'nuance') – emerged in response to the mainstreaming of anti-immigrant rhetoric. Though it didn't cross the threshold necessary to enter parliament, it made a strong initial showing in some distressed immigrant areas. Its leader had been expelled from the Centre Party in 2018 for failing to disclose his personal ties to Turkey's ultranationalist Grey Wolves. Turkish media have published a series of glowing profiles of Nyans, and some have even speculated that Erdogan plans to use it to exert his influence in Sweden. Predictably, right-wing media seized on this story to feed the general hysteria.

In recent years, the media has effectively incited moral panic about immigration and crime. (While certain crimes, such as shootings by organized criminal groups, have increased in recent years, the overall crime rate is actually down; but this is rarely acknowledged.) The media's rightward turn was already underway during the 2010s. In that decade, free-market thinktanks proliferated; Sweden now has more than any other country in Europe besides Germany and the United Kingdom. Among the most prominent is the neoliberal advocacy group Timbro, modelled on the Cato Institute, which runs an academy for training young politicians and journalists. Timbro is funded by the Confederation of Swedish Enterprise, which has reportedly courted the Sweden Democrats in recent years. The confederation has lobbied the party to drop its opposition to for-profit welfare systems. In exchange, the Sweden Democrats have gained mainstream respectability and access to elite corridors that were previously closed to them. Speaking at the confederation's SME committee meeting in February, Akesson adopted Timbro's red-baiting register: 'When the government says they're going to "take back democratic control of welfare", I get Soviet vibes.'

Thus, while the Sweden Democrats have retained much of their chauvinist welfare rhetoric, they have also steadily embraced a Thatcherite policy platform. Few may have noticed, but in the lead-up to the election, Akesson even U-turned on one of the party's supposedly core values: Swedish jobs for Swedish workers. Until 2008, a test was used to restrict labour migration to those jobs facing domestic labour shortages. Under this system, employers, unions and the government would assess whether a given job could be filled by Swedish workers before opening it up to foreign applicants. But in an interview last month, Akesson said that he 'doesn't want unions to control work permits' and voiced his opposition labour market tests – aligning himself with the other bourgeois parties.

The Sweden Democrats have also started to echo mainstream parties' support for membership in 'globalist' institutions like NATO. In 2016, when the Rikstag voted on whether to allow NATO forces to be stationed on Swedish territory, the Sweden Democrats were expected to join the Left Party in their bid to delay signing of the agreement pending a further review. But at the last hour, they decided to back closer military cooperation with the alliance, allowing the vote to pass with a broad majority. Then, in April, the party went so far as to complain that the Social Democrats' timetable for joining NATO was 'far too slow'. Now, former Prime Minister and uber-Atlanticist Carl Bildt has been floated as a potential foreign minister in the new government. How the Sweden Democrats will retain their anti-establishment, anti-globalist bonafides while working with a man who once rhapsodized about the 'New World Order' before his sponsors in Washington, is anyone's guess.