

Letter From Stockholm

by Allan Carlson

The Ants and Elephants of Swedish Politics



In February, I returned to Sweden after a 15-year absence, and discovered a very different land. In 1976, Americans were viewed with suspicion. We carried the immediate legacy of the Vietnam imbroglio and a vague reputation as "protofascists." These were the heady early days of Prime Minister Olaf Palme. The Swedes were, as always, polite, but they were more than a little haughty as citizens of a ruggedly independent nation, in solidarity with international socialism and the Third World. In 1992, an American strides the streets of Stockholm as a kind of king, or conqueror. With communism dead, and the Swedish economy in a swoon, capitalism is triumphant, and America looms as the center of the world, the protector of the New World Order. Swedish youth in double-breasted suits crowd around, wanting to hear about the wonders of American commercial television or the latest conservative gossip from Washington. Even the Social Democrats are humble and self-deprecating, ever willing to shine an American's ideological shoes. Only in Stockholm could I appreciate the utter mystification of James Baker and George Bush (the Swedish tabloids label them "the world's most powerful men"), who must experience in spades the same fawning adulation whenever they step beyond the American border. With the world as our oyster, they have to ask, how can the voters possibly respond to the Sirens' song of "America First"?

Most Swedes have given up on the dream of splendid neutrality and the "middle way." In retrospect, the whole notion of Swedish autonomy rested on socialist chutzpah. With foolish courage, the Swedes sought to organize the "non-aligned states" behind their leadership. The Soviet Union and the United States, they reasoned, equally threatened Swedish sovereignty. Gunnar Myrdal, Dag Hammarskjöld, and Palme wandered the globe

as prophets of a better world order based on secular moralism and a planned economy.

Alas, these dreams are all now in ruin. Sweden has been in a home-grown depression since 1989, with little likelihood of renewed growth before 1994. A huge public sector (taxes gobble up 57 percent of the Gross Domestic Product), strangling work rules, high inflation, low work effort, and fleeing capital have destroyed the old certainties. "The Social Democrats didn't know when to stop," goes the standard explanation. A smaller number cite the consequences of 60 years of welfare state incentives on notions of personal responsibility and family integrity. Among all Swedes, confidence in state-directed solutions is at a 20th-century low. Except for the aging denizens of the Left Party (formerly the Communists), everyone believes that "only the market can save us." It is also clear that the very logic of the Swedish "third way" rested on the wondrous gift of the Cold War, with its warring blocks of "Marxists" and "capitalists" leaving plenty of room for rhetorical and policy maneuvering. The end of the Soviet Empire, it seems, has been as disorienting for Swedish socialists as it has been for American conservatives.

Sweden's big political event came last September, when the Social Democrats suffered a stunning setback at the polls, their vote total falling to 37.6 percent, a level unseen since the 1920's. At the local hustings, they fared even worse: only one out of ten Swedish municipal and county councils are now under socialist control. In a nationwide straw vote of high school students, the socialists won only 16 percent. These results have shaken their confidence, with odd but interesting consequences. An acquaintance of mine who works for the Labor Movement Archive, tending the papers of Branting and other socialist heroes, despaired over cutbacks in government and party grants. I asked what the response had been. "Well, we've had to put a price on our services, create a marketing strategy, and sell our work to the individual trade unions. And we've started a fund-raising program." Alas, a specter still haunts Europe, but it has a vaguely Austrian countenance.

Nonetheless, the electoral reversal of

1991 was not enough to stimulate a fundamental rethinking of other Social Democratic positions regarding "rights," "equality," and "solidarity." The Social Democrats' historic triumphs in the 1930-68 period came in large degree as the party wrapped itself in the regalia of "nation" and "family." Their social program originated in "population policies" designed to "save the nation" through support of motherhood and large families. In the late 1960's, though, the party reoriented its message around radical individualism, a derivative of left-wing feminism that shattered lingering attachments to pre-modern sentiments. Anders Isaksson, Sweden's most thoughtful Social Democratic journalist, sees no sign of change: "equality" and a regime of "rights" mediated through the state, he told me, have irreversibly triumphed.

The election brought to power a Center-Right coalition government composed of the Moderates, the Christian Democrats, the People's Party (or Liberals), and the Center Party. Winning 21.9 percent of the vote, the Moderates placed the 42-year-old Karl Bildt in as prime minister. Closely tied to the Swedish Employers Confederation, the Moderate Party resembles our Republicans. Indeed, one right-winger describes Bildt as "a young, Swedish Bush," bound politically to international business interests, lacking other deeply held political principles, and born to parents in the public sector. His office is peopled by former associates at TIMBRO, an American-style think tank which has enjoyed uncommon success (the socialists complain bitterly about TIMBRO's infiltration of the universities). The Bildt team dresses snappily, admires the United States enormously, and looks with pleasure at the new order taking shape in Washington and Brussels.

The Moderate Party's first goal is the integration of Sweden into Western Europe. As Olof Ehrenkrona, Bildt's chief of staff, puts it, Swedish nationalism now means "a seat at Brussels." Bildt also envisions an informal linkage to the American defense umbrella, partly through a United Nations under the effective control of the U.S. State Department (as during the Persian Gulf War). A sense of destiny drives the Moderates. Their mentor

here is sociologist Hans Zetterberg, long of American residence, who spawned a party campaign document hinting that the Moderates were riding the crest of history. Turning Marx on his head, Zetterberg suggests that the old political system, resting on the 19th-century stress lines of industrialization, is breaking down, while a new system, rooting in postindustrial, conservative values, is being born. Zetterberg has recently moved to TIMBRO, where he heads a massive new social research project.

Yet the party has a few skeptics in its ranks, too. Particularly outspoken was Riksdag member Margit Gennser. A generation older than most of the Bildt team, she worries that the prime minister's advisers are "yuppies," too young and inexperienced, with an excessive attachment to social theory and technology. Citing her own hopes for reenergizing Swedish family life, she fears (shades of the Reagan coalition, circa 1981) that Bildt may have undermined the government's opportunities here by turning the Social Ministry over to the civil libertarians and by putting economics "first" on the agenda.

One of the Moderates' new coalition partners—the Christian Democratic Social Party—drew 7 percent of the vote. Founded in the mid-1960's in a protest over elimination of religious education in the schools, the party never reached the 4 percent level of support needed to enter the proportionally determined Parliament. In 1991, though, the party de-emphasized its anti-abortion message ("we'll pursue education for now, with no change in the law") and tripled its vote.

The Christian Democrats have developed a distinctive agenda, but one resting on a telling contradiction. Their basic Idea Manifesto, for example, builds on the Roman Catholic concept of subsidiarity, and urges defense of the family as the first "natural community." The party also seeks to restore traditionalist family life, through social policies encouraging marriage and children. At the same time, though, the party's voting strength lies heavily in the Pentecostal Church, where Catholic communitarianism has an alien ring. This new Swedish experiment seems to be a test of whether Pius XII and Pat Robertson can really co-exist. The question is open whether the Christian Democrats can become more than the Moderate Party's symbolic "religious wing," much as the pathetic state Lutheran Church once gave moral cov-

er to the leftist posturings of Palme. One young Christian Democratic parliamentarian believes that real party success depends on a spiritual Great Awakening in Sweden, which no one sees coming soon.

The more interesting new force in Sweden is New Democracy, the right-wing party in Parliament *not* included in the coalition government. For a decade, a populist politics has been brewing in Sweden, first seen in the political shenanigans of the Kalle Anka, or Donald Duck Party. Regional parties grew potent in Skåne, Sweden's southern region, where anti-immigration, anti-tax, and anti-Stockholm sentiments coalesced around *Skåne Partiet* and the *Sjöbö Parti*, both of which won seats in local assemblies. This ferment gave rise, in early 1991, to New Democracy, which won 7 percent of the vote six months later and holds the balance of power in Parliament, with 25 seats. Part of New Democracy's secret lies in its two leaders, Count Ian Wachtmeister and Bert Karlsson. The former is a sharp-witted aristocrat, with a gift for public speaking and humor (one Swede dubs him "Pat Buchanan with a title"). To see the party's campaign video, featuring Wachtmeister dressed as a tree and a clown, or downing a glass of champagne with his bare feet plopped in a Stockholm public fountain (illegal acts under Swedish law), all to the potent beat of the party's pop-country campaign song, is to understand the neo-anarchy of New Democracy. The party's ditty says "here comes a group which hates all paternalism," one "gathering to agitate and war against. . . bureaucracy and the welfare state, to cut taxes," and concludes: "Here comes . . . a team that will battle for a populist regime, so Sweden might breathe happier and purer air." Ehrenkrona, Bildt's chief of staff, dismisses New Democracy with a hiss, citing their use at rallies of country-western tunes as a sign of being out of touch with urbane reality. Yet he so misses the inner secret of the party's success.

The co-founder of New Democracy is Bert Karlsson. Short, burly, and buck-toothed, he is the physical antithesis of the Count. Karlsson is also a self-made millionaire, developer of Sweden's largest amusement park, and a voice for Sweden's small businessmen: the true inventors and entrepreneurs, not the managerial elites found in Sweden's cozy mega-firms. In-

deed, data shows that New Democracy's electoral base rests in the small cities and towns, among shopkeepers, the engineering shops, and the skilled craftsmen: a classic source of most populist movements. Post-election analysts also reported that about a third of New Democracy's voters were right-wing Social Democrats, with whom I had several good conversations. John Bouvin, a bulldozer driver and steel mill worker, now sits as a New Democrat in Parliament. With plebeian charm and anger, he denounces a state that seizes the majority of his income, that forced his wife—as a young mother—into the labor force, and that treats his children as state wards. A colleague, electrician Peter Kling, complains that he has worked seventy to eighty hours a week to support his wife and three young children, only to see it all taxed away. In his frustration, he once toyed with the idea of coming to the United States as an illegal immigrant (friends here assured him that it was easy), a plan vetoed by his wife. Kling also leads the New Democracy charge against the state's liquor monopoly and crushing "sin taxes," which amount to about three quarters of the price of wine or beer (not surprisingly, he reports that 40 percent of the liquor consumption in Sweden today is "on the dark side"). These men, quite simply, represent Sweden's "redneck" or "Bubba" constituency. They seek a "living wage," a wife at home with the baby, and a couple of beers after a hard day's work, all goals sharply at odds with prevailing state policy. They also believe that the Moderate Party is in thrall to corporate interests, and that it doesn't really care about people like them.

New Democracy has further mobilized support by questioning Swedish immigration and refugee policies. Looked at objectively, it's hard to imagine a system better designed to create trouble. To begin with, members of the Swedish political establishment either claim solidarity with the oppressed peoples of the world or a Julian Simonish love for energetic newcomers, and generously welcome "refugees" (even though only one out of ten actually qualifies for this status under already generous United Nations standards).

Accordingly, Sweden has recently taken in twenty to forty thousand "refugees" a year, from Iran, Iraq, Ethiopia, and Yugoslavia. However, rigid union work rules prohibit these new refugees from getting jobs, while bureaucratic barriers stall

decisions on permanent status for up to four years.

In the interim, the refugees receive state allowances, free housing, and endless rounds of counseling, usually in "camps" placed in economically troubled small towns. Predictably, the good Swedish burghers grow incensed over this lavish support for refugees as a new leisure class, while the latter nurse resentments over being denied the opportunity to work. The educational bureaucracy, meanwhile, has diverted vast sums into *hemspråk* schools, where immigrant children are taught in their native tongues, in service to the odd goal of a "multicultural" Sweden, another dubious American import. Indeed, it is easy to see how "refugee resettlement" has grown into a huge, self-interested bureaucracy. Binding this all together, a hysterical consensus exists in the Swedish media that any criticism of existing refugee policy constitutes racism or Nazism of the worst sort.

New Democracy is the only party with the courage to raise the issue. Its official platform is, in fact, fairly modest: give refugees a quick decision on their status; allow those accepted into the country to find jobs rather than receive a monthly allowance; provide settlement loans rather than grants; and close the *hemspråk* schools, teaching refugee children instead in the Swedish language. For these commonsense prescriptions, the party is attacked as "foreigner hating," even by Moderate Party members who know better. Undaunted, a few of the New Democrats have gone further: John Bouvin calls for a two-year hiatus in new immigration, while the country sorts out the existing mess.

A commonsense nationalism creeps into New Democracy's program in other ways. Party member Richard Uhlenberg—international engineer, filmmaker, and at age 26 the second-youngest member of Sweden's Riksdag—describes his motivation as a love for Sweden. "Just to fly the Swedish flag today is seen by many as racist, because it makes the immigrants feel bad." He noted that at a "name day" celebration which he had recently attended (a custom equivalent to a birthday), the joke was that the little Swedish flag normally placed on the breakfast tray was covered by a brown paper bag. He worries, too, about losing national identity in the looming Eurocratic sea.

This desire to save a Swedish identity might account for some of the contradictions found in New Democracy's plat-

form. On the one side, they chart a quick reduction of the state sector from 57 to 47 percent of Gross Domestic Product and support entry into the Common Market. Yet on the other, the party advocates some increases in state expenditure, when either a special community is being "unjustly hurt" (forty thousand old Swedish pensioners living below the "existence minimum") or when Swedish folk culture is at stake (the party would double Sweden's cultural budget for support of national museums, folk art, and Swedish music). In line with its regionalist origins, the party also seeks to devolve power from Stockholm to the provinces and local communities.

New Democracy has staked out an "anti-politician" politics. By intent, only four of their 25 Riksdag members come out of the public sector (in comparison, 90 percent of Social Democratic and 75 percent of Moderate riksdagsmen do). Wachtmeister uses elephants to symbolize the existing power centers in Sweden, and small, busy creatures to represent the insurgency of New Democracy. "Five ants outnumber four elephants," reads one party slogan.

Where the other major Swedish parties are overtly ideological, New Democracy is eclectic and opportunistic. New ideas can enjoy a rapid rise, unhindered by a fixed bureaucracy or a heavy institutional history. In late February, for example, the party announced a new reform program for sickness insurance, one devised by two private personnel directors, and one more logical and economical than the government alternative. To gasps of horror, New Democrat Anne Sorenson recently denounced in the Riksdag the goal of "gender equality" as a distraction for real women with real problems. She is also drafting the party's new family policy program, predicated on a general reduction in taxation (so a family can live on one income), family tax relief in place of existing child allowances, and a clampdown on bureaucratic "social investigations" of families.

Near the end of my stay, I attended New Democracy's Party Congress, an event normally held once every three years. This "extra" meeting was designed to bring some organizational coherence to a movement still in its infancy. About 750 delegates gathered on the ridge overlooking Skövde, a mixed crowd in terms of age, but predominantly male (much as New Democracy's voters have been). These weren't the yuppie Stockholmers

of the Moderate Party. They were, by and large, the lumpen-bourgeoisie, resembling the attendees at a Kiwanis convention in Indiana. The assembly exuded energy and excitement, and talk of winning 20 percent of the vote in the 1994 elections. Party members clearly see the Swedish establishment on the run, where a combination of protest and prescription just might do the trick. Also present, though, were signs of the tensions that dog any populist campaign. The session opened with a 90-minute dialogue by "Bert and Ian" designed in large part to quiet local party officials seeking more policy authority at the "grass roots." The Count and the businessman warned that the party must not lose its focus on issues of concern to the voters, by wasting energy on endless reorganizations. Tensions also surfaced between the party's "more respectable" elements and the "red-necks." A surprising number of physicians, for example, are found in New Democracy; one of their number, Johan Brohult, a professor of medicine at Stockholm University, serves as vice-chairman of the parliamentary group. Bound into the national medical service, Swedish doctors are paid at the level of a well-tenured nurse in the United States, and are understandably restless. Yet they are also uncomfortable with the "Svensson" (i.e., "Archie Bunker") character of some party comrades. Several that I talked to apologized in whispers for the "crazies" in the party, saying that it would take several years to weed them out.

The greatest danger to New Democracy's future may be the mixed blessing of being co-opted by the Moderates. Already, several of the more popular party ideas advanced last September have been absorbed by the ruling coalition. This has challenged the party to be always one step ahead of the government, pushing the Moderates and their allies ever rightward (and occasionally leftward), always staking out new policy terrain. Helpful, in this regard, has been the hysterical hostility of the Liberals to New Democracy. The former group, headed by old pol Bengt Westerberg, regularly denounces the New Democrats as "racists." Indeed, it was Westerberg's moralistic posturing that kept New Democracy out of the coalition government. In fact, this was the finest gift he could give them: the Center-Right government survives only as it attracts New Democratic votes in the Riksdag, but the party bears no responsibility for

governmental errors, and can freely criticize when it suits its purposes. "Power without responsibility" is not a bad posture for a populist party, but it is one unlikely to last beyond this Riksdag's three-year term. Over the long run, New Democracy's leaders look toward a true "right-wing" government in Sweden. If they can double their vote to 14 percent, a coalition of the Moderates, the Christian Democrats, and New Democracy might just be possible.

Near the end of my visit, news from America shook up everyone: Pat Buchanan had taken nearly 40 percent in New Hampshire; George Bush was wounded. Business leaders and the Moderates were deeply distressed. Believers in a New World Order resting on Bush-Baker internationalism, the Common Market, and the World Bank, they saw one of the legs of their vision wobbling. Swedish media commentators, however, quickly reassured them that New Hampshire was a fluke, and that Buchanan couldn't possibly repeat his success in another state. After all, George Bush had won the war in the Gulf and right-wing populism has no staying power. Only time will tell.

Allan Carlson is president of The Rockford Institute.

Letter From the Lower Right

by John Shelton Reed

A Sense of Place

Some people, mostly Southerners and geographers, like to argue about how you can tell whether you're in the South. This discourse (if you'll excuse the expression) can be more or less serious. My friend Vince Staten, for instance, once ran up a major phone bill calling restaurants on the Interstate to see how far north you can get grits for breakfast.

But some heavyweight scholarship has been devoted to the question, too. A Penn State geographer named Wilbur Zelinsky, for example, has compiled some great maps that show where people start painting their barns (roughly the same place where they once began to farm with horses instead of mules, just north of the old National Road through Ohio,

Indiana, and Illinois). Zelinsky has also looked to see where creeks stop being called that (or branches, or runs) and become brooks. (If you see the word "brook" in a Southern place-name, you can be sure the real-estate developers have been at work.)

This game can go on and on, and often does. Literally hundreds of criteria have been suggested, from kudzu to sweetened ice tea. My own contribution has been to look at phone books to see where people name businesses "Southern" or "Dixie" something-or-other. (Turns out there are a lot of hairdressers named Dixie, but I didn't count them.) My theory, if you can call it that, is that folks outside the South don't do this much.

The phone-book test works remarkably well, which is to say that it confirms my prejudices—like the one that says southern Florida, northern Virginia, and western Texas are only marginally Southern, these days. If it hadn't worked, though, I'd have scrapped the technique and stuck with the prejudices. After all, some of us just *know* when we leave the South.

It seems that, just like folks with acute sensitivity to light or noise, some people have a hypertrophic sense of place. Southerners may be especially vulnerable to this inflammation, but it's not just another regional malady, like hookworm or pellagra. Here's an Englishwoman, for instance, Jessica Mitford:

On the train, through Kentucky. There's already a marked change of atmosphere. The women on the train seem to travel in Sears catalogue dreamy date dresses. One is wearing a beige silk sheath, spangled semi-transparent top, high-heeled simulated glass slippers. She's a great kidder. The conductor, checking on reservations, just asked her, "Are you Mrs. Jennie Lee Kelley?" She answered, "Can't you see I am, by my browbeaten look?" Shrieks of laughter from all, especially her fat husband. . . . Lovely pale green, lush country outside. . . . In a Louisville hotel: already the punctuation and spelling are breaking down. A brochure in my room says, "Derby Lounge. Stall's are named and portray famous derby winners . . ." and also, "YE-OLE KENTUCKIE BREAKFEASTE." Why the hyphen?

Borrowed from you-all?

This is exactly the sort of alertness I experience from the moment I get off the plane at Newark. All sorts of everyday things take on special significance when they're *northern* things. My wife finds this ironic: she says she can move the furniture or get a new hairstyle and I won't notice for months. Maybe so (I haven't noticed), but put me in a new place and by God I *pay attention*.

A while back I wrote that when I used to drive north to college on old U.S. 11, chronic heartburn always set in about Hagerstown, Maryland, and it let up about the same place when I headed south. A book reviewer picked that out as an example of my "characteristic exaggeration," but—as God is my witness—it's the literal truth. What's more, my buddy Jake read the review and wrote to say that the same thing always happened to him somewhere around Newcastle, Delaware.

Jake also sent along a photocopied page from *The Web and the Rock*. As usual, Thomas Wolfe does go on, but he's worth quoting at length:

George would later remember all the times when he had come out of the South into the North, and always the feeling was the same—an exact, pointed, physical feeling marking the frontiers of his consciousness with a geographic precision. There was a certain tightening in the throat, a kind of dry, hard beating of the pulse, as they came up in the morning toward Virginia; a kind of pressure at the lips, a hot, hard burning in the eye, a wire-taut tension of the nerves, as the brakes slammed on, the train slowed down to take the bridge, and the banks of the Potomac River first appeared. Let them laugh at it who will, let them mock it if they can. It was a feeling sharp and physical as hunger, deep and tightening as fear. It was a geographic division of the spirit that was sharply, physically exact, as if it had been cleanly severed by a sword. When the brakes slammed on and he saw the wide flood of the Potomac River, . . . he drew in hot and hard and sharp upon his breath, there in the middle of the river. He ducked his head a little