

## SWEDISH GENERAL ELECTION, 2002

### BACKGROUND: SOME MISSING ISSUES?

#### Introduction

This Group's election observers are often asked by ordinary voters in the post-Communist societies where much of BHHRG's activities take place whether there aren't enough problems back home in the West to keep them occupied. Unlike some other human rights groups, BHHRG's observers have never operated on the presumption that they come from states of perfection to observe others. As readers will remember, this Group suggested that serious flaws are apparent in the existing British electoral system and that they are likely to be worsened by proposals to make voter turnout rather than ballot security the key criterion in future regulation of elections in the U.K.

A Swedish correspondent, who shares an interest in much of the Group's monitoring of human rights and democracy in the Balkans especially, suggested that the BHHRG should monitor aspects of the forthcoming Swedish general election. Along with several other academics, journalists, lawyers and political activists, he suggested that the run-up to the polls on 15<sup>th</sup> September, 2002, would be a suitable time to study what was happening in the Swedish general election campaign but also some of the controversial issues omitted by common consent of the parties already sitting in the Riksdag.

#### The Outgoing Parliament (Riksdag)

Sweden is ruled by a single-chamber Parliament, the Riksdag, with 349 members chosen by proportional representation from 29 constituencies across the country. A threshold of 4% must be crossed for representation at the national level (or 12% in any individual constituency). At the last election in 1998, 7 parties won seats ranging from the Social Democratic Party (SAP) with 36.6% and 131 seats to the Greens (MP) with 4.5% and 16 seats. The Social Democrats formed a government with the toleration of the Left Party (Vp) which won 12% of the vote and 43 seats. Although 1 member short of an absolute majority this de facto coalition could also rely on the Greens to vote with it against the 4 "bourgeois" parties on those issues where the "bourgeois" parties did not in reality support a consensus with the Social Democrats.

In 1998, the 4 "bourgeois" parties were ranked by the voters in the following way: the Moderate Assembly Party (M) received 22.7% of the votes and 82 seats; the Christian Democrats (KD) received 11.8% and 42 seats; the Centre Party © received 5.1% and 18 seats; while the People's Party – the Liberals (FpL) brought up the "bourgeois" rear with 4.7% and 17 seats.

In the run up to 15<sup>th</sup> September, 2002, opinion polls suggest that only these 7 existing parliamentary parties have realistic chances of election to the new Riksdag. Already much of the discussion is about what will be the make-up of the next coalition. Will Social Democratic Premier, Goran Persson, continue with his reliance on the Left Party (Vp), which is demanding ministerial positions in a future coalition as its price for support, or will the Social Democrats ally with a "bourgeois" which might be more enthusiastic for Persson's EU-integrationist orientation as well as his support for President Bush's War on Terrorism?

#### Marginalised Groups and Overlooked Questions

Given the powerful tradition of consensus in Swedish politics, it is surprising to the outside observer how far the rhetoric of class struggle survives. At least for people and observers on the left the use of the term "bourgeois" as an adjective for the current opposition parties is routine, yet the policies of privatization, encouragement of share-ownership and integration into the EU and

globalist models pursued by the current Social Democrat-led government make it difficult for the outsider to see where the big differences lie between the real contenders for office.

As in other EU member states, the consensus among party elites and in the Establishment as a whole masks deeper divisions within society. In 1995, the referendum on EU entry was highly divisive despite the Establishment's unanimity on the benefits of entry and opinion polls suggest that EMU entry would be at least as tightly contested.

### **Technical Aspects**

Although the Swedish PR system appears to guarantee equal chances and reasonable local access to all potential points of view, there are features of the electoral system which, despite being in force for many years, are of dubious value. Like most people in Britain, most Swedes are understandably proud of their long history of parliamentary government. However, as in Britain complacency about election procedures can creep into the system and make people unaware of emerging flaws or even irregularities and cheating.

Although initial counts in the individual polling stations around the country are open to observers from the different parties and members of the general public, participation of non-members of election commissions throughout the whole counting process is not universal. Where all members of the local commission are known to each other and may be friends/comrades, even if not drawn from the same party, there is always the risk of collusion in counting. This, admittedly small risk, is magnified by the very large number of ballot papers floating around the country. Given that voters, and even non-citizens, can pick up ballot papers at post offices around the country at least 18 days before the poll, the possibility of "valid" ballot papers being available to substitute for ballots actually cast exists. The theoretical possibility exists that members of an election commission might be horrified by the turnout for an extremist party beyond the pale of the existing Swedish parliamentary model. Such members could be tempted to substitute legally valid ballot papers (of which there are too many left over around the country) for the offending extremist ones. In the absence of external control by observers or public, this would be very easy to achieve. Unlike in other electoral systems which list all candidates/parties on a single sheet of paper with only so many ballots issued as voters are registered, the Swedish model (like similar models in France, Latvia or the Czech Republics) puts temptation in the path of EC members since it makes cheating a much easier theoretical possibility.

Of course, many, probably most Swedes, as well as foreigners aware of the country's reputation for probity, will dismiss as improbable any risk of cheating. However, since all politics is about the possession of power, it is inherently unwise to rely on indefinables such as national character as the guarantors of the democratic process.

Ironically, in proportional representation systems where every vote counts, the temptation to cheat is greater than in less fair first-past-the-post systems (in use in OSCE members like Great Britain, Canada and the United States). Small shifts in a party's vote can influence its number of seats or whether it gets representation at all.

As in Great Britain, there is anecdotal evidence that party activists responsible for the care of the elderly and infirm occasionally misuse the postal voting system in Sweden. So-called "granny farming" has recently been the subject of several prosecutions in Britain, when care home owners or welfare workers affiliated to particular parties (all three main U.K. ones in fact - Labour Conservative and Liberal) have cast proxy votes on behalf of Alzheimer sufferers or other patients so ill that they could not possibly be said to have exercised any choice of their own. Allegations were made to the Group's observers that politicized carers in Sweden can exercise a similar prerogative to cast postal votes in the name of seriously infirm people in their care whose political views cannot be reasonably ascertained because of the severity of their mental or physical infirmities.

Although Swedish pollsters anticipate an electoral participation far higher than Britain's miserable 59% in the June, 2001 general election, many Swedes would regard a turnout in the mid-80s% as a severe challenge to the standing of the political system. Even if in Britain the pressure to find ways to boost turnout rests on a steady fall in voter participation to levels unseen in the democratic age (since 1918), in Sweden too, the ease of access to the ballot raises questions about whether the security of the poll is being diluted.

However desirable it may be that universal suffrage is realized by the active participation of all registered voters, when proxy and postal voting is made absurdly easy and guarantees of the reality of the identity of individual voters are frequently not ascertained in practice, then the rights of real individual voters may be diluted by fraud. Obsession with a high turnout can mask indifference or blindness to structural failings in an electoral system which makes voting too easy.

Another problem which arises with the widespread distribution of ballot papers before the poll is that ballots may be deliberately destroyed or misdirected in order to disadvantage a particular party list. Parties on the margin advocating radical policies which might seem abhorrent to many ordinary Swedes even though such parties are entirely legal and properly registered for the general election could suffer disproportionately from such interference with the pre-election distribution of ballots.

Representatives of the Swedish Democrats in Gothenburg had a specific complaint. They claimed that the ballot papers for their party's list were routinely removed by opponents of their party from post offices in the city. They also implied that postal workers were deliberately slow to replace the removed or vandalised ballots. This meant that their party's potential voters could not always find their ballots and might choose another party's list which was still available.

The Gothenburg Swedish Democrats also claimed that supporters had telephoned their volunteer office to complain that they had not received by post the mailed ballots which their party like more mainstream ones sent out to likely backers. The envelopes containing such ballots are clearly marked with the party's election symbol and so any postal employee, or anyone else for that matter, could identify and remove or destroy such mail on behalf of a party which they might strongly disapprove of.

In a close-fought election or referendum such interference with the distribution of ballots could decisively affect the outcome. For future polls, Sweden would be advised to consider ways of tightening the security of the ballot and limiting access to ballots before polling day in order to avoid the possibility of a scandalous fraud which lax rules could tempt over-zealous partisans of a particular party/side into attempting.

### **Media Coverage**

A survey of the Swedish media routinely available in Gothenburg conducted with the aid of a local resident suggests very strongly that divisive issues are largely confined to the letters pages of the print media, while Swedish television (SV) broadcasts remarkably non-confrontational election broadcasts. The broad consensus among the established parties limits the heat of political debate.

However, another phenomenon which reduces political confrontation on television and radio is the adoption of post-modern methods of reporting and questioning politicians.

Several observers drew the BHHRG's attention to the use of studio lay-outs more appropriate to mid-morning talk shows discussing fashion or gardening than the government of the country or Sweden's role in the world.

The Group's observers saw several examples of interviews with prominent politicians conducted in the relaxed atmosphere of a talk show promoting the memoirs of a popular footballer or hairdresser. This does not make for the kind of interview which draws out politicians' policies and

exposes potentially unpopular aspects. Indeed to the contrary, controversy tends to be avoided and a synthetic consensus created for the viewers, who are in fact voters presumably trying to make up their minds on whom to choose as their representatives.

A good example of the elision of real debate came with the appearance of the Liberal leader, Lars Leijonberg, on the comfortable chairs of a SV discussion fifteen days before the poll. Mr Leijonberg had appeared to stir controversy over immigration. Sweden's post-war reputation as an exile-friendly state had encouraged up to 50,000 people a year to seek asylum there, especially from war-torn ex-Yugoslavia in the 1990s and from the Kurdish areas of Turkey and Iraq. Mr Leijonberg simultaneously proposed that migrants seeking naturalisation should have to speak Swedish while at the same time proposing to permit more immigration (up to two million migrants over the coming two decades) provided they had a firm job offer. Such people could qualify for citizenship after five years (only being able to initiate the application after three years of residence. Otherwise they would be merely guest workers and could be returned to their country of origins if their job disappeared (as scores of thousands of jobs in Sweden have done with the downturn in the country's once booming telecoms and engineering sectors).

Given the obloquy heaped on the extra-parliamentary Swedish Democrats and the more militant National Democrats for their anti-migrant stances one might have expected Mr Leijonberg and his Liberals as well as the Moderates who took up similar proposals to come under attack or be at least put on the spot in the media. After all, leaving aside any language test and ability to return jobless migrants, any influx of skilled workers might be expected to force down wages and salaries and offend the traditionally left-voting workers.

Mr Leijonberg appeared in his "sofa debate," moderated by a skilled TV professional of non-traditional Swedish appearance (a glamorous ethnic Indonesian from her appearance) while he was "confronted" by beautiful lady of Greek ethnicity, though naturally a Swedish citizen. The appearance of Mr. Leijonberg's female interrogators seemed intended to make the case for a multi-cultural Sweden as much as any arguments. This condescending combination of sexism and racism in the cause of liberalism might well alienate ordinary viewers, whose interest might have been more intellectual and policy-orientated.

TV Pink in Milosevic's Yugoslavia pioneered this type of post-modern political dialogue as beauty parade. This Group's observer saw an interview conducted by a scantily clad lady on a white leather sofa with the leader of the Serbian Radical Party, Vojislav Seselj in Belgrade in 1997. Style over substance can disguise sinister social phenomena, but at best it dulls the critical senses of an audience, or irritates it. Neither can contribute to debate of the issues.

Mr Persson has stated publicly that on the issue of immigration he is glad that the Social Democrats are more restrictive than his right-wing rivals since the SAP does not advocate loosening Sweden's immigration policy nor does it propose testing the "Swedishness" of candidates for citizenship. Some people may see this confusion of right and left as typical of post-modern politics, but the fact that the Left can appear right-wing in its restrictiveness and the Right can be superficially left in its openness to more immigration merely suggests how narrow the spectrum of parliamentary politics in Sweden is.

The question of future inflows of people from EU accession-states likely to join the EU in 2004/05 was avoided in the campaign. From this Group's experience and recent opinion polls in candidate countries like Poland or Slovakia, Sweden may expect a marked increase in arrivals from its neighbours across the Baltic. Up to 7 million Poles are expected to seek work in the existing EU states after Poland's accession (regardless of any rules limiting free movement of labour which might be conditions of entry). Migration on this scale cannot help but be a socio-economic issue in the politics of the existing member states like Sweden.

The impact of Sweden's membership of the EU on her traditional neutrality as well as her decades-old engagement with Third World development issues has been hardly discussed in the

campaign. A bill going through the Riksdag which would transfer decision-making capacities to the EU has been ignored in the campaign. What is important about this bill is that it is precisely Sweden's attributes as a neutral state which would be abolished. Many Swedes seem to think that the EU and EC are synonymous and therefore do not see any issue in the bill's transfer of decision-making powers to the Council of Ministers in Brussels. However, since the key aspect of the new EU is that it has a common security and foreign policy, it is not only the old EC's economic, agricultural, social and environmental powers which will be decided by votes in the Council of Ministers but also questions of foreign and military engagement.

Unlike EC membership, EU membership carries with it a shared obligation to bear the burden of potential military engagements, enforcement of a common sanctions regime and other policies which are not compatible with neutrality. Swedes may well wish to renounce their traditional neutrality and play an active part in military confrontations along with their EU partners and the EU's own allies like the United States, but such a major shift in fundamental policy deserves broader debate so that the public understands what is at stake.

Late on the evening of Wednesday, 4<sup>th</sup> September, Swedish TV's *Karavan* broke the apparent tabu on European issues and carried a discussion about the EU. Although only one participant was clearly anti-federalist (with two others making criticisms of aspects of the EU), what was striking was the audience response. Whether comments from the panelists were for or against the EU, members of the studio audience were much more animated in their response. Cheers, boos, applause and even catcalls came from members of the audience who wished to support or take exception to comments by the different panelists.

This lively reaction to politicians discussing issues which had been largely ignored or dormant during the campaign was in marked contrast for instance to the respectful silence which had shrouded another *Karavan* discussion of unemployment which had been accompanied by short films about the cutbacks and closures in the city of Nordköping. Swedes may be peculiarly polite and willing to listen to the other point of view, but it was striking how far the consensus among the panel went from the need for re-training for the unemployed to an acceptance of the consequences of global competitive forces.

### **The Legacy of the Gothenburg Summit Riots (May, 2001)**

The Group's observers heard claims that the police had doctored video tape evidence by overlaying the film track of defendants clashing with the police with another soundtrack which gave the impression that the crowd around him were chanting aggressive slogans. Several people made this point independently. A defence lawyer suggested that since the opening of the trial of one of his German clients had been prefaced by the playing of the videotape in which the defendant did not appear, that this unprecedented use of audio-visual material in a Swedish court had the effect of creating an emotive atmosphere prejudicial to all defendants, even those not featured on the film or soundtrack.

Most Swedes were shocked by the violence in Gothenburg. As with ordinary television viewers almost anywhere they were antagonised by pictures of rioters in their streets and took particular exception to the presence of non-Swedes among the protestors. What many viewers were ignorant of was the context of the disturbance, seeing only a few short minutes of vandalism and physical violence on the television news.

Although there may well be a small travelling circus of so-called "Chaoten" who seek confrontation with the police at international summits like that in Gothenburg - from Seattle via Gothenburg to Prague and Genoa such clashes have taken place - the similarities between, police tactics and even police equipment at all these summits suggest that an international of law and order has also developed.