

"THE SWEDEN DEMOCRATS - THE NEW KID ON THE BLOCK?"

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Sweden – too nice for the populist right?

A wave of radical right populism is spreading across Europe. The populist right has not broken through everywhere, nor can it claim to enjoy continuous momentum in the countries where it has had some success – but the overall development is one of steady progress rather than stagnation or, indeed, decline. In addition, populist right parties have gained legitimacy in a growing number of countries, as exemplified by government participation in Italy and Austria, and the role as government support party, with significant amounts of policy influence, in Denmark (cf. Bale 2003).

But Sweden remains an exception. When *Ny Demokrati* came from nowhere to enter the Riksdag in 1991, many expected the party to stay. There seemed no reason why Sweden, with the heaviest tax burden in the OECD, should be immune to politics similar to that of the anti-tax Progress parties in Norway and Denmark. However, the success of New Democracy's mix of populism, anti-immigration, pro-EU and market liberalism, spiced up with a dose of buffoonery, turned out to be temporary. After Ian Wachtmeister's resignation from the leadership in February 1994, followed by a farcical leadership struggle, the party imploded and was annihilated in the election seven months later (see further Rydgren 2006, ch. 4).

New Democracy limped on for a few years, but was a completely spent force. Ian Wachtmeister's futile attempt to form a new party for the 1998 election, called *Det Nya Partiet* (The New Party), showed that his personal appeal, once quite considerable, had disappeared. The Sjöbo Party, named after the southern town whose inhabitants rejected the accommodation of asylum seekers in a local referendum in 1988, also failed to make a breakthrough. It polled fairly respectably in the southernmost county of *Skåne* in 1991, but was probably crowded out by New Democracy, and was never able to build on what, in hindsight, was a relatively promising start.

Exactly why the populist right bug has not been able to take hold in Sweden has been the subject of some debate. Before New Democracy, it was sometimes argued that the Moderate Party, with its demands of radical tax cuts and vociferous criticism of the size of the public sector, provided a substitute for the radical populism of the Danish and Norwegian Progress parties. Indeed, the fact that the Moderates twice, in 1978 and 1981, left non-socialist coalition governments, therefore never facing the voters as incumbents, added credibility to this argument – as it was claimed that support for the Progress parties was fuelled by disillusionment with non-socialist governments. This explanation was discredited when New Democracy broke through, as it happened after nine years of Social Democratic government, and an election where the Moderates also were highly successful, resulting in a non-socialist coalition government with a Moderate Prime Minister.

A more elaborate discussion about the reasons for the lack of populist right success in Sweden is provided by Jens Rydgren (2002; 2006). He argues that three factors are of key significance. First, that traditional class loyalties have proved enduring in Sweden. Consequently, the socio-economic dimension has retained its importance in Swedish voting behaviour, and the socio-cultural dimension has failed to break through. Second, that the issue of immigration has not had the same saliency in Sweden as in many other countries. Third, there has been a low degree of left-right

convergence in the political space. The Moderate Party has been perceived as far enough to the right to refute any allegations that there are no real political alternatives (Rydgren 2002:47f).

Rydgren's analysis is authoritative and sophisticated. Still, it could be argued that it may have been overtaken by events. The saliency of immigration rose considerably in the 2002 election, partly due to proposals on ethnic integration by the People's Party Liberals. The policies proposed by the People Party Liberals could be regarded as straightforwardly xenophobic – indeed the party wanted to open up for labour immigration – but they included a number of demands, such as a language test as a criterion for Swedish citizenship, which were considered as more severe than the existing legal framework. The degree of left-right convergence, furthermore, may have increased following the reorientation of the Moderate Party after Fredrik Reinfeldt became party leader in 2003. Under Reinfeldt, the Moderate Party has toned down earlier tax cut proposals, and dropped some of its earlier demands of a reformation of labour market legislation.

The significance of these changes should not be overstated. Immigration and ethnic integration played a large party in the media coverage of the 2002 election campaign, but the voters considered other issues, notably education, health care and the economy, as more important. As for the changes in the Moderate Party, the impact on the party space is not yet fully researched. Longitudinal expert survey data on the ideological positions on the Moderates and Social Democrats would probably suggest a convergence, but the extent to which this is also perceived among the electorate we do not yet know.

Rydgren (2002:48) does point out that there is a potentially fertile ground for the populist right in Sweden. There is a high degree of disillusionment with the political system and establishment, and a significant reserve of xenophobic sentiment. Indeed, the slow but steady rise of the Sweden Democrats could be taken as evidence of a potential niche for an anti-immigration, anti-establishment populist party. As seen in Table 1 below, the party began very modestly, but in every parliamentary election, the party has improved considerably compared to the previous result. The 2002 performance of 1.4 per cent was the second best of any populist right party in Sweden, only bettered by New Democracy in 1991. In 2006, the Sweden Democrats came within 1.1 percentage points of parliamentary representation. Since 2006, the party's support is reported by several of the main opinion polls, and many predict that it party will enter the Riksdag in 2010.

Thus, although the idea might appeal to some Swedes, there is not much to suggest that Sweden is too 'nice' and tolerant for the populist right. While an eventual breakthrough for the Sweden Democrats is by no means a certainty, it is increasingly becoming a possibility. The remainder of this paper will take a closer look at the Sweden Democrats. Formed in 1988, the party has so far belonged on the fringe of Swedish politics. Originating from an extremist right-wing subculture, it has been treated as a pariah by the media as well as by other parties. It has, however, been able to establish itself in a number of local councils, and there is much to suggest that the other parties will have to decide how to deal with this new and unwanted kid on the block.

Table 1. Riksdag election results for populist right and extreme right parties in Sweden, 1988-2006.

Year	Party	Votes	Per cent
1988	SD	1,118	0.0
1991	NYD	368,281	6.7
1991	SjP	27,637	0.5
1991	SD	4,889	0.1
1994	NYD	68,663	1.2
1994	SjP	8,647	0.2
1994	SD	13,888	0.2
1998	NYD	8,287	0.2
1998	SD	19,624	0.4
1998	DNP	25,276	0.5
2002	SD	76,300	1.4
2002	ND	4,122	0.1
2006	SD	162,463	2.9
2006	ND	3,064	0.1
2006	NSF	1,417	0.0

Legend: DNP=*Det Nya Partiet* (The New Party); ND=*Nationaldemokraterna* (National Democrats); NSF=*Nationalsocialistisk Front* (National Socialist Front); NYD=*Ny Demokrati* (New Democracy); SjP=*Sjöbopartiet* (The Sjöbo Party) SD=*Sverigedemokraterna* (Sweden Democrats).

To get to its current position, the Sweden Democrats has undergone a number of changes. These changes will be looked at later in the paper. First, however, a brief overview of the extreme right legacy in Sweden will be given. Then follows a discussion of the development of the Sweden Democrats.

The extreme right legacy in Sweden

Parties and movements labelled as extreme right or populist right have existed in Sweden for at least 80 years. The first nazi party was formed in 1924, and it was followed by a long list of extreme right parties and movements (Löow 1990; 2004). The impact of these groups was never been great. The inter-war Swedish extreme right was noisy, but numerically limited. Its importance has been exaggerated in some recent publications, the argument apparently being that Sweden ought to be ashamed of its nazi past (e.g. Hübinette 2002; Schön 2004). Still, the highest level of support these parties could muster in an election was 1.6 per cent, the combined total of three extreme right parties in the parliamentary election in 1936.

It should be noted, however, that the membership of inter-war Swedish extreme right was not completely insignificant. The historian Helene Löow (1990:266) has estimated that the Swedish nazi parties had a combined total of circa 30,000 open and secret members in the mid 1930s. This was equivalent to circa 0.8 per cent of the electorate, and higher than the pre-occupation membership figures for extreme right parties in Denmark and Norway. Towards the end of the 1930s, membership as well

as electoral support declined, and the Swedish extreme right was more or less a spent force already at the outbreak of WWII. The party that survived longest was *Nationalsocialistiska Arbetarepartiet* (NSAP). This was a fully fledged nazi party, with Roman/nazi salutes, uniforms and the Swastika as party symbol. In late 1938 the party changed name to *Svensk Socialistisk Samling* (SSS), and toned down some of the nazi symbols and practices, but ideologically it remained almost unchanged. In the literature, the party is usually referred to as NSAP/SSS, sometimes also the 'Lindholm party', after its leader Sven Olov Lindholm. It was disbanded in 1950, but some of the remaining members became involved in the post-war extreme right groups (for more on NSAP/SSS, see Löw 1990; 2004).

In the early post-war years, the extreme right was as discredited in Sweden as anywhere else. Some inter-war groups survived, such as *Nysvenska rörelsen* (the Neo-Swedish Movement) a group of intellectuals primarily inspired by Italian fascism, and *Sveriges Nationella Förbund* (The National League of Sweden), which originated from a split in the Conservative Party in 1934. There were also new parties, most notably *Nordiska Rikspartiet* (The Nordic Realm Party), a small group of Hitler-admiring oddballs (Lindquist 1979:24 calls the party *Gäng för dårfinkar*; a gang for loonies). These and other groups sometimes received some media attention, but mostly in the form of entertainment articles, where interviewed leaders and sympathisers were treated as exotic animals.

Their political impact was minimal. *Nysvenska rörelsen* and *Sveriges Nationella Förbund* were mostly discussion clubs for aging gentlemen, although the former achieved some notoriety for producing a leaflet supporting the anti-asylum referendum campaign in Sjöbo in 1988 (Wahl 1988). *Nordiska Rikspartiet* was noted for a bomb attack on another small right-wing organisation, the pro-US and South Vietnam *Demokratisk Allians* (Democratic Alliance) in 1974, and were associated with harassment and a number of physical attacks on political opponents (Lindquist 1979:26f). On the whole, however, these and other extreme right groups of the first three post-war decades were comparatively insignificant and harmless.

A new generation of racists and neo-fascists/nazis emerged around 1980. The new groups were more aggressive and, at least occasionally, more efficient than their predecessors. An early representative of this generation was *Bevara Sverige Svenskt* (BSS, Keep Sweden Swedish), which started in 1979 (Lodenius and Larsson 1991:17ff). *Vitt Ariskt Motstånd* (VAM; White Aryan Resistance) was a loose network which existed for a few years in the early 1990s (Löw 1999:80ff). BSS and VAM were relatively short-lived, and they never attracted a large numerical following, but they became very well-known as brand names. In general, extreme right and racist activity in Sweden increased, and some of these activists were convicted of serious crimes, including murder.

While the neo-nazi, extreme right and militant racist subculture was making inroads into Swedish society, right-wing populist parties were still finding it difficult. Before the New Democracy interlude, populist right parties had only appeared in local politics, mostly in southern Sweden (cf Peterson et al 1988; Larsson and Ekman 2001:207ff). Gradually, the Sweden Democrats have emerged as by far the strongest of these parties. The problem for the Sweden Democrats, however, is that it originates from the neo-nazi/militant subculture, while it is trying to establish itself as a more

moderate party on a nationalist, anti-immigration ticket, the Danish People's Party being a clear inspiration. The move from the extremist to the comparatively moderate camp is not an easy one, and is one of the main obstacles to a national breakthrough. In order to better understand this dilemma, it is helpful to take a closer look at the party's origins, formation and subsequent development.

From the ashes of *Sverigepartiet* – *Sverigedemokraterna* take shape

In November 1986 BSS merged with *Framstegspartiet* (Progress Party) to form *Sverigepartiet* (Sweden Party). *Framstegspartiet* had originally been formed in 1968, thus being older than its Danish and Norwegian namesakes, but had led a very modest and erratic existence. *Framstegspartiet* was hardly a coherent entity in its own right, and the co-habitation with BSS turned out to be uneasy. This mix was manifested in the party's first and only manifesto. *Sverigepartiet* advocated an ethnic nationalism, arguing that the Swedish people is "rooted by the same trunk" (*rotat vid samma stam*) and that immigration should be restricted to "culturally and ethnically closely related peoples" (*Sverigepartiet, Politiskt Program 1987*, p. 2ff). The economic policy, which took up just over one of the 18 pages in the programme, was a mixture of pro-market and welfare chauvinist demands; the party declared itself strongly in favour of free enterprise but also advocated restrictions on multinational companies, and proposed government intervention in the wage bargaining system (*ibid.*, p. 9f).

Despite the underlying tensions, *Sverigepartiet* began relatively promisingly. In the spring of 1987 it was very active on the streets, leafleting in central Stockholm every Saturday. This led to a fair amount of media attention, but also to counter-demonstrations. The anti-racist mobilisation eventually forced *Sverigepartiet* to abandon the regular leafleting. The agenda was soon taken over by internal conflicts, and the party split in the autumn (Larsson and Ekman 2001:83-105). With some simplification, the split was between the Progress Party and the BSS factions, although there appears to have been three groups laying claim to the name *Sverigepartiet* in early 1988. It seems clear, however, that the BSS faction was better organised, and it was out of this group that the Sweden Democrats were formed. Formally this happened at the annual meeting of the BSS faction of *Sverigepartiet*, where the party name was changed to *Sverigedemokraterna* (Larsson and Ekman 2001:107ff). The formation received little public attention, and the early days of *Sverigedemokraterna* were a far cry from the media impact of *Sverigepartiet* in the previous year. Still, this early period is important for our understanding of *Sverigedemokraterna* and its subsequent development.

It is not difficult to pin the fledgling *Sverigedemokraterna* down as a party with extreme right connections. Leif Zeilon (who later took the surname Ericsson), a driving force behind the formation of BSS, played a prominent role in the extreme right scene from the late 1970s until the early 1990s. Zeilon was allegedly involved in the pro-US and anti-FNL *Demokratisk Allians* in the early 1970s. In 1977 he visited the then Rhodesia, still ruled according to apartheid, and at this time he also appears to have been in sympathetic contact with *Nordiska Rikspartiet*, although he has denied the latter connection (Lodenius and Larsson 1991:18ff; Larsson and Ekman 2001:54-60).

The first party leader, Anders Klarström, had been active in the Action Group (similar to the German SA) of *Nordiska Rikspartiet* in the 1980s. During this time he had been convicted of several crimes, including vandalism, theft and telephone threats against the well-known TV personality and anti-racist Hagge Geigert (Larsson and Ekman 2001:125f). Klarström, who led the party until being ousted at a tumultuous party congress in 1995, tried to polish up the party image but he was always haunted by his troubled past. After being forced out of the leadership he left politics, and has later disowned his previous anti-immigration views.

Zeilon-Ericsson and Klarström belonged to the younger generation of the party, which included several other members with criminal records and extremist connections, past as well as present. At least as compromising was the presence of nazi veterans, with a background in the inter-war and wartime groups. Gösta Bergqvist had joined NSAP/SSS as a teenager, towards the end of WWII, and had connections with various extreme right movements in the post-war period. He was involved with BSS, and he joined *Sverigedemokraterna* during its first year of existence. He did not have a leading role in the party, but appears to have acted as an advisor and inspirator, at least during the early years. He was expelled in 1996, after having been caught on camera in a march commemorating of Rudolf Hess (Larsson and Ekman 2001:117).

Gustaf Ekström also had a background in NSAP/SSS. At least as importantly, he served in Waffen-SS during the war (Larsson and Ekman 2001:117; Schön 2004:223). Described as a “fanatical national socialist” (Schön 2004:323), Ekström was one of the Swedish SS veterans that refused to be apologetic about his past (as seen in the two-part TV documentary *Blågul Nazism*, first broadcast by SVT in 1993; Gösta Bergqvist also appears in the same documentary). He was the auditor of *Sverigedemokraterna* in 1989 and 1990 (Larsson and Ekman 2001:118; 341). Other veterans from the 1930s and 40s included Gunnar Prawitz and Erik Walles, both prominent office holders in NSAP/SSS. Neither played a prominent role in *Sverigedemokraterna*, but they were signed-up members and made contributions to the party’s periodicals (Larsson and Ekman 2001:118ff).

The above examples could be multiplied. During its early years, *Sverigedemokraterna* had several members with compromising backgrounds. Many in the party realised that this made a political breakthrough impossible. Not least the first formal party leader Anders Klarström, despite his own troubled past, seems to have been aware of the situation, and tried to clean up the party image. Still, there was a dilemma. Many of the problematical members were important to the party. It was mostly they who had the organisational experience, and the bravery to participate in public activities, which often were met by more or less violent responses from the public and anti-racist activists. It is also possible, although little is known about this, that the party’s finances to some extent depended on fund-raisers and donators with extremist leanings.

On the fringe – *Sverigedemokraterna* 1988-2002

For many years, there was no sign of *Sverigedemokraterna* ever being able to establish itself, even in the long-term perspective. The party was a small sect on the fringe of Swedish politics, and it was not even certain to establish itself as the dominant force on the extreme right. The compromising background of its early

members and leaders has already been discussed. In addition, there is plenty of evidence that the efforts of Klarström and others to clean up the party image were compromised by numerous contacts with more openly extremist groups. Officially, such contacts were denied by the party, there are numerous allegations of activists who participated in activities by *Sverigedemokraterna* as well as supporting groups such as VAM (Larsson and Ekman 2001:141). Blomgren (1999:53f), in her study of three council areas in western Sweden, reports that contacts between the party and more openly extremist groups tended to vary locally; in some places it does not exist while in others contacts were regular, and dual memberships were possible. According to research by Larsson and Ekman (2001:225), the background of the party leadership was particularly compromising during the party's first six years. Until 1994, around half of the party executive had a criminal record between in the early and mid 1990s, while between 30 and 55 per cent had nazi connections. The compromising details were not only in the past; in 1991 one of the party's founders, Ulf Ranshede, was convicted of grievous bodily harm for an attack on a 14-year old immigrant (Larsson and Ekman 2001:127). Ranshede was not unique; there were several similar examples.

The party's initial electoral impact was limited. As seen in Table 1 above, it polled miserably in 1988 and 1991, although it did get its first local council seats in the latter year. One of the seats, taken in the small community of Dals Ed (some 120 km north of Göteborg), symbolised the party's problems. The top name on the local party list did not take up the seat because of his criminal record. The eventual representative, Marcus Koch, had the same problem with convictions that included unlawful threats and dealing in stolen goods. He still held the seat for the entire election period, and was re-elected in 1994. Koch was also a member of the party executive for a number of years in the 1990s (Larsson and Ekman 2001:136).

The other representative, Tina Hallgren Bengtsson, elected to the council of the southern town of Höör, was a more suitable representative for the party. A 27-year old nurse, Hallgren Bengtsson had no criminal record, and the leadership was quick to see her potential. Her photo featured regularly in the party's propaganda material, and she turned out to be a good public speaker. She soon made her way into the party executive, and was made deputy party leader in 1993. In 1996 she left to join the more extremist National Socialist Front, but she later abandoned politics and made anti-racist statements (Larsson and Ekman 2001:136ff).

Despite continued internal tensions, a period of consolidation followed after the party's first stumbling years. It was involved in a number of violent incidents, and some of its members repeatedly got into trouble with the law, but it was also able to assert its presence on the extreme right flank, and build up a fledging party organisation. A number of marches and meetings were attracted several hundred participants, even though they were often marred with violence (Larsson and Ekman 2001:143ff). In 1994 the number of council seats increased to five, and for the first time it reached five figures in the parliamentary election. However, the internal split erupted at the 1995 party conference. Anders Klarström was unseated as party leader, and appears to have left the congress in rather embarrassing forms. Formally the complaints against Klarström seem to have focused his alleged handling of the party finances, but the real reason appears to have been a combination of personal rivalries and differing political strategies (Larsson and Ekman 2001:154ff).

Klarström was succeeded by Mikael Jansson. Formerly a local politician for the Centre Party, and without a criminal record, Jansson presented the party with the clean image it so badly needed. Not seen as charismatic, or a particularly effective public speaker, Jansson has been described as politically and ideologically vague. He has cited Jörg Haider as his political role model (Larsson and Ekman 2001:165). Despite not being the person to arouse the masses, Jansson's lack of a compromising background gave him a good platform from which to initiate party reforms. The party still comprised many problematical elements, but the above-cited research by Larsson and Ekman (2001:225) suggests that 1995 was something of a cut-off point. From that year the proportion of members in the party executive with criminal records dropped significantly (from 46 per cent in 1994 to 16 in 1995; it then never got higher than 21 per cent), and the proportions with nazi connections dropped the following year.

The slow but steady progress continued in the 1998 election, when *Sverigedemokraterna* nearly reached 20,000 votes in the parliamentary election, and made further gains in local councils. Still, there was unease in the organisation, which erupted in 2001. Two of the party's most successful activists, Anders Steen and Tor Paulsson, were expelled in the spring, and together with around 150 sympathisers, the expellees formed *Nationaldemokraterna* (National Democrats) on 12th August. The reason for the split has been described as ideological. *Nationaldemokraterna* accused their former party for trying to "liberalise" the party programme, while the leadership of *Sverigedemokraterna* accused the defectors of Nazism and "seeing Jews and Freemasons behind every corner" (Larsson and Ekman 2001:185). According to Larsson and Ekman (2001:185) the main reasons for the split were personal, and the ideological differences should not be overstated. This, however, was written very shortly after the split, and subsequent developments show that the parties have taken rather different routes. Rydgren (2006:109) argues that *Nationaldemokraterna* comprised a traditionalist faction in *Sverigedemokraterna*, which was disgruntled with changes in the latter party's programme, and in subsequent years it has been clear that *Nationaldemokraterna* is by far the more radical of the two (Rydgren:2006:118).

An indication of the political difference is the respective international connections of the two parties. Before the split, *Sverigedemokraterna* had frequent contacts with parties such as the British National Party and Front National in France. Since the split, however, these contacts seem to have been taken over by *Nationaldemokraterna*. The party has visited the BNP annual Red White and Blue festival as well as the French Front National's Bleu Blanche Rouge festival. BNP leader Nick Griffin has spoken at meetings arranged by the party, and there have also been representation from FN. *Nationaldemokraterna* protested at the British embassy in Stockholm against the trial against leading BNP members, following a BBC documentary broadcast in 2005. *Sverigedemokraterna*, meanwhile, prefers less compromising contacts, notably with the Danish People's Party. In an article in the party's periodical *SD-Kurien*, dated 23 February 2007, the Danish People's Party, Italian Alleanza Nazionale, and Austrian FPÖ (the defection by Haider and supporters to form the BZÖ is not mentioned) are cited as positive international examples of "Democratic Nationalism". *Nationaldemokraterna* have been riddled with splits and defections, and has in no way been able to compete with *Sverigedemokraterna*'s electoral support, but has had a few successes in local elections, and continues to exist.

On balance, the 2001 split was positive for *Sverigedemokraterna*. The party lost a number of committed and experienced activists, but also some of its most compromising and disruptive elements, which paved the way for continued party reforms. The 2002 election was a great success by the party's own standards, with 1.4 per cent of the vote in the parliamentary election and a six-time increase in the number of local council seats. The conditions for further successes seemed favourable. The nazi 'old guard' was gone – deceased or defected. Significant parts of the bad eggs in the younger generation had also left – many to *Nationaldemokraterna*, others to smaller groups or away from politics. Still, the party carried a burden in the shape of its origins and history. The party name was the same as in 1988, when it had many nazis in its ranks. Many of the nazis were still there when the eventual leader, the 'clean' Mikael Jansson, joined in 1993. By the early 2000s the party was the dominant force on the radical/extreme right, but it still faced a difficult task to finally break away from the fringes of Swedish politics.

On the verge of a breakthrough? *Sverigedemokraterna* from 2002 to date

Sverigedemokraterna had high hopes to build on the election to the relative success of 2002. There would be a referendum on the Euro in September 2003, and an election to the European Parliament in June 2004. The party has been strongly anti-EU throughout its existence, and it could reasonably hope to exploit an available EU sceptical niche among voters who would not be prepared to support the two main EU critics in the party system, the Left and Green parties. However, *Sverigedemokraterna* was not able to use this niche in the Euro referendum. The party campaigned against the Euro, but was largely outflanked by the Centre Party, whose pro-EU but anti-Euro stance meant that it could channel the centre-right, non-socialist criticism of the Euro. This deprived *Sverigedemokraterna* of a competitive advantage the Danish People's Party had enjoyed in the Danish referendum in 2000, being the only party of any significance campaigning against the Euro. This also paved the way for the Danish People's Party's acceptance as a support party of a centre-right minority government in 2001.

The attempts by *Sverigedemokraterna* to make its own impact in the Euro referendum failed miserably. The party was given space to write a 'debate article' in the tabloid *Expressen*, but rather bizarrely it used this opportunity to praise the Centre Party for its anti-Euro campaign. In the article, party secretary Johan Rinderheim wrote that the Centre Party and its leader Maud Olofsson had been a solid counter-weight against the "political alchemists", with a message based on common sense (*Expressen* 3 September 2003; Widfeldt 2004a:138f). Olofsson reacted angrily, and an intense debate followed about the extent to which Rinderheim's embrace in any way compromised the Centre Party, and also whether *Expressen* had been right to publish it. The debate lasted less than a week, and there was no sign that it benefited *Sverigedemokraterna*. Thus, although a clear majority voted against the introduction of the Euro, *Sverigedemokraterna* could not benefit from the referendum in the same way as its Danish role model had been able to.

The EU election in the following year could only be described as a failure. In a number of countries, for example France, Belgium and Italy, extreme and populist right parties have been able to use EU elections as 'springboards' to further national success. Even though the representational threshold had been raised, as Sweden's

number of seats in the parliament was lowered from 22 to 19, *Sverigedemokraterna* could reasonably have expected to capitalise on growing discontent with EU, following the ill-fated attempt by the political and organisational establishment to convince the Swedish people to accept the Euro as currency. Against this background the election result of 1.2 per cent, or 28,303 votes, must be seen as a massive disappointment. To some extent the disappointment could be attributed to the emergence of the June List, which from nowhere took three seats and 14.5 per cent of the vote. A cross-political alliance of disillusioned EU critics, formed out of the No campaign in the Euro referendum, the June List was – and is – a very different party to *Sverigedemokraterna*. It does not advocate Sweden leaving the EU, and the criticism against the EU and the political establishment is mild-mannered in comparison to many other EU critical parties and movements. Above all, the June List has never politicised immigration, which makes it decidedly distinct from *Sverigedemokraterna*. Despite the very clear differences, it seems as if the June List took a significant part of the protest potential in the election. While *Sverigedemokraterna* could hardly have hoped to have taken all the votes that fell to the June List, probably not even enough to enter the EU parliament, the result would in all likelihood have been at least somewhat better, had it not been for the presence of the June List (Widfeldt 2004a).

The disappointment of the 2004 election represented a missed chance for *Sverigedemokraterna*. A key problem for the party seems to have been one of leadership. Mikael Jansson was not the leader you would expect of an anti-immigration party on the verge of a breakthrough. While his clean background was a clear asset, he could in no way be described as charismatic. According to Larsson and Ekman (2001:165), he has been largely anonymous in the party's ideological debate, and he describes himself as an analyst and organiser rather than an orator (Larsson and Ekman 2001:167). In May 2005 Jansson lost the position as leader, after being challenged by the 26-year old Jimmie Åkesson, who was supported by 91 conference delegates to Jansson's 50. The reason for the leadership challenge seems to have been factional battles. According to the anti-racist periodical *Expo* (no. 2, 2005), Jansson was supported by the so-called 'bunker group' consisting of traditionalists with more tolerance to lingering extremism in the party, while Åkesson wants to speed up the modernisation process. Jansson, however, has continued in the party, and was elected to the city council of Göteborg in 2006.

The youthful Jimmie Åkesson has been active in the party throughout his adult life. At the age of 18 in 1997, he joined the party executive. In the following year he was elected to the local council of Sölvesborg in south east Sweden, and became leader of *Sverigedemokraterna*'s youth organisation, as post he held until he became party leader. By all accounts not a spell-binding speaker, he performed competently when appearing in brief TV interviews in the 2006 campaign. His smart appearance, his low-key but confident and reasoned style and his 'clean' background belie any accusations of extremism or quirkiness.

The extent to which the unprecedented success in the 2006 election, with 282 council seats and 2.9 per cent in the Riksdag election, can be attributed to Åkesson is uncertain. He did feature on TV and radio on a couple of occasions during the campaign, but his media exposure was fairly limited. Conclusive data are not yet available, but there is not much to suggest that the party's gains were the result of a

party leader effect. In a different sense, however, it could well be that Åkesson's intensified attempts to rid the party of its extremist legacy and image made it a more attractive alternative for many voters.

Ideological changes

Sverigedemokraterna has tried to build up its own nationalist ideological niche, distinct from other parties but without extremist connotations. Its form of nationalism has clear links with traditional conservatism, but the party also likes to claim adherence to the Social Democratic concept of the *Folkhemmet* (People's Home). The extent to which the party has found an effective ideological mix, which will broaden its electoral base as well as maintaining a core of loyal activists remains to be seen, but there has been a clear shift in its rhetoric and demands.

One of the most significant changes in the party ideology has been the toning down of its anti-immigration policies. A key step in the de-radicalisation was the adoption of the 1999 party programme. Here, many of the early radical proposals were dropped or toned down (Larsson and Ekman 2001:25f), and the changes contributed to the split that led to the defection of *Nationaldemokraterna*. A key example of the de-radicalisation is the abolition of the demand of enforced repatriation of all immigrants to have entered Sweden since 1970. Today the party claims that it will work towards the repatriation of immigrants that have not assimilated to the Swedish society, unless they need protection according International Law. The repatriation can be encouraged with counselling and economic incentives. It should be noted that also after the party programme change in 1999, and the defection of *Nationaldemokraterna* a year later, activists in *Sverigedemokraterna* expressed in desire to rid the country from non-European immigrants in stronger terms than the party programme. In a feature article by the writer and broadcaster Mustafa Can, cited by Rydgren (2006:111f), the party representative Torbjörn Kastell said that when in power, *Sverigedemokraterna* would introduce make it "unappealing" for immigrants and refugees to live in Sweden, and that "No immigrant would want to live in a society that I have just described to you" (the original article was published in the Sunday extra section of *Dagens Nyheter*, 28 September 2002). The current party programme, however, does open up for the possibility of assimilation (*Sverigedemokraternas Principprogram*, section 2).

This would suggest that many of the ideological changes are cosmetic, something that is difficult to judge until the party has had some political influence. The party claims not to be racist, instead it uses the populist technique of "frame transformation", where the party adopts a concept used by its opponents and changes its meaning (Rydgren 2006:112). The party argues that it is in fact the Swedes that are the victims of racism, when they are mugged and raped by immigrants, and that it is the Swedes that are the subjects of discrimination when immigrants are given priority to housing or benefits. It is difficult to find clear evidence of 'classical' biological racism in the party. It supports the UN declaration of human rights, and opposes all kinds of discrimination. Demands of bans on the adoption of non-European children have been dropped, but the party does argue that "the most important factor in a safe, harmonious and solidaristic society is the common identity, which in turn depends on a high degree of ethnic and cultural likeness among the population" (*Sverigedemokraternas Principprogram*, section 2). The party is opposed to multiculturalism, which it claims leads to conflict and disharmony, which could be

seen as an expression of ethnopluralism, sometimes called culturism or ‘new racism’, which holds that all ethnic groups are equal, but should be kept separate (cf. Mudde 2000).

Economically, the party is probably best described as centrist, with elements of welfare chauvinism. It advocates free enterprise and entrepreneurship, but also proposes restrictions against the internationalisation of the economy (*Sverigedemokraternas Principprogram*, section 4). The perspective on democracy is on the face of it clear cut. The adherence to the democratic principle is manifested in the party name (although there are unconfirmed allegations that one of the nazi veterans disapproved of the party name, as he did not want it to be a democratic party). Certainly, the party claims to fully support the principles of procedural democracy (*Sverigedemokraternas Principprogram*, section 4). Also in this area, however, the party often uses frame transformation, claiming that the other parties and the media establishment are undemocratic in their negligence of the party and its policies. *Sverigedemokraterna* also claims to adhere to democracy in a substantive sense, i.e. democracy defined as human rights and liberties. The party has made such claims throughout its existence, but its constant claim to be in opposition to the political ‘establishment’ could, perhaps, qualify it as ‘semi-loyal’ to democracy (Schedler 1996).

De-nazification?

The attempts to clean up the party image has brought organisational as well as ideological challenges. The party has carried a burden of activists who are sometimes caught in compromising situations. Party leader Mikael Jansson was aware of the negative publicity caused by the “Hollywood Nazis”, and in 1996 political uniforms in public meetings and demonstrations were banned (Larsson and Ekman 2001:168ff). The party did not have its own political uniform as such, the practice clamped down on was more a question of different members sporting more or less imaginative outfits, in some cases connected to more extremist organisations they were simultaneous members of. Political uniforms had already been banned in Swedish law since the 1930s, but in practice the law turned out to have no effect, particularly after the Swedish Supreme Court declared it incompatible with the freedom of expression granted in the constitution. Subsequent court decisions, however, determined that certain symbols, gestures and expressions (e.g. Swastikas, the nazi/Roman salute and ‘Sieg Heil’ shouts) would be arrestable offences under the law against persecution of population groups (*Hets mot folkgrupp*) (Widfeldt 2004b). Thus, while concerns for the party image no doubt played a key part in the decisions that led to the uniform ban, fear of numerous arrests and criminal proceedings against party members may also have played a part.

Of course the nazi tendencies did not disappear immediately. Indeed, it was not until February 2000 that it publicly disowned Nazism, and has since made it clear that pro-nazi behaviour in the party will lead to expulsion. What seems to have triggered this was a series of highly publicised violent acts by open Nazis in 1999, including a bomb attack on two investigative journalists, the shooting of two policemen following a bank robbery and the murder of a trade unionist who had exposed a nazi impostor in a local trade union committee (Larsson and Ekman 2001:171f). It should at the same time be noted that the party’s criticism of Nazism was wrapped in criticism against

the political establishment, the argument being that the lack of openness in the debate about immigration has led to extremist outbursts of protest. Still, the harder line on Nazism has led to a number of expulsions, even if there does not seem to have been a zero tolerance policy.

The party organisation

Like many populist and extreme right parties, *Sverigedemokraterna* has been very secretive about its membership. Estimations have been rather crude, and based on assessments from anti-racist organisations and investigative journalists. It has been clear, however, that the membership has never been particularly large, at best between 1000 and 2000. In recent years, however, the party has been somewhat more open about its membership, and statistics published by the Internet site Wikipedia gives us an impression of the party size. The earlier assumptions of a small party are corroborated by the figures reported in Table 2 below.

Table 2: *Sverigedemokraterna's* membership, 2001-2007.

Year	Members
2001	900
2002	1000
2003	1200
2004	1386
2005	1740
2006	282
2007	2523

Source: Wikipedia

The party is nevertheless trying to establish local and regional organisations across the country, and while this work is by no means complete, *Sverigedemokraterna's* website regularly reports on the formations of new party units. Still, however, the organisation is still far too small to generate any campaign impact. The new leadership under Jimmie Åkesson has challenged a more traditionalist faction in the party, which advocates traditional footwork, with leafleting et c. Clearly the party does not have the numbers for this to make any substantial impact, something Åkesson and his supporters have realised (*Expo* 2/2005). In addition, he also seems aware of the negative consequences of members leafleting on the streets, constantly getting into conflicts with anti-racist campaigners. There are signs of a new organisational strategy, with more focus on modern campaign techniques, where the Internet plays a key part, as well as conscious efforts to get more media attention. As Susan Scarrow (1996) has shown, rank-and-file members are by no means irrelevant in such a strategy, as they can in many ways be part of more high-tech campaigning.

No modern party can survive on membership dues, least of all a party the size of *Sverigedemokraterna*. It has had to live from donations and financial sacrifices from its sympathisers and activists. Not much is known about the how the party has been funded, but there are reports that the 1998 election campaign was financially supported by the French Front National, although the sums involved are unknown

(Larsson 2001:317). There are also reports of individual wealthy donors but little is known about their number, resources and generosity, although one of the alleged donors claims in an interview in the anti-racist journal *Expo* (2/2004) that “there are many members in *Sverigedemokraterna* that are millionaires”. In the future, however, *Sverigedemokraterna* will to an increasing extent be able to rely on a more dependable source than private donations, which tend to be lacking in stability and predictability. The increasing representation on local (and since 2006 also regional) councils makes the party eligible for public funding. Every local and regional seat entitles the party to a fixed annual sum from the respective council, and since 2006 the party is also eligible for some state funding, which is given to parties with at least 2.5 per cent of the vote in the parliamentary election. Exactly how the public funds are used is not known, but it is virtually certain that the vast majority of the money generated by local and regional seats is channelled to the central party organisation. Indeed, Jimmie Åkesson is now fully salaried as party leader.

An interesting indicator of the changes is the party symbol. Early material from the party did not tend to have a symbol or logo at all, although the party itself claims that its first symbol was a forget-me-not. In the 1990s, it changed symbol to a torch shaped and coloured like a Swedish flag. According to Larsson and Ekman (2001:170) the inspiration seems to have been the British National Front, but more or less similar symbols are used by many extreme and populist right parties across Europe. In May 2006, however, a membership ballot approved the change of party symbol into the hepatica, a blue small flower which is common in parts of Sweden. The change was clearly an attempt to rid the party of its strident and conflictual image. For the 2006 election campaign, the party also released a song called *Blåsippans väg* (The road of the hepatica), with lyrics about a flower that continues to grow in adverse conditions.

Impact on the party system

Although a national breakthrough has not yet been achieved, *Sverigedemokraterna* is now a force to be reckoned with in subnational politics. As can be seen in Table 3, the party is extensively represented in local councils after the 2006 election.

Table 3: *Sverigedemokraterna*'s representation on local councils, 1988-2006.

Year	No. of seats	No. of councils
1988	0	0
1991	2	2
1994	5	3
1998	8	5
2002	49	29
2006	282	145

Note: Entries refer to the number of seats won in the election. In several cases the party's elected representatives defected, or resigned their seats. In some cases, the party had no candidate to take the seats. In 2006, the party also won a total of 16 seats in three regional councils.

The party does not appear to have the organisational resources to cope with such a large increase in council representation. In some councils the party has not had any candidates at all to occupy the seats gained (according to the anti-racist journal *Expo*, 4/2006, this applied to 14 seats in 13 councils). In others defections and resignations have led to seats quickly being abandoned. There are also some question marks about the competence of the councillors that do occupy their seats, particularly in councils where the party holds a pivotal position between the two main ideological blocs. An example is the Stockholm suburb of Upplands Bro, where the party's elected councillor appears to have behaved rather erratically in shifting back and forth between the two main ideological blocs.

The main parties do not yet have a coherent strategy of how to deal with *Sverigedemokraterna*. There is no *cordon sanitaire* along Belgian lines, where the other parties agree not to in any way deal with *Sverigedemokraterna*. In some councils, the party's presence has led to cross-bloc deals, in others *Sverigedemokraterna* has been involved in some agreements to stabilise the majority, although it is not so far a fully accepted part of any ruling coalitions.

Conclusion

Although *Sverigedemokraterna* has not yet broken through on the national level, it is not likely to go away. It is by far the biggest party outside the *Riksdag*, and while a national breakthrough in the 2010 election is not certain, it would be unrealistic to rule it out. If a breakthrough does occur it would be quite remarkable, given the party's highly compromising background and origins. The contrast to the Danish People's Party and the Norwegian Progress Party, which do not have the same nazi or extremist origins and history, is striking. In this respect *Sverigeindemokraterna* has had a less favourable starting point than many comparable parties in other countries, and is likely to continue to be an obstacle on the party's route to a national breakthrough. As we have seen, the party has tried to get rid of this legacy. This has often been met with opposition from traditionalists in the party, and transformation process is not complete. Indeed, the political opponents will continue to highlight the troubled background as long as the party exists.

Still, *Sverigeindemokraterna* is no longer a trivialty on the lunatic fringe. It already wields some power in local politics. In its strongholds in southern Sweden, further advances by the party will make permanent political impact inevitable, especially as some of *Sverigedemokraterna*'s councillors are likely to increase in confidence and knowledge. Thus, although *Sverigeindemokraterna* not yet represented in the *Riksdag*, the other parties are already now in need of a strategy of how to deal with the new kid on the bloc. With New Democracy the strategy, to "close your eyes and it will go away" worked (cf. Downs 2001). *Sverigeindemokraterna*, however, is not a flash party, and will not go away quite so easily.

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