

The Myths versus Modernisation - Sweden's Euro Referendum

1.

This is by no means a full analysis of what happened. It will take some time to get the full picture. It is my personal reflections for the benefit of all my friends in different countries who have asked what happened. I am by no means an unbiased observer, having spent a month full-time campaigning from Kiruna in the extreme North to Ystad in the extreme South in the country.

2.

The result was a surprise for everyone involved. Opinion polls had predicted a No-vote throughout the campaign, but the gap was seen as closing in much the same way as before the November 1994 referendum on our membership of the European Union. Then, the outcome was really decided during last few days of campaigning, with the final TV debate finally securing the narrow victory for the Yes-side.

3.

In the late afternoon of the Wednesday prior to the Sunday poll, Foreign Minister Anna Lindh was brutally attacked and stabbed in central Stockholm. Campaigning immediately came to a halt, and when the news was released the following morning that it had not been possible to save her life, the nation as a whole felt the grief intensely. More or less every form of campaigning activity was stopped. This included the final TV debate, in

which the Yes side would in all probability had been able to present its case in a more convincing way than had been the case previously. The Yes team then should have consisted of Mrs Lindh, the Prime Minister and myself.

4.

It is difficult to know what effect the murder of Mrs Lindh had on the vote. It clearly prevented the Yes-side from sustaining its upward momentum, while there does not seem to have been much of a sympathy vote. The coming together of all political leaders under the theme of supporting democracy might in fact have been counterproductive, since democracy was one of the key themes of the No campaign, claiming that our democracy was threatened by membership in the monetary union. But in retrospect it is obvious that the gap was so large that it is most unlikely that it could have been closed even under the best of circumstances.

5.

The final result was that 56,1 % voted No, while the Yes side was supported by only 41,8 %. The gap was thus close to 15 percentage points, which is uniquely large in referendums of this kind.

6.

The best comparison is with the November 1994 referendum on membership in the European Union, in which 52,3 % voted Yes and 46,8 voted No. Although there have been changes in the electorate over the nine years since then, we are talking about a swing to the No side of app 10 percentage points. While in 1994 the expectation was that support for European integration would gradually grow in the following years, the 2003 result clearly puts that assumption into question to some extent.

7.

In terms of regions, only Stockholm and the southernmost province of Skåne voted Yes. With a national average of a 14 percentage point lead for the No side, the Stockholm region registered an 11 percentage point lead for the Yes

side, with Skåne registering a very weak 0,4 percentage lead. With the exception of the Stockholm region, those parts of Skåne directly facing Öresund and Denmark, the well-off Gothenburg neighbourhood of Kungälv and the small city of Haparanda in the extreme north of the Gulf of Bothnia at the border crossing with Finland, every single city and municipality in the country returned a more or less solid No vote.

8.

In more solid centre-right district, support held up somewhat better, with a swing in comparison with 1994 to the No-side of app 5 percentage points. In the larger cities – medium-sized to small by European standards – the swing was app 10 percentage points, while it become more dramatic in regions traditionally dominated either by the Social Democrats or the rural-based Centre party. In Katrineholm, which is the Prime Ministers political origin and often referred to home, as well as in nearby Vingåker where he was born, the swing was dramatic 25 percentage points. There was a virtual meltdown in support for the European project in these types of areas.

9.

Of particular concern is the fact that there seems to have been a clear majority for the No side among the younger parts of the electorate. This is in clear contrast to both when the issue of an application to the then EC was pressed in the late 1980's and early 1990's, and during the 1994 referendum. There were many more women than men that voted against, but this balance does not seem to have been worse than was the case already in 1994.

10.

A new feature of the voting pattern is that of the immigrants, as those that have resided in Sweden for three years or more had the right to vote. Their turnout was somewhat lower than the average, but it seems as if app $\frac{3}{4}$ of them voted for the Yes side. Thus, the immigrants are a force for a more country more open to cooperation and integration across the borders.

11.

The way in which the PM handled the campaign has been severely criticised also from within his own party. Campaigning started late, the message kept shifting, there were sudden statements that diverted the debate in odd directions and there were the constant splits within the ranks of the government as well as with parts of the trade union movement. One day, the PM could say that a No vote could be followed by another quick referendum, the next day he could say that the referendum was a strange idea and the third he could add that the wording on the ballot paper should perhaps have been a different one. Thus, the media portrayed a Yes campaign in a certain amount of disarray, while the No side kept hammering away on its core message. Although the Yes campaign was massively better financed than the No side, ultimately it was the images of the two campaigns on the TV screens that made the difference.

12.

It would however be too easy to explain away the massive failure with only these campaign missteps, obvious and damaging as they were. Instead, it is a question of a combination of a country struggling with its own myths, and the failure of the dominant political party to sort out the relationship between these myths and the necessity of modernisation. This failure has found its concrete expression in a notable failure of leadership on the European issues during the past years.

13.

Prior to the 1994 referendum, European issues had been at the forefront of the political debate since the late 1980's. The SD's had done their controversial U-term in late 1990, with all the internal debates this caused, while for the then centre-right government the European issue has been their number one priority. Thus, the electorate were not entirely unprepared for the choice they had to make.

14.

After the 1994 referendum, the then SD government deliberately played down all European issues. In 1997, one had Parliament decide that Sweden should not join the Euro, since such a decision in the absence of clear-cut popular support could jeopardize democracy. The Prime Minister wrote and stated that EMU was a “risky” and “shaky” project that was likely to do more harm than good for Sweden. The division inside the party led to them simply ignoring it in the hope that it in some way would go away.

15.

Thus, the 1998 and 2001 election campaigns were fought on purely national issues, with a certain amount of nostalgia for a past that was alleged to have been better being a key part of the SD message. Europe wasn't even mentioned, and the rhetoric proclaimed the need to preserve a perceived Swedish model of welfare from influences and ideas coming from other countries. The tone of the debates was often introspective and nostalgic bordering on the isolationist.

16.

Sweden can thus be described as a society clinging to a myth of its past, seeing its restoration in the present as pressing, and being profoundly uncertain of where it wants to head in the future. While other nations have managed to break away from their myths – difficult as that is – in Sweden the preservation of this myth has been a key component of the power preservation technique of the dominant political party.

17.

The defeat on September 14 demonstrates that this lack of leadership on European issues during past years, in combination with a perceived clash between the European project and the national myth, led to a massive melt-down of support for the political and economic establishment of the country and a No vote of a size that surpassed the fears or expectations of everyone.

18.

To this should be added factors that had to do with the current situation in the Eurozone itself. There was a perception that reforms in these have had stalled, and that key governments – notably Paris – were openly defying the rules that had been agreed to, and that Sweden should abide by. While not decisive, these factors were distinctly not helpful.

19.

Thus, the September 14 vote was the result of myths with deep roots and failures over year rather than just a bungled campaign, and will have repercussions for Sweden's policy not only in terms of staying out of the euro for the foreseeable future, but also in complicating the handling of the different European issues more immediately on the table.