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A Home for Whom? Contested Identities and the Politics of the Welfare State in Sweden

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A Home for Whom?
Contested Identities and the Politics of the Welfare State in Sweden

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of Social Studies
of Bard College

by
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Annandale-on-Hudson, New York
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Dedication

I dedicate this senior project to my grandmother (Mormor) who always believed in me and was there when I needed her most.

Jag älskar dig.

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Introduction

“What Sweden is today, dead and living Swedes have made it, and no one else. Today, Sweden is ours through Swedish endeavours. The task of the living Swedes is to preserve it and improve it by continuing this endeavour - on the basis of freedom.”¹

The above quote is from Swedish journalist Vilhelm Moberg’s essay “Swedish endeavour.” It was published in 1941 as propaganda for the Swedish military in the face of the threat of a Nazi occupation. Moberg is widely considered one of the most important Swedish journalists of the twentieth century. His works often critiqued the Swedish monarchy and he was very vocal in his opposition to the lack of Swedish resistance toward Nazi Germany. While Sweden has come a long way since World War II, Moberg’s words about preserving Swedish values have particular relevance today.

Sweden is often considered the ideal social democracy. The country combines a high standard of living with a generous social safety net. Its citizens enjoy access to a wide range of benefits including free education and universal healthcare. But in recent years, many Swedes have become increasingly disillusioned with their welfare system. In the most recent Swedish general election, a surprising number of Swedish citizens voted for the Sweden Democrats, a far-right anti-immigration political party with roots in the neo-Nazi movement. While the Sweden Democrats received less votes than expected, it still represented the largest gain by any political party in the Riksdag (Swedish parliament). Meanwhile, the ruling Social Democratic

¹ Vilhelm Moberg, *Svensk strävan* (Stockholm: Bonnier, 1941).

Party had their worst outcome in over 100 years. This change in voter behavior has been the subject of much study and prompted many onlookers to declare this the end of the Swedish model of social democracy. How are we to understand this turn of events?

Sweden is a very successful country. Over the past century, it has managed to combine features of capitalism with social benefits such as healthcare and education. The Social Democratic Party rose to power in the 1930s and soon became one of the most successful social democratic parties in the world. Their success was contingent upon their ability to combine both nationalist and socialist policies, thereby laying the foundation for the social democratic welfare state. They did this under the assumption that it was a joint effort by the national family. They called this new model of social democracy *folkhemmet*, or, “the people's home.” Unlike other countries where the emphasis was on race and ethnicity, Sweden emphasized equality, freedom, and democracy. Even today, polls conducted suggest that Swedish national identity is to an unusual extent connected more to citizenship and the rule of law than ethnicity.²

However, in recent decades, the Swedish model has become the center of a political and ideological conflict. The Sweden Democrats, the most right-wing of Sweden's major political parties, have laid claim to the Swedish model and created a dispute surrounding its meaning. Beginning in the 1970s, the Swedish welfare model began receiving criticism from the right, who wanted more tax cuts. In the ensuing years, right-wing political parties began appearing in the Nordic countries and, although they were initially opposed to high levels of taxation, their focus shifted toward immigration and they began developing nativist tendencies. Following the most recent wave of immigration to Sweden during the 2015 refugee crisis, the issue of immigration

² Bruce Stokes, “How Countries Around the World View National Identity,” Pew Research Center's Global Attitudes Project (Pew Research Center, May 30, 2020), <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2017/02/01/what-it-takes-to-truly-be-one-of-us/>.

has been front and center in Swedish politics. This has led to a reevaluation of the Swedish model, in particular who it is meant to benefit and who it is not meant to benefit. Unfortunately, the Swedish model suffers from a conflict of interest in which two of Sweden's largest political parties view the model as fundamental to Swedish society but disagree on the meaning of “the people.” This has had a profound impact on Swedish politics which, although ranking consistently high in terms of democracy and freedom of expression, have struggled to reconcile a massive cultural divide between the pro-human rights, open borders and internationalist Swedes and the more conservative, nationalistic ones. A recent surge in crime has further exacerbated this divide and the Sweden Democrats have wasted no time capitalizing on Swedes’ fears surrounding the increase in gang violence in many of Sweden's major cities. They have been massively successful in constructing the narrative that immigrants are responsible for these crimes and in pushing many of Sweden’s major political parties further to the right on issues such as immigration. As a result, Sweden is becoming more and more polarized and its core values of democracy and egalitarianism are becoming increasingly contested.

Sweden is at an inflection point. The country's two largest political parties need to reevaluate the Swedish model before the next election or else it risks fracturing itself even more over issues like immigration. Swedes should ask themselves- Who are “the people?” What constitutes “Swedishness” in the twenty-first century? This thesis seeks to answer these questions by looking at the history of the people's home and trying to understand both sides' conception of its core features. Chapter 1 lays out the history of the Swedish welfare system and shows how it was constructed around the idea of a shared national identity. It then delves into the history of immigration to Sweden and finds that it is a relatively new phenomenon. Chapter 2 examines the history of Swedish far-right movements, beginning with the earlier Nazi parties and ending with

the Sweden Democrats. It then explains how Sweden provided the ideal conditions for a far-right populist movement to flourish despite the image we often have of Sweden as a tolerant and welcoming country. Chapter 3 looks at the rhetoric surrounding the people's home and how politicians on both ends of the parliamentary spectrum interpret it. It finds that the people's home is an inherently contested concept that has been continuously used and misused throughout history. Chapter 4 explores whether it is possible for Swedes to come up with a new definition of the people's home suitable for the twenty-first century that works for everyone. In doing so, perhaps politicians can begin alleviating many of the ideological battles that Swedes face on a daily basis. It also looks ahead to the 2022 Swedish election and explains the challenges that Sweden faces moving forward.

There has never been a better time to study the far-right in Sweden. Many countries look up to Sweden as a perfect model of social democracy. What this thesis finds is that the Swedish model, while it initially had good intentions, became something easily appropriable by the far-right much to the detriment of Swedish politics and society. Sweden can still be a great country, but it needs to work out its flaws before the next election or else it risks losing what makes it great altogether. In addition, Sweden's Nordic neighbors have already seen the far-right become part of the mainstream and it leads to the question of whether Sweden is an anomaly in a world increasingly defined by far-right movements or whether Sweden is finally catching up to its European neighbours.

Chapter 1

In the mid-nineteenth century, Sweden was one of the poorest countries in the world. The period between 1870 and 1970 saw Sweden become the fourth richest country in the world. The country did remarkably well in combining high levels of economic growth with increasing equality. For many, Sweden is proof that a generous welfare system is compatible with a relatively free market economy. Today, the Swedish model is considered a “middle way” between capitalism and socialism. What explains Sweden's success over the 100 year period between 1870 and 1970?

Part of Sweden’s success story is attributed to the fact that the country is rich in natural resources. In addition, Sweden remained neutral during both world wars and has stayed out of wars for centuries. But these explanations only go so far as to explain Sweden's success since the beginning of the twentieth century. In order to understand the true nature of the Swedish success story, it is important to understand the history of the country starting with the prehistoric period up to the present. In the following paragraphs, I will lay out Sweden's early and modern history and hopefully shed light on what made the country so successful to begin with.

Sweden's Early History

Humans have inhabited the area that is present-day Sweden from as early as 12,000 BC.³ Between 1,200 BC and 1,000 BC, the Swedish population began settling down. Agriculture came

³ Sweden.se, “History of Sweden – More than Vikings: Official Site of Sweden,” sweden.se, August 14, 2020, <https://sweden.se/society/history-of-sweden/>.

to form the basis of Sweden's economy and society during this time. Also during this time, Sweden expanded its economic activity toward the east and created trading links with the Byzantine Empire and Arabic Kingdoms. By the eleventh century, Sweden had become a Christian nation.

Sweden did not begin encountering migration from other parts of the world until the late twelfth century. During this time, a group of northern German towns formed a confederation called the Hanseatic League. For almost three centuries, the Hanseatic League dominated trade in the North Sea region. The Swedish cities of Visby and Stockholm soon became important links in the Hanseatic trading network. However, by the beginning of the sixteenth century, the influence of the Hanseatic League started to decline and Sweden soon viewed them as an unwanted competitor. In the Middle Ages, the German influence in Sweden contributed to the country's urban development and even affected the development of the Swedish language. Germany's influence in Sweden during this time would go on to have a profound impact on Swedish attitudes toward immigration in the ensuing centuries all the way up until the twentieth century.

Sweden's Modern History

Sweden did not become a great power until the seventeenth century. During that time, it controlled a territory comprising present-day Finland as well as parts of Norway. The Swedish Kingdom was home to Finns, Norwegians, Danes, Germans, Latvians, Russians, and Sammi all living in the same territory. It was during this period that Sweden permitted, and sometimes even enforced, people to move from one region to another. It was also around this same time that

Sweden began recruiting a professional class of industrial workers from neighboring countries. These laborers would become crucial to Sweden's early development.

During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Sweden was involved in a number of wars with Finland. The wars reduced Sweden to what Robert Weston referred to as “a small, insignificant country in northern Europe.”⁴ By the mid-nineteenth century, Sweden's population grew dramatically due to improvements in living conditions and land reforms. But within a few years, a series of crop failures resulted in a famine that triggered a massive wave of migration to North America that lasted until the 1930s. Although there has always been movement in and out of Sweden, it was this wave of migration that left the deepest imprint on the country's development.

Swedish Immigration History

Sweden did not technically become a country of immigration until World War II when refugees from neighboring countries began settling in Sweden as a result of the war. Thousands of migrants from Finland, Denmark, and Norway fled to Sweden to seek asylum following persecution in their home countries. It was also during this time that Jewish people from Nazi Germany began seeking asylum in Sweden. They were given jobs primarily in factories and in the agricultural sector, jobs that would have otherwise gone to the Swedes who were called for national defense service. But due to the fact that Sweden was trying to avoid conflict with Nazi Germany, a majority of them were rejected. This is precisely the policy that intellectuals such as

⁴ Charles Westin, “Sweden: Restrictive Immigration Policy and Multiculturalism,” migrationpolicy.org, March 2, 2017, <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/sweden-restrictive-immigration-policy-and-multiculturalism>.

Vilhelm Moberg were critical of in that it restricted movement at a time when Sweden was in need of labor migrants from other countries.

During both World War I and World War II, Sweden pursued what Michael Byström refers to as a policy of “neutrality and Nordicism.”⁵ This policy rested on the premise that Sweden's responsibility toward refugees would apply only to those from Nordic countries. Byström refers to this policy as “the Nordic prerogative.”⁶ Sweden’s refugee policy during this time was considered restrictive and xenophobic by some observers while others argued that Sweden’s labor market needed to be protected from foreign labor. At the same time, Sweden had no official integration policy, meaning that refugees arriving in Sweden were required to figure it out on their own. It is also worth noting that, because there was a high demand for labor, these immigrants did not create any major societal problems.

By the end of the second world war, Sweden replaced its restrictive immigration policies with more liberalized ones. The reason for this was that the country wanted to protect its security at home and abroad. By opening the door to more immigrants, Swedes felt as though they were in a better position than most other European countries during this time. Unlike other countries, Sweden adopted an integration policy that treated labor migrants as future Swedish citizens. During the middle of the twentieth century, there were virtually no limits on immigration from countries such as Finland and those in southern Europe.

In addition to the recruitment of foreign labor, an increasing number of migrants began arriving in Sweden on their own accord to find jobs. It was common knowledge that as long as there were bountiful job opportunities in Sweden this would not become a problem. But the

⁵ Mikael Byström, “The Nordic Prerogative – An Explanatory Perspective on Swedish Refugee Policy 1942-1947,” DIVA, December 18, 2008, <http://www.diva-portal.org/smash/record.jsf?pid=diva2%3A183024>.

⁶ Byström, 67.

Swedish government was unaware of this growing flow of people in the 1960s. In Sweden, like other Scandinavian countries, labor migration from non-Nordic countries was officially ended in the early 1970s. However, Sweden's experience with immigration was only just beginning.

During the 1970s, labor migrants were replaced by refugees from various parts of the world such as the Middle East and Latin America. Many of these migrants were granted asylum on humanitarian grounds which allowed Sweden to live up to its commitments to the United Nations following its signing of the UN Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees in the 1950s.⁷ Over the years, the number of refugees fleeing persecution in their home countries increased dramatically which prompted Sweden to return to a stricter asylum policy in the late twentieth century. At the same time, refugees from the Bosnian War began seeking asylum in Sweden and most were granted temporary residence permits. I will get more into this later in the thesis.

It was during the postwar period that Sweden developed an image of itself as a humanitarian superpower. This was especially true when it came to minority rights. Following the second world war, a growing number of outside voices began drawing attention to the fact that Sweden was still a relatively backwards country that didn't live up to some of its European neighbors. Sweden's policy of neutrality and Nordicism during both world wars earned the country a reputation as a soft power and Swedes wanted a way to lift themselves out of this predicament. To put themselves in a better position, the Swedish government began drawing up plans for a welfare state that would emphasise compassion and a willingness to help. It was this decision to pursue a model of welfare that stressed humanitarian exceptionalism and earned Sweden a reputation as a model social democracy. But at the same time, Sweden's commitment

⁷ Westin, Charles.

to a humane welfare system did not necessarily stem from moral considerations. Rather, scholars like Mikael Byström argue that it derived from political motives that prioritized good relations with neighboring Nordic countries. In this sense, the Nordic prerogative never really went away and neither did many of its proponents.

Beginning in the 1970s, Sweden needed to figure out how to deal with migrants arriving from southern Europe. Before the 1970s, Sweden had no official integration policy because it was assumed that migrants from other Scandinavian countries would automatically assimilate since their cultures were so similar. However, migrants were now arriving from different parts of the world that most Swedes were unfamiliar with. Ironically, it was Sweden's conservative party that advocated for a policy of cultural pluralism while the ruling Social Democratic Party was skeptical about expanding minority rights for immigrants. This was because the Social Democrats believed that a certain level of cultural homogeneity was necessary for successful integration. As a sort of compromise, both parties introduced *The 1975 Immigrant and Minority Policy* which combined cultural pluralism with the integrative logics of the welfare state.⁸

The 1975 Immigrant and Minority Policy affirmed Sweden's commitment to human rights issues during the postwar period. Shortly after the introduction of this policy, more and more asylum seekers and their families began arriving in Sweden. Sweden had taken a very liberal approach toward immigration and a majority of Swedes seemed happy to be champions of minority rights. However, critics of the policy argued that it promoted an essentialist viewpoint of culture that regarded Nordic culture as somehow superior to others. This is an argument that has arisen in recent years in regards to Sweden's integration policies which have changed on multiple

⁸ Karin Borevi. "The Political Dynamics of Multiculturalism in Sweden." In *Challenging Multiculturalism: European Models of Diversity*, edited by Taras Raymond, 138-60. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013. Accessed Jan 27, 2020. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3366/j.ctt20q22fw.13>.

occasions throughout the twentieth century. It is important to understand that these policies did not promote special institutions for ethnic groups. Rather, they combined cultural pluralism with the integrative logics of the welfare state. This, in effect, promoted standardized institutional arrangements that applied equally to all.⁹

The multicultural approach to Swedish integration policy began receiving serious criticism during the 1980s. There was a question as to whether immigrants were required to follow the same laws and norms that applied to the rest of the population. In addition, there was a question as to what responsibility the state had toward these minority groups. In 1986, *The 1975 Immigrant and Minority Policy* was abandoned in favor of a new policy that would meet the needs of Swedish citizens, not give special treatment to minority groups.¹⁰ It took nearly a decade for the Swedish government to come up with a new integration policy that departed from the “us” versus “them” narrative that defined Swedish integration policy throughout much of the twentieth century. Since then, the goal of Swedish integration policy has been equal rights, obligations, and opportunities for all regardless of ethnic or cultural background.¹¹

Throughout much of the twentieth century, it was assumed that by providing immigrants with similar rights to those of native citizens, immigrants would feel as though they belonged and would be compelled to live up to certain standards. This might mean contributing to Swedish society in whatever capacity possible or simply seeking employment in available industries. Up until fairly recently, Sweden's integration policy was relatively unaltered and most Swedes felt as though it was working for them. But as recently as 2015, a massive wave of immigration to

⁹ Borevi, 144.

¹⁰ Borevi, 147.

¹¹ “Swedish Integration Policy,” Ministry of Integration and Gender Equality, 2009, <https://www.government.se/contentassets/b055a941e7a247348f1acf6ade2fd876/swedish-integration-policy-fact-sheet-in-english>.

Sweden changed many Swedes' perception of the state's integrative logistics and there have been calls to alter a once admired welfare system. But first, it is necessary to go over the history of the Swedish welfare system beginning with the Social Democrats who are credited with creating the welfare state we know today.

The Social Democrats

The story of the Swedish welfare state begins with the Social Democratic Party who, prior to the twentieth century, were a relatively obscure faction of the Swedish polity. Over the years, the Social Democrats became one of the most successful social democratic movements in the world. They enjoyed over four decades of power before being voted out of office for a period of time and reelected to head the Swedish government in 2014. Considering that there are four other major political parties in Sweden, it is quite remarkable that the Social Democrats managed to stay in power for such a long time. The extraordinary success of the Sweden Democrats rested on their ability to construct a welfare state that emphasized “national community.” But before they became successful, they were a largely unknown political party in Sweden.

The Social Democratic Party was founded in 1889 and became the first political party to organize outside of the Riksdag. Nineteenth century Sweden had been characterized by radical socialist and liberal ideology. During this time, Sweden began looking to other countries for new ideas that quickly went against the old paternalistic order.¹² In its early years, the Social Democrats adhered to a strictly Marxist ideology but this quickly faded away following the

¹² Richard F. Tomasson. "The Extraordinary Success of the Swedish Social Democrats." *The Journal of Politics* 31, no. 3 (1969): 772-98. Accessed March 27, 2021. doi:10.2307/2128497.

party's decision to support the Liberal Party in the late nineteenth century. In 1896, Hjalmar Branting was elected the Social Democrats' first representative to the Riksdag. From here on out, the party adopted a pragmatic approach to governing that would contribute to the success of the Swedish welfare state in the years to come.

In 1917, the Social Democrats merged with the Liberal Party to form Sweden's first parliamentary government. The coalition broke up in 1920 because the Liberals rejected the Social Democrats' radical approach to economic development and the Social Democrats formed the first fully socialist government in the world achieved by peaceful means.¹³ As stated previously, the Social Democrats adopted a more pragmatic model of socialism that departed from the German and British influences it had been accustomed to. However, this was still Depression-Era Sweden and roughly one million Swedes had migrated overseas in search of job opportunities. Sweden was heavily impacted by the Great Depression and most Swedes struggled to make ends meet. The country was far from the wealthy first-world nation we know today. It was a land defined by political instability and economic hardship. But thanks to the visionary leadership of figures like Hjalmar Branting, Sweden was able to lift itself out of this depression that was practically bringing the country to its knees.

In addition to the poor economic conditions in Sweden at this time, there was a divide in the Riksdag. The Conservative coalition was calling for authoritarian leadership to deal with poverty while the ruling Social Democrats had a completely different idea. Hjalmar Branting, the leader of the Social Democratic Party, had this to say-

¹³ Tomasson, 782.

“In a backward land like Sweden we cannot close our eyes to the fact that the middle class increasingly plays a very important role. The working class needs the workers behind it in order to be able to hold out against our common enemies.”¹⁴

Branting’s pragmatic approach to alleviating poverty in Sweden set him apart from other socialists in Europe at the time. Unlike political parties elsewhere, the Social Democrats promised to use the democratic process to improve conditions for the average citizen. Rather than using authoritarian control to deal with the issue, the Social Democrats thought it was best to alleviate poverty by creating a new model of social democracy. However, the conservative party argued that the Social Democrats were pitting the working class against the proletariat. Despite the opposition, the Social Democrats went ahead with implementing this new model under the leadership of a man by the name of Per Albin Hansson.

The People’s Home

In 1928, Per Albin Hansson became the new leader of the Social Democratic Party. That same year, Hansson gave a speech to the Riksdag that many historians consider the most famous oration in social democratic history. He stated,

¹⁴ Sheri Berman, *The Primacy of Politics: Social Democracy and the Making of Europe's Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

“The foundation of the home is community and solidarity. The good home knows no privilege or neglect, no favorites and no stepchildren [...] In the good home equality, thoughtfulness, cooperation, and helpfulness prevail.”¹⁵

Hansson is, of course, referring to the Swedish idea of *folkhemmet*, or, “the people’s home.” Under this model, Swedish society would function as a good home absent of any inequalities. This would include the breakdown of all socioeconomic barriers that divided citizens into rich and poor. In order for Swedish society to become a good people’s home it first needed to eliminate class distinctions. In addition, democracy had to be implemented in all aspects of Swedish life. This was no easy task and many Swedes assumed that it could not be done. However, Hansson and Branting shared a pragmatic mindset aimed at providing Swedish citizens with a better quality of life. They did, after all, view themselves as no better than their fellow citizens.

Hansson and Branting surrounded themselves with theorists and politicians who advocated for increased economic production rather than the redistribution of an underdeveloped economic base. During his time as leader of the Social Democrats, Hansson listened to these figures and implemented policies that eased much of the suffering resulting from the Great Depression. It was this sense of cooperation and pragmatic decision making that contributed to the success of the Social Democrats and the Swedish model at this time. However, it was not only wise economic policies and an overall spirit of pragmatism that contributed to Sweden's

¹⁵ W.E. Smith , “The ‘Folk Home’: Hjalmar Branting, Per Albin Hansson & the Creation of Social Democracy in Sweden,” *The Social Democrat* , May 2017, <http://www.thesocialdemocrat.us/blog/the-folk-home>.

success. Hansson had introduced to Sweden, and the world, a new model of social democracy that revolves around the idea of a “people’s home.”

The idea of a people’s home is not unique to Sweden. Different countries have their own version of a people’s home that signifies a national family bound together by a common national identity. Historians like Jenny Andersson argue that what “the Empire” is to British national identity, and “la Republique” is to the French, so “Folkhemmet” is to Swedish national identity.¹⁶ Although these British and French slogans pertaining to national identity are mostly a thing of the past, they still play an important role in how their respective countries are perceived by both insiders and outsiders. Each of these terms have their own unique history that can provide useful insight into how and why important changes take place. In Sweden's case, *folkhemmet* became a political metaphor that influenced Swedish domestic politics for much of the twentieth century. While some Swedes would argue that *folkhemmet* no longer retains the status it once did in Swedish society, it still has important significance in Sweden today.

Folkhemmet has no English equivalent. The literal translation is loose and clunky and fails to capture the central idea of the political metaphor which is “the home.” Scholars like Andrew Brown argue that the best way to conceptualize *folkhemmet* is to think of it as a family.¹⁷ Similar to traditional families, the members of the people’s home must learn to live with each other despite their differences, or at least learn to live with their shared hatred of each other. Like a family, members of *folkhemmet* are bound together by innate covenants rather than voluntary contracts. In this sense, *folkhemmet*, much like families themselves, becomes a profoundly

¹⁶ Jenny Andersson , “Nordic Nostalgia and Nordic Light: the Swedish Model as Utopia 1930–2007,” Taylor & Francis, 2009, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/03468750903134699>.

¹⁷ Andrew Brown, “Swedes Can't Go Home Again,” *Foreign Policy*, September 6, 2018, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/09/06/swedes-cant-go-home-again-decoder-folkhemmet/>.

iliberall institution. Swedes, of course, would argue that *folkhemmet* is anything but iliberal and is necessary to maintaining a healthy democracy.

While there exists this conception of *folkhemmet*, others argue that *folkhemmet* was merely a certain period in Swedish history when the Social Democratic Party was first in power. However, it seems more likely that *folkhemmet* is an actual political metaphor that some Swedes use in daily life today. More so than most other national ideologies, *folkhemmet* is deeply ingrained into the psyche of Swedish society and many Swedes consider it a pillar of their democracy. But how did *folkhemmet* make its way to Sweden and why did it become so wildly popular among Swedish politicians during the first half of the twentieth century?

The term *folkhemmet* comes from the German slogan *volks-gemeinschaft*, or, “the people’s community.”¹⁸ It was originally used during the first world war to rally Germans in support of the war and create a shared sense of national unity. Many Germans thought that by doing this, it would break down class divides and unite Germany around a common national identity. However, the slogan soon became used by Nazi Germany. David Welch suggests that the main goal of Nazi propoganda was to restructure German society and create a new national awareness that would replace exiting class, religious, and sectional loyalties.¹⁹ Such a conception of national identity is eerily similar to that created by Per Albin Hansson in the early twentieth century. Interestingly, *folkhemmet* and its Nazi connotations are believed to be part of the reason why the term was initially downplayed by many Swedes in the years following the second world war.

In the beginning of the twentieth century, the slogan *volks-gemeinschaft* was brought to Sweden by right-wing political scientist Rudolf Kjellen. Kjellen had spent a number of years

¹⁸ David Welch, “Nazi Propaganda and the Volksgemeinschaft: Constructing a People’s Community,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 39, no. 2 (2004): pp. 213-238, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022009404042129>.

¹⁹ Welch, 213.

studying and working in Germany where he was first introduced to the idea of a people's community. There is debate as to how exactly the term entered the political mainstream in Sweden during its early years. Left-wing figures, in particular, became attracted to the idea of a national community, most likely because it stressed ideals such as collectivism and shared responsibility which were attractive to the socialist left. Figures such as Per Albin Hansson were particularly successful in transforming the people's community from a tool of Nazi propaganda into a left-wing political slogan. As a result, Hansson was able to lift Sweden out of an economic depression that affected most, if not all, Swedes, but the working class in particular.

During his earlier years as leader of the Social Democrats, Per Albin Hansson introduced work relief programs that mitigated the detrimental effects of the depression. In doing so, Hansson lifted a great deal of the population out of poverty. In the past, Europe's socialist parties tended to overlook working class people like farmers. Hansson, in contrast, reached out to the working class and made them a part of *folkhemmet*. This is part of the reason why the Social Democrats remained in power for so long and turned Sweden into the successful social democracy we see today.

Central to this chapter is the idea that *folkhemmet* is inextricably linked to the Swedish welfare system, so much so that the two are often used interchangeably. For this reason, *folkhemmet* is still important to this day, although most Swedes would argue that it is significantly less important than it once was. The concept's ties to Nazism during its early years merits closer attention and is part of the reason that it is not as prominent today. Ironically, Nazism would return to Sweden in the ensuing years in the form of far-right political movements that seem to contradict everything the country stands for. Many of these fringe parties started out

as Nazi organizations before evolving into far-right political parties that would go on to hold significant power in Sweden. In the following chapter, I will introduce the Swedish far-right which, up until recently, was a much maligned and insignificant faction of the Swedish voting bloc. However, in recent years, political parties like the Sweden Democrats have seen their support increase with each election cycle. Why might this be the case?

Chapter 2

It is hard to imagine that a country as liberal as Sweden could be home to far-right political parties like the Sweden Democrats. But in 2010, the Sweden Democrats entered the Riksdag for the first time with 5.7% of the vote. It was an unprecedented feat for a political party that had been ignored for decades. Jimmie Åkesson, the leader of the Sweden Democrats since 2005, remarked that his party would take this opportunity to make its voice heard.²⁰ He went on to declare that the Sweden Democrats could finally speak out on the issues that mattered most and influence Swedish politics. According to some observers, 2010 was the first year that the Sweden Democrats successfully tapped into voter fears surrounding the issue of immigration. While many considered the victory of the Sweden Democrats an anomaly that undermined Sweden's reputation as a tolerant and welcoming country, others weren't so taken aback by the victory of the Sweden Democrats.

²⁰ "Swedish Far-Right Wins First Seats in Parliament," BBC News (BBC, September 20, 2010), <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-11367622>.

The Swedish Far-Right

In order to understand the recent success of the Sweden Democrats, it is important to understand the making of the Swedish far-right. While it is likely that far-right ideologies had existed in Sweden prior to the twentieth century, it was not until this time that they manifested themselves in the form of Nazi organizations and far-right political parties. Following the second world war, it was assumed that Nazism and hatred toward Jewish people had been more or less eradicated because of Nazi defeat. In reality, hateful ideologies were alive and well on the fringes of Swedish society. One man by the name of Per Engdahl was particularly instrumental in sending Sweden back to a darker past.

In 1926, Per Engdahl, a prominent far-right activist, founded the Fascist People's Party of Sweden, or, *Sveriges Fascistiska Folkparti*, a fascist and eventually Nazi political party in Sweden. The party initially supported Italian fascism but went on to promote Nazi ideology in its later years. In 1930, it was replaced by the Swedish National Socialist Party, or, *Svenska nationalsocialistiska partiet*. This was the first true Nazi movement in Sweden. After a series of unsuccessful election bids, the party was dissolved in 1936. In 1941, Engdahl founded the New Swedish Movement, or, *Nysvenska Rörelsen*, which promoted Swedish nationalism and anti-communism. The movement also promoted a "new Swedishness" and supported the Third Reich in Nazi Germany.

During his time as leader of the New Swedish Movement, Per Engdahl was a proponent of a particular brand of socialism that he termed a "people's community," which appeared earlier in this thesis. Engdahl's movement was called everything from "racist" to "anti-semitic." Engdahl himself went so far as to declare white Western culture racially homogenous. Some

scholars have described the party as “little more than a discussion club for intellectuals.”²¹

However, the New Swedish Movement had a considerable influence on other far-right movements that would arise in Sweden in the ensuing years.

Before Per Engdahl disappeared completely from the Nazi movement in Sweden, he founded one last organization that he tied to other Nazi movements called “Keep Sweden Swedish,” or, *Bevara Sverige Svenskt*. Engdahl had been inspired by other postwar fascist organizations, some of which he created himself over the years. The party quickly became well known in Sweden for spewing racist rhetoric and inciting violence. According to the party, their main goal was to spark a debate surrounding immigration in an effort to stop non-European immigration and repatriate non-ethnic Swedes.²² The party’s platform was highly controversial, not only to the vast majority of Swedes, but also to figures on the right who considered the party too far-right to ever garner success in Sweden. Oddly enough, the slogan “Keep Swedish Swedish” is still used by many Swedish nationalists today.

In 1987, a group of members from Keep Sweden Swedish merged with the right-wing populist Progress Party, forming the far-right Sweden Party. However, the merger was unstable, and within months, the coalition broke apart with some members of the two parties coming together to form the Sweden Democrats, or, *Sverigedemokraterna*. During the party’s earlier years, it frequently collaborated with the White Aryan Resistance and had a number of membership overlaps with other neo-Nazi and skinhead organizations.²³ The party’s first few

²¹ Anders Widfeldt, “A Fourth Phase of the Extreme Right? Nordic Immigration-Critical Parties in a Comparative Context,” edoc (Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, February 18, 2011), <https://edoc.hu-berlin.de/handle/18452/8689>.

²² Gustav Sjöholm, “‘Fördjupar Bilden Av Kamprads Engagemang’: SvD,” SvD.se (Svenska Dagbladet, August 24, 2011), <https://www.svd.se/fordjupar-bilden-av-kamprads-engagemang>.

²³ Kaminsky, David. “Keeping Sweden Swedish: Folk Music, Right-Wing Nationalism, and the Immigration Debate.” *Journal of Folklore Research* 49, no. 1 (2012): 73-96. Accessed April 27, 2021. doi:10.2979/jfolkrese.49.1.73.

leaders had been arrested for making anti-semitic remarks toward prominent public figures and for being open Nazis. At this point, some members of the Sweden Democrats recognized that they needed to legitimize their party by purging these types of people. Mikael Jansson, a former member of the Center Party, became party leader in 1995. Jansson quickly began removing Nazis and other criminals from the party's membership rolls which seemed to work. The Sweden Democrats saw their poll numbers go up with each election cycle. However, it would not be until 2010 that the Sweden Democrats would enter the Riksdag for the first time with 5.7% of the vote.

The Sweden Democrats' inability to put forward a respectable façade is largely why they were unsuccessful prior to 2010. Under new leadership, the party managed to rebrand itself by invoking nostalgia for the good old days of, ironically, social democratic rule. Gabriella Elgenius and Jens Rydgren argue that the Sweden Democrats adopted a decidedly ethnocentric platform that suggested a "decay" of the golden ages of relative cultural homogeneity.²⁴ In other words, the Sweden Democrats' success is contingent on the idea that Sweden is under the threat of a changing demographic due to immigration and the only way to preserve the Swedish way of life is by voting for their party. In effect, the Sweden Democrats are promoting an ethnonationalist message that departs from the traditional idea of Swedish exceptionalism. The 2010 election was a signal of this departure from traditional values of openness and tolerance toward those of nativism and ethnic homogeneity. But this message is to a large extent nothing more than an imagined past, especially when you consider how the Sweden Democrats often over exaggerate

²⁴ Gabriella Elgenius and Jens Rydgren, "Frames of Nostalgia and Belonging: the Resurgence of Ethno-Nationalism in Sweden," *European Societies* 21, no. 4 (2018): pp. 583-602, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616696.2018.1494297>.

the reality of what is happening in Sweden. In a 2018 campaign video, Jimmie Åkesson painted a very bleak picture of Sweden and the threat to its welfare state when he stated,

“In parts of our country there is a civil war between rival gangs [...] In Sweden terror is now a reality. Swedes are attacked, maimed, and killed on their own streets.”²⁵

In this quote, Jimmie Åkesson is conveying the message that Sweden is in the midst of a civil war, a far cry from the original idea of *folkhemmet* which suggested that Sweden should look like a well ordered and secure society. But the Sweden Democrats’ argument is that *folkhemmet* is more or less a homogeneous entity that needs to be preserved for the sake of protecting the welfare state. The only solution is to elect the Sweden Democrats because their platform calls for an end to mass immigration. Mass immigration, they argue, is a threat to the unity and security of the Swedish state. This is the Sweden Democrats’ vision of *folkhemmet*; the return to an imagined past. As we will see in the next chapter, the Sweden Democrats have stuck to this message throughout most of their history and figures such as Jimmie Åkesson invoke it on a regular basis.

At the intersection of this imagined past and envisioned future lies the dystopian present in which the Sweden Democrats have fashioned themselves as the only political party capable of saving Sweden from impending doom. It is at this intersection that the Sweden Democrats emerge as a populist political party claiming to be leading Sweden on a new path away from multiculturalism and toward monoculturalism. In the following section, I will illustrate how

²⁵ “Sweden Democrats Sverigedemokraterna Jimmie Åkesson Åkesson English Campaign Election Ad Subtitles,” YouTube (YouTube, May 30, 2018), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eejsyEmLEno>.

populist political parties can emerge in unforeseen ways much to the chagrin of establishment parties.

The Sweden Democrats and its “Entry Points”

In the last decade, countries around the world have witnessed an unprecedented level of support for far-right populist political parties. From Victor Orban’s so-called “illiberal democracy” in Hungary, to the surprising victory of Donald Trump in the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election, there is no denying that far-right populism is on the rise. What these populist leaders all share is a common disdain for their countries' establishment political parties. Populist figures like Donald Trump challenge liberal democratic norms by claiming that the establishment parties’ policies weaken democracy and hurt everyday people. This recent pattern of populist revolt comes into conflict with the same ideals that advanced liberal democracies throughout the 1990s. So, what happened?

In his essay, “The End of History?” Francis Fukuyama argues that, following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, humanity has reached a point where Western liberal democracy is the final form of government for all advanced nations.²⁶ A famous political intellectual, Fukuyama had several reasons for why he believed that liberal democracy would define the world in the years to come. His belief rested on the premise that there could be no alternative system to that of Western liberal democracy. Other theorists supported his hypothesis by pointing to the fact that liberal ideas had been successful throughout history and, because of this, they would

²⁶ Fukuyama, Francis. “The End of History?” *The National Interest*, no. 16, 1989, pp. 3–18. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/24027184. Accessed 5 Dec. 2020.

continue to be successful in the years to come. While some figures began embracing this type of historical determinism, its political justification became weaker. Critics pointed to the fact that people all have different ideas of what freedom should be and they drew attention to the unlikelihood that some historical doctrine could govern the course of history.

While this explanation of Francis Fukuyama's hypothesis that we have reached the end of history might seem like a tangent from the topic at hand, it actually relates directly to Vilhelm Moberg's essay which I introduced at the beginning of this thesis. In his essay, Moberg discusses the idea of freedom and suggests that Sweden is founded on freedom. For a long time, it seemed as though Swedes had a common definition of freedom. Freedom, to a Swedish person, implied freedom through the welfare state, or, *folkhemmet*. Freedom, democracy, and equality were the three main pillars of Swedish society beginning in the 1930s. But in recent years, Swedes' understanding of freedom has seemingly come into conflict with itself. What does freedom mean in the context of emerging political parties with diametrically opposing views to those of the Social Democrats? In order to better understand this, it is important to understand the politics of populism and how the Sweden Democrats became so successful in the first place.

Cas Mudde defines populism as "an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogenous and antagonistic groups."²⁷ In other words, populism pits the "pure" people against the "corrupt" elite. Populism is based on the idea that politics should express the general will of the people. Populist political parties oppose establishment political parties and call for the formation of a political party that will put the interests of those that they assume to belong to the "in-group" first. Multicultural policies, like the *1975 Immigrant and*

²⁷ Mudde, Cas. "The Populist Zeitgeist." *Government and Opposition* 39, no. 4 (2004): 541–63. doi:10.1111/j.1477-7053.2004.00135. x.

Minority Policy, extended the “us” group to include the formerly excluded. Sara Goodman notes that any liberal democracy that redefines citizenship in the way that Sweden did in 1975 opens itself up to populist challenge.²⁸

This is exactly what we see happening in Sweden with regard to the success of the Sweden Democrats, a populist political party that entered the political arena at a time when Sweden's ideological borders were not salient. In the years since the introduction of the *1975 Immigrant and Minority Policy*, Sweden has changed its citizenship requirements on multiple occasions, allowing room for the Sweden Democrats to grow. As the Sweden Democrats have increased in popularity, they have also contributed to the fracturing of Swedish society and politics by putting into question the meaning behind the welfare state and, more specifically, *folkhemmet*. As Sara Goodman points out, liberal democracies and populism are on an unavoidable collision course. Liberal democracies like Sweden are in a constant state of limbo trying to balance economic openness and sociopolitical closure. Goodman refers to this as “the liberal paradox.”²⁹

It is important to mention that populism is not always a bad thing. It can also be the voters' reaction to the undemocratic nature of liberal institutions. Populist politicians can make democracy more representative by mobilizing new voters, thereby improving democratic institutions. However, in Sweden's case, populism can also threaten the very existence of liberal democracy. In other words, populists can reject the concept of cultural pluralism altogether and embrace a policy of cultural exclusion. We see this happening with the Sweden Democrats who have appropriated the concept of *folkhemmet* and turned it into something exclusionary rather

²⁸ Sara Wallace Goodman, “Liberal Democracy, National Identity Boundaries, and Populist Entry Points,” *Critical Review* 31, no. 3-4 (2019): pp. 377-388, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08913811.2019.1647679>.

²⁹ Goodman, 6.

than inclusionary. At the same time, the ambiguous nature of Swedish citizenship laws throughout much of the twentieth century gave the Sweden Democrats the opportunity to appropriate the concept for their own political advantage.

Today, Sweden finds itself in what Sara Goodman would call a “liberal paradox.” Over the years, the country has attempted to promote both cultural pluralism and political closure. During this time, the Social Democrats have enabled contestation by espousing values such as pluralism, tolerance, and neutrality. The Sweden Democrats have contested these ideals by entering the Riksdag and pushing many of Sweden's political parties further to the right on issues such as immigration. The party's focus on immigration has been politically strategic in that it claims to be protecting the “pure people” from immigrant “outsiders.” For this reason, the Sweden Democrats are a classic example of a populist political party that garners support through populist entry points.

The 2015 Refugee Crisis

It would be wrong to discuss the Sweden Democrats without drawing attention to their ability to have capitalized off of the massive influx of refugees who entered Sweden between 2015 and 2016. During this time, the Sweden Democrats saw their popularity increase as evidenced by their success in the 2018 general election. It was during this period that the Sweden Democrats managed to push many of Sweden's more established political parties further to the right on issues like immigration. While there has always been some movement of people in and out of Sweden, the country was ill prepared to handle immigration at such an extreme level in

2015. As we will come to see, the Sweden Democrats positioned themselves as the only political party in Sweden that could handle such a challenge.

Throughout 2015, hundreds of thousands of people fled across the Mediterranean Sea escaping war and persecution in their home countries. Initially, Sweden was happy to welcome refugees with open arms. These people had crossed the most treacherous terrain, survived the most brutal weather conditions, and encountered the most unforgiving political bureaucracies that would ultimately decide their future. It was no easy task and many refugees, particularly those fleeing the civil war in Syria, heard about the generous asylum policies in countries like Germany and Sweden. Because of this, many refugees viewed Sweden as their final destination on their journey toward a better future.

Prior to 2015, Sweden's immigration policies were considered very generous, especially when compared to those of other European countries. One of Sweden's most liberal policies was introduced in 2013 when the Swedish government decided to issue permanent resident permits to people arriving in Sweden from war torn Syria.³⁰ There is reason to believe that this policy was responsible for the massive influx of refugees that arrived in Sweden from Syria beginning in the early months of 2015. It was around this same time that immigration became a salient issue in Swedish politics.

To many onlookers, the 2015 refugee crisis marked the end of Swedish exceptionalism. It was around this time that the Sweden Democrats became a legitimate force in the Riksdag and were in a position to influence policy for years to come. This is not to say that the Sweden Democrats did not face any backlash, because they certainly did, even from the right. However, it

³⁰ Eleni Karageorgiou, "Solidarity and Sharing in the Common European Asylum System: the Case of Syrian Refugees," *European Politics and Society* 17, no. 2 (August 2016): pp. 196-214, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23745118.2016.1121007>.

did signal a new era of Swedish politics wherein once maligned parties like the Sweden Democrats, running on an aggressively anti-immigration platform, could expect a significant share of the vote in upcoming elections.

The 2018 Swedish Election

It had been eight years since the Sweden Democrats first entered the Riksdag and the party was making more gains with each election cycle. The 2018 election was considered by many observers to be a referendum on Sweden's immigration policies that some Swedes viewed as too generous toward immigrants. In response to the 2015 refugee crisis, Sweden implemented temporary border controls in an effort to control immigration into the country. This was largely in response to the Sweden Democrats' narrative that immigrants arriving in Sweden from countries like Syria were a threat to the nation.

Before 2016, anyone in need of a residence permit generally received one. In the case of Syrian refugees, those who had fled the civil war were given temporary residence permits that, after a certain period of time, could become permanent. Then, in 2016, Sweden passed legislation that required all municipalities in the country to take in a certain number of refugees. While this sounds like it could work in theory, it allowed the Sweden Democrats to adopt the narrative that immigrants are criminals who commit crimes and take part in gang violence, even though this is often not the case. During the debates preceding the 2018 election, the Sweden Democrats used this narrative to portray immigrants as a threat to Swedish society.

In Sweden, there are several debates before every election and during each election cycle there are a number of issues that the candidates wish to tackle. During the 2018 election, the most important debate topic by far was immigration. Although Sweden had limited the number of immigrants arriving in the country following the 2015 refugee crisis, anxieties surrounding crime and increased gang violence were high among Swedish voters. Unsurprisingly, throughout the debate, the Sweden Democrats pushed the narrative that immigrants were responsible for most, if not all, of these crimes.³¹ The party also argued that these same immigrants were placing a strain on the Swedish welfare state by taking advantage of many of the country's generous welfare programs. Although the wellbeing of the Swedish welfare state is important to all parties involved, party leaders recognized that the Sweden Democrats' claims were heavily race-based rather than based on actual facts and data. While there has been an increase in crime in recent decades, there is little evidence to suggest that it is directly the result of generous immigration policies.³²

Also during the debate, almost every single party leader referred to the Sweden Democrats as “racists” and “xenophobes” at one point or another. Swedish Prime Minister Stefan Löfven went so far as to declare that the Social Democrats would never work with the far-right. He called out some of his opponents for expressing a willingness to work with the Sweden Democrats. Former Prime Minister Carl Bildt expressed similar sentiments, noting that the Sweden Democrats' success is a sign that Sweden should begin taking their views more seriously. Polls conducted around this time showed that many of the country's establishment

³¹ Euronews, “Swedish Election: Will Sweden Turn to the Right This Weekend?,” YouTube (YouTube, September 6, 2018), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J9joGbk42Qg>.

³² “Facts about Migration, Integration and Crime in Sweden,” Regeringskansliet, accessed May 4, 2021, <https://www.government.se/articles/2017/02/facts-about-migration-and-crime-in-sweden/>.

parties were losing support and, in response, they adopted more hardline immigration policies in an effort to meet the needs of, and reduce the fears among Swedes.

Around this same time, Sweden began attracting the attention of the United States. During a campaign rally in Florida in February 2017, U.S. President Donald Trump stated,

“You look at what is happening in Sweden - Sweden, who would believe this? They took in large numbers, and they're having problems like they never thought before.”³³

Politicians around the world were quick to respond in confoundment to the President's remarks. What was he talking about? It is most likely that Trump was referring to Sweden's immigration policies before the 2015 refugee crisis. Kim Hjelmgaard suggests that he was referring to a nonexistent terror attack in Sweden to bolster his calls for tighter immigration policies.³⁴ In other words, Trump might have been making the point that even liberal democracies like Sweden can reach a breaking point and decide to limit immigration from certain countries. In Hjelmgaard's interview with Amy Horowitz, she explains how Sweden is representative of a liberal bastion that differs from the United States when it comes to Sweden having open immigration policies, higher taxes, and a more comprehensive welfare state.

Donald Trump's comments in the early months of his presidency represent an international interest in Swedish politics that, although not often cited, might be viewed as a

³³ Rebecca Morin and Josh Dawsey, “Trump's 'Last Night in Sweden' Comment Fuels Twitter Firestorm,” POLITICO, February 19, 2017, <https://www.politico.com/story/2017/02/trumpsweden-twitter-235196>.

³⁴ Kim Hjelmgaard, “Trump and Sweden Don't See Eye to Eye – on Anything,” USA Today (Gannett Satellite Information Network, August 14, 2019), <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2019/08/02/trump-sweden-relationship-asaprocky/1877464001/>.

litmus test of sorts when it comes to handling immigration, particularly in liberal democracies. Both Denmark and Norway have already witnessed the proliferation of far-right political parties that have managed to form coalition governments with the more mainstream parties. The question is not if but when the Sweden Democrats will catch up to their Scandinavian counterparts.

In the 2018 election, the Sweden Democrats received almost 18% of the vote. While they had anticipated a higher percentage, it still represented the largest gain by any party in the Riksdag. Meanwhile, the Social Democrats saw their share of the vote fall to nearly 28%, its lowest since 1911. The Sweden Democrats had become Sweden's fastest growing political force. But while some parties have adopted more hardline immigration policies following the successes of the Sweden Democrats, the Social Democrats have been very vocal in their opposition toward the party, having gone so far as to call them the Nazis of today.³⁵

In this chapter, I have attempted to present the history of the Swedish far-right, beginning with the earlier Nazi movements, and ending with the Sweden Democrats, Sweden's fastest-growing political party. What we find is that the Sweden Democrats have been largely successful in seizing the concept of *folkhemmet* and transforming it into a tool of exclusion that, in many ways, contradicts what it originally set out to accomplish. In the following chapter, I will explain why Sweden's crisis of identity is largely attributable to the loose definition of *folkhemmet*. As we have seen, there is still debate as to what exactly constitutes *folkhemmet* and Swedish identity as a whole. While the term is important to both the Social Democrats and the Sweden Democrats, they have diametrically opposing views as to what it implies. *Folkhemmet*

³⁵ Derek Scally, "Sweden Faces Hung Parliament as Far-Right Makes Big Gains," *The Irish Times* (*The Irish Times*, September 10, 2018), <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/world/europe/sweden-faces-hung-parliament-as-far-right-makes-big-gains-1.3623956>.

was, after all, never enacted into law as much as it was used as a political slogan throughout much of the twentieth century. At the same time, *folkhemmet* had a profound effect on the success of the Swedish welfare state during the early part of the twentieth century.

Chapter 3

By now it is understood that the concept of *folkhemmet* is important to all of Sweden's major political parties. In recent years, *folkhemmet* has re-emerged as a core feature of Swedish society and it is difficult to understand exactly why this is the case. Unlike other countries, the welfare state is viewed favorably by both conservatives and liberals. But for whatever reason, both the Social Democrats and the Sweden Democrats are divided on the meaning of “the people.” In this chapter, I will analyze rhetoric from both sides surrounding the concept of *folkhemmet* in hopes of both illustrating an ideological fracture as well as getting to the root of what it means to be a Swedish citizen.

A Home for Whom?

Folkhemmet was successful in two main ways. First, it laid the foundation for the Swedish welfare state. Second, it became a marker of Swedish identity and what it meant to be Swedish. For many decades, it represented a shared national identity that other countries could look to and say, “*that’s* Sweden.” Because of this, Sweden's understanding of itself became increasingly tied to the welfare project, so much so that, at one point, to be a Swedish citizen meant being a member of *folkhemmet* and the Swedish welfare model. In recent years, the

concept has re-emerged as a symbol of Swedish national identity, but in two different ways. Only one of these ways mirrors what the Social Democrats had initially intended that it would accomplish.

Every year, some 45,000 visitors descend on the Swedish island of Götland for Almedalen Week, a major annual political event in Sweden. The event features workshops, speeches, debates, and seminars. Many Swedes consider it the most important forum in Swedish politics. Representatives from Sweden's major political parties take turns giving speeches. The Social Democrats have a long history of speaking at Almedalen. The Sweden Democrats have only recently begun speaking at Almedalen, largely because of the party's controversial history. Many people even criticized the event for giving a platform to a political party with neo-Nazi roots.

Prior to 2012, the Sweden Democrats held an annual event at the party leader's home in Sölvesborg, Sweden. The party would discuss issues such as crime, gang violence, and unemployment. They were known to attack the other major parties in Sweden, claiming that they were not really watching out for the Swedish people. It was not until the party was introduced at Almedalen that these far-right views entered the national spotlight. It raised a serious question as to whether it was the establishment politicians or the populists that had the right idea when it comes to what constitutes "Swedishness." So, what exactly did they have to say about this idea of Swedishness?

In her 2010 speech at Almedalen Week, the Social Democrats' Party Leader Mona Sahlin stated,

“My vision for Sweden is a Sweden where everybody, regardless of their background, can strive to achieve their dreams [...] We should be a party for freedom and solidarity in the world [...] Sweden has a long history of solidarity and international cooperation.”³⁶

It is worth mentioning that the term *folkhemmet* did not begin reappearing in the rhetoric of the Social Democratic Party or the Sweden Democrats until around 2014. It was during this time that immigration from different countries like Syria prompted Swedish politicians to reassess what it meant to be Swedish. In her speech, Sahlin depicts Sweden as a welcoming country that does not discriminate on the basis of race, ethnicity, etc. Sweden is essentially open to anyone who wants to become a part of Swedish society. Over the years, the Social Democrats have maintained this position, although even Stefan Löfven has recognized that Sweden needs to be careful with who it lets into the country for security reasons.

The Sweden Democrats could not be more different in their approach toward immigration. From the get go, the Sweden Democrats adopted the position that immigrants in general pose an existential threat to the Swedish welfare state. Before the Sweden Democrats were even welcomed to participate in Almedalen Week, the party had already criticized the Swedish government for being too generous when it came to immigration policies. Perhaps the best example of this came from Jimmie Åkesson’s 2010 speech at Sölvesborg in which he stated,

³⁶ socialdemokraterna, “Mona Sahlins Tal i Almedalen 2010,” YouTube (YouTube, July 8, 2010), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k-vGPYooZCc>.

“It scares me that we have a prime minister who says that it was not us Swedish people who built Sweden, but people who came from other countries [...] Therefore, our long term goal must be to form an alternative government created by the Swedish people that can steer this country in another direction.”³⁷

This rhetoric suggests that *folkhemmet* belongs exclusively to the native Swedish people. It is as though only native Swedes can contribute to the welfare state that they worked so hard to create. Historically speaking, it was not only “native” Swedes who helped build the Swedish welfare system. As I mentioned earlier, Sweden borrowed ideas from other countries like Germany and Great Britain, including the ideas of a national community as well as specific welfare policies that the country was eager to try out. Of course, labor migrants from different parts of Europe also contributed to the success of the welfare state.

Unlike the Social Democrats, the Sweden Democrats are making distinctions on the basis of race, ethnicity, etc. This is a slippery slope considering how Sweden accepted labor migrants from different parts of Europe who looked quite different from what you might call an ethnic Swede. But this is something that the Sweden Democrats purposely overlook in an attempt to (re)construct *folkhemmet* along ethnic lines. The Sweden Democrats’ vision for Sweden is a country where its people all look more or less alike because this signals that they participated in the construction of *folkhemmet*.

It is worth noting that Åkesson’s suggestion that only his party can steer Sweden in the right direction reinstates the populist appeal that the Sweden Democrats have. Even on their

³⁷ sdwebbtv, “Jimmie Åkessons Sommartal i Sölvesborg 2010,” YouTube (YouTube, January 3, 2011), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OjzOfsaM940>.

webpage, the Sweden Democrats stress that they are the party best suited to deal with the biggest challenges facing Sweden, in particular, immigration.³⁸ Following several terrorist events in Europe in 2014, the Sweden Democrats started playing more and more into voters' fears surrounding terrorism in an attempt to garner support. In his 2014 summer speech at Sölvesborg, Jimmie Åkesson stated,

“It is no longer possible to ignore Islamism and its bloody borders [...] Sweden and the West must view and treat Islamism similar to how we have previously viewed and treated other conquering and totalitarian ideologies. Islamism is today's Nazism and Communism.”³⁹

In Åkesson's speech, it becomes clear that the Sweden Democrats oppose all forms of extremism. Åkesson recognizes that Sweden has a long history of dealing with opposing ideologies and he would like to treat islamism the same as nazism or communism. It is rather ironic that a party with roots in the neo-Nazi movement would express fear over these same forces. At the same time, it makes sense when you consider that Jimmie Åkesson would likely never admit to the fact that his party was once heavily associated with these hideous ideologies. It would be politically unwise for Åkesson to confess to this, but at the same time, he *could* acknowledge that Sweden does have an unfortunate history of Nazi organizations, but that his party would like to move on from this dark past. Still, some Swedes claim that there are undercover Nazis who are members of the Sweden Democrats today. Unsurprisingly, the Social

³⁸ “Vilka Vi Är,” Sverigedemokraterna, accessed May 4, 2021, <https://sd.se/vilka-vi-ar/>.

³⁹ “Jimmie Åkesson Sommartalar Från Gästhamnen i Sölvesborg.,” YouTube (YouTube, August 2, 2014), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fy9z0WrDI8>.

Democrats have a very different view of what constitutes extremism. In his 2018 speech at Almedalen Week, Prime Minister Stefan Löfven stated,

“I will take the fight for Swedish democracy, characterized by respect and humanity. I will do everything in our power in the EU, so that Europe will never again fall into the darkness of hatred [...] We must all do our part to strengthen the community and democracy [...] It will not break if we stick together!”⁴⁰

Based on their speeches, both the Social Democratic Party and the Sweden Democrats are united in their hatred toward extremists but the two parties have opposing views as to what constitutes hatred and darkness. In this speech, it becomes clear that the Social Democrats consider the Sweden Democrats to be the extremists and the single greatest threat to Swedish democracy. Meanwhile, the Sweden Democrats consider islamists the extremists and the biggest threat to Swedish democracy. The Sweden Democrats do not view themselves as part of the problem. Rather, they consider themselves protectors of the Swedish welfare state that Sweden worked so hard to create.

Both the Social Democrats and the Sweden Democrats have their own conceptions of the modern *folkhemmet*. In recent years, *folkhemmet* has been used more and more in each of these parties' political speeches. At the same time, the concept needs a new definition because, although both parties recognize its importance, they are divided on what it means. For that reason, I have identified two speeches that illustrate the ideological differences between the two

⁴⁰ Karolina Skoglund, “Stefan Löfven Om Nazisterna i Almedalen: ‘Det Kokar Inom Mig,’” Så var Stefan Löfvens tal i Almedalen (Expressen AB, July 5, 2018), <https://www.expressen.se/nyheter/almedalen/lofven-om-nazisterna-det-kokar-inom-mig/>.

parties when it comes to the concept of *folkhemmet*. In his 2014 speech at Almedalen Week, Prime Minister Stefan Löfven stated,

“Few countries have as much potential as Sweden [...] If we want to take advantage of Sweden's full potential, we need to see each other as sisters and brothers [...] We must shape society as we want a good family to be [...] This is modern solidarity. It is folkhem in the twenty-first century.”⁴¹

The Social Democrats see *folkhemmet* as a home where each member treats the other like a sibling or parent. Again, they are emphasizing Sweden's commitment to solidarity with the international community. Whether this means accepting refugees from other countries or promoting global solidarity, the Social Democrats want you to recognize that they are a big tent party and Sweden should resemble this model. Sweden will succeed in the twenty-first century by taking advantage of the opportunity to become one big family. Meanwhile, the Sweden Democrats have a different approach to the modern *folkhemmet*. In his 2018 speech at Almedalen Week, Jimmie Åkesson stated,

“It scares me that my kids will grow up in a segregated society without feeling the security I experienced growing up [...] Stefan Lofven and other party leaders, you have destroyed the people’s home. We are building a new one [...] This election is a referendum on the Swedish welfare system and Sweden’s future.”⁴²

⁴¹ socialdemokraterna, “Stefan Löfvens Almedalstal 2014,” YouTube (YouTube, June 30, 2014), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xV2Z21KAq60>.

⁴² ExpressenTV, “Jimmy Åkesson Talade under Sverigedemokraternas Dag i Almedalen,” YouTube (YouTube, July 7, 2018), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JoXC77365tg>.

Like the Social Democrats, the Sweden Democrats also want to see a modern version of *folkhemmet*. The Sweden Democrats take a drastically different approach by playing into voters' fears surrounding an increase in crime and gang violence. Jimmie Åkesson is invoking an imagined past, as we saw before, that portrays the old Sweden as an idyllic society where there was a high level of safety and security. Åkesson wants to return to the so-called good old days of social democratic rule when Sweden was more or less culturally homogeneous. Ironically, this was also the time when the Social Democrats were in power and building the welfare state. In this sense, both parties seem to want similar things but they are divided on how to get there.

The information presented in this section suggests that *folkhemmet* is an inherently contested concept. Throughout their history, the Social Democrats have considered *folkhemmet* to be inclusive and open to everyone. In contrast, the Sweden Democrats believe that *folkhemmet* belongs to the Swedish people and therefore they tend to look at it through an exclusionary lens. If we are going by the original intentions of *folkhemmet*, then the Social Democrats have the right idea when it comes to whose home it is. At the same time, we cannot ignore the fact that Sweden is no longer the country it was one hundred years ago. When you dig a little deeper, you discover that there is a whole other dimension to *folkhemmet* when it comes to the very idea of what it means to be Swedish.

In the following chapter, I will talk about the approaches that we can take toward arriving at a new definition of *folkhemmet* that works for everyone. In order to do so, it is necessary to first try and understand what defines, not just Swedish, but Scandinavian culture as a whole. It turns out that a large number of people have already studied this subject and have arrived at some interesting conclusions when it comes to what constitutes "Scandinavianism."

Chapter 4

In the last several chapters, I explained how *folkhemmet* is an inherently contested concept that has been used and misused over the years. Both of Sweden's major political parties agree that *folkhemmet* is important to Swedish society and identity but they are divided on how to approach it in daily life. While the term is meant to be inclusionary, there is little argument that Swedes are divided on who should benefit from it. The Social Democratic Party argues that everyone can belong to *folkhemmet* while the Sweden Democrats argue that it should be reserved for native Swedish people. In this chapter, I delve into what constitutes Swedishness and explore whether Swedes can arrive at a new definition of *folkhemmet* that works for everyone.

Defining “Swedishness”

Earlier in this thesis, I explained how Sweden was obliged to take in Nordic refugees following the second world war. They did this under the assumption that the Nordic countries all share a common culture and set values. This is sometimes referred to as “Scandinavianism.”⁴³ But do the Nordic countries really have their own culture? Or was this perhaps a tactic to reduce immigration during the postwar period? Similarly, is it something that the Swedish government still takes into account when processing asylum applications today? Based on official data, it is unlikely that the Swedish government considers one's country of origin to be the deciding factor

⁴³ Mats Wickström, “Nordic Brothers before Strange Others: Pan-National Boundary Making in the Post-War Naturalization Policies of the Nordic Countries,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 40, no. 4 (February 2016): pp. 675-693, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2016.1181269>.

when it comes to letting in refugees.⁴⁴ But what is not so clear is whether or not the Nordic countries do in fact have their own culture. In 2002, Mona Sahlin gave a speech where she stated,

“I cannot figure out what Swedish culture is. I think that's what makes many Swedes jealous of immigrant groups. You have a culture, an identity, a history, something that brings you together. And what do we have? We have Midsummer's Eve and such silly things.”⁴⁵

I would argue that Sweden's lack of culture is its culture. The country is essentially a blank canvas ready to be complemented by new and unfamiliar cultures. For this reason, politicians like Sahlin might argue that Sweden should be willing to accept immigrants from all backgrounds because this is part of its identity. Up until 2015, the country's welcoming attitude toward refugees was part of its identity, but since then, Sweden has had to reconcile two opposing ideologies arising from the concept of *folkhemmet*. So far, this has proven to be mostly unsuccessful. In the following section, I will try to establish a new understanding of *folkhemmet* that works in this day and age.

Toward a New Definition of *Folkhemmet*

The original purpose of *folkhemmet* was to create a society based on freedom, equality, and the rule of law. During much of the twentieth century, *folkhemmet* was considered a success

⁴⁴ Sweden.se, “Sweden and Migration,” sweden.se, March 15, 2021, <https://sweden.se/society/sweden-and-migration/#:~:text=For%20five%20years%2C%20Syrians%20have,another%20country%20come%20from%20Syria.>

⁴⁵ Johan Ingerö “DEBATT: Klart Att Vi Ska Fira Allt Vi Har Gemensamt,” Aftonbladet (Aftonbladet AB, May 31, 2011), <https://www.aftonbladet.se/debatt/a/6nBddo/klart-att-vi-ska-fira-allt-vi-har-gemensamt>.

in that it provided the necessary conditions for economic growth following the Depression Era. However, since the 1970s, *folkhemmet* has been continuously appropriated by far-right actors as a result of mass immigration from countries unfamiliar with the Scandinavian way of life. So, what provided Sweden with the necessary conditions for constructing *folkhemmet*?

Sweden had remained neutral during both world wars and, as a result, the country was in an excellent position to take part in the reconstruction of war torn Europe. It also benefited from an increased demand for foreign labor and, as I mentioned earlier, began recruiting labor migrants from other European countries. Since the country's production facilities remained relatively unharmed as a result of both world wars and its labor force was now intact, Europe favored the Swedish industry and its economy ended up flourishing. It is unclear whether Sweden could have achieved such success without having operated under the assumption that the construction of the welfare state was a joint endeavour by the national family.

During the first half of the twentieth century, Sweden was not faced with the same sorts of immigration problems that we see today. For decades, the country had a fairly small population that was mostly homogeneous. Swedes felt content with their “little welfare state” and were proud of the fact that they had found a middle way between capitalism and socialism. All of this started changing in the 1970s when Sweden began accepting refugees from different parts of the world. However, in the early 1990s, a particular group of refugees began arriving in Sweden that seemed to be treated differently than those we see today.

In the early 1990s, an armed conflict took place in Bosnia and Herzegovina that resulted in thousands of refugees fleeing the former Yugoslavia to find asylum in Sweden. In 1992, Sweden recorded a record number of asylum seekers, a record that would not be broken again until the 2015 refugee crisis. Over the next two decades, most of these refugees would

successfully integrate into Swedish society. What explains the success of Bosnian refugees in Sweden as opposed to, say, Syrian refugees? It turns out that a healthy relationship between refugees and their new country is crucial to successful integration, argues one author.⁴⁶ Similar levels of education between refugees and the native population is also important to achieving successful integration in the long run.

Today, some observers argue that Sweden faces issues with refugees from countries such as Syria and Iraq because they are either poorly educated or not educated at all. As a result, it can be difficult for them to contribute to Swedish society and the Swedish welfare state in the capacity that many Swedes expect of them. It doesn't help that Sweden seems to change its integration policies every ten years or so. What might Sweden do moving forward to address this issue? One solution is to come up with a more timely version of *folkhemmet* that takes into account a changing demographic that Swedes did not have to face a hundred years ago.

Back in the days of Per Albin Hansson, Swedes had a shared sense of mutual obligation, something that many Swedes argue has been lost somewhere along the way. Despite their best efforts, it is difficult to imagine that any political party will be able to restore *folkhemmet* to its glory days. And maybe they do not need to. Times have changed and Sweden looks very different than it did in the early twentieth century. For this reason, if Sweden wants to fix some of the country's biggest problems, then they should establish a new and improved *folkhemmet* that is acceptable by all parties.

As I already mentioned, Sweden was in a great position in the beginning of the twentieth century to participate in the reconstruction of war torn Europe while making improvements at

⁴⁶ Amina Dzaferovic, "What Is the Key to the Success of Bosnians in Sweden?," Sarajevo Times, September 22, 2017, <https://www.sarajevotimes.com/key-success-bosnians-sweden/#:~:text=During%20the%20year%20of%201992,of%20successful%20integration%20int.>

home. The introduction of *folkhemmet* alleviated class disputes and improved living conditions for the average Swedish citizen. Sweden quickly became one of the most equal countries in the world. But while the economy continued to grow for much of the twentieth century, inequality increased more so than in most other countries surveyed.⁴⁷ However, since then, Sweden's economy has fared better than it did during the late twentieth century.

Historians like Jenny Andersson argue that, following these economic challenges of the late twentieth century, Sweden once again reemerged as one of the most modern countries in the world.⁴⁸ This is the Sweden that we know today, a massively successful country that can get back on its feet through pragmatic problem solving. However, Sweden still struggles to define itself when it comes to the politics of memory which politicians like Jimmie Åkesson invoke to bring Swedes back to an imagined past that largely didn't happen. In one of his speeches that I introduced earlier in this thesis, Åkesson referred to an imagined past where he felt secure because Sweden was more or less culturally homogeneous when he was younger. As a result, he is recreating *folkhemmet* along cultural lines, something that Per Albin Hansson never really had to address because back then Sweden was more or less culturally homogeneous.

Per Albin Hansson failed to take into account that as Sweden moved forward in the twentieth century, opposing ideological actors might latch onto the idea of *folkhemmet* and misuse it altogether. While this might seem like the natural transgression of things today, back in the 1930s it would have been harder to tell what direction Sweden would head in seeing as the welfare state was still young and it hadn't had the time to develop yet. What might Hansson say about today's *folkhemmet*?

⁴⁷ "OECD Economic Surveys: Sweden 2017," *OECD Economic Surveys: Sweden*, August 2017, https://doi.org/10.1787/eco_surveys-swe-2017-en.

⁴⁸ Jenny Andersson, *Between Growth and Security: Swedish Social Democracy from a Strong Society to a Third Way* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006).

In his speech, Per Albin Hansson called for equality, democracy, and the dissolution of class differences. While *folkhemmet* today shares some of these characteristics, it was never quite clear who it belonged to apart from just “Swedish people.” As we have seen, the Sweden Democrats took the Swedish people to mean native Swedes, not those who come from other countries. It is likely that Hansson never meant for this to happen, but because Sweden was more or less culturally homogeneous at the time, this would not have been an issue. If we think back to Vilhelm Moberg’s essay, published around the same time as the inception of *folkhemmet*, he argues that it was “dead and living Swedes [...] and no one else”⁴⁹ who made Sweden. Like Hansson, Moberg does not directly allude to native Swedes but rather uses the term more vaguely. It is this failure to capture a particular type of Swede early on in the history of *folkhemmet* that led to it becoming something that is easily appropriable.

Considering that *folkhemmet* is such an important part of Swedish history, it is hard to believe that it has such loosely defined borders. While it is used interchangeably with the Swedish welfare state, the actual message of *folkhemmet* was lost somewhere along the way. It makes perfect sense that a populist political party like the Sweden Democrats would contest its permeable boundaries at a time when Swedish citizenship and integration laws were changing so often. After all, whenever a country changes what it means to be a citizen, it opens itself up to populist contestation. Perhaps no other country is more vulnerable to populist challenge than Sweden when you consider that *folkhemmet* is so deeply ingrained in the Swedish welfare state.

Back in the days of Per Albin Hansson, it might have been harder for far-right movements to garner support because everyone was more or less homogeneous and had a common idea of what *folkhemmet* meant. Today, this is not the case and Swedes need to decide

⁴⁹ Vilhelm Moberg.

whether they want to keep an arguably outdated concept. A successful modern *folkhemmet* requires rigid boundaries at both the physical and conceptual levels. While I agree with most historians that Hansson's speech back in 1928 was phenomenal, he left much of the concept open to interpretation. Who are the Swedish people he was speaking about? As this thesis suggests, Hansson wanted it to include everybody but "everybody" in the early twentieth century did not imply immigrants who share a different culture and set of values.

As I have illustrated, there is not really such a thing as "Swedish culture." While this is, of course, debatable, Swedish culture is not easily identifiable in the way that, say, Syrian culture is. This is precisely why the Sweden Democrats are reluctant to accept refugees from these parts of the world where they have a completely different set of values and customs. It is also why I suggest that the modern *folkhemmet* should embrace more immigrants from these parts of the world because they might be able to enrich Swedish culture, or lack thereof.

Swedish culture is largely a construct that arose during the early twentieth century in response to Sweden's reputation as a backwards country that was impoverished and in need of new ideas. Sweden turned to other countries for inspiration, and under the pragmatic leadership of figures such as Hjalmar Branting and Per Albin Hansson, the Social Democrats were able to lift the country out of poverty. They did this under the assumption that it was a joint endeavour by the national family which they termed *folkhemmet*. Through a combination of pragmatism and Sweden's culture of *folkhemmet*, the country has been massively successful since the mid-twentieth century. What this means is that the successful modern *folkhemmet* should take into account the values that made it successful in the first place. However, rather than vilifying immigrants, the Sweden Democrats might want to work with the more moderate parties to enact policies targeted at effective integration. Such a model would preserve the things that the Sweden

Democrats like about Sweden's welfare state while recognizing that Sweden, and Scandinavia in general, has its own way of doing things that is no better or worse than any other country.

The key to a successful *folkhemmet* is recognizing that no one culture is superior to the other. This is something that critics of the *1975 Immigrant and Minority Policy* pointed out by suggesting that well intentioned policies such as these promote an essentialist viewpoint of culture that regards Nordic culture as superior to others. Equality was one of the main pillars of the Swedish welfare state at its inception. Along the way, the Sweden Democrats changed the nature of the welfare state by suggesting that certain cultures are incompatible with Nordic values. Ironically, this thesis has found that most Nordic countries view egalitarianism and mutual respect as central to Swedish values.

Looking Ahead

Throughout history, there have been examples of events that have affected the psyche of a country's people. The 2015 refugee crisis left a deep mark on Swedish society and its effects have been felt by almost every Swedish citizen. It was an event that led to what many observers call the end of Swedish exceptionalism in which Sweden was no longer viewed as the humanitarian superpower it once was. During this time, reactionary politics became popular and the Sweden Democrats saw considerable gains in the ensuing elections.

The first thing that Swedes need to come to terms with is the fact that the Sweden Democrats are here to stay. The party can no longer be ignored by the other parties and, at the time of writing, the Sweden Democrats have been successful in recent months at becoming more mainstream. As in any good home, the other parties must either learn to live with the Sweden

Democrats or convince them that immigration is not such a bad thing after all. So far, they have only been marginally successful in accomplishing this.

Although far-right populist movements have proliferated across Europe in recent years, Sweden is somewhat of an anomaly. Unlike far-right parties in countries such as Germany and Greece, the Sweden Democrats had been largely ostracized by the establishment parties until fairly recently. Even in neighboring countries like Denmark and Norway, the far-right has formed coalitions with the more mainstream parties. In Denmark, for example, the Danish People's Party has worked alongside the mainstream parties since the beginning of the twenty-first century. In Sweden, they have been mostly unsuccessful at forming a majority government because none of the establishment parties really want to govern with the help of the far-right. If the Sweden Democrats were to make big gains in the next election and form a coalition government with one of Sweden's establishment parties, it would bring the country more in line with its Scandinavian neighbors whose far-right parties are already mainstream.

The next election takes place in September 2022 and it is certain to be an interesting one. At the time of writing, the Sweden Democrats have been able to convince at least three other parties to accept help from them if they want any chance of defeating Stefan Löfven in next year's election.⁵⁰ If support from opposition parties increases before the next election, the Sweden Democrats might be able to secure real influence moving forward for the first time since entering the Riksdag in 2010. The Sweden Democrats have publicly stated that they are happy to at least be acknowledged in the Riksdag while recognizing that there is still more to be done.⁵¹

⁵⁰ Charlie Duxbury, "Sweden's Far Right Takes a Step Closer to Power," POLITICO (POLITICO, March 25, 2021), <https://www.politico.eu/article/sweden-far-right-jimmie-akesson-election-2022-step-closer-to-power/>.

⁵¹ Duxbury, Charlie.

A number of scholars have questioned whether it has become the norm for establishment parties to work with the far-right in Sweden.⁵² It is clear that some of the establishment parties are willing to work with the Sweden Democrats on certain issues which has led to further normalization of the party in recent years. There is concern among the Sweden Democrats that if they try too hard at making the other parties conform to their politics, the relationship between both sides will collapse completely, leaving them ostracized once again. Because of this, the Sweden Democrats need to be very careful in how they interact with the establishment parties or else they risk losing credibility among Swedish voters. But if they fail to convey their message hard enough, they risk losing supporters altogether.

The upcoming election will be a formative moment in Swedish politics and whatever happens next year will shape Sweden in the years to come. Support for the Sweden Democrats is likely to grow because they have been successful in fashioning the narrative that they are the only political party defending *folkhemmet* from “dangerous” immigrants. In one of his speeches, Jimmie Åkesson goes so far as to claim that if Per Albin Hansson were alive today he would be a member of the Sweden Democrats.⁵³ But if this thesis has shown anything, it is that the Sweden Democrats have a very different vision for Sweden's future that contrasts dramatically with the one envisioned by Per Albin Hansson and the Social Democrats.

⁵² Emilia Jansson, “ANALYSIS: Has the Far-Right Become Normalized in Sweden?,” *thelocal.com*, April 6, 2021, <https://www.thelocal.com/20210406/analysis-has-the-far-right-become-normalised-in-sweden/>.

⁵³ Jansson, Emilia.

Conclusion

The works of writers such as Vilhelm Moberg remind us that Sweden is an excellent country. It is a country that was founded on the basis of freedom, equality, and democracy. But similar to Per Albin Hansson's speeches, we need to accept the fact that times have changed and Sweden is no longer the same country it was one hundred years ago. Moreover, intellectuals like Moberg failed to take into account that one day Sweden might actually become a successful social democracy capable of accepting a certain number of people from other countries. While we cannot blame Hansson and Moberg for what they thought in the twentieth century, we can use this as a lesson that nations needed coherent boundaries, or else they leave themselves open to populist challenges that threaten the very nature of democracy altogether. For this reason, I have proposed the creation of a new *folkhemmet* that takes into account changing demographics as well as national pride when it comes to the Swedes' ability to have created such an incredible welfare state centered around the idea of a people's home.

Swedes can use their conception of Swedish exceptionalism to promote what some would consider Nordic values without imposing their beliefs on others. A modern people's home is one of egalitarian values, similar to what we see in some parts of Sweden today, but without the resentment towards one's fellow citizens. Swedes are all living under the same roof and therefore should make the best of it whether it was their choice or not. Again, this is ironically illiberal, but it *does* take into account the realities of a changing demographic. This changing demographic does not necessarily need to put an end to Swedish exceptionalism. Rather, it is a signal that now is the time to put one's differences aside and contribute to the welfare state together. In doing so, Swedes maintain their culture of *folkhemmet* while not hurting those who are disadvantaged.

While this might sound overly idealistic, I believe that most Swedes have it in them to realize this new model of the people's home.

If this thesis has demonstrated anything it is that the Sweden Democrats are not an aberration from, but rather a symptom of, the Swedish welfare state and *folkhemmet* more specifically. When you think about it, it is actually quite astonishing that the Sweden Democrats did not emerge sooner considering how Sweden's Nordic neighbours had already seen the far-right make gains for quite some time. In this sense, Sweden is quite exceptional and stands out from the rest of Scandinavia. Perhaps there is some new brand of Swedish exceptionalism that no one really saw coming, or maybe they did see it coming, but simply disavowed it because it does not fit into the narrative most people have of Sweden. When we think of Sweden we tend to think of egalitarian values, not far-right ideologies. But this is what has changed in Sweden in recent years. Sweden can no longer be defined solely by this image that the world has created for it. The good news is that Swedes are an innovative bunch and more than willing, for the most part, to compromise on certain issues and come up with a new identity that combines the best of both worlds.

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