

February 2010 Lookout

Swedish bloc politics an historical parenthesis

The current political analysis leading up to last autumn's parliamentary election is largely based on the fact that today's political blocs are modern manifestations of the Hat and Cap Parties that dominated the Swedish political scene during the last half of the 18th century.

At the same time, we shouldn't forget that Sweden's political system is actually designed so that we can form strong minority governments and that strong, multi-party political blocs working in coalition are alien to our system.

Due to the fact that our proportional voting system makes it easier for small parties to enter parliament – which often creates uncertain majority relationships – there are various rules built into the Swedish form of government that allow minority governments to function and implement their policies:

- We have a so-called “negative parliamentarism”, meaning that a government doesn't need to have the parliament's active support – it's enough that they don't have a majority against them.
- To date, a government doesn't need to automatically step down after an election. It can remain in office until an absolute majority of the parliament votes to remove it. This will change, however, in the 2014 election – the head of government will then be required to submit his or her own and the government's resignation.
- The government's most important legislative proposal, the budget, must be approved by the parliament if the assembled opposition does not present a joint shadow budget (a co-ordinated budget motion including all spending areas).
- The budget's expenditure ceiling also guarantees the obstruction of populist overbid policies aimed at winning power.

A “strong minority government” is characterised by internal unity and its ability to seek support for its legislative proposals from a number of sources. It is therefore a matter of a one-party government in the middle of the political spectrum. Sweden has traditionally had just such an alternative – the Social Democrats, who have ruled in this way for 47 of the post-war years.

Currently, bloc politics appear to be more cemented than ever before. We have two distinct party blocs and two clear alternative governments, both coalitions. Yet there are strong indications that this situation is a fleeting historical aberration. We will witness bloc erosion as early as next autumn if the Social Democrats (SD) enter parliament. But the shift doesn't rise and fall with this. If the SD fails now, they or someone else will be knocking on the doors of parliament in the next election.

The party leader who is currently most prepared for such a shift and who acts on this insight is Prime Minister Fredrik Reinfeldt. With his alliance-building and during his term as head of government, Reinfeldt has ensured his party's credibility for financial competence and accountability in times of crisis. He has meanwhile moved the party left, towards the centre.

The purpose of the shift of position is twofold:

- 1) First, Reinfeldt knows that the Swedish right-left spectrum is becoming obsolete. Other spectrums will count in the future, such as co-operation/isolation, privacy/security, culture production/culture consumption, city/country, etc. And in order to hold a command height that enables governance based on these new realities, the starting position must be in the middle of the current political spectrum.
- 2) Second, Reinfeldt knows that by placing the Moderates in the middle, alongside the Social Democrats, he has created favourable conditions for two possible strong minority governments in Swedish politics: a Social Democratic minority government and a Moderate one-party government. We have two large minority parties, both with opportunities to seek support for their legislative proposals from various quarters, and both with a more stable basis for ruling – with, for example, SD tipping the scale – than any political bloc's blocking minority would have.

The Moderate's shift to the centre also reduces the party's dependence on other centre-right parties, something that has historically limited the Moderate's influence on politics despite their size. If any of the smaller centre-right parties are voted out of parliament in the autumn, the Moderate's influence will be greater still.

Any entry into parliament by the Swedish Democrats could serve to restore the order of things and split bloc politics in the short term. Both blocs have more or less clearly stated that they will not co-operate with or make themselves dependant on the Swedish Democrats. What this means in

practice remains to be seen, but it is clear that both the government and the opposition are ill-equipped to handle the situation. For a minority coalition government consisting of SD and the Left and Green Parties, the choice to seek support from any of the Alliance parties will seem like a choice between the bird flu and the swine flu.

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