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The shining city on the hill? A case study about Sweden

Sweden is no longer only a shining city on a hill, but rather a tale of two cities, where an impressive green transition is happening next to record levels of assassinations and gang violence. When elections were held in September 2022, the underlying challenges in the former shining city proved to be a stumbling block for the popular social democrat Magdalena Andersson, who lost the election to Ulf Kristersson – a conservative backed by the extreme far-right Sweden Democrats. The new government has agreed upon the so-called Tidö agreement, which might imply radical changes to Sweden’s migration policy and even the rule of law. As the new government also delivers a killing blow to Sweden’s climate and environmental policy, an obvious red-green opportunity presents itself to the social democrats: a green transition combined with reforms of the same magnitude as the problems in the former shining city.

To progressives around Europe, Sweden often seems like a shining city on a hill. And they are right: in many ways, we are a shining city on a hill. But the hard truth is that not everyone shares in this city’s splendour and glory. And in 2022, it became evident to everyone that this nation is more a ‘tale of two cities’ than it is just a ‘shining city on a hill’.¹

Let us start with the shining parts. The best country to raise a family in? Sweden is first on the list, according to UNICEF – and what can possibly be more important? Moreover, the world’s most innovative country? Sweden comes in second, says the World Economic Forum. The green transition? Sweden is fifth on the Environmental Performance Index. Leading countries for startups worldwide? Fifth again, given research by Statista. The OECD Better Life Index, based on multiple dimensions of economic and social progress? Ninth place. And the best country to do business in? Sweden comes in tenth, according to *The Wall Street Journal*.

¹ ‘A tale of two cities’ is the bearing metaphor in a speech delivered by New York Governor Mario Cuomo on 16 July 1984, at the Democratic National Convention in San Francisco, California.

Moreover, and if you are looking for inspiring political stories in Europe, you should look more closely at the green transition sweeping across Sweden. When Social Democratic prime minister Stefan Löfven took the floor at the Paris Climate Conference in 2015, he spoke about his former job as a welder – and promised that Sweden would lead the way for a green, industrial revolution. “He has the burden of proof”, replied the then second-biggest political party in Sweden, Moderaterna (conservative).

Fast forward to 2022, and *The Washington Post* is walking around outside Boden (population 16,832) in the very north of Sweden, guided by the local Social Democratic mayor Claes Nordmark. In this little town, H2 Green Steel (H2GS) will construct the world’s first “fossil-free” steelworks: “It’s a multibillion-dollar project that would make a multimillion-ton impact on the climate, cutting over 90 percent of a regular steel factory’s carbon dioxide emissions”, wrote the *Post*, which concluded:

A boom of renewable-powered industries has given rise to what has been dubbed a “green revolution”. A massive revamp is underway to decarbonize the state-run mines. Besides steel mills, the region hosts Europe’s first battery mega factory, called Northvolt Ett, along with fossil-free fertilizer and aviation biofuel factories. [...] An estimated \$100 billion to \$150 billion will be invested and up to 100,000 jobs created in this sparsely populated and often overlooked region.²

So, the shining welfare city on a hill addresses climate change and regional inequalities through a green industrial revolution – the brainchild of a former welder/union leader/Social Democratic prime minister. What could possibly go wrong? Well, quite a lot, unfortunately.

The tale of two cities

Income differences in Sweden decreased until 1980, but since then, inequality has increased dramatically. During the past 40 years, economic inequality has continuously increased in the shining city – and this development has accelerated. According to a research report by Oxfam and Development Finance International, Sweden was still regarded as the best country at countering economic inequalities in 2017. But by 2022, Sweden had fallen through the roof to 20th place. And it should be noted that Sweden has had governments led by Social Democratic prime ministers from 1982 to 1991 (Olof Palme and Ingvar Carlsson), from 1994 to 2006 (Carlsson and Göran Persson), and again from 2014 to 2022 (Stefan Löfven and Magdalena Andersson).

One reason cited by Oxfam was changes to the tax policy; for example, the abolishment in 2019 of the ‘austerity’ tax which gave a tax cut to Sweden’s 345,000 highest earners. One legitimate question is why a social democratic government handed out an extra €1,600 (on average) to its richest. The answer: a tricky situation in the Riksdag with no clear

² Liljas, P. (story) and J. Gratznerin (photography) (2022) “The green revolution sweeping Sweden”. *The Washington Post*, 29 June.

majorities, which in 2019 forced the Social Democratic Party (SAP) and the Green Party into the “January agreement” with two liberal parties – the Centre Party and the Liberal Party – who still happen to believe in the trickle-down economics of the 1980s.

The main underlying dynamic when inequality grows has been well described by Thomas Piketty: the rate of return on capital exceeds the rate of economic growth. Put simply: rich people’s earnings from capital grows faster than your wage. In 2022, a new book, *Greedy Sweden: How the People’s Home became a Paradise for the Super-rich*, was nominated for our national book award, the August Prize (named after Strindberg, of course). Written by the economic journalist and author Anders Cervenka, the entire book is filled with graphs and examples of how Sweden is being torn apart by economic inequality:

A country where the number of billionaires has risen from 28 to 542 in 25 years and where they have collectively become 30 times richer while the proportion of households with low financial standards is increasing; a country that tops the list of dollar millionaires’ assets as a percentage of GDP (in second place is Russia); a country where billionaires are often taxed less than low-income earners; a country that has abolished wealth tax, inheritance tax and gift tax – in short, a tax haven for the rich where inequalities are widening.³

Let us add a few other troubling developments. Sweden is the only country on earth where ‘free schools’ (voucher or charter schools) can be owned by for-profit companies that happily share large dividends with the shareholders. If you glance at the stock exchange, you will notice that the largest educational consortium, AcadeMedia, has annual revenues of over €1 billion. This revenue is solely based on taxpayers’ money since the state guarantees your funding. And guess what: pupils born in families with strong resources – economically, academically – tend to choose ‘free schools’ more often. And if a school run by the municipality – perhaps in a disadvantaged neighbourhood where no ‘free schools’ are established – ends up with a budget deficit, the ‘free school’ in the nice part of town must be compensated economically. More than 25% of Sweden’s 290 municipalities have paid extra compensation to ‘free schools’ because their own school operations were forced into a deficit. Furthermore, some municipalities were forced to transfer money to ‘free schools’ that no longer have any operations.⁴

At the same time, the famous Swedish welfare state is facing important challenges. A new report states that the welfare sector needs to be strengthened by over €20 billion during the coming four years, and an additional 100,000 people must be employed in the sector. The report has some revealing statistics, describing a sector with precarious working conditions and profitable private companies providing different forms of care. If we take a two-week period, elderly people in Sweden with home care receive help from an average of 16 different people. And the return on equity for companies within healthcare, schools and elderly care in Sweden was an average of 24.5% in 2019.⁵

3 Björk, N. (2022) “Så blev Sverige ett extremt orättvist land”. Book review in *Aftonbladet*, 19 April.

4 “Granskning: Var fjärde kommun betalar “straffavgift” till friskolor”. Skolvärlden website, 22 September 2021.

5 Herlitz, J., U. Lorentzi and E. Sundström, “Välfärdsgapet. LOs prognos 2022: Resursbehov i vård, skola och omsorg till 2026”.

The marketisation of the school sector especially has become a vehicle for segregation at a time when Sweden is changing demographically. First things first: our country would not be functioning at all without all the people who have come to live here. But the pace of change has been rather rapid. In 2000, 11% of Sweden's population was born outside of our country. By 2022, this number had grown to 20%. In the greater Stockholm region, 27% of the inhabitants are born in other parts of the world.

The challenge to accommodate people who come to your country becomes harder when the economy is hit by turmoil: a pandemic, a war in your neighbourhood and a possible global recession. In 2022, Swedish unemployment stands at 7.2%. Unemployment among those born abroad amounted to 16.2% (18.4% for women; 14.2% for men) – with long-term unemployment being a challenge, specifically among foreign-born women.

Another development that must be mentioned in relation to the labour market – which is constantly affected by globalisation, the EU's internal market and frivolous companies and employers – is the lack of security and basic law and order. In October last year, the government saw the need to establish a new delegation to fight work-related crime, which can come in many different forms: “the criminal exploitation of subcontracted employment, tax avoidance, breaking migration law and the rules for labour immigration – including sometimes pure human trafficking”.⁶

During the last couple of years, 4,000 businesses have been inspected without warning in the workers' former paradise of Sweden: “One in ten were either completely or partially shut down, while half were found to be in breach of legislation and told to fix it”.⁷

Another problem in paradise – a cleavage that indeed is debated across the Western world – is the dynamism in some urban regions, and the stagnation in more rural parts of the country. A new study has found that 67% of Sweden's population lives in dynamic regions that are very important for growth. A fifth of the population lives in Sweden's ‘stable centre’. 13% live in areas with significant outmigration and an ageing population. Of Sweden's no fewer than 290 municipalities, almost half have seen a decreasing number of inhabitants in the last 30 years. The closing of stores, the postal office, the police station, and other symbols of a living community have followed.

Inequality, immigration and discrimination, struggling schools, unemployment and an indiscriminating labour market, and regional differences – these might be some explanations for a phenomenon that is hard to nail down. Maybe one must conclude that some things take root, then grow more than you could ever have imagined. But here we go: in 2022, 61 Swedes were killed by gun violence, almost exclusively in gang-related activities. In comparison: four people in Denmark, two in Finland and four in Norway. During the last three years, there have been 700 shootings close to schools in Sweden. This means that “16% of Sweden's primary school students – 196,000 children – attend

6 Wallin, G. (2021) “New Swedish delegation to fight work-related crime”. *Nordic Labour Journal*, 13 October.

7 Ibid.

a school where there have been one or more shootings within a 500-metre radius in the last three years”.⁸

These two stories – both the shining city on the hill and the tale of two cities – must be considered when analysing the big political event in Sweden in 2022: the general election on 11 September.

You want it darker? The Swedish elections 2022

In 2018, the Swedish Social Democratic Party (SAP) made a brilliant ad. Then prime minister Stefan Löfven walks up to a quaint hotdog stand and is asked: “What do you want?” Löfven looks into the camera with a warm smile: “I want a society where safety comes before tax cuts”. He continues with the priorities of the election campaign (that was eventually won, Löfven was re-elected). He then concludes: “And I want a hotdog as well”.

In 2022, a YouTuber made a parody of the ad. When asked “What do you want?”, the YouTuber goes on a rant for almost three minutes. He wants returned IS warriors to walk around freely; sky-high electricity prices and an extra tax on petrol; the lowest number of police in the EU and soaring gang criminality; children, teenagers and police officers shot dead in the streets; the highest taxes on earth and low wages for burnt-out teachers and nurses; long queues to access hospital care, beggars everywhere but no midwives – and a hotdog, of course.

The election campaign became the darkest in living memory. The conservative Moderate Party proposed compulsory tests for attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) for all 5-year-olds in immigrant-heavy suburbs (to counter crime later in life). The Liberal Party suggested mandatory language tests for 2-year-olds “who are not enrolled in preschool” (code for children of immigrants). The SAP talked about a cap on residents with a “non-Nordic background” in immigrant neighbourhoods, and Magdalena Andersson promised a country without “Somali towns”.

This agenda suited the party of the extreme right – the Sweden Democrats – who calmly put up election posters depicting aeroplanes (metaphor: repatriation). Such a poster makes sense if you ever cared to read their party platform, which states that democracy is difficult to keep in a state inhabited by “several peoples” – language that brings the 1930s to mind.

And still, the SAP increased its share of the vote by 2% to 30.3%, and almost won a general election for the third time in a row. The main reasons for the ‘close but no cigar’ situation are the following:

- Magdalena Andersson was a trusted and highly popular prime minister, scoring popularity points not seen since the best days of previous Moderate Prime Minister Fredrik Reinfeldt.

8 “Dödsskjutningar i Sverige når nya högstanivåer”. SVT Nyheter website, 11 December 2022, including the data study “700 skjutningar nära skolor - på tre år”.

- The backdrop (albeit absent in the actual campaign) was the national unity during the pandemic – eventually replaced by war in our neighbourhood.
- The Moderates had a quirky candidate for prime minister (Ulf Kristersson) and ran a bad campaign that lacked a larger ‘time for change’ narrative. They focused on an agenda owned by the Sweden Democrats (immigration and crime) to which they mainly added nuclear power and tax cuts. It was surprisingly narrow and lame after being out of office for eight years, and they lost their position as Sweden’s second-biggest party (the Moderates got 19.1%, compared to 20.5% for the Sweden Democrats shrewdly led by Jimmie Åkesson).
- Ulf Kristersson promised a prominent Holocaust survivor to never, never, never cooperate with the Sweden Democrats. He broke that promise, and the Moderates have still not figured out how they will handle the xenophobic gang that they now rely upon in government. This danger was obvious to many urban, liberal voters who would subscribe to a quote from John F. Kennedy’s inaugural address: “Those who foolishly sought power by riding the back of the tiger ended up inside”. As a result, many centrist voters in big cities voted for the sitting Prime Minister and Social Democratic Party leader ‘Magda’.
- The Swedish labour movement is not what it used to be, but it is still a movement. The Social Democratic Party broke previous records and completed 761,000 verified conversations with voters (canvassing and phone). The unions within the Swedish Trade Union Confederation (LO) talked to over 620,000 of their members.

However, the election was lost. To understand why, let us revisit the steps any social democrat campaign should include:

1. Neutralise what stands between yourself and the voters. To do so, the Social Democratic Party has adopted a tougher stance on migration, beginning in the autumn of 2015. Now, Magdalena Andersson promised to “leave no stone unturned” in the fight against criminal gangs.
2. Present breathtaking reforms that will improve welfare and schools for working families. Add green transition and new jobs to underline that you embrace the future with hope.
3. Hit your opponent hard. If their candidate for Prime Minister comes with problematic political luggage, make sure to have surrogates that can unpack and show voters the dirty laundry.

The Social Democratic campaign completed the first step, but never managed to move the election to their own turf. This was an opportunity lost. As voters walked out of the polling booths, they said that healthcare was their most important issue, with schools as well as law and order in second place. 52% of voters who went for the Sweden Democrats said in an exit poll that they agreed with the statement “Profit distribution shall not be allowed in tax-financed operations in healthcare, schools, or elderly care”.⁹

The election ought to have moved beyond immigration and crime; big reforms were lacking; and key ministers could have done better. In short, given the magnitude of the

9 SVT, Valu 2022, “Väljarnas viktigaste frågor”.

problems facing the shining city on the hill, the SAP did not present reforms in corresponding magnitude – for example in areas concerning inequality, schools and welfare. The SAP tried to turn a parliamentary election into a presidential campaign with ‘Magda’ as a safe pair of hands, and they almost succeeded. Campaign workers shared photos on Facebook in their purple ‘MAGDA’ baseball hats (for the nerdy political observer, it was close enough to MAGA – Make America Great Again, but the hats were not red). But at the start of 2023, it is difficult to remember a single concrete promise or welfare reform in the SAP campaign.

However, and if we put our Marxist glasses on, we can see how more significant trends among the factors of production were at play. The cleavages in the emerging tale of two cities were dominating the campaign – not least segregation and gang violence. In such a scenario, it becomes awfully difficult to get elected for a third time in a row – even if you had the most popular politician in the land. As a result, urban voters (successful ‘anywheres’) trusted Magdalena Andersson to keep their lives sunny in these uncertain times. Small-town Sweden (displeased ‘somewheres’) has had a disproportionate share of the flip side of the negative trends and sent their signal by voting for the Sweden Democrats.

The urban-rural political divide should be analysed in tandem with the gender gap. If only women voted, the social democrats would have received 34% of the vote. If you include their allies (Greens, Left Party, Centre Party) the victory would have been rock solid: 56%. But with only men at the ballot box, the SAP and the Sweden Democrats are tied (26% and 25% respectively). And if we only count the male vote, the right-wing bloc (Sweden Democrats, Moderates, Christian Democrats, Liberals) collects 56% instead.

As a result, polarisation (for or against the Sweden Democrats) and cannibalism (among the red-green parties) walked hand in hand. The SAP (notably ‘Magda’) gained votes from their allies (Greens, Left Party, Centre Party) but the bleeding to the Sweden Democrats continued in this election as well. Winning votes from your friends, and not moving voters across the aisle by completing steps two and three of an election strategy, proved fatal.

Like in the rest of Europe, the overriding challenge for social democrats is to find bold reforms that can reverse the strong trends that divide our country and allow populists to grow. Ideally, this should be done while building sustainable societies at the same time. Lack of progress in this regard during the last eight years of governing with a very divided parliament should be added to the list of explanations. The divide kept growing, and voters took note.

It can therefore be argued that the working class decided the outcome, and the SAP lost: among self-described ‘workers’, the SAP received 31.8%, while the Sweden Democrats received 28.8%. Among trade union members within LO, the numbers were better but not good: 42.4% voted for the party led by ‘Magda’, and 27.2% for Jimmie Åkesson’s party. It should be noted that the share of votes for the SAP among LO members was about one percentage point higher than in 2018. But 42.4% in 2022 can also be compared to the share in 2002: 59%.

The gender gap is staggering also within the trade union vote: 45.7% of LO women voted for the SAP, but only 38.9% of the LO men. The Sweden Democrats are now at 32.2% among LO men, but remain at 22.6% among LO women.

These numbers also pose the question of which kind of party the SAP is becoming, and which kind of party it would like to be. As we have seen, 31.8% of self-described workers voted for the SAP. Among voters with a postgraduate university education, the support for the SAP was just slightly lower: 30%.

In any election, there are additional trends to account for. The stance in favour of nuclear power within the right-wing block paid off as the energy crises emerged. And Sweden's new immigrant party 'Nyans' gained ground in immigrant suburbs and won 20% of the vote in some districts, as the SAP lost heavily. 'Nyans' won two local seats in the municipality Botkyrka, south of Stockholm, and one in Landskrona, and received 2.88% of the vote in Malmö. It seems likely that many voters of immigrant background were fed up with the harsh rhetoric confusing and mixing immigration with gang violence, which led to either abstention or a vote for 'Nyans' instead of the SAP. Electoral participation went down in general by almost three percentage points to 84.2% – and the drop in one part of Botkyrka was no less than 22 percentage points. It can be said that a new party with Islamic ties helped the former Nazis to beat the social democrats.

It should also be noted that a growing number of voters with an immigrant background are voting for the far right, like in other European countries. Among voters who grew up in Europe but outside of the Nordic countries, or have a mother/father with that background, the Sweden Democrats received 19% of the vote.

Young voters vote heavily for the Moderates and the Sweden Democrats, while the left seems absent in the digital world where young minds are formed. Among 18- to 21-year-olds, the Moderates received 26% and the Sweden Democrats 22% – with the SAP in third place with 20%. In the home country of Greta Thunberg, only 5% of the youngest voters chose the Green Party.

As the final votes were counted, Sweden had ended up with an extreme right-wing party that has grown in nine consecutive elections – a party that is bigger and much more extreme than those in other European countries. We tried to expose their Nazi roots, but they continued to grow. The centre-right parties in Sweden offered them a warm embrace – but were surpassed by them. All the traditional right-wing parties – the Moderates, the Christian Democrats, the Liberals – received a smaller share of the vote than in 2018. But together with the Sweden Democrats they obtained 176 seats in the Riksdag, compared to 173 for the SAP, the Left Party, the Centre Party and the Greens.

On this basis, a government needed to be formed.

The Tidö agreement and the road ahead

After the election, as negotiations started behind closed doors in the Riksdag without signs of initial progress, senior representatives from the four right-wing parties eventually checked in at a well-preserved castle from the 17th century called Tidö, south of Västerås, about 100 kilometres west of Stockholm. They negotiated, there were apparently late nights infused with alcoholic beverages in different parts of the castle, and eventually

the 62-page “Tidö agreement” was presented – heavily focusing on immigration and crime.

When it comes to the actual government, it was decided that it would be formed by the Moderates, the Christian Democrats and the Liberals. Ulf Kristersson, party leader of the Moderates, became prime minister. But the Sweden Democrats earned the right to appoint no less than nine officials who will work in the government offices. In this way, they can make sure from the inside that their favourite parts of the Tidö agreement are enforced – and from the outside they can complain about everything else. They were also given the chair of four of the 16 parliamentary committees: foreign relations; labour market; industry and trade; and justice.

The Swedish public service television company – SVT – closely followed two of the political parties during the entire election campaign. They chose the parties at the opposite end of the political scale: the Left Party and the Sweden Democrats. The result, a behind-the-scenes documentary called “The Power Game”, starts with a closed meeting featuring the very top leadership of the Sweden Democrats.

During this meeting, Jimmie Åkesson has been briefed about the Tidö results by staffer Gustav Gellerbrant, who will head the squad in the government offices. Åkesson called Gellerbrant “the architect behind Sweden’s new and very tough migration policy” and asked him to elaborate. Gellerbrant’s answer is revealing – pure TV gold – and fortunately captured by the camera: “This means a paradigm shift in the view of asylum. No one thought we would get this far. It is..., it is incredible. Really”. The room bursts into humming laughter.¹⁰

The Civil Rights Defenders (CRD), an international NGO based in Stockholm focusing on civil and political rights, has studied the Tidö agreement closely:

The agreement is clearly repressive. It is focused on detentions (including those of children and young people), harsher sentences, increased opportunities to monitor and deport people, and measures that undermine the rule of law and human rights. [...] There is also a recurring confusion, or equation, between migration and criminality, that singles out people with migration experience as the cause of Sweden’s problems. [...] We also note that several of the measures would directly conflict with international and regional obligations and conventions to which Sweden has committed itself, as well as with our own constitution. If the agreement’s proposed measures become a reality, we will have a society that no longer rests on the rule of law’s basic principle of everyone’s equality before the law. [...] The Tidö agreement shows that the global trend of dismantling democracy has come to Sweden.¹¹

The Tidö agreement was presented on 14 October, and since then the new government has also presented its first budget. They have failed to act on several of their major election promises, not least regarding the soaring prices of electricity and petrol. In order to analyse the new government and the changing political landscape, one might place the developments into three different categories.

10 SVT, “Maktspelet”, by Mari Forssblad and Kalle Segerbäck.

11 Civil Rights Defenders (2022) “Our review of the Tidö Agreement (Tidöavtalet)”, 16 December.

First, the analysis by the Civil Rights Defenders of the Tidö agreement must imply a clear line in the sand. The words and ideas in that document lead to a society that is unpleasant to live in. The use of penal populism in Sweden – focusing on penalties rather than prevention – has finally gone too far. Social democrats who have disagreed about immigration policy and exactly how tough you ought to be on crime should now be able to agree on the following: we all remember how Tony Blair said that New Labour should be “tough on crime, and tough on the underlying causes of crime”.¹² The Tidö agreement is a natural turning point from where the main focus must always be the fight against the underlying causes of crime – think of all the challenges in the tale of two cities – including the avoidance of language that mixes crime with migration. Even if we will be as tough as nails on all the activities of the criminal gangs as well.

This first category also means that you ought to be a careful observer of reforms and actions that might undermine the basic idea of a society based on democracy, human rights and the rule of law.

A second category consists of all the proposals and reforms in the ‘ordinary’ areas of economics, welfare, and so forth. So far, we have seen unfortunate cuts to labour-market policy, undermining necessary re-skilling and the fight against long-term unemployment. Government support to municipalities and regions in order to maintain services in the welfare sector has been increased – but far from sufficiently (the SAP wisely promised more resources in their alternative budget proposal). And most notably, the new government’s budget has been called a ‘killing blow’ to Sweden’s ambitious green policy by researcher Mikael Karlsson from Uppsala University. Karlsson added: “It is almost skillful to be so bad at environmental and climate policy”.¹³ Sweden is now projected to miss the binding EU emissions goal, as well as our own ambition to achieve net zero emissions by 2045.

On the positive side, it should be noted that big tax cuts have mostly been put on hold because of the dire economic times, and the slight improvements to the unemployment benefit scheme made during the pandemic have been kept.

Finally, when a right-wing government takes control, you must also be aware of the risk that they might weaken the institutions and structures built by the labour movement during previous decades. All four right-wing parties have previously introduced proposals in the Riksdag that would make the unemployment benefit schemes – which are administered by the trade unions – mandatory and run by the state instead. Such a change would severely undermine the traditional Swedish model with strong social partners – a system that encourages the worker to join both the union and the unemployment benefit scheme. Another proposal would weaken the role of safety officers in the workplace, disassociating their important function from the trade unions. So far, no such measures have been decided upon. On the other hand, cuts in the foreign aid budget mean that Sweden will no longer meet the target of giving 1% of its GDP in development aid. This will limit Sweden’s work for the world’s most vulnerable through international

12 New Statesman (2015) “From the archive: Tony Blair is tough on crime, tough on the causes of crime”. *The New Statesman*, 28 December.

13 “Forskare: Budgeten är ett dråpslag mot miljön på bred front”. *Dagens Nyheter*, 9 November 2022.

development cooperation – which traditionally has been an essential act of solidarity for the Swedish labour movement.

So, if progressives were to follow the advice to use these three columns – Tidö; reforms; institutions – to monitor the new government's actions during the coming years, what actions could be expected from the left side of Swedish politics?

First, one should note that the last decade has been characterised by governments without clear majorities in the Riksdag. As a result, the partners on the labour market – unions and employers – have risen to the occasion, delivering agreements on, for example, labour law reform as well as a new flexible study-support system for adults in the middle of their working life, encouraging transition into new jobs.

In December 2022, yet another reform by the social partners was handed over in its final form to the government – 'entry agreements'. This initiative aims to move newly arrived immigrants and the long-term unemployed into jobs which are partly paid by the employer and partly subsidised by the state, before the job eventually is turned into a full-time 'normal' occupation.

The pressing economic conditions – the war in Ukraine and soaring energy prices, inflation, and interest rates – have also encouraged LO to present its "crisis winter programme". The programme focuses on compensation for the energy prices; improved unemployment benefit; lower gas prices and subsidies for long journeys to work; lower amortisation requirements; and state support to companies introducing shorter working weeks. It also proposed an extra child allowance in December, to be provided right before Christmas. The programme has hitherto not been acted upon by the new government.

To conclude: is there obvious homework for the SAP to do, that will lead the way back to power in 2026? One answer is that it is still early days: the party's election analysis has not even been presented yet. However, a few obvious strategic observations can be made. Magdalena Andersson remains the most popular politician by far and the SAP is lucky to have her. The Centre Party is about to elect a new leader, and they should be courted as a possible ally – because the alternative is to fight five parties to the right. The new government is dependent on a party formed by Nazis and will most likely face severe problems that will make your own poll numbers soar. When that happens, remember that the SAP had 45.9% in a poll in 2007, and still lost the subsequent election. Focus on your own policies and what you would like to achieve in order to make a difference.

If personal privilege can be invoked, I would like to conclude with a lesson I learnt during a study trip to Berlin in autumn 2022. I was lucky enough to have a meeting with an advisor to the German Social Democratic chancellor Olaf Scholz, and, curious, I asked if they had a secret plan to win the next election.

I got the impression that my counterpart did not understand my question, because there was no need for a secret plan. The task is obvious: transition, as my new German friend had already explained. We progressives must fight for the future of the planet, only we understand that this green project must be red and built on fairness and equality. And while doing it we must use Europe and our union to achieve security in this uncertain world of ours. If we fail, populists will continue to grow.

As it happened, I was in Berlin on 9 November 2022. On my way back to the hotel I stopped on the sidewalk in front of a grave candle and two 'stumbling stones' honouring victims of the Holocaust. I was only wearing a shirt and a jacket; it was the warmest autumn in Germany since measurements began in 1881.

Our common challenges could not have been more obvious: the darkness we must avoid. The transition we must make.

