

FUTURION

Painting too rosy or too black a picture

- Sweden in an international comparison

English short version

PAINTING TOO ROSY OR TOO BLACK A PICTURE OR SOMETHING IN BETWEEN

Sweden and “Swedishness” has been the focus of much social debate in recent years. The Prime Minister has said that “we will develop the Swedish model, not dismantle it”, at the same time that we have had a debate that has in part been polarised on whether Sweden is a pioneering country or a country that is falling apart. In many ways the political debate has become a debate about the picture of reality. This may not be that strange given the seriousness of this picture, but more important is that it is based on knowledge and facts. If Sweden is essentially a good country, there is reason to build on what has proven successful, but if we are facing considerable problems we then have reason to bring about change.

That said, for several years now there has been a marked pessimism among Swedes concerning the future. For example, in the 2016 SOM survey only 19 per cent of respondents said that they felt things were going in the right direction, while 54 per cent said they felt it was going in the wrong direction. Bearing in mind the debate of recent years in which warnings have been made that Sweden is facing a “system collapse” and politicians have repeatedly said that “we must take seriously the unease in society”, this pessimism may not be so surprising.

The answer, however, is whether this is justified. One answer is found in the new report by Futurion entitled “Mellan skönmålning och svartmålning” (Painting too rosy or too black a picture or somewhere in between). The report is based on nearly 40 indexes that carry out international comparisons in measuring anything from democracy and equality to social justice and inclusiveness, to corporate climate and innovation. Indexes worthy of note are those that focus on economic growth, such as the Global Competitiveness Index compiled by the World Economic Forum and Ease of Doing Business by the World Bank, and those that focus on social growth, such as the Human Development Index compiled by UNDP. This review shows that Sweden is regularly counted among the ten top-ranking countries and, moreover, that in just over half of these cases Sweden is among the top five top-ranking countries. In other words, Sweden stands out not only in a particular area but also as one of the leading countries across almost the entire board. It would thus seem that there is no divergence between freedom and justice or between welfare on the one hand and enterprise and innovation on the other.

The international comparisons set out in the report show that the alarmism and unease that has characterised much of Swedish debate in recent years is out of proportion. If Sweden really were facing some form of system collapse or had such huge problems as is claimed by some, it would no longer consistently rank among the ten leading countries. In other words, what marks out Sweden is not a country in crisis. What marks it out is that there are a number of different areas where it is counted among the leading countries in the world.

Although one can always direct criticism at individual indexes and debate these, none of them has been produced to favour a particular side in the political debate. The fact that Sweden does so well should therefore be highlighted in internal political debate. There is no doubt that problems exist, and no doubt that Sweden – like many other countries – is facing significant challenges for the future in connection with issues such as demographic change, integration and the supply of skills in the labour market.

However, if Sweden is to successfully address the different problems and challenges of today and tomorrow, we need a knowledge-based and constructive debate that takes account of the country’s strengths as well as weaknesses. Swedish comedian and author Tage Danielsson once said that “if

you refuse to look backwards and daren't look forwards, you need to look out". The same applies if you allow excessive optimism or pessimism to colour analysis and social debate. In the social debate of today, however, excessive optimism is seen to be less of a problem than excessive pessimism. Therefore, in order to avoid creating a breeding ground for populism and increased polarisation, politicians should take a step back from confirming or even reinforcing unease and pessimism that is not warranted.

A Swedish version of this summary has been published as an article by Jesper Strömbäck and Ann-Thérèse Enarsson in Dagens Samhälle.

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Futurion

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