ELECTIONS IN SWEDEN AND NORWAY

In Sweden and Norway, recent election results indicate that policies of the Reagan/Thatcher/Howard variety have little support in this part of the western world. Though, in the past five years, the right wing has made significant gains in Scandinavia also, the tide may now have turned against the conservative parties.

In Norway, the conservative coalition government managed to hang on to office in the elections on September 9 with the narrowest possible margin. The opposition labour party, under the leadership of a woman, Gro Harlen Brundtland, increased its share of the vote from 37.2 percent to 40.8 percent. Welfare issues figured prominently in the campaign, with strong public pressure for increased state spending on the health system and on policies for regional equity. Norway has very large incomes from its North Sea oil production, and living standards have been considerably improved. In the new parliament, there is likely to be a majority in favour of a Nuclear Free Zone in the Nordic countries, and the government will find it very difficult to gain support for its strongly pro-NATO stance.

In Sweden, the social democratic government was re-elected on September 15 with a reduced majority. A few seats were lost but the result is an important victory as, only a few months ago, a change of government was generally predicted. The Communist Party saw a marginal drop in its support from 5.6 to 5.4 percent, but will continue to play a significant parliamentary role with a 19-seat representation. Its policy is to give critical parliamentary support to Olof Palme's government. In the last few years, the two workers' parties have, on several occasions, entered into unprecedented formal parliamentary negotiations, giving the communists a certain influence on some aspects of government policy and boosting its public standing. Opinion polls show that there is a strong minority opinion within the Social Democratic Party favouring a Social Democratic-Communist coalition government. This is utterly unlikely within the foreseeable future, but it is an indication of the deep division in Swedish politics between the so-called "socialist" and "bourgeois" blocs.

The division on the bourgeois side of Swedish politics into three different parties has long detracted from their credibility as an alternative government. The Conservative Party (the "moderates") declined from 23.6 percent to 21.4 percent while the "small-I" Liberal Party (the "people's party") jumped from 5.9 to 14.3 percent. The flow of votes from the Conservative to the Liberal party show that even non-socialist voters rejected the "change of system" which the conservatives confidently advocated.

The depth and strength of popular support for the welfare programs created by social democratic governments was seriously misjudged by rightwing commentators and strategists. The high level of taxation in Sweden is undoubtedly a cause for discontent among sections of the electorate but, when it comes to the crunch, only a small minority opts for the dismantling of the welfare state.

The social democrats have pledged to continue economic policies aimed at a continued reduction of the large budget deficit (inherited from the bourgeois governments 1976-1982) but without cuts in welfare programs. Exactly how this is to be accomplished is unclear. Unemployment in Sweden is currently three percent of the workforce (6.6 percent in the 16-24 age group). Prime Minister Olof Palme argues that the Swedish social democrats successfully pursue an alternative course to that of other Western countries: a policy of economic stability without mass unemployment or cutbacks to the welfare state. Whether there still exists a "Swedish model" is, however, a matter of dispute.

The left of the Swedish trade union movement and the communists are unimpressed by aspects of current government economic policy. In particular, the emphasis on the need for a high level of profitability in the export industry coupled with falling or stagnating real wages has caused criticism and discontent. On the other hand, Palme and his government have gained considerable credibility within the business community as competent "economic managers".

Today, little of the resurgent social democratic radicalism of the early 1970s remains. The controversial "wage earners funds" proposed then — optimistically believed by some observers to be a key component of a reformist strategy — are today operational on a small scale but in a form and with an official rationale completely different from that put forward by left-wing social democrats ten years ago. Now, they make up a minor part of a "social contract" allowing for very low wage increases. Palme declared during the election campaign that the current fund system is not to be
expanding beyond 1990, and the issue has virtually disappeared from the political agenda.

The importance of the elections is that they demonstrate the strength and resilience of the labour movement in Scandinavia, and that the welfare state has very strong popular support. The right wing's offensive aimed at a "change of system" has been rejected in this part of Europe. Furthermore, the energy and resilience of the labour movement seem to have developed a sense of endurance, and has moved away from a breathless外观.
expectation of immediate success and settled in for the long haul.

The strengths should also include the lead up to the actual conference. The dialogue it initiated in several states, where potential conference topics were canvassed among local groups and affiliates and in state-level forums prior to the conference itself, was at least as valuable as the event itself.

A welcome and rare event. It liberates a space for creative endeavour usually closed off by internal and external pressures on the disarmament movement as a whole. But it also lends itself to all-embracing universal statements rather than the harder work of determining what is politically feasible both within and beyond the movement.

I, for one, am strongly in support of the broad(er) platform for the movement, and believe that it is only through an increased emphasis on connections with our comrades around the Pacific, with a renewed and strengthened emphasis on related local issues like land rights and uranium mining, and inclusion of other concerns — such as economic and conservation issues — that the disarmament movement will be able to develop a coherent and attractive alternative to pose against the nuclear realpolitik which confronts us all.

Nevertheless, the conference (as viewed from my part of the elephant) was singularly unable to grapple seriously, or in a sustained fashion, with either internal (movement-related) problems or external issues which could lead to the realisation of these connections in a coherent and concerted campaign which would be accessible to those within the movement and popular and attractive to those "unconverted".

The forums which attempted to present an overall strategy for this, the next stage of the movement's development, did not gain the sort of overall exposure which they required.

By way of example, discussion of the "Nuclear Lake Strategy" — the ways in which we, nationally, could make the idea of a Nuclear Free Pacific/Indian Oceans campaign the point of coherence and focus for our actions against ships/N.W. Cape/nuclear weapons testing and transit — seemed to occur around the perimeters of the conference rather than at its "centre".

Similarly, any honest and direct discussion of the real state of the movement, on a state by state basis, was avoided — one imagines for the usual reasons of interstate political rivalry and the difficulty of drawing such into perspective. The tension between autonomous anti-nuclear actions and groups (including local groups, to some extent) on the one hand, and the nature/structure/role of any centralised (e.g. national) co-ordinating body or process for the movement on the other, also remained subterranean and unexplored, though this too is a central issue which now needs to be addressed. Clearly, a process of frank collective self-assessment is vital to the creation of a viable national disarmament movement/project. So is a clear assessment of the state of political play in the larger sandpit. Yet I heard no broad discussion of the implications of the last federal election, of the achievement or the fate of the NDP, of the coherent strategies which might be adopted by the movement in relation to the formal political sphere over the next two or more years.

Perhaps this is merely a comment on the sociology of conferences. Yet, if this conference was substantively democratic, "it" also "used" this democracy to avoid the hard discussions which need to occur if a national movement is to meet the opposition from the Right which it has encouraged.

Shortly after the conference, PND Victoria held its annual general meeting. This meeting, as all who attended it will attest, was one of the smallest general meetings to date — and the one least representative of local activists. This is, in part, attributed to the high level of involvement and satisfaction in the conference of local groups and activists. If it will now take the various state PNDs and other components of the movement twelve months to digest and ruminate over its outcome, not only did this conference take place two years too late, but it will have further distracted us from the need to make real strategies and decisions — by making people believe that it actually produced something concrete, rather than being ephemeral, suggestive and indicative only.

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