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 equality.

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.

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 a small-l (the "moderates") declined 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 division on 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 leftwing 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

Social Democrat Olof Palme celebrating victory.
expanded 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.

Hans Lofgren.

"WHAT ROUGH BEAST..."

The National Disarmament Conference

In some ways, the recent National Disarmament Conference, sponsored by the ACDP (Australian Coalition for Disarmament and Peace) and hosted by PND Victoria, was reminiscent of the fable about the blind men given the collaborative task of describing an elephant, where each was assigned a portion of the animal and reported first impressions. One's view of the conference — and of the state of health of the disarmament movement itself — very much depended on which part of the Beast you were attached to.

Those embracing the local groups and local actions workshops probably found themselves still very solidly attached to the ground. Yet those attempting to make head or tail of the strategy and the overall shape of the New Wave Disarmament movement, four years since its inception, would have been forgiven if they misread their respective parts. Nevertheless, all would have agreed that, whatever this Beast is nowadays, it moves cautiously and reacts slowly.

This blurring of the two, the conference and the movement, is intentional. Both display the extraordinary diversity and complexity of anti-nuclear activity, in its various political forms, strategies and levels of sophistication. Neither shows an immediate overall coherence which can give confidence that the new challenges being presented to the movement will be met in the concerted fashion they require.

The conference itself lasted four days and was the site of over one hundred workshops and panel discussions for nearly six hundred delegate participants from around the nation and the Pacific region. It presented a wide variety of options from which people could choose and structurally reflected the openness of the movement by encouraging participants to make connections between areas of concern which may not have previously been juxtaposed by either individual activists or their organisations. The conference's breadth of perspective was perhaps best exemplified by its platform of overseas speakers (which included retired Admiral Gene la Rocque, Ferenc Koszegi from the Hungarian Independent Peace Movement, Rosalie Bertell, and Maria Villariba from the Philippines).

This openness to issues which had previously generally been rejected or regarded as "subsidiary" to the disarmament project alongside the more usual debates around future campaign strategies, the nature and shape of a national movement, ANZUS, the Soviet question and so on — "naturally" led to the outcome of the final plenaries. The highly consensual atmosphere of these plenaries produced a strong affirmation of the role of this broader perspective in the definition of future anti-nuclear activity. This expansion of the movement's humanistic universe probably underlines both the strengths and weaknesses of the conference's overall achievement.

The strengths should not be minimised. Few who attended expressed anything but satisfaction at the informed way in which they were able to broaden their field of vision and make the links. Simultaneously, the energy and high spirits of those present showed — if the conference was an accurate indicator — that the movement seems to have developed a sense of endurance, and has moved away from a breathless
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.

Indian Oceans campaign the point of coherence and focus for our actions against ships/N.W. Cape/n-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.

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 something concrete, rather than being ephemeral, suggestive and indicative only.

Peter Christoff

Neverthelass, for the more pessimistically minded, the conference highlighted several areas of major and longer term concern. It is wrong to criticise this conference for failing to do what was never on its agenda, but one must question the depth of analytical rigour and political resolve of its final apparent consensus. A conference which explicitly sets out to facilitate the exchange of ideas, and is not yet another chance to experience the political minefields of movement decision-making, is 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.

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. 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.