

A Traditional Right: Jimmie Akesson and the Sweden Democrats

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Sweden's elections are normally dull affairs. The same political arrangements have been in place for decades, featuring mild oscillations around the centre between the green-red bloc (Social Democrats, the Greens and the Left Party) and the conservative Alliance (the Moderates, Christian Democrats and the Centre and Liberal Parties).

The favoured line for political watchers of Sweden is standard. Few monumental disagreements have registered since Sweden became a model free-education welfare state with impeccable health services funded by high taxes. But Europe has caught a rash, and it has become something of a contagion. The symptoms are clear enough: consternation at Brussels at the centralising European machinery; concerns about immigration; apoplexy about perceptions of rising crime; and the corrosions posed to the once seemingly impregnable welfare state.

Sweden's own contribution to such fears comes in the form of Jimmie Åkesson of the Sweden Democrats, a person who reminds the observer of fascist politics that appearances, and the aesthetic of appeal, matter. Last Sunday's elections saw the SD do well, garnering 42 of the 342 seats in the Riksdag.

While his party was nursed in the bosom of neo-Nazi politics in the 1980s, Åkesson has spruced matters up, giving the impression that slickness and modern looks are somehow contradictory to reactionary politics. (Parallels are evident in the cosmetic adjustments made to the Front National in France.)

His party members seem well kitted out, dressed less to offend than to blend. Decency is all in, and efforts are being made to keep the more savage sentiments in the cupboard. "Open Swedishness" is being promoted as a platform for integration, and Åkesson has been conscious to carry the necessary political ornamentation that comes with good public relations. Jonas Chongera, a Congo-born former pastor, has been seen keeping him company as a member of the municipal council of Forshaga in Värmland. Four years ago, the lapsed pastor [made](#) it clear that responsibility for refugees was a fundamental goal of the party, proud that the SD was the only one daring to ponder the imponderable issue of immigration. And that was before the arrival of 163,000 asylum seekers in 2015.

As Barbara Wesel of Deutsche Welle [observed](#),

“It seems that voters really buy this image of the ‘nice son-in-law’ that Jimmie Åkesson is projecting – you know, sort of every mother’s dream if she wants to marry off her daughter.”

Not that this is an image that needed to be sold in the first place. Traditional voters have been put off by policies seemingly placed on the autopilot of consensus, a stance that made former Prime Minister Frederik Reinfeldt smugly deem Sweden a “humanitarian superpower”.

Such political tags tend to prove dangerous and unnecessary.

“I feel immigrants have priority now,” [came](#) the opinion of former Social Democrat voter Helena Persson, who did her bit push the SD into first place in the village of Håbo-Tibble. “The Swedish people come second.”

Åkesson was also given a modest pre-election fillip by French President Emmanuel Macron, who felt slighted at [remarks](#) made by the SD leader calling him an “EU-federalist” who “travels around Europe to speak ill of the national state, nationalism, all that I stand for.” Between Russia’s Vladimir Putin and France’s Macron, few differences could be discerned, a view prompting the French leader to [suggest](#) to Swedish voters, rather impudently, that Åkesson “is not compliant with your story and your values”.

Åkesson’s views have not been racy or spectacular, having spent time on the boiler plate for some years. In the summer of 2014, as his party was readying itself for the September general elections, he [espoused](#) the sorts of views that would have moved many a supporter of US President Donald Trump. “Islamism is the Nazism and Communism of our time.” To those few Swedish nationals who had found their way to fight in Iraq and Syria, “You guys can stay there. Sweden is no longer your home, this country is built on Christian principles.”

If tranquil, unflappable Sweden can be rocked and disrupted, the rest need to worry. But it would also be remiss to consume a version of Sweden as the land of milk-honeyed tolerance somehow free of Nazi sympathy. A figure such as Åkesson is hardly a bolt out of the blue, and historiography on the subject of Swedish fascism has [attempted](#) to correct the misunderstandings about its origins and influence. Elisabeth Åsbrink has done more than anybody else in recent times to show how certain figures of Swedish fascism were very aware about the need to evolve their creed after the Second World War. Like Ingvar Kamprad’s modular furniture, fascist ideology has, over time, been re-assembled for modern needs.

One such figure in this reassembling venture was Per Engdahl, [described](#) by Åsbrink as “intelligent and modern” who realised in 1945 that he needed a new set of clothes, nay, wardrobe, to sell his politics. “He made contact with Oswald Mosley’s fascists in England, with the French fascists, the Swiss Nazis and Hitler’s loyalists in Germany.” And that was merely a spare green grocer’s list of right wing pugilists, not considering his own role in founding a Danish Nazi party and links with the Italian Social Movement.

The SD now finds itself riding a European trend distinctly offended by the sensibilities of “bloc” politics. The forces of progressivism have been found wanting, and refusing to stake any claim to political relevance will simply provide kindle for Åkesson. Despite not winning

the Swedish elections, he has already staked an irrefutable claim to change his country's politics.

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