From growth to sustainability: implications of the Swedish experience

Fundamental Questions Paper No.2

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Table 1. Total Primary Energy Requirements:
Sweden & Australia (domestic consumption in
million tonnes of oil-equivalent)

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Source: IEA, Energy Policies & Programmes in IEA Countries, 1988

This is a rather gloomy beginning. Fortunately we can point to some conservation achievement and in the process learn about the social processes which facilitate it. To this end I intend to focus on the Swedish experience. This deserves close attention because the Swedes are amongst the most affluent of nations, with a productive system run by capitalist firms deeply embedded in the international economy (the Swedes exported the equivalent of 30.9% of their GDP in 1984 compared with our 13.7%). In addition their political system has been dominated by employer and particularly employee (union) organisations deeply committed to material growth. Yet since 1973 the Swedes have developed new energy policies partly inspired by sustainability ideals, some of which threaten the interests of the productive system.

These policies include a commitment in 1975, endorsed by Parliament, to a slow down in growth of energy use to 2% per annum (from 4% previously), and for conservation to play a significant role in this. These policies emerged in reaction to the Arab/Israeli war of 1973/74, when oil imports, (which Sweden then depended on for 75% of her total energy), were threatened.

But by far the most striking policy changes have been directed at nuclear power. By 1973 the Swedes had one nuclear plant in operation and eleven others under construction (Banks, 1984). The Government and the electrical power industry at the time were anticipating that more would be built this century. But from 1973 the nuclear industry faced an increasingly hostile political reception such that in the aftermath of the 1979 Three Mile Island accident in the USA, the major political parties agreed to an 'advisory' referendum on the issue. This was held in March 1980 and resulted in a victory for those proposing no new nuclear plants should be initiated, and that existing reactors should be phased out over an extended period.

This 'advice' has since been converted into a programme, approved by the Parliament, to phase out all nuclear plants by the year 2010, with the decommissioning of the first two (of a total of twelve in operation by 1980), in 1993-95 and 1994-96 (IEA, 1988, 399). The Swedish energy program for the late 1980s and 1990s focuses on curbs to further growth in energy use. The objective is now to stabilise demand. This is to be achieved through conservation programmes and the replacement of nuclear power, mainly by various forms of renewable energy, particularly biomass, wind and other solar sources. On the conservation front, the National Energy Conservation Plan adopted in 1981 called for a 30% cut in energy use in the 1978 commercial and domestic building stock by 1988. As of the mid 1980s significant progress had been made towards this goal (Klingberg, 1987, 177).

Recent Swedish energy use projections (Table 1), as mediated through International Energy Agency assessments, (along with parallel Australian figures), indicate the current objectives.

This commitment to stabilise energy demand and to phase out nuclear power is momentous. It means a sharp break with past growth, including during the 1979 to 1986 period when nuclear power expanded from 9.1% to 23.7% of TPER. If carried out it would represent a major victory for the Swedish conservation movement over the forces for growth outlined above. Nuclear power holds enormous attractions for the Swedish productive system. Sweden happens to possess significant uranium reserves but little coal or oil. To a nation worried about energy security the nuclear industry offered an avenue towards energy independence. Moreover by the early 1970s the Swedes had developed their own technology and construction capacity. As a result the nuclear alternative had been embraced by the Social Democratic Government and the electric utilities.

Now it may be responded that this energy stabilisation commitment is not so impressive given the high per capita usage level reached by the Swedes in the 1970s, (as indicated in the
comparison with Australia in Table 1). Indeed by 1973 the Swedes were the highest per capita energy users in Western Europe (after Belgium) (Banks, 1986). But this objection misses the point. Sweden’s growth in energy use reflected the successful economic growth programme presided over by an unbroken series of Social Democratic Governments since 1932. The Social Democrat’s electoral appeal was precisely their ability to deliver continued advances in material affluence and an expanding social wage to their predominantly working class supporters. Swedish affluence (and high energy use) was a consequence, and not surprisingly the Social Democrats were firmly committed to further economic and energy growth. They did not look kindly at environmentalist threats to this, and as we will see, the impetus for policy change came from outside the Party and its Trade Union support base.

From the vantage point of 1973 the prospects of any environment movement breaking the prevailing pattern looked bleak. Not only had the system generated a level of affluence the Swedes were proud of, but it also operated in a fashion difficult for opposing interests to penetrate. The Social Democratic party, the unions and the employer organisations functioned in a centralised and cooperative style which appeared to offer few chances for alternative policies. It was a corporatist form of government in which capital accepted an unusually high degree of Government regulation and union influence, in return for the latter’s cooperation in stable industrial relations and technological innovation.

The Social Democrats (and the unions) had an added incentive to protect the viability of the corporate sector, because of Sweden’s dependence on external trade. Low cost energy availability had been an important ingredient in this (especially via cheap hydro power). The commitment to phase out nuclear energy threatened industry viability, especially since the Swedes have been reluctant to consider replacing nuclear with coal or hydro based power. Coal has been dually damned, firstly as the culprit for Sweden’s acid rain problem, and more recently because of Greenhouse worries. There are strict limits on hydro expansion, again because of environmentalists’ insistence that no more of the few remaining wild rivers be regulated.

The alternatives of conservation and biomass etc. are of uncertain capability and cost relative to nuclear. As a consequence there has been bitter criticism of the nuclear phase out policy – and not just from the utilities involved. For example, according to the President of the Royal Swedish Academy of Engineering Sciences, Professor Forsberg, the Academy has estimated that electricity prices will have to rise by 50-55%. ‘It is economic stupidity to phase out nuclear power stations ... if the nuclear power stations are phased out entirely, expanding the electricity output from hydro power could provide only another 20% of the power needed’ (Sweden Now, 3/1986, p.8). Likewise Swedish energy economist F E Banks writes that current policy will lead to Sweden’s economic ‘Waterloo’. ‘Scandinavian welfare states are not based on an innate and permanent altruism, but high productivity (resulting from high energy consumption) which creates a large surplus that can be used for public consumption, and a highly developed sense of justice. But take away the productivity (by taking away the energy), and a strong possibility exists that the sense of justice will be weakened’ (Banks, 1986).

We cannot be certain that the Swedes will actually carry out their nuclear phase-out as currently scheduled. When it comes to the crunch the economic concerns just cited may prevail. But given that these concerns are still widely held within elite circles our puzzle is, how did the environmentalists get as far as they have? What can we learn from the Swedish experience about the social processes involved?

The Swedish Environment Movement

The comfortable Swedish consensus on energy issues was shattered from outside the Social Democratic Government. The Swedes are justly famous for the rationality of their system – its capacity to patiently investigate problems via expert commissions which subsequently help shape compromise across the political spectrum. This procedure did not work in the nuclear power issue. Ideas for the abolition of nuclear power and replacing it with renewable energy came from a new political movement outside the Social Democratic party. This took its inspiration from life style ideals which challenged the very basis
of the growth orientation at the heart of the productive system. It was argued that a democratic, healthy, environment friendly, and especially a safe way of life required a break with the past preoccupation with economic growth.

The leaders of this movement derived from the Swedish intelligentsia, as did many of their followers. To understand why, we need to explore the social location of the intelligentsia. This will follow after a brief narrative of events.

Interest in 'green' issues had developed in Sweden toward the end of the 1960s. But it was not until 1973 that the official consensus on energy policy and its nuclear focus was seriously challenged. The issue was taken up by the leader of the Centre Party, Thorbjorn Falldin. He began by questioning the safety of Swedish nuclear reactors and later went on to passionately argue the anti nuclear case – including its alleged centralising, anti-democratic implications.

While Falldin seems to have been utterly genuine in this advocacy, the political situation of the Centre Party probably contributed too, since its electoral base lay amongst a declining rural population. During the 1960s it drew upon an urban protest vote, as issues of urban impersonality and pollution began to take hold. In seeking to cultivate this the Party had placed decentralisation, and environment protection at the top of its platform (Hadenius, 1988, 129). This proved effective, for the Party’s overall share of the vote increased from 9.4% in 1956 to 16.2% in 1968 to 25.1% in 1973 (Sahr, 1985, 19-20).

Falldin’s advocacy forced the nuclear issue onto the political agenda. It was the dominant issue by the 1976 election, and appears to have been the key factor in the Social Democrat’s loss of government, for the first time since 1932 (Korpi, 1983, 144-145). Falldin became Prime Minister of a coalition government, uniting the three opposition parties – the Liberals (a reformist middle class party), the conservatives (a right wing, business- oriented party), and the Centre Party. As a consequence the energy, and particularly the nuclear issue now held centre stage.

Falldin was unable to implement his, by this time, quite radical anti-nuclear position because of opposition from the Social Democrats and his coalition partners. But the debates helped alert and mobilise public interest. No party, including the Social Democrats could ignore it given the delicately poised nature of the balance between the parties, (with the Social Democrats just one or two points away from returning to power). The Swedish proportional representation system contributed too, because with the coalition split three ways it increased the leverage of the green vote. By the same token, the pro-nuclear parties could always mobilise a parliamentary majority against anti-nuclear proposals.

It was anxiety to get rid of a troublesome electoral issue which prompted the Social Democrats to support a referendum on the nuclear issue. This was held in the aftermath of the Three Mile Island accident. It provided the catalyst for a massive public anti-nuclear movement. Quite uncharacteristically, the Swedish political system was engulfed by a genuinely popular movement, mobilised largely outside the formal political parties. This was led by sections of the intelligentsia. The movement combined anti big business/big government themes with environmental concerns plus opposition to war and other evils associated with nuclear power. Significantly, the ‘Peoples Campaign against Nuclear Power’ made quite explicit its support for zero economic growth and alternative technology (Korpi, 1983, 148). Pragmatic worries about Swedish industry’s competitive position were almost swamped in this moral tide. As one Social Democratic official put it ‘every single person who can play a guitar in Sweden appears to be against nuclear power’ (Sahr, 1985, 112).

The outcome of the referendum was remarkable. Voters were given three alternatives, which as they were debated came to mean firstly, continued use of nuclear power (with only tentative commitment to phase it out), secondly, a clear cut through unspecified timing for its phasing out, and thirdly, a radical program to phase out the six reactors then in operation within 10 years and put in their place a program involving ‘continued and intensified savings of energy’ and ‘substantially increased investment in renewable sources of energy’ (Sahr, 1985, 190). The vote was 18.9% for the first option, 39.1% for the second, (the one endorsed by the Social Democrats), and 38.7% for the third. The anti-nuclear movement got within a whisker of winning the poll. This was enough to convince the Social Democrats that nuclear power had to go, whatever the worries of the technocrats. Since returning to power in 1982 the Social Democrats have set an agenda for the staged decommission-
ing of plants (cited earlier), and committed the Government to a vigorous conservation and renewable energy programme.

In 1981, in the aftermath of the referendum, when the Centre party decided to accept the continued use of nuclear power, a Green Party was organised. This ran unsuccessfully in the 1985 elections. To gain membership in the Swedish parliament a party must win at least 4% of the total vote. However, in the 1988 elections, the Green's won 5.5% of the vote, enough to give them 20 seats in the 349 member assembly. They were the first new party since the war to make this breakthrough. The implication is that the environmental issue has proved to have political staying power, (helped along recently by the Chernobyl disaster). While all the Swedish political parties now carefully address environmental questions, the presence of the Greens in parliament will help ensure their commitments are honoured.

Recent commentary on the Green’s personnel and platform indicates most derive from the intelligentsia, notably from the ranks of teachers and academics, and from persons outside the Social Democratic movement (Bergstrom, 1988, 9). Their economic programme rejects the hitherto sacrosanct Swedish commitment to growth. Their enthusiasm for self sufficiency and decentralisation suggest a rather romantic rural utopianism. They also oppose greater Swedish involvement in the international marketplace, including Swedish entry into the European Common Market.

Their current political platform reads as follows:

It is high time for Sweden to alter its economic course. People’s spiritual and physical wellbeing and a balanced natural environment must be given priority over material growth. The economy should be guided by democratic, ecological, cultural and social values. Creating the kind of society that best conserves resources requires democratic control of production. Private, public, cooperative, labour controlled and other business firms should be able to operate side by side. Enterprises should be based on traditional market mechanisms and on democratically determined economic plans (The Swedish Political Parties, 1989).

The Swedish Intelligentsia

I have argued that the only way the sustainability issue could have intruded so forcefully on the Swedish political agenda was via a social movement initiated outside the established political organisations. With the partial exception of the Centre Party and the Communist Party, by the 1970s these were locked into the celebrated Swedish ‘progress machine’. As indicated it was members of the intelligentsia who were largely responsible for the anti nuclear/environment movement. They acted as the political circuit breaker – exposing voters to issues which have challenged the very basis of the Swedish ‘machine’. The question therefore becomes, what is it about the intelligentsia’s social position which predisposes some of its members to such a challenge?

There do appear to be tensions in the social position of the intelligentsia. These seem endemic to both developing and developed societies – though the target or outlet for their tension varies from society to society. By intelligentsia I refer to those possessing educational credentials which are the basis for claims to professional positions in the occupational system. This definition excludes lower level technical or craft skills. The credentials in question are gained primarily from tertiary institutions. Because of this the degree holder can also make claims to high status by virtue of the cultural and intellectual achievements usually associated with their possession. So defined, in societies where there has been a rapid growth of higher education, the intelligentsia are often referred to as ‘new class’.

There is some justification for this designation because with the rapid rise in their numbers most will have achieved significant social mobility. Few will have been drawn from established business or propertied families. Also, because their status claims depend on their credentials and not on the possession of property or social pedigree, their position can be clearly differentiated from these elites (Gouldner, 1979, 6-7).

Nevertheless there is much dispute in the literature as to whether the ‘new class’ tag is appropriate. Smith, amongst others, would deny this on the grounds that there is such diversity within the intelligentsia, as between those working for private firms and those employed by the
State, that there is no common relation to the means of production (Smith, 1981, 111). This point is well taken, and any detailed analysis must take account of the differing social location of the scientific and scholarly, technological, administrative and cultural intelligentsia – to use Daniel Bell’s classification (Bell, 1980, 158). But we can identify some objectives which all have in common, including advancing the independence and autonomy of their particular professions, as articulated in the ideology of professionalism. Likewise, they have in common a desire to elevate the status due to those possessing higher educational credentials and the cultural advancement associated (relative to money or aristocratic lineage).

In all industrialised societies there has been a rapid expansion in the ranks of the tertiary educated, with Sweden being one of the most vigorous in opening up entry to universities and technical colleges. This educational expansion, where conducted – as in Sweden – in a liberal environment is also a potent socialising experience. It initiates new members into the critical, reformist culture of the intelligentsia.

The product is a potentially flammable mix of upwardly mobile students and graduates with high expectations relative to their social origins. The result can be status disparity, wherein many feel a disjunction between ‘their recent possession of culture and their corresponding lesser enjoyment of income, power and wealth’ (Gouldner, 1976, 63). This is likely to be most acutely felt amongst humanities graduates, who experience the most thorough socialisation into a critical intellectual culture, yet the least prospect of material reward.

These circumstances tend to generate a critical and competitive stance towards established elites, sometimes summed up as an ‘adversary orientation’. The critical focus can vary according to the nature of the dominant elite. The usual pattern has been for dissatisfied elements to support leftist critiques of the status quo – including moral denigration of the capitalist elite and its political representatives. This critique has the added attraction that it helps justify a greater role for ‘enlightened’ professionals to take over the running of society. Not surprisingly, professionals employed by, or aspiring to be employed by the state are amongst the most vigorous advocates of this.

In Sweden, the intelligentsia has played an important role since the 1930s in the development of the Social Democratic and union movements – certainly far more than in the parallel Australian institutions. But such has been the Social Democrats’ dominance of Swedish politics, and the extent of their cooperation with big business, that the Social Democratic elite themselves have come to be seen by many as part of the establishment. I believe this has contributed to recent intelligentsia interest in environmentalism as a counter elite ideology.

Environmentalism has a clear appeal to a critical intelligentsia, especially its youthful members, still on the fringes of secure professional employment. This has been evident in the USA, Canada, Britain, Germany and Australia, as well as Sweden. In its anti nuclear, anti economic growth, anti big technology guise it attracts because it offers an holistic critique of the capitalist system. This is one of the reasons the Swedish Communist Party, which still attracts around 6% of the vote in national elections has so vigourously adopted the environment cause. It also offers a ‘superior’ morality, hinging on reverence for the natural world, and an alternative ‘green’ lifestyle compatible with global survival. This lifestyle has particular appeal for youth since it enables them to turn their low income (and dependence on bikes, vegetarian food, patched jeans etc) from a status handicap into a claim to moral superiority relative to the material indulgence of the rich.

Another characteristic of the ‘green’ ideology is the idea of ‘getting control of one’s own life’, as with the enthusiasm for back to the earth, locally self sufficient communities using small scale technology. The appeal is analogous to that of professional autonomy. It can also be interpreted as another form of attack on the ‘big government/big business alliance’. In Sweden as elsewhere, the nuclear power industry has served as a highly emotive negative symbol of this because of its association with high technology and centralised political dominance.

This exploration of the social functions of the anti nuclear/environment movement is not meant to belittle its seriousness or to deny the validity of the case. But the Swedish record of nuclear safety, and the minute technical scrutiny the industry has been subject to, suggests that the intensity of the environmentalist’s attack is also deeply symbolic. Consistent with this, in the March 1980 referendum, the greatest support for the anti nuclear third line came from farmers (via their connection to the Centre
Party), from students and from women (Korpi, 1983, 150). Female support cut across all classes, but was particularly strong amongst public employees, implying great appeal amongst professional women employed in education and human services (Korpi, 1983, 150). Swedish women, especially the tertiary trained, have been in the vanguard of social change via feminism. One suspects that their critical orientation to the ‘system’ has extended to one of its key manifestations – nuclear power.

Post Materialism

There is another factor which many analysts feel has contributed to environmentalism. This is affluence itself. The argument, best known from the work of Inglehart, is that with affluence, and the satisfaction of basic needs of food, shelter and overall material security comes disinterest in further material acquisition.

Inglehart bases his psychological premises on Maslow’s needs hierarchy thesis, whereby as ‘lower order’ needs are satisfied individuals become more responsive to those of a ‘higher order’. These include self expression and aesthetic (or quality of life) interests. This ‘post materialist’ thesis has been plausibly documented for the generation emerging to adulthood during the buoyant 1960s.

This generation, particularly those exposed to tertiary education, much more commonly endorse attitudes critical of materialism and favourable to environmentalism than do their parents. Conversely, the subsequent generation, raised in the more economically troubled 1970s show less adherence to ‘post materialist’ values (Inglehart, 1981, 888).

I am sceptical of the underlying psychological theory, in that material ‘needs’ seem to be remarkably elastic. But Inglehart has modified his thesis to incorporate elements of ‘new class’ theory as outlined above. He now acknowledges the importance of socialisation into an adversary, intellectual culture (Inglehart, 1981, 881), and the links between ‘new class’ interests and the appeal of objectives like ‘more say on the job’, and ‘less impersonal society’ and ‘more say in Government’ (Inglehart, 1981, 895).

The two theories appear to fortify each other, in that both help explain the search for a new ‘anti system’ moral order and way of life. Environmentalism appeals because it offers aesthetic and life style attractions which to the critical eye, the crowded, noisy, polluted and ‘impersonal’ urban world cannot match.

Unfortunately, Inglehart’s data do not include Swedish material. However there is ample evidence to suggest that post materialist values have strong appeal to the Swedish intelligentsia. The Swedes are almost infamous for their breast beating, guilt ridden stance towards the Third World. Olaf Palme, their recently murdered former Prime Minister made commitment to Third World emancipation a central component of his political identity. Movements such as Erik Damman’s ‘The Future in our Hands’, with its explicit rejection of western affluence, have been very popular in Scandinavia.

This should not surprise, because Sweden is amongst the most affluent of western societies, and perhaps even more important, places more emphasis on employment and welfare security than any other capitalist nation. Young Swedes can criticise their community’s materialism with the knowledge that they are unlikely to face material insecurity themselves.

One implication of this is that if the critique of growth is to spread, it must be based on a foundation of affluence. Should Sweden unilaterally pursue expensive sustainable energy options then Swedish competitiveness could suffer, and with it the tax revenues financing the welfare state.

We should also be cautious in assuming environmentalism will hold its appeal as a lifestyle alternative. To the extent ‘control over one’s life’ and ‘doing one’s own thing’, has an element of fashion about it, its adherents may look to new fads. The individualistic component of the critique also raises doubts whether its adherents will accept the necessary constraints on individual freedom needed for economic stabilisation.

But with these qualifications, the longevity and vigour of the Swedish environment movement is encouraging. Some Swedish analysts postulate that the hitherto dominant left/right, class based axis of Swedish politics is being replaced by a new ‘technology-ecology’ dimension (Korpi, 1983, 145). I will consider this point in the course of discussing the response of the Swedish public to environmental advocacy.
The Public Response to Environmentalism

Environmentalists have certainly succeeded in putting energy/ecology issues on the agenda, and in establishing political organisations capable of mobilising public support—if it exists.

The experience so far in affluent societies is that while there may be broad public sympathy for particular environmental causes, their priority tends to be low. They all too easily get swamped by wages, taxes, employment and other living standard issues. This is consistent with post-materialist theory, since Inglehart's European survey data show that the majority of people in all age groups are still 'materialists' in that they place a high valuation on financial security and social order (Inglehart, 1981, 890).

Another problem is that although environmentalism has emerged as a new political dimension, it tends to get mixed up in the public's mind with other lifestyle issues, including feminism, sexual liberation, prison reform, peace movements and so on. Intelligentsia elements invariably dominate advocacy of these causes. Since most working and lower class citizens are conservative on these questions, to the extent they do become electorally significant, any public sympathy for the environmental cause may be lost in the antagonism stirred up by the other issues. This has been very effectively exploited in recent years by Ronald Reagan in the USA and Margaret Thatcher in Britain. They have been able to mobilise voters in opposition to the alleged threats to material progress and social order posed by 'trendy', 'long-haired' advocates of alternative lifestyle causes. Unfortunately environmentalism has been set back in the process.

However this has not yet happened in Sweden. One important reason is that Swedish support for causes like feminism and peace extends right across the social spectrum, such that there is less opportunity for division on these issues. Sweden is a remarkably secularised society. Organised Christianity is weak, and equally important, there is an absence of religious or ethnic divisions. The Catholic church, which elsewhere has been a potent force in mobilising citizens against liberal lifestyle advocacy, especially amongst ethnic minorities, is weakly represented in Sweden.

As regards the working class, this progressivism also derives from the socialising influence of the Social Democrats and the union movement. The unions have been active in educating their members, and with intelligentsia influence strong within leadership ranks, this ensures a sympathetic message on most lifestyle issues. In addition State ownership of the broadcast media means conservative forces have less avenues to direct a counter message towards ordinary people.

Public Attitudes to the Environment

Swedish opinion poll data indicate wide public support for environmental quality. When the issue first began to grab public attention in the late 1960s, the response was enthusiastic. For example, four fifths of the urban population, and 69% of all Swedes endorsed higher local taxes in the fight against pollution. 54% favoured a lower growth rate in the interests of saving the environment (Lundquist, 1980, 121). Similar strong support continued into the 1970s, including majority willingness to accept curbs on consumption in the interests of solving environmental problems (Himmelstrand, 1981, 168). Current news reports from Sweden continue to highlight public concern about environment problems, including Baltic Sea pollution, where algal blooms have apparently resulted in extensive fish deaths (Sweden Now, 5/1988, p.3). It appears that ordinary Swedes are amongst the most environmentally conscious people in the world. Why should this be?

The answer must be speculative since I have not found any studies specifically addressing the issue. We might start by asking whether Swedish affluence is such that Swedish workers have also crossed the threshold into 'post materialism'. The high level of worker job security, the solidaristic wage policy which has resulted in a compressed spread of income between professional, skilled and unskilled workers, the quality and availability of housing, the generous welfare benefits and other worker privileges (including five weeks holiday), all suggest a foundation for post-materialist values (Gilbert, 1986, 164-65).

Swedish workers do not seem to exhibit nearly as strongly the 'economistic' values so
prominent in the British working class, i.e. an instrumental, earnings oriented attitude to work, and relative disinterest in larger working class or welfare issues. Comparisons between Swedish and British workers show the former to be far more supportive of union activity in the cause of social justice than the latter (Scase, 1977, 137). Worries about the operation of multinational corporations, industrial waste, pollution etc. all seem quite pronounced amongst Swedish workers (Himmelstrand, et al. 1981, 169). These attitudes are all cultivated by the union movement, which as noted, sees its task as promoting a broader social consciousness amongst its members.

Another significant contributor to this social consciousness is the fact that Swedish workers can endorse schemes to tax polluters etc. with the comfort of knowing that their interests, if affected, will be looked after. The Swedish Government’s programmes for new skill training, relocation assistance, and if necessary, generous unemployment benefits to the casualties of industrial restructuring ensures this.

Finally, we should address the status of the Swedish citizen. Social democracy has advanced further in Sweden than anywhere else in the capitalist world, in regard to ensuring an equalitarian distribution of society’s rewards. This applies not only to material rewards, but also to the respect due to each citizen. Various measures have been taken to minimise social divisions between citizens. These include the establishment of a common education system in which all share the same curriculum and the same schools for the first nine years of schooling. There are practically no private schools in Sweden. Also, successive Social Democratic Governments have insisted that welfare benefits are allocated universalistically, i.e. they are generally not paid on a means tested basis, such as might create social divisions between welfare recipients and others.

The outcome is that Swedish citizens have good reason to feel that they are an integral part of their community and as a consequence seem to accept that they owe a reciprocal obligation for the community’s wellbeing. The Social Democrats have long promoted a community image consistent with this. This is their concept of the ‘people’s home’, or ‘folkhemmet’, which can be traced to their 1930s leader Per Albin Hansson. It means all Swedes should be treated as if they belong to a family, and like brothers and sisters all receive similar treatment (Korpi, 1978, 84).

Contrast this situation with that of a black worker in the USA, consigned to a dog eat dog struggle in the marketplace, with little union or state protection and constantly exposed to privatising consumerist messages from the commercial media. The resulting alienation from any sense of involvement or responsibility to the larger society is hardly surprising.

Finally, Swedes have the good fortune to live in a relatively sparsely populated land, in which fields, forests and lakes are still very much part of the landscape. All the Nordic nations share this and all seem to have incorporated something of it in their sense of identity as a people. This encourages a strong personal involvement in the environment issue. As a recent commentary put it, ‘Swedes are possibly the most nature-loving people in Europe, the result of a slow and relatively painless industrial revolution, and a population thinly spread over a large area, and for the most part, unspoiled land of lakes and forests’ (Sweden Now, 5/1988, p.3).

We might hypothesise that this love of nature is related to the extent of secularisation in Sweden. Perhaps the resulting religious vacuum has been filled by a reverence for nature. Nature becomes an ultimate end, good in and of itself.

The Swedish achievement: how fundamental?

The Swedish situation combines a number of elements supportive of the environmental case. The outcome by the end of the 1980s was a radical energy policy, involving a philosophical endorsement of sustainability and particular commitments to conservation and renewable energy sources.

But even in Sweden’s case we must not draw too sanguine a conclusion. The Swedish Government has not given up economic growth itself. Its plan is for further expansion in the consumption of goods and services, but on a more energy efficient basis. The Swedes appear capable of achieving this (for a time), in part because of their concurrent process of industrial restructuring, in which energy intensive ship-building, iron and steel and pulp industries are being rationalised in favour of high technology products like telecommunications equipment.
To a degree this just displaces the energy use problem to the newly industrialising countries like South Korea.

Nor should we exaggerate the political significance of the green movement. Though all Swedish parties have moved towards the green end of the technology/ ecology spectrum, Korpi’s conclusion is that it is still far from displacing the predominant left/right dimension. He writes that his research suggests ‘that the groups of voters for whom nuclear power and ecological questions are the decisive issue have remained relatively small’ (Korpi, 1983, 148). Since Korpi wrote this the Greens have achieved parliamentary representation. One could look at this positively or negatively. The movement will need far more than the 5.5% of the vote it has so far won if it is to become a dominant force in Swedish politics.

Implications for Australia

There is insufficient space to do more than sketch some Australian implications. The subject clearly deserves extended treatment, since as stated at the outset, the sustainability case needs to be framed in the light of the particular Australian social impediments and potentialities for a positive response.

As everywhere else, the key problem will be to shake the intellectual hegemony of the ideology of growth. The task will be even harder in Australia than Sweden because conservative forces are stronger and politically more united. The Swedish Social Democrats have long been blessed by the advantage of an opposition split three ways. In addition their proportional representation system has opened avenues within this split opposition to minority ideas, as with the Centre Party’s promotion of the anti nuclear cause.

On the left side of politics, as in Sweden, the fact that a union-based Social Democratic party wins near half the total vote is no guarantee growth will be challenged. Partly because of the seriousness of Australia’s external indebtedness problem, the Australian Labor Party has sought to make its capacity to manage economic growth its trade mark. Labor’s dramatic policy initiatives, (relative to the Whitlam era), towards economic deregulation and the internationalisation of the Australian economy, imply even less room for a response to sustainability options. Since Australia’s clear area of comparative advantage lies in its non-renewable mineral and energy resources, this strategy means these will be subject to greater exploitation.

It follows that it is unlikely Labor will respond with anything other than cosmetic measures when challenged by green advocacy. As in Sweden, a breakthrough, if it is to come, will depend on a green social movement originating outside the Labor Party, and outside the organisations dominating the Australian productive system.

The 1989 achievements of the Tasmanian greens indicates this is within the realm of the possible. There are suggestive parallels with Sweden here. Australia, being an affluent society, with a rapidly growing intelligentsia has also generated a critical ‘new class’ dissatisfied with the ‘system’ and responsive to the green alternative (Betts, 1988, ch3). As with Sweden, the environment movement attracts partly because if offers a moral alternative to the allegedly bloated ‘system’. We can therefore expect the green message to be articulated vigourously in Australia. But what are the prospects of a sympathetic public response?

There are favourable signs. Most Australians are responsive to the environmental message. Like Sweden, the link between the land and symbols of Australia’s national identity is important in generating an emotionally charged reaction. Moreover there is also a strong social democratic tradition of worker involvement in social issues. The Australian labor movement’s success in winning Government in 1910 on a platform of social reform embracing welfare, economic and cultural issues predates the Social Democratic achievement in Sweden. Unlike the US labor movement, the Australian Labor party and its union supporters have never limited their focus just to wages and conditions. This reform commitment has made its mark in helping shape a society in which ordinary workers do feel they are valued members of the community, with claims to equal status by virtue of this membership. Most do feel they have a stake in their country and therefore a responsibility for it.

The current ACTU leadership would like to increase the unions’ involvement in broad social issues. As can be seen with the recent Australia Reconstructed proposals it would dearly love to emulate the Swedish example. The willingness of individual unions to participate in ‘green
bans’ is a unique and encouraging feature of the movement. It shows quite tangibly that some workers do share a sense of responsibility for environmental quality.

Unfortunately the linkage between the wider social concerns of the union hierarchy and the membership is not nearly as strong as in Sweden. The proportion of the workforce enrolled in trade unions is also considerably smaller. Australian traditions of robust worker independence contribute here. This has its positive side in a healthy scepticism towards all authority — but in recent years this too, has turned rather sour in that the main avenue of independence seems to have become private material acquisition. This is sad, because in the formative years of the Australian labor movement at the turn of the 19th century, there was a strong ethos that workers did not need to emulate their bosses or the rich. Unlike their US counterparts at the time, Australian workers were relatively content to improve their lot as workers rather than seek to climb the social pyramid.

Another problem is that to the extent politics here do get reoriented towards social issues and away from the left/right class dimension, it is certain that the technology/ecology axis will be contaminated by other issues. Relative to Sweden, Australia is rent by religious, ethnic and locality divisions. Debates on issues of sexual liberation, race, abortion and so on are far more divisive, partly because minorities can be mobilised by diverse ethnic and religious organisations. The unwillingness of the Australian conservation movement to take an aggressive stance on population stabilisation, for fear of antagonising such minorities, is a case in point (Birrell, 1987a, 38).

Australians are also to be persuaded of the limits to Australia’s resources. Myths of open spaces, resource abundance and underpopulation still abound. For example, on the energy issue, most Australians believe there is no resource problem here, even with liquid fuels (Birrell, 1987b, 186). Evidence of the limits of Australia’s arable land, such that we have already passed the point where we could provide for our current liquid fuels from biomass sources has simply not registered (Birrell, 1987b 195).

I am inclined to the pessimistic conclusion that any radical move towards sustainability will require a reversal in the current trend towards the internationalisation of the Australian economy. If Governments continue to try to solve our debt crisis by welcoming even more foreign equity investment, and ever more industrial specialisation towards foreign markets, this will severely limit our capacity for national independence. This is essential if environmental issues are to be given priority. Should Australia become a pawn in the international economy, driven largely by the interests of the imperial powers, notably Japan and the USA, we will become locked into the quarry role.

Sweden, despite its dependence on foreign trade has nevertheless zealously protected its national independence. The level of foreign investment in Swedish manufacturing industries was only 8.1% as of 1985. There are strict limits to foreign takeovers, and in the movement of funds in and out of Sweden. The Swedes have insisted on military independence, having for years pursued a policy of armed neutrality. They still have the capacity to act as a relatively united, independent community, something rapidly withering away in Australia.

Though this implies a hard row for Australian environment leaders, it also points to their crucial significance if these processes are to be reversed. Their action, in ringing the environmental alarm bells, and in articulating practical and morally appealing alternative strategies is central if an Australian green movement is to act as the political circuit breaker. If the future looks ominous, the implication is that we must try harder.

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