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“BETWEEN REFORM AND REVOLUTION”

During the winter of 1971—1972, the Swedish television showed a series of programs on the historical development of the labor movement in Sweden. These programs utilized a central theme: the leaders of the Social Democratic party and the trade union movement had failed to recognize the radical nature of the working class and under the guise of “reformism” had led the labor movement into complete cooperation with the extant capitalist system. Implicit to this interpretation was the idea that despite over 40 years of Social Democratic governance contemporary Sweden was too “bourgeois” and that workers in particular had been turned into petty capitalists. The response to these shows was considerable especially from the established labor leaders who demanded equal time to defend the more traditional view that the history of the Swedish labor movement has been a series of small, progressive, but decisive steps taken within Swedish traditions that has over time led Sweden toward a fully democratic society.¹ This traditional view denies the possibility of, indeed the desirability of, a more revolutionary approach to the creation of a democratic socialistic state. One period where these two interpretations clashed forcefully was 1917—1918. 1917 has special significance for both groups. It appears for those who believe in the possibility of radical change as a golden and missed opportunity. In contrast, the labor establishment views 1917 as a major triumph of their reform policies. Was a revolution possible in 1917? Were the Social Democrats as successful in their

¹ The initial television programs were sent in the fall of 1971 under the title “From Socialism to Increased Equality.” The Social Democratic Party and the central trade union organization (LO) complained that the programs were biased and a full evening of discussion on the validity of the program’s interpretations occurred on television in November 1971. The former prime minister, Tage Erlander, was the chief spokesman for the traditional view. A wide spread discussion of the programs occurred in the newspapers and academic journals. For example see, *Historikeren og samfundet* (foredrag ved Nordisk fagkonferense for historisk metodelære på Kollekolle 6—10 Maj 1973), 1974.

reform politics of that year as the traditional view would have us believe?² Evidence exists to support each view as well as a number of alternative interpretations.

A number of spectacular events occurred in 1917: the split of the Social Democratic party in February; the Russian Revolution in March; increasing food shortages; a number of food riots and military mutinies; the collapse of two conservative governments; the elections of the Second Chamber; and the creation of a Liberal-Social Democratic coalition government in October that eventually established parliamentary democracy in Sweden. The first five factors are often cited as clear proof of the revolutionary nature of 1917, while the latter three are believed to demonstrate the strength and correctness of the reformist tradition. How then are we to interpret 1917? This essay questions both aforementioned interpretations and seeks to raise interest in further research on the period. Three key areas will be examined: the nature and timing of the split in the socialist ranks; the significance of the popular upheavals of the spring; and the election results. One initial observation must, however, be made: Sweden in 1917 remained a society controlled by "the forces of order".³

Indeed the conservative nature of institutional Sweden should be underscored. Despite a comparatively rapid industrialization after 1890 and the mass migration of peoples internally and overseas, the rural and small town components of Swedish society remained larger than the industrial and city sectors. More individuals continued to be engaged in agrarian related occupational activities than industrial ones. The bureaucratic infrastructure maintained both its strength and vitality even as great social and economic changes occurred. Under these circumstances the crisis *within* the conservative ranks should be an area for

² See Gerdner, Gunnar, *Det svenska regeringsproblemet*, (1946), p. 9 ff., for an example of this interpretation. Gerdner claimed that the united left made it "impossible" for Hammarskjöld to remain in office. Also, Andrén, Nils, *Från kungavälde till folkstyre*, 1965, p. 111.

³ Arno Mayer in his *Political Origins of New Diplomacy* (1959) developed a general analytical framework for the events of 1917 that was to be applicable to all European countries. He divided the political spectrum into two groups: "the forces of order," and "the forces of movement." The former group previously had dominated Europe and opposed changes in 1917 despite the continued futility of the war, while the latter group which was a mix of a wide variety of elements from moderate liberals to Bolsheviks supported at a minimum democratization and a peace without indemnities or annexation. General political conditions primarily as a result of the war led in 1917 to a sudden surge of "the forces of movement" led at one end by Woodrow Wilson and at the other by Lenin. Mayer showed how Wilson and Lenin competed for control over "the forces of movement" and how Wilson once successful against Lenin was overwhelmed by "the forces of order" at Versailles. Mayer's dichotomy has both advantages and disadvantages. At its best it captured a sense of common struggle (much as R. R. Palmer did in his *Age of Democratic Revolutions*) and permitted one to avoid party labels that are often confusing in this period. At its worst the division appeared somewhat simplistic especially in the second volume on Versailles which unlike *Origins* has received rather harsh reviews. For this essay the term "forces of order" represented those groups who hoped to maintain "gamla Sverige" in the face of various demands for change.

research as important as studies of "the forces of movement."⁴ The type of conservatism represented by the King and Queen, like their counterparts in Germany and Russia, had become antiquated, no longer capable of responding to the demands of modern Sweden. A new conservatism was in the making—a conservatism that in time would be more flexible and responsive to change than other forms of conservatism. The symbol of this type of conservative evolution was Arvid Lindman. In 1917 Lindman was the critical spokesman for "the forces of order." He watched the upheavals of 1917 with surprise, fear, and indecisiveness. In the end it would be he, not some left figure, who made the final decision that led to the establishment of the left government in October 1917.⁵ Yet the great television debates of the early seventies focused exclusively on the socialist related component of the development of the working class. Where stood Sweden between reform and revolution?

The split in the Social Democratic party in February came as no surprise. For the preceding four years a severe schism had existed within the party leadership. Since its founding in 1889, a reformist tradition dominated the party. Hjalmar Branting, university trained and son of a professor, surfaced as the party leader around 1900 and his influence increased throughout the first quarter of the century. The party grew rapidly in the period before the war. Recruits came not only from the working class but from other segments of society. Geographically differentiated traditions within Sweden made their impact on the fledgling party.⁶ As the party moved toward organizational maturity, it witnessed, and was plagued by, serious ideological disputes. These disputes were similar to those experienced by socialist parties elsewhere.⁷ The issues of most concern were those of extra parliamentary actions, cooperation with left liberal parties, growing military expenditures, and the internal organization of the socialist parties themselves. The reformist perspective as represented by Branting opposed extra parliamentary

⁴ There are too few studies on conservative elements in modern Swedish history despite the highly suggestive work by Sven Anders Söderpalm, *Storföretagarna och det demokratiska genombrottet*, 1969. A critical biography of Arvid Lindman and Ernst Trygger would be useful. Better coverage exists for the intellectual development of conservative elements. See, Torstendahl, Rolf, *Mellan Nykonservatism och Liberalism*, 1969.

⁵ A. Gottfried Billing Samling, Brev från Viktoria, Drottning Viktoria to Billing, October 12. 1917.

⁶ The geographical component of Sweden's modern political development needs more attention by historians than it has received. Distinctive geographical variations can be found in all the parties. The dependence of the Left Social Democrats on the area north of Uppland was such an example. Höglund, Zeth, *Från Branting till Lenin*, 1953, p. 137. Northern "free churchmen" Riksdag members often voted with the radical Social Democrats in the two year period before the division of the Social Democrats in 1917. Political scientists and other social scientists often focus on geographical components to political development, for example William M. Lafferty, *Economic Development and the Response of Labor in Scandinavia*, 1971.

⁷ Wigforss, Ernst, *Minnen*, II, (1965), p. 100; Edenman, Ragnar, *Socialdemokratiska riksdagsgruppen, 1903—1920*, p. 166.

actions except in extreme circumstances, favored cooperation with the liberals, desired a party structure with considerable influence resting in the hands of the leadership groups, and felt ambivalent on the issue of increased military expenditures. The radical perspective as it developed in Sweden opposed any cooperation with non-socialist elements, desired either severe cutbacks in military expenditures or total abolition of military service, believed that the use of extra-parliamentary tactics, particularly the general strike, would be necessary to establish a socialist state, and supported an institutional structure that permitted great differences of opinion within the party. After 1905, the visibility of the radical group grew perceptibly while at the same time the commitment to reformism hardened both for Branting and the trade union leadership.

The general strike in 1909 strengthened simultaneously the reformist and radical perceptions. The reformers thought that the failure of the general strike had demonstrated its futility, while the radicals noted the behavior of the liberals, erstwhile allies of the socialists, in support of the suppression of the strikers. By 1912, the opposition took an organized form, the Left Social Democratic club. Between 1912 and 1916 an open struggle between the reformists and the Left Social Democrats occurred within the party for leadership of the labor movement. Although ideological issues clearly were at stake, both factions tried to avoid a final confrontation. Instead each side referred to the other's tactical errors. The radicals complained:

It was the political tactics we didn't like. It meant that the very success of the Social Democrats (electorally) was the failure of socialism.⁸

The reformers argued that the opposition's criticisms had overreached bounds of party loyalty and they demanded a higher degree of party discipline particularly with regard to the party's parliamentary representatives.⁹

By 1914, the radicals had made considerable inroads. They dominated the party locals in Stockholm and Göteborg, controlled the northern locals, and under Zeth Höglund, commanded the Young Social Democrats at the expense of the second generation of reformists like Per Albin Hansson and Gustav Möller. Yet the radicals failed to penetrate the leadership of the trade union movement which provided the backbone of the party.¹⁰ The contrast between the organized political opposition within the party leadership and the failure of the radicals to provide themselves with a firm grass roots base can best be understood as a product of the particular character of the oppositional group themselves.

⁸ Höglund, *Från*, p. 39. As late as 1956 Höglund continued to deny the need for the split. Höglund, Zeth, *Revolutionernas år, 1917—1921*, (1956), pp. 21—22.

⁹ Edenman, pp. 129, 217 ff.

¹⁰ Bäckström, Knut, *Arbetarrörelsen i Sverige*, v. 2, (1971), p. 236, 244.

Throughout its existence the radical group was a diverse ideological lot. Although they felt a common hostility to the reformist tradition, they shared no common ideology. Carl Lindhagen, for example, the eldest member of the group and the only radical figure of stature comparable to Branting, had joined the Social Democrat only in 1909 and was in reality a radical liberal.¹¹ The younger leaders, Höglund, Fredrik Ström, Karl Kilbom, etc., were influenced, and in direct contact with, the revolutionary socialists on the continent, particularly Rosa Luxemborg, Karl Liebknecht, and later Lenin. An interesting contrast to this ideological diversity was the apparently relatively narrow social strata from which many radical leaders came. An analysis of parliamentary representatives of the reformist and radical groups suggests some important differences in the two groups:

*Table 1. Social Democratic Representatives to Riksdag 1917: Age, Occupational Distribution and Length of Service.*¹²

	Left Social Democrats	Reformist Social Democrats
Total sample	16	85
Average age	44	46
Average length of service:	4.3 (without Lindhagen 3.4)	5.8
Occupational distribution:		
workers	2	33
intellectuals*	7	20
white collar	7	8
small farmers	—	8
businessmen	—	7
upper class	—	5
farmers	—	4

* intellectuals=newspaper editors, writers, and teachers.

This data seems to confirm conclusions drawable from written sources: the radicals at least initially were primarily intellectual opponents to reformism. Additionally there is considerable evidence that part of the antagonisms was personal,

¹¹ Höglund, *Revolutionernas*, p. 29. Also, Höglund, Zeth, *Hjalmar Branting*, v. 1, (1928), pp. 445—6. Lindhagen had been an active liberal leader for over 12 years in the Riksdag before he became a socialist.

¹² Edénman, p. 132. The sample of radical leaders here is obviously too small to draw hard conclusions. The reformist population gives a good indication as to the diversity of that group. There is additionally the problems of drawing conclusions about representation of attitudes based on occupational categories and the lack of data on the family backgrounds of the representatives. Much remains to be learned about the relationship of the decision-making groups (and the process of decision making) and the grass roots organizations.

perhaps based on an inter-generational conflict between would-be heirs to Branting's position.¹³ Claims that the radicals more realistically represented working class attitudes than the reformers is hard to support at least in terms of occupational activities. The radicals themselves were anxious lest they be deprived of their institutional base, the regular party apparatus. Nonetheless the trials of the war pushed the radicals toward an open break with the reformers.

It was the war and its impact on international socialism that provided the impetus for the final split.¹⁴ Both reformers and radicals had drawn their ideological inspiration from abroad. Branting himself felt closest to Jean Jaures, and Jaures's violent death in August 1914 symbolically represented the failure of the Second International to prevent the war. Throughout the conflict the Second International attempted to revitalize itself. Despite these effort one failure followed another, most spectacular of which was the abortive Stockholm Conference in 1917. Only peace would provide the possibilities for cooperation between the European reformers; they were too strongly committed to nationalism to work together during the war. Branting's efforts concentrated on the terms of the peace and he quickly became a firm supporter of Woodrow Wilson. Wilson's peace program became the rallying cry of the Second International and the solution to the organization's immobility during the hostilities.¹⁵

The war's effect on the radicals was to push them into an open break with the Second International. In the fall of 1915 the European radicals met clandestinely in a small Swiss village, Zimmerwald, to discuss their options. The program adopted called for active steps to end the war, rejected nationalism and reaffirmed the international character of the socialist movement, and expressed opposition to cooperation with the bourgeoisie. The Swedish representatives, Höglund and Ture Nerman, found themselves to the left of the adopted program and supported Lenin's faction.¹⁶ Branting saw Zimmerwald as a direct threat to much that he held dear, domestically and internationally.¹⁷ The struggle in Sweden clearly mirrored a larger split in European socialism. Fredrik Ström, party secretary yet a radical, summarized the situation:

The struggle between left and right within socialism is not simply a Swedish occurrence

¹³ Höglund, *Från*, p. 81. Edenman, p. 167.

¹⁴ Ström, Fredrik, *I Stormig Tid*, (1942), p. 212.

¹⁵ Mayer's *Origins* exposed the difficulties of the Second International and Branting's role in trying to build reformist socialist support for Wilson. See Martin Grass, *Friedensaktivität und Neutralität*, (1975), for an analysis of the impact of the war on Scandinavian Social Democrats' attempts to maintain neutrality and to cooperate during the war.

¹⁶ Höglund, *Från*, pp. 178—9. A detailed study of the Swedish representatives' behavior at Zimmerwald can be found in Grass, pp. 196—203 ff. Grass saw Nerman's and Höglund's support of Lenin as primarily symbolic p. 199.

¹⁷ Höglund, *Branting*, v. 2, p. 80: *Revolutionernas*, p. 23. Kilbom, Karl, *Ur mitt livs äventyr*, (1953), p. 13.

but an international one. It comes driven by the world war, in nearly all the world's socialist parties.¹⁸

The conflict came to a head in Sweden in April-May 1916. Branting took the initiative. He used as an excuse a recently held radical dominated, anti-interventionist convention which the reformers had tried to prevent from being held. He insisted that the major party newspaper, *Social Demokraten*, support the party (reformist) program. The radical members of the editorial board including Höglund resigned in protest. In May the central committee of the party declared open war on the opposition. Ström quit his position as party secretary and Möller replaced him. The radicals had lost their key organizational position and the columns of the most important socialist newspaper. They founded their own organ, *Politiken*, and soon afterwards began to campaign to gain a majority of delegates to the next party congress due to meet in February 1917. The congress would make the final decision.

The outcome was never in doubt. The reformists had the prestige of Branting, control of the party apparatus, and the complete support of the trade union leadership. The method used to induce the split was quite ingenious; rather than simply declaring the radicals outside the party and thereby taking the responsibility publicly for a division in labor's ranks, a series of 'tactical' resolutions was raised—disciplinary questions, cooperation with the liberals, etc.—that would force the radicals either to leave the party voluntarily or swallow their principles. The advantage of this procedure for the reformers was that it gave the appearance that the radicals had split the party and refused to accept majority rule. The key votes were in the general range of 180 to 40, i.e. a comfortable margin of 140 votes for the reformist program.¹⁹ Almost immediately discussions began among the radicals to form a new party. The Left Social Democratic party was created in mid-May.

The question of timing with regard to the party split is important. Branting took the initiative in the spring of 1916 to force a confrontation. The confrontation culminated in the spring of 1917 with the formation of a new party. The evidence available does not permit the conclusion that there was a single determinant factor in Branting's decision. Branting could no longer avoid a conflict that had lost any last illusions of being "tactical" and was clearly ideological.²⁰

¹⁸ Edenman, p. 165.

¹⁹ See *Protocoll från Sveriges socialdemokratiska arbetarpartis tionde kongress*, February 12—20, 1917.

²⁰ Höglund, *Från*, p. 84, seems to agree. Despite the recent publication of essays on Branting, Jan Lindhagen, *Bilder av Branting*, (1975), our knowledge of Branting's role in the party remains weak. The Lindhagen anthology presents little that is new. Agne Gustavson's article, "Mellan 'Höger och Venster' Branting och Palmstierna", pp. 246—281, examines the way in which Branting responds to Palmstierna's continuous demands after 1912 to remove the radicals from the party.

Although it was not entirely clear how much Branting himself was bothered by the clamor on the left that culminated in the anti-interventionist congress, other groups both within the party and outside of it needed some sign that he was willing to deal forcefully with his rebellious left. Palmstierna had been demanding a house cleaning for years.²¹ Cooperation with the liberals which was after all a central thread in Branting's reformism had to be reinforced for the trials of the election year. The direct attack on the radicals could leave no doubt as to Branting's commitment. There also was the bonus that a confrontation in 1916 clearly favored the reformers. Branting's prestige was extremely high. The mood inside the socialist movement in general pointed leftward. It was better to root out the dissidents before they became too powerful, better too because the radicals would be forced to form their own institutions. Still Branting, no more than we, could feel certain that the deprivations sustained by the working class in 1916—1917 would not produce a radicalized labor movement sympathetic to the radical slogans of the opposition.

Unemployment and inflation continued to climb throughout the spring. The availability of food lessened. How could the left parties meet the needs of the suffering without playing into the hands of the Left Social Democrats? This question must have plagued Branting. The task was not made easier by the fact that it was the conservative elements that actually held power. They could hardly be relied upon to give up their positions voluntarily. Indeed, even if the left won the elections in 1917, progressives knew all too well that the conservatives had consistently rejected parliamentary government. Why should Branting expect them to change in the midst of the war? The danger for the reformers was that they might discover that the opposition was correct, that only through revolutionary means or at least radical reform could a democratic, socialist state be born.²² Their policy had to be to maintain a maximum pressure on the government and hope that when the crunch came the conservatives would give way. Initial pressures concerned the economic issues: the trade negotiations with the Entente and a "cost of living" congress. The March revolution in Russia provided the reformers with further fuel with which to press the conservatives. It served as a warning to those who refused to bend to the demands for change.

The events of the spring in Sweden, particularly the fall of the Hammarskjöld government and the demonstrations and hunger strikes in the military units, should be seen with the Russian revolution as a backdrop. Swedes were fascinated, thrilled, terrified. The newspapers were filled with stories from Russia. No other

²¹ See Palmstierna, Erik, *Orostitid 1917—1919*, (1953), p. 9, for example.

²² The dilemma of the Social Democrats can be seen clearly in their own discussions during the late spring. *Socialdemokratiska Riksdagsgruppen Protokoll, 1915—1917*, meeting of April 27, 1917. *Socialdemokratiska Partistyrelsens Protokoll, 1917—1919*, meeting of May 20, 1917, p. 21.

event, not the Bolshevik coup or the end of the war, received as much public attention. It began in the midst of a governmental crisis in Sweden. Hammarskjöld resigned on March 4 ostensibly because of a parliamentary defeat on a defense bill. Actually he hoped to use his "resignation" as a weapon to strengthen his own position within the government and to isolate the critics of his foreign policy. For three weeks the issue remained unresolved. During this time, the fresh winds from the east blew over Sweden.

The issue at the heart of the governmental crisis was Hammarskjöld's attitude on the trade treaty and the unwillingness of certain conservatives to support him. The left parties were caught completely by surprise by the news of his resignation. They remained throughout the crisis vocal outsiders. Although the left tried to see all sorts of "democratic" issues at stake, the conservatives wanted Hammarskjöld only to give some small indication that he recognized the seriousness of the economic problems. Arvid Lindman, the pivotal conservative, hoped Hammarskjöld would compromise and remain in office. Lindman did not want the responsibility of governance. Hammarskjöld overplayed his position and the Conservatives led by Lindman as Foreign Minister took over. The new government's self-proclaimed task was to solve the economic difficulties and to keep Sweden neutral. The left in turn called the shift in government a step toward parliamentarism, a non-party cabinet had been replaced by a partisan one.²³ Sometimes what one wants to be so becomes so—but often for very different reasons than were initially imagined.

The March revolution had created a psychological mood, a mood strengthened in Sweden by the change of governments. Change was in the air. Conservatives worried. Branting rushed off to Petrograd to welcome the revolution. Lenin stopped in Stockholm on his way to the Finland station. The Left Social Democrats were heartened by his encouragements. The world revolution was not far off. Each day brought new hope and new fears. Spontaneous rioting began in Sweden in mid-April; military mutinies soon followed. Was Sweden on the verge of its own revolution?

The March revolution had begun with food riots. A syndicalist inspired "food demonstration" in Västervik on April 16 signaled the beginning of a series of leaderless demonstrations and riots that would last until June 6. In the two week period April 16—28 relatively large scale activities were reported at 23 different localities including Stockholm and Malmö. On April 20 the first hunger strikes in the military began. On the same day a soldier and workers council was formed

²³ Both Wilhelm Carlgren, *Ministären Hammarskjöld. Tillkomst-Söndring-Fall*, (1967), and this author, *Sweden: The neutral victor*, (1972) have viewed Hammarskjöld's fall as a purely conservative issue related to the trade agreement with Great Britain. The parliamentary consequences of the change in governments are certainly debatable but Gerdner's interpretation of the pivotal role of the left is not supported by the extant evidence.

in Stockholm by the Young Social Democrats. Sadly our knowledge of the social composition of the participants is weak. Their political demands were not revolutionary but rather directed at relieving immediate concerns. The amount of social cleavage produced by the economic dislocations has not been measured and would be difficult to assess.²⁴ The September election returns suggest an increasing disaffection among the worse-off elements of Swedish society with all the established parties including both socialist parties.

As this wave of unrest passed over Sweden, political leaders faced a difficult choice. Branting wanted both to use the demonstrations for reformist programs and to make sure that they did not lead toward a revolutionary situation. He stated his position to the party's central committee:

The immediate question is how the working class can best use to its advantage the world's reaction even within our country. We should try to use the discontent that exist to serve democracy.²⁵

The government's response was not so hopeful. They feared that the annual May 1 festivities would be used to start a general revolution. Loyal military units were moved into Stockholm. A voluntary white guard formed with its headquarters at the officer training academy. These steps were premature, the reformists had no intention of letting the May 1 demonstrations get out of hand. They too feared that such a circumstance would benefit only the radicals.²⁶

The last week in April offered a curious spectacle. Both the Conservative and Social Democratic leaders feared revolutionary developments. Shadows rather than substance seemed to spark their fears. Each group took what they felt to be appropriate measures. Repression marked the governmental response, while the Social Democrats tried to insure that any serious discontent would be channeled toward a demand for democratic reform. Branting interpellated Swartz on the attitude of the Conservatives toward constitutional reform. It took six weeks for the Conservatives to respond, in the meanwhile the Left Social Democrats organized. How could the reformers block any potential radicalization of their supporters?

²⁴ Carl-Göran Andrae has made the most careful studies of the demonstrations. He has published two articles, "Från ord till handling" in *Från fattigdom till överflöd* (1973), edited by Steven Koblik, and "1917 års arbetarkommitté" in *Arkiv*, n. 7—8, 1975. Neither of these essays purports to be a complete study of the events of the spring. Indeed available evidence may be such that a complete account will prove extremely difficult. A less scholarly attempt but nonetheless valuable work has been done by Sigurd Klockare, *Svenska revolutionen, 1917—1918*, (1967).

²⁵ *Socialdemokratiska partistyrelsens protokoll, 1917—1919*, meeting of May 20, 1917. p. 21.

²⁶ *Socialdemokratiska riksdagsgruppen protokoll, 1915—1917*, meeting of April 27, 1917. *Riksdagens protokoll vid lagtima riksmötet 1917: Andra Kammaren*, v. 4, meetings of April 27 and 28, 1917, pp. 21—23, and 41—69.

In order to shore up the reformist control of the labor movement, a "worker's committee" was formed on May 7. The committee itself turned out not to be of great significance but its creation, the divisions within it, and its potential illustrated the temper of the times. Consisting of seven members—two members of the central committee (Thorsson and Rydén), two delegates from the party secretariat (Möller and Hansson), two trade union leaders (Lundqvist and Söderberg), and Branting as chairman, its few meetings were marked by eagerness on the part of Möller and Hansson for overt action while the labor leaders remained opposed to any direct policies. They saw the committee as a potential to be used only in case the situation got unruly.²⁷ What possibilities were there for such a development?

The riots/demonstrations of April/May indicated how hard pressed many Swedes were by the food shortages of 1916—1917. This type of lawlessness was quite rare for twentieth century Swedish history. Economic conditions and the lack of food put severe strains on a large part of the population. Rationing had been introduced in January but did not function effectively. People were hungry and frustrated yet it is difficult to find evidence that would suggest that a revolution was near at hand. Initially the discontent was undirected and apolitical.²⁸ Could the Left Social Democrats capture the unrest and put it to a political purpose?

The Left Social Democrats failed to capture the full force of the popular unrest. Their attempts to form a "Swedish union opposition" collapsed without any success.²⁹ The establishment of the party itself took too long for it to be able to take advantage of the situation. While the party represented a formidable section of the working class movement—16 members of parliament, the entire youth movement, and most of the effective ideologues, it proved difficult to accommodate all these diverse elements in a single party. Like the proverbial too many indian chiefs without enough braves, they floundered as they tried to develop a political program and organizational structure.³⁰ Unlike Russia where the Bolsheviks maintained the strictest discipline of the socialist factions, the radicals were less committed to a tight disciplined structure than the reformists. Without discipline, the possibilities of the Left Social Democrats to utilize the unrest effectively was minimal. The unrest of the lower classes remained by and large unguided. The reformists equally failed to guide this discontent into regular

²⁷ Andrae, *Arkiv*, p. 101. Also, Westerståhl, Jörgen, *Svensk fackföreningsrörelse*, 1945, pp. 227—228. Lundqvist's attitude to the call for radical action was "A general strike or revolution would give the people neither bread nor shorter working hours." p. 228.

²⁸ Andrae, "Från ord till handling," pp. 216—18. Syndicalists were the most active politicized element in the initial demonstrations. Klockare, pp. 18, 40 ff.

²⁹ Bäckström, p. 244.

³⁰ Höglund, *Branting*, v. 2, p. 148. Andrae, "Från ord till handling", p. 94.

political channels. The traditional historical view that the election results proved the success of the reformist position in capturing the disaffected needs reexamination.

The unruly spring reached its climax on June 5—6. On the fifth the government responded negatively to Branting's interpellation on constitutional reform. Demonstrations held simultaneously with the Riksdag meeting were dispersed with excessive zeal by the police. The socialists were shocked by the police action and many wanted to take immediate action to end 'police brutality.' On the sixth working class groups in Stockholm led by the Left Social Democrats held open meetings to discuss the possibility of an immediate general strike. Branting and the trade union leaders rejected the idea and nothing came to pass.³¹ Strangely the sixth marked the end of public demonstrations. Were the roots of the popular discontent so shallow that a show of force, the negative attitudes of trade union leaders, and the coming of summer could rip them out? Had the public accepted the cry of the Social Democrats and the Liberals to use the ballot box and became absorbed in the election campaign itself? Or was discontent unfulfilled or directed in other forms?

Traditionally the election has been seen as a defeat for the Conservatives and a victory for the Social Democrats that in turn produced a new government.³² This conclusion was drawn from the change in the parties's strengths in the Second Chamber:

Table 2. *Distribution of Parliamentary Seats: Second Chamber: Fall 1914 & 1917.*

	1914	1917
Conservatives	86	59 (—27)
Liberals	57	62 (5)
Social Democrats	71*	86 (15)
Left Social Democrats	15*	11 (— 4)
Farmer parties	—	12 (12)

* Figure after split 1917.

³¹ Casparsson, Ragnar, *Vårt fattiga liv*, (1961), pp. 304—6. Casparsson as well as Andrae, *Arkiv*, p. 106, suggested that the opposition of the trade union leaders to a general strike killed the idea. The trade union leadership's position fit with their previous policies. The meakness of the radicals *if the situation was as emotionalized as some authors suggest* (Casparsson for example) can not be explained so easily. Andrae stated that "Left leaders didn't dare start their own action . . ." Why not? Lenin already in April had concluded that the radicals could not lead a revolution: "Swedes are an organized and educated people, but you are pacifists. Even you on the left are bourgeois pacifists." Ström, p. 199. My own explanation would underscore the sense of isolation the radicals knew they would find themselves if they tried to lead some form of direct action. Höglund had just been released from prison after serving over a year's term for his political activity in the spring of 1916. There could be little doubt about the result of some new adventure.

³² Thulstrup, Åke, *När demokratin bröt igenom*, (1937), pp. 180—1, for example.

Certainly in terms of the change in the distribution of seats the moderate left (Liberals and Social Democrats) achieved a stunning victory. Their opponents on both ends of the political spectrum lost over 25 % of their seats. But are these figures the only ones that are germane to an analysis of the election returns? How representative were the seats of the actual voting figures? Who was eligible to vote? What level of participation occurred? How did the proportional representation system effect the seat allocation? All these questions should be answered before one makes an interpretation of the relationship between the "election results" and the relative standing of political parties in the fall of 1917.

Suffrage was quite restricted. 25 % of the population—males over 24—theoretically had the right to vote. Actually only 80 % of these citizens were declared "eligible" in 1917.³³ The right to vote could be lost for a variety of reasons primarily the failure to pay taxes; and an indirect, multiple voting system was still extant for the First Chamber. Of course the lowest social classes were hardest pressed by these rules. 68.5 % of social group III were eligible in 1917, corresponding figures for social groups II and I were 91.5 % and 83.4. Social group II's high eligibility was due to the inclusion of the land holding farmers in their midst who were nearly all eligible and who were the second largest voting group numerically after the "workers"—251,238 and 295,323 respectively. By comparison only 61.3 % of the "workers" and 48.7 % of the sailors were eligible. Additionally the ineligibility of city voters had increased since the last election. Clearly the suffrage was not fully democratic, but most males could vote. Did they?

1917 was supposed to be an election of great significance. Participation by eligible voters was slightly lower than in the fall 1914 elections that occurred in the shadow of the outbreak of the Great War (65.8 % 1917 as to 66.2 % 1914). The difference was hardly significant but the fall 1914 elections were not normally referred to as particularly volatile. The "courtyard crisis" election of the spring 1914 registered 69.9 % participation. Even in those groups that presumably were

³³ All of the following election statistics come from the official statistical studies of the elections of the spring and fall 1914 and the fall 1917: Kungliga Statistiska Centralbyrån, *Riksdagsmannavalen åren 1912—1913 samt Hösten 1914*, *Riksdagsmannavalen våren 1914*, *Riksdagsmannavalen åren 1915—1917*. These statistics offer a rich resource for any scholar but also provide a number of problems. The grouping of voters by occupation and social class—at all levels, precinct to national—presents a particularly important but risk filled section. There is the initial problem of definition of occupations—for example the category "workers." There is also the problem of putting all of one occupational category in a single social group. Also one could question the placing of a specific occupation within a particular social group. Finally, there exists a long standing debate about the ability of scholars to correlate voting by occupational groups with voting by parties. Aware of these problems, I have tried to resist the temptation to draw too sweeping conclusions with these measurements and have combined them where possible with other forms of data. The statistical information and contemporary observations tend to coincide on a wide range of issues.

most concerned with the 'forward march of socialism', the courtyard crisis and its repercussions enflamed the Swedish electorate more than the events of 1917. Yet the two elections that preceded and followed those of 1914—1911 had 10 % less participation, which suggests that all three crisis elections were comparatively intense. Voting figures were high, how were they dispersed?

Table 3. Election returns 1914 and 1917: regular elections Second Chamber.

	1914	1917
Conservatives	267,124	182,070 (—85,054)
Liberals	196,493	202,936 (6,443)
Social Democrats	266,133	228,777 (—37,356)
Left Social Democrats	—	59,243 (59,243)
Farmers parties	—	61,921 (61,921)

The actual returns give quite a different picture of the election than the mandate distribution. The Conservative defeat no longer appeared so overwhelming when it was clear that most Conservative voters had moved directly over to two conservative farmers parties. The three conservative parties often listed the same candidates in electoral districts and together showed a loss of 23,133 votes from 1914 (9 % decrease). Nor did the Social Democratic gains seem so large on closer inspection. The actual drop in votes was of course due to the existence of the Left Social Democrats; the socialists together had increased by 21,887 votes (8 %). The important question must be in what proportion was the increase divided between the two groups? No definitive answer can be given but some statistical approximations can be made.

If we make an assumption that each Social Democratic seat in 1914 represents approximately the same number of votes, we find that 3094 votes were needed for each seat. Using this figure an estimate of the relative strengths for the fall 1914 election can be made: Social Democrats, 219,674; Left Social Democrats, 46,410. Therefore the gains registered in 1917 would be 9103 for the Social Democrats and 12833 by the Left Social Democrats. The Social Democratic "landslide" in 1917 no longer appeared so remarkable. What explained the difference between the large seat increase of the Social Democrats and their relatively meager vote increase?

The particular nature of the proportional representation system played a major role in the moderate Left victory in 1917. If there had existed a proportional representation system similar to the one that now exists in Sweden, the following results would be:

	Pure PR	Actual	Difference
Conservatives	56	59	3
Liberals	63	62	-1
Social Democrats	71	86	15
Left Social Democrats	18	11	-7
Farmers parties	19	12	-7

The total gain of the Social Democrats would have disappeared! The three new parties paid heavily for each seat while the Social Democrats utilized the system to their advantage: average votes per seat—Social Democrats, 2660; Conservatives, 3086; Liberals, 3273; Left Social Democrats, 5385; and the Farmers, 5160. It cost the Left Social Democrats over twice as many votes for each seat as it did for the Social Democrats. Part of this variation rested with the distributional character by region of the vote itself. The new parties established large pluralities and tended to be regionally isolated. In many other areas they offered an established party's candidate as their own—for example the Left Social Democrat had no independent office seekers in Skåne. Undoubtedly part of the difference was based on the effectiveness of the established party's campaign organization. It is generally recognized that new parties do not utilize proportional representation systems as effectively as established ones. The Left Social Democrats also miscalculated badly, in Stockholm for example.

Prior to the election the Left Social Democrats held 4 seats from Stockholm. These seats were held by powerful figures within the movement. All lost in 1917. Höglund, one of the defeated, conceded that his party had done much worse in Stockholm than they had expected. He blamed poor tactics and an attitude among "young workers" who were hostile to any contact with parliamentary ideas and who refused to vote.³⁴ It should be noted however that the party's votes in the two Stockholm districts (1619 and 1939) were similar to vote totals that in northern districts produced seats.

Perhaps most interesting of all would be the question of which groups voted for which parties and in particular who were the swing voters and the non voters. Again no totally reliable data exists but scholarly research, contemporary observations, and precinct returns suggest some common themes. None of the political parties except of course the farmer parties was totally tied to a single class. Previous research has shown that in rural areas social group I had no positive correlation with a single party countrywide.³⁵ Jörgen Weibull concluded

³⁴ Höglund, *Revolutionernas*, p. 57.

³⁵ See Jörgen Weibull's unpublished article, "Yrke och Parti," for a more complete analysis of this problem. Using election statistics from the 1923 election, John Olsson came to the same conclusion. "De politiska partifördelningar inom de olika sociala klasserna i Sverige," *Statsvetenskaplig tidskrift*, 1923.

that in the elections of 1911—14 the Social Democrats ran stronger among middle class, white collar workers than in the “workers” category. The Social Democrats were also weak among the agricultural workers.³⁶ Contemporary observers believed that there had been a major swing of Conservative voters to the Social Democrats—a swing that Fredrik Ström ascribed to fear:

A large part of the bourgeoisie voted for Branting’s party because of their fear that the revolutionary fire was on the march.³⁷

Leif Lewin’s controversial book *The Swedish Electorate* also emphasized this swing.³⁸ Ludvig Widell’s report in the official statistical survey of the election noted: the greatest decline of participation by eligible voters in social group I (about 5 %); participation highest in larger city precincts especially Stockholm, Malmö, Norrköping, and Linköping; the greatest growth for the Social Democrats occurred in the cities; the largest decline registered for the three conservative parties was also in urban areas; the Liberals grew almost exclusively in rural districts; and there occurred distinctive regional patterns of voting.³⁹

A summary of all of this data gives us a more sophisticated view of the election of 1917 although certainly not a complete one. A simple glance at the mandate division presents a highly inaccurate picture—that of a great Social Democratic victory. With the Swartz-Lindman government and the remaining conservative elements in Swedish society explicitly rejecting parliamentarism, it seems likely that they too would have taken a closer look at the election returns to judge the mood of the country. Tension obviously was high among all elements of society but it probably had been even higher in 1914. The election results indicated that the great, and critical, changes, that occurred in 1917 were on the right, not the left. Here one finds great movement, confusion, and a certain degree of fear. The spectacular division of the socialists in February, the actual seat division after the election, the collapse of the Conservative government thereafter, the future

³⁶ Weibull, p. 66. Gösta Carlsson in his “Partiförskjutningar som tillväxtprocesser,” *Statsvetenskaplig Tidskrift*, 1963, concludes that the growth of Social Democratic voters 1911—1940 exceeds the pace of the growth of the working class, pp. 183, 210.

³⁷ Ström, p. 246.

³⁸ Lewin, Leif, et al, *The Swedish Electorate*, (1972), p. 239. This work has received extensive critical comment both in Sweden and the United States. Questions of a definitional and methodological character raised in these reviews have led to some doubt about the value of the work. Most of the comments made by Lewin on the 1917 election are supported by other sources. He too underscored the diversity of Social Democratic recruitment: 46 % non-industrial workers. p. 169. The most questionable statistic in the study from the viewpoint of 1917 is the comment that the Left Social Democrats took almost exclusively industrial worker’s votes. p. 280.

³⁹ *Riksdagsmannavalen åren 1915—1917*, p. 52. It should be of some interest to note that Widell’s article written in 1918 made the same type of calculations about the nature of the election results that I have in this essay.

domination of the reformists in Swedish politics, and scholarly interests that led naturally to studies of "progressive" changes have blinded us to this reality. Two new conservative parties established themselves during this year—larger together than the Left Social Democrats. The only significant increase of non-voters came from social group I. There was a critical flow of conservative voters to the Social Democrats—voters who were probably upper class, city dwellers. Of the 28,320 votes gained by the three left parties (Liberals—6443, Social Democrats—9103, and Left Social Democrats—12833), about half (13,378) can be explained as additional "workers" votes.⁴⁰ The movement of social group I and II voters to both socialist parties should not seem so remarkable. Reformist socialist strategy sought precisely to legitimize the Social Democrats for these groups. The Left Social Democrats were regionally isolated and in all likelihood received support from rural elements in northern Sweden that previously had been liberal. The election showed the disarray of the conservative forces, not any fundamental change in Swedish politics. This confusion reached its height in the election post-mortem that the Conservative leaders held.

The decision by the Conservative to retire in early October was in many ways one of the most fascinating issues of the period. Again we know far too little of these decisions. The Conservatives virtually to a man refused to recognise publicly the idea of parliamentarianism. Their letters echo the same unwillingness.⁴¹ Yet the crucial figures, Arvid Lindman, Carl Swartz, and Crown Prince Gustav Adolf, argued that some change had to occur as a result of *recent events*.⁴² What they meant by recent events is debatable but it did not mean solely the election results. More generally their feeling was directed toward the mood of the period particularly the sense these men had that their world, "gamla Sverige," was gone, and their desire to maintain unity on a commitment to neutrality during the remainder of the war. After the Luxburg affair (September 10—20) the Conservatives no longer claimed that they alone were credible as representatives for Swedish neutrality. A purely Conservative government was no longer acceptable to the Conservative leadership. When attempts at an all party coalition failed, the way was paved for the establishment of the left government of Eden-Branting-Hellner.

Was 1917 a revolutionary opportunity missed? Hardly, neither the disturbances

⁴⁰ In actual fact it seems highly unlikely that all the additional "workers" voted for the two socialist parties.

⁴¹ Prime Minister Carl Swartz kept rather extensive daily notes on the governmental crisis in late September and early October. Lindman too wrote a number of memorandi. Swartz was the only leading Conservative who was willing to join a proposed committee for constitutional change. Koblik, *Sweden*, pp. 133—148.

⁴² I have elsewhere suggested that it was a combination of occurrences in September not the least of which was the Luxburg affair, that provided the impetus for the governmental change. See *Ibid.* pp. 150—52. Also, Thede, Palm, "Joachim Åkermans anteckningar om ministären Swartz," *Historisk Tidskrift*, I, (1968), pp. 38—58.

of the spring nor the relative electoral successes of the Left Social Democrats indicated any real likelihood of a revolutionary upheaval. There was no organization both capable of and interested in leading a revolution. Lenin told the radicals in April, 1917, "Branting is too smart for you . . ." ⁴³ Was 1917 the great triumph of reformism? Not in the sense that the moderate left controlled the pace of developments or deliberately manipulated developments for their own use. Despite the large parliamentary gains, the moderate left's total vote decreased by 4 % in 1917. Conservatives held power in 1917 as they had in the past. Faced with a crisis of unknown yet broad proportions, should they respond by rejecting as they had done in 1914 the demands for political reform? The causes and issues of 1917 repeated those of 1914. Lindman could not bring himself to support again a policy of confrontation. Forced to choose he stepped aside. In that sense Branting had been right; gradual, progressive change proved possible.

⁴³ Ström, p. 200. The comment was made with regard to the organizational issue between the reformists and the radicals. Lenin for obvious reasons was more sympathetic toward Branting's attitude on organizational issues than he was impressed by the radical call for increased freedom.