

Minorities in Sweden

Large-scale immigration has been an important factor in social and economic change in Sweden. The strong welfare state has been an important instrument of economic and social incorporation for immigrants – but the consequences have not always been as intended. Today, this approach is under review and significant changes are taking place. This text was revised in 2013 by Rebecca Williamson and Stephen Castles

Until 1945 Sweden was a fairly homogeneous country, with only a small indigenous minority: the Sami or Lapps (about 20,000 people today). From 1945 to 1972, labour migration was encouraged; family reunion and refugee entries continued afterwards. By 2011, Sweden had 1.4 million foreign-born residents – almost 15 per cent of a population of 9.4 million. While in 2011 almost one fifth of the foreign born were from other Scandinavian countries, others came from the Former Yugoslavia, Europe (Germany and Poland), the Middle East (mainly Iraq and Iran), Asia, Africa and Latin America (Statistics Sweden, 2012). Just under half were foreign citizens, while over 800,000 had acquired Swedish citizenship, which represents 59 per cent of the foreign born. Swedish-born people with both parents foreign-born numbered 413,000. Altogether 1.8 million people (19 per cent of Sweden's population) are immigrants or their children (Statistics Sweden, 2010).

The Swedish approach to immigration differed from other European countries: the aim was to include immigrants within the social-democratic model of a full-employment economy and a strong welfare state (Ålund and Schierup, 1991; Schierup *et al.*, 2006). Family reunion and easy access to citizenship would contribute to permanent integration. The waiting period for naturalization is two years for Scandinavians, four years for refugees and five years for everybody else, while children born to foreign resident parents can obtain Swedish citizenship upon application (Migrationsverket, 2012). In 1975, Parliament set out an immigrant policy designed to combine *equality* (access to the same living standards as Swedes) with *freedom of choice* (allowing immigrants to decide whether to maintain their own cultural identities or to assume Swedish identity). Special measures included language courses, translator and interpreter services, multi-lingual information services, grants to immigrant organizations and special consultative bodies. Children of immigrants

were to receive pre-school and school instruction in their own language (Hammar, 1985).

From 1975, foreign residents were allowed to participate in local and regional elections. It was planned to extend such rights to national elections, but it proved impossible to get the parliamentary majority required for a change in the Constitution. A study of voting participation and social inclusion of immigrants found that acquisition of citizenship makes a real difference to the probability of voting. Immigrants who naturalize are in general far more likely to vote than those who do not' (Bevelander and Pendakur, 2011). Anti-discrimination laws were introduced in 1986 and updated in 2003, with a new single, comprehensive Anti-discrimination law enacted in 2009 (OECD, 2010: 242).

Yet this inclusive policy could not prevent trends towards socio-economic marginalization. Non-Scandinavians were mainly employed as manual workers in manufacturing and services. They found it hard to gain access to white-collar jobs in both public and private sectors. Public housing was open to immigrants, but was allocated in such a way that it led to concentration in certain neighbourhoods. This facilitated the maintenance of languages and cultures, but also increased isolation from the Swedish population. In some city neighbourhoods, non-Europeans make up 75 per cent of the population - among the highest rates of ethnic concentration in Europe.

When Sweden was struck by recession and financial crisis in the early 1990s, economic restructuring tended to eliminate the types of jobs held by immigrants. By 1993 overall unemployment reached 8 per cent, but the rate for foreigners was 21 per cent and for non-Europeans 37 per cent. Economic recovery often meant jobless growth: by 2010, the unemployment rate for foreign men was 15.9 per cent and for foreign women 16.7 per cent – more than double the rate for nationals (OECD, 2012: 275). Many foreigners withdrew from the employed workforce and labour force participation declined. Discouraged jobseekers ended up living off welfare payments, working in the small but expanding informal sector or setting up marginal businesses. However, from about 2010 seasonal labour recruitment increased, especially of Thai workers for fruit-harvesting, while labour migration from India and China also grew (OECD, 2012: 274).

The economic changes coincided with growing public concern. The increase in asylum-seeker entries led to anti-immigrant campaigns by extreme-right groups. Racist violence became quite widespread, including arson and bomb attacks on refugee centres. The government introduced a series of measures to restrict the entry of asylum seekers. In 1992 the inflow - particularly from former Yugoslavia - peaked at 84,000, but had declined to 11,200 by 1992. Yet by 2010 asylum seeker numbers had again risen to 32,000, driven by an increase in Serbian applicants (OECD, 2012). Violent extremist groups lost support, but Swedish opinion became much more sceptical about multicultural policies. Despite this, in comparison with other European nations and the US, public opinion about cultural diversity and immigration in Sweden is relatively positive (Fetzer, 2011).

In 1997, parliament discussed a proposition on 'Sweden, the future and diversity', which argued that the previous immigrant policy had led to economic inequality, the isolation of immigrant communities and the emergence of a new social problem. In 1998, a Swedish Integration Board was set up. The new policy emphasised integration and equal opportunities rather than cultural maintenance. A 'metropolitan policy' was also introduced, to reduce ethnic segregation and to help achieve equal living conditions in cities. The Centre-Right Government elected in 2006 decided to abolish the Integration Board, and a range of social services important to immigrants were closed down or reduced.

In 2008, Sweden overhauled its immigration system, shifting to a demand-driven system. New rules for labour immigration gave unprecedented power to employers to recruit labour from third countries, shifting responsibility away from the government (OECD, 2010: 242). Stricter rules for family member migration were introduced in 2010. The policy changes coincided with a renewed shift towards anti-immigrant sentiment. In 2010 the centre-right government was re-elected. A far-right party, the Swedish Democrats, campaigning on an anti-immigration theme, won 6 per cent of the vote and seats in the Swedish parliament for the first time, despite widespread reactions against the party and ostracism by other politics parties (BBC, 2010; Daley, 2011).

Swedish integration policies have also been overhauled, with significant reform enacted in December 2010. The 'Law on the Establishment of Certain Newly Incoming Immigrants' was intended to introduce newly arrived migrants into the

labour market and Swedish life more quickly and efficiently, and to better utilise migrants' skills. Coordinated by one central agency, the new introduction policy includes stronger incentives to work and participate in introduction activities, but unlike other Western European countries, migrant participation remains voluntary.

Despite questions over the effectiveness of the policies for combating issues of social exclusion, Sweden has consistently ranked highly in terms of its integration models. In a study by the Migration Policy Group in 2006, Sweden's integration policies scored more points than any other of the 28 countries surveyed (Wiesbrock, 2011: 51). Despite the changes in immigration and integration policies, some commentators argue that the emphasis on diversity and multiculturalism, and the underlying principles of equal rights, obligations and opportunities remain intact (Wiesbrock, 2011: 50). Others have warned that the changes to integration and immigration policies in Sweden represent a shift towards 'neoliberal' policy and fail to acknowledge structural barriers (Jørgensen, 2011)

In 2009 civil unrest in metropolitan areas with high concentrations of migrants highlighted ongoing tensions and issues of social exclusion in these neighbourhoods (Schierup and Ålund, 2011). The Government responded with an integration strategy focusing on 'employment-related issues and policy goals that address general needs rather than those of a specific population' (OECD, 2012: 274). Despite this, over a week of riots in several Swedish cities in May 2013 showed the continuing feelings of isolation and disadvantage of many immigrants (Orange, 2013).

References

- Ålund, A. and Schierup, C.-U. (1991) *Paradoxes of Multiculturalism: Essays on Swedish Society* (Aldershot: Avebury).
- BBC (2010) 'Protests against Swedish far-right election gains'. (London: BBC News)
- Bevelander, P. and Pendakur, R. (2011) 'Voting and Social Inclusion in Sweden'. *International Migration*, 49:4, 67-92.
- Daley, S. (2011) Feb 26, 2011 'Swedes Begin to Question Liberal Migration Tenets' *New York Times*.
http://www.nytimes.com/2011/02/27/world/europe/27sweden.html?_r=3&hp=&pagewanted=print
- Fetzer, J.S. (2011) *The Evolution of Public Attitudes toward Immigration in Europe and the United States, 2000-2010*. <http://cadmus.eui.eu/handle/1814/17840>.
- Hammar, T. (1985) 'Sweden' in Hammar, T. (ed.) *European Immigration Policy: a Comparative Study*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press) pp. 17-49.

- Jørgensen, M.B. (2011) 'Understanding the Research–Policy Nexus in Denmark and Sweden: The Field of Migration and Integration'. *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 13:1, 93-109.
- Migrationsverket (2012) *Applying for Citizenship: Time period in Sweden* http://www.migrationsverket.se/info/499_en.html, accessed 31 January 2012,
- OECD (2010) *International Migration Outlook: SOPEMI 2010* (Paris: Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development).
- OECD (2012) *International Migration Outlook: 2012* Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (Paris: Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development).
- Orange, R. (2013) 26 May 'Swedish riots spark surprise and anger' *The Observer*. (London). www.guardian.co.uk/world/2013/may/25/sweden-europe-news
- Schierup, C.-U. and Ålund, A. (2011) 'The end of Swedish exceptionalism? Citizenship, neoliberalism and the politics of exclusion'. *Race and Class*, 53:1, 45-64.
- Schierup, C.-U., Hansen, P. and Castles, S. (2006) *Migration, Citizenship and the European Welfare State: A European Dilemma* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- Statistics Sweden (2010) 'Summary of Population Statistics 1960 - 2010'
- Statistics Sweden (2012) 'Foreign-born persons in Sweden by country of birth, age and sex. Year 2000-2011'
- Wiesbrock, A. (2011) 'The Integration of Immigrants in Sweden: a Model for the European Union?'. *International Migration*, 49:4, 48-66.