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Learning from Secular Sweden

Everyone loves Sweden. If only everywhere was more like Sweden. It's reported to be the best place to have a baby, the best place to grow old and the best place to visit (after Scotland). Chief Medical Officers love Sweden- just read Professor Dame Sally Davies' report of October 2013. Swedes have long lives, few teenage mothers, and very few child deaths.

Academics love Sweden. Here is a country that is "good without God." It has placed its faith in Science, with advanced social attitudes and progressive public policies. Enlightened Swedes left old superstitions like marriage behind decades ago, so scientists who look at environmental risk factors for health outcomes don't need to ask awkward questions. A quick headcount of adults at home will do.

Politicians love Sweden because academics love Sweden, and politicians love academics. Academics save politicians the trouble of having to work out what they actually believe in.

Living in Sweden certainly has its advantages. It is a wealthy country for a start. They didn't have to rebuild after spending the Second World War as a neutral state, and they have always had lower Infant Mortality Rates than everyone else. Until recently they had the highest levels of public spending in the OECD.

So where is this going? Well that is the question. The headline numbers for health and social wellbeing have been so good for Sweden and their Nordic neighbours that we have been drawn down a particular path in social policy which is quite radical but, in historical terms, unproven. Our children are to be saved from smacking but subjected to round the clock professional child care. It is almost surprising that the children haven't been asked which punishment they might prefer.

But all is not well in the state of Sweden. Income inequality, which was always impressively low, has been rising steadily since 1990 and is now approaching the OECD average. This is partly due to increased numbers of single parent households. Reading the Swedish Public Health Report of 2012, it can be seen that the trends in Swedish health are the same as ours, even if the headline figures look better. The incidence of breast cancer is rising and female mortality from lung cancer has also been increasing. Childhood obesity and ADHD have appeared from nowhere. School children are having more sex and acquiring more sexually transmitted diseases. Hospital admissions for mental illness among young adults, especially young women, are steadily rising and the health service is under pressure. It all sounds quite familiar.

In the last year or two, young Swedes have started making the news. Police are shocked by their attitudes to sexual violence for example, and many boys seem to have been reading "Mein Kampf" rather than doing their Maths homework. It was hardly noted in the UK, while we bemoaned the stagnation of the British performance in the Pisa education rankings, that Sweden had suffered the biggest slide through the charts of any OECD country. Concerns in the Swedish press were quieted by calming voices- "The girls did ok. Our boys are just a bit distractible. They teach us to think here, not to pass exams."

Recently, the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights published “Violence against women: an EU-wide survey.” It reports that a third of EU women have been subjected to physical or sexual violence. While it was recognised in the media that women in countries with good PR on equality issues like Sweden, Finland and Denmark had experienced the highest rates of violence, this was considered an artefact. We are told that liberated women talk more openly about these things!

Inevitably, the violence was characterised in the press as husband against wife, but this badly misrepresents the data, and the relationship of violence to family structure. In fact there is a statistical relationship between the rates of violence against women in EU states and the rates of birth to unmarried parents going back decades. The higher the rate of birth outside marriage has been in the 28 EU states, the higher is the reported rate of violence against women and girls over the age of fifteen years (births data from eurostat). The link with recent rates of violence is closest for births in 1990. It looks like married parents might have a positive influence on behaviour after all.

Middle-aged Swedish policemen, doctors and journalists can easily recall happier times, but they might well be reluctant to reflect on what is going on. It seems that the effects of a social revolution which began in the sixties and seventies are being exposed in a new generation- the first in Europe whose grandparents were not married.

It is still enticing for politicians, encouraged by the professors, to follow the Swedes further down their road to Utopia, but we must open our eyes to the dangers. Births to Swedish teenagers are few because they have so many abortions. Sweden has an abortion rate double that of the Finns for example, so the arrival of the next generation has been delayed. Shortly however, a third generation will be born outside marriage, which is why we might suspect that our Chief Medical Officers are kept awake at night by a secret fear; and their sleep is disturbed by a recurring nightmare. They know that one day soon they might waken up to find not only that female life expectancy has peaked, but that Sweden’s Infant Mortality Rate is higher than ours.