

Nationalist Challenges – the Dilemmas of Nordic Welfare Policies

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“The Social Democratic governments created a collective understanding telling that ‘there are no problems’ and that ‘we are best in the world.’ Thereby they prevented the Centre-Left in drawing up a big comprehensive project which could fill the common people with enthusiasm.” (The vice-president of the Danish Trade Union Federation, LO, Tine Auvig-Huggenberger in a comment about the present state of the Danish Social Democratic Party. *Politiken* September 7 2002)

Throughout the twentieth century nationalism in its many variants has constituted a major challenge to the progress and consolidation of the socialist labour movements. Scores of books and articles by politicians, political theorists as well as academics have been written about the intricate relationships between socialism and nationalism, but the theme is remarkably absent in the general studies of the history of socialism. The problematic covers a wide range of historical situations from the traumatic break down of the Second International in 1914 under the stress of the great war until the last decade where we have witnessed the emergence in Western Europe of new populist/nationalist movements and political parties which harvest most of their electoral support from the Socialist/Social Democratic labour movements.

In this essay I intend to trace the historical roots of contemporary dilemmas for the Nordic Social Democratic movements by making some reflections on the ways the three Scandinavian (the Danish, the Norwegian, and the Swedish) Social Democratic parties have handled the problems of nation(alism), political power and welfare politics in two different epochs: the inter-war decades and the second half of the 20th century.¹ My aim is to find some historical explanations for today’s pressures on social democracy, in particular in Norway and Denmark, and to invite a discussion about the apparent ability of the Swedish Social Democratic Party to resist populist and nationalist attacks. Further I intend to discuss what, if anything, is “new” about these movements and parties? Can they, to some extent, be explained through an analysis of reformist socialism in the second half of the 20th century? Can the Social Democratic difficulties in finding adequate reactions to the new movements be explained by a strategic vacuum in the old labour movements?

From ‘Class’ to ‘People’ – the Scandinavian Social Democratic Parties in the Inter-war Period

The outbreak of World War One left the international socialist movement with the traumatic experience of the break down not only of an organisation (The Second International) but also the principle of solidarity across the national borders. Moreover, the permanent division within the labour movement made the feeling of socialist unity illusory. In the mental universe of pre-war

¹ I owe many of my insights and viewpoints to discussions among participants in the research project “The Nordic Model – a Historical Reappraisal” which during the last five years has been the framework for welfare state historians from all the Nordic countries. Some preliminary results of this project can be found in *Scandinavian Journal of History*, Vol. 26, No. 3, 2002: The Nordic Welfare States 1900-2000.

socialists internationalism and socialism were inextricably linked. Socialism would be the result of a parallel, if not simultaneous, development in larger regions of the world. For the socialist in the small countries like the Nordic, durable socialist transformations were unthinkable if they did not happen in the major European countries as well.

During the Great War and the early post war years a reversion of this kind of strategic thinking took place. The nation-state assumed the role of primary framework for social(ist) transformations. Not in the sense of Stalin's 'Socialism in one country', but as a recognition of the fact that the (democratic) nation-state for years, perhaps decades, ahead would remain the inescapable base for political and social practice. Internationalism was replaced by international non-committal co-ordination.²

In the Second International the relation between the national and the international had been regarded as complementary. Hardly anybody imagined that the nations would be eliminated, but they and the con-comitant nationalism were historical products, and they were gradually being undermined by the in-built tendency of capitalism to expand without respect for national borders. Socialist transformation would follow the same tendency. The task of the Social Democratic parties in the various countries was to prepare the road and accelerate the progress towards socialism.

The 1920s were a decade of strategic re-orientations within the Nordic Social Democratic parties. Just as complementarity between the national and the international was replaced by the primacy of the nation-state, the view of capitalism changed gradually in the 1920s, at least among the analysts of the Scandinavian labour movements.³ The vision of a capitalist economy which would break down because of inner contradictions was abandoned. The socialist future should not be constructed on the ruins of a bankrupt capitalism but on a flourishing and expansive economy. The ideological changes coincided with a shift in power structure in the Nordic countries. The dominant forces in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the Conservative and Liberal parties based upon the urban bourgeoisie and the rural propertied classes, gradually yielded to the labour movements. In the 1920s the Social Democrats in all three countries held government positions, albeit for rather short periods of time, and even if they left no significant traces they experienced the burdens of representing the 'national interest', not least the national economic interest which included respect for and even help to the propertied classes and restraints on the demands of the working class as they were formulated by the trade unions.

The increasing power of the Social Democrats was built on at least three pillars: Firstly the growing number of working class voters and the smoothly working labour markets based upon high levels of organisation and national collective agreements between trade unions and employers' associations; secondly, on the successful appeal to broader social groups, in particular the lower middle classes, the retailers, the master artisans, the rural smallholders and the rapidly growing number of white collar employees in both the private and the public sectors; thirdly, on the ability to establish class compromises at the national level between primarily workers and farmers/smallholders and, at times, even with the capitalist employers.

Consequently, in the economic and political turmoil of the 1930s the Nordic Social Democrats appeared as symbols of political stability and social harmony. In spite of the serious economic blows hit by the world economic crisis, they were able to carry through comprehensive social

² Internationalism, of course, was not totally eliminated. In the interwar period we can observe many examples of practical international solidarity, fi. towards political refugees and in the Spanish civil war.

³ For a short period of time the Norwegian socialist party is an exception to the general trend in Scandinavia, since a majority opted for membership of the Communist International. From the mid-1920s, however, the party began a reconsideration of this position, and from around 1930 the Norwegians followed the line of the two other Scandinavian parties.

reforms, and in spite of pressures from the political extremes on the Right and Left they managed to secure the institutions and functions of parliamentary democracy.

In this process the labour movements became more and more integrated in the national community. Or rather, they actively integrated themselves and, to a certain extent, conquered the national platform as their home-ground. Symbolically, this change manifested itself in the Social Democrats' adoption of the concept of the "people" (*folket* – is a common Nordic term), now calling themselves class and people's parties. The terms varied a bit. In Sweden the term *folkhem* (the people's home) became the household word for the Social Democratic vision of the good society. The Danish and Norwegian parties called their programmes *Danmark for Folket* and *Norge for Folket* (Denmark/ Norway for the people).

In Nordic historical tradition the concept *Folk* is deeply rooted and associated with unambiguously positive connotations. It had been part of the name of the strong popular movements in the 19th century promoting the religious and cultural and political independence of the common people. By adopting the concept *Folk* the Social Democrats positioned themselves as the true heirs to a long national tradition for popular participation. Moreover, they anticipated the attempts of the various fascist/nazist movements and parties to usurp the concept as they had succeeded in doing elsewhere in Europe. For instance, it caused no problems to translate the German terms *Volk*, *völkisch*, *Volksgemeinschaft* into the Nordic languages, and the Social Democrats had to find a delicate balance between their own terminology and the concepts used by the local right wing movements.

When, for example, the Danish Social Democratic prime minister Thorvald Stauning concluded his draft for the programme *Danmark for Folket* with the following appeal: "...Now it is time. Not for fantastic experiments and anarchy, not for threats and attempts to destroy a well organised society, but it is time to create the community of the people (*folkefællesskab*) that turns its back to lawlessness and put the construction of the whole society as the goal of the future", he came very close to introducing the conceptual universe of the contemporary extreme Right.⁴

However, in the course of this struggle over power and language the Nordic Social Democrats succeeded in establishing an identification between State, Nation, People - and Social Democracy at a much earlier time than most other socialist parties in Europe. One might even argue that they were the only Social Democratic movements which fulfilled this ideal. Among the working class and the lower middle class the Nordic Social Democrats shaped an understanding of their nations as democratic shelters against the evils surrounding them. It was even an accomplishment which was recognised by broader social groups. However, it was never accepted by their opponents to the extreme Right or Left. Nevertheless, the feeling had an enormous impact on several generations of Social Democrats and many people outside the labour movement. As a dominant train of thought and self-understanding it played an essential role during the following half century.

Parallel to the growing national self-consciousness the feeling of *Norden* as a specific region spread both internally in *Norden* and outside the region. Marquis Childs presented the Idea of a Nordic *Sonderweg* in *Sweden: The Middle Way* (1936) and the prominent Danish Social Democrat Hartvig Frisch in his book about the fascist/nazist and bolshevik regimes wrote an influential 'Nordic Foreword' stressing the ability of the Nordic Social Democrats to conquer and transform the national state and most importantly preserve the political democracy in contrast to most other international socialist movements.⁵ Symbolically the new Committee for Co-operation between the Nordic Social Democratic labour movements (SAMAK) was established in the early thirties.

⁴ Claus Bryld: *Det danske socialdemokrati og revisionismen*. Vol. 2: *Fra 1914 til 1930'erne*, 1976, p. 190 (my translation).

⁵ Marquis Childs: *Sweden: The Middle Way*, New Haven 1936; Hartvig Frisch: *Pest over Europa*, Copenhagen 1933.

National welfare, Nordic Model and European Challenges

Undoubtedly, the imagined unity of nation, people and Social Democracy helped to mobilise electoral successes and to place the Social Democratic parties in almost hegemonic positions in the decades after World War Two. But, on the other hand, it backfired when they were confronted with the new political and economical constellations created by the Cold War, the liberalisation of the international markets, and the attempts to create international associations or unions like the EEC. Once again Sweden because of its insistence on neutrality and its late entrance into the EEC/EU had less difficulty in handling the national self-understanding than their Norwegian and Danish brothers and sisters.

In the first decade after World War Two the former kind of Social Democratic nationalism seemed to be relegated from the legitimate public discourse, only to surface when the Nordic countries were confronted with the triple challenges of the Cold War, the creation of full scale welfare systems and political and economic internationalisation.

All European socialist parties found it difficult to find their stand on the new communities.⁶ But nowhere did the European question cause such big internal problems as they did within and between the Nordic countries. Moreover the problems were closely associated with the parallel development of the welfare states.

The build up of the Nordic welfare states in the so called Golden Age took place within the framework of the nation state, and, to a certain degree, the various national solutions were determined by historical precedents/path dependence. Nevertheless, there were so many common features that they justify the concept “the Nordic Model”.⁷ It has been argued that the foundation of the whole model was the specific Nordic organisation of the labour market where the industrial relations were controlled autonomously by the trade union federations and the employers’ associations in a smooth co-operation with the state-power. Not only did this ‘voluntary corporatism’ guarantee relatively peaceful industrial relations. It was also an important factor in promoting the economic growth which was regarded as a vital precondition for the expansion of welfare.

The basic elements of the Nordic welfare model were universalism, a strong state/public sector, tax financing of welfare arrangements, the individual as the basic recipient of welfare benefits and services, and empowerment of the women. With some national variations these elements have been attributed to the strong Social Democratic colour of the welfare reforms.⁸ To a great extent, however, the reforms were accepted, if not supported, by the centre parties, the liberals and the conservatives. Thus, in a paradoxical way, they helped to confirm the Social Democrats in their belief that they acted on behalf of the whole nation.

Gradually, the idea that the Nordic countries were realizing ‘the good society’, if not the best, in shape of the welfare systems became an integrated part, if not the dominant element in the national identities. Probably, one can find similar ideas in many other countries. But in the Nordic countries it seems to have determined the whole scheme of things to a much higher degree than

⁶ Donald Sassoon: *One Hundred Years of Socialism*, 1996, pp. 228 seq.

⁷ The actual word ‘model’ came into common use rather late. In academic circles it was introduced in the 1960s, but it was not until the 1980s that it became a household word in the political debates. It has been argued that the word ‘model’ was adopted at a point of time when the Nordic countries began to implement great transformations which threatened to dismantle central elements in the ‘model’, cf. Bo Stråht: *Den nordiska modellen. Historisk bakgrund och hur talet om en nordisk modell uppstod*. In: *Nordisk Tidskrift* 1993, 1, pp. 49-61.

⁸ For a general introduction to the Nordic Model see *Scandinavian Journal of History*, vol. 26, No. 3, 2001: *The Nordic Welfare States 1900-2000*. Pauli Kettunen, in particular, in his article about Finland discusses the importance of the labour market organisation.

anywhere else. Simultaneously, national and Nordic identities presented themselves as complementary. The idea of the good nation was closely interwoven with an imagined community among the Nordic nations.

Moreover, the community was more than imagination. It was embodied in several institutions, most prominently in the Nordic Council (1952) and the Nordic Council of Ministers (1971) both of which promoted an acceleration of the practical and ideological co-operation which had taken place at all level and in all areas of society since the last decades of the 19th century. In the heat of the Cold War, the Nordic countries presented themselves as utopias of peaceful co-operation and progress.⁹

At the centre of this development stood the Social Democratic labour movements. They were the dynamic forces behind the creation of the welfare states and the international prominence. But it was also the Social Democrats who had to confront the problems caused by the close interconnection of welfare and national identity, and it was nowhere more acute than in the debates about the relations to the European communities. From the early 1960s until today, in Norway and Denmark in particular, the welfare state and the labour relations model have been highly important battlefields for both supporters and opponents of the countries' entry into the EEC and the later on the further integration within the European Union.¹⁰ Both within the trade union movements and the Social Democratic parties the feelings and arguments for and against Europe have been extremely strong.

In the first phases, they shared a concern about the conservative (and catholic) cultures in most of the continental states. Cultural arguments have played an important and perhaps increasing role in the debates. From both sides, however, the arguments have dealt with the ability of the national/Nordic 'model' to survive in a larger international/supranational context. All of the prominent advocates of entry into the EEC like the former Danish prime minister Jens Otto Krag, his Norwegian colleague Trygve Bratteli and later on Poul Nyrup Rasmussen and Gro Harlem Brundtland argued that the economic growth necessary for the preservation and expansion of the welfare state could only be secured within a larger community. In the long run a united (western) Europe might become a framework for the realisation of post war Social Democratic strategies. In their most lyrical formulations they referred to the traditions for international solidarity within the international Socialist movement arguing that precisely the European communities represented a modern version of this historical tradition. Krag, in particular, never hesitated in his attempts to convince his fellow Social Democrats that the European Community was essentially a progressive project. He found no signs of danger for the national/Nordic model. Welfare strategy and European integration were two sides of the same coin. At the same time, many pro-European advocates demonstrated the high degree of Nordic self-confidence arguing that the Nordic model would not only survive but expand at least into some parts of Europe. The traditions for political, social and cultural democracy were the contributions which the Nordic countries could offer Europe.

The trade unions leadership – and membership – were more sceptical. They feared the consequences for the deep rooted autonomous labour market and the tripartite model. In a Europe dominated by Germany and France the system of independent national collective agreements would be exposed to heavy pressures. An alternative in the shape of transnational collective agreements seemed highly unlikely in the foreseeable future. Behind their scepticism lay also a fear of a single free labour market which would enable unlimited immigration of underpaid southern European

⁹ From the 1950s to the 1970s the Nordic countries were regarded by many Third World countries as examples of harmonious modernisation worthy of imitation.

¹⁰ The following pages are based upon Hans Branner and Morten Kelstrup (eds.): *Denmark's Policy towards Europe after 1945*, Odensen 2000, especially the article 'A Nordic Alternative to Europe? The Interdependence of Denmark's Nordic and European Policies' by Johnny Laursen and Torsten Boring Olesen.

labour power. The president of the Danish Trade Union Federation (LO) Eiler Jensen envisaged the risk of “a flood of wage labourers from less developed countries”. The weak Socialist International and the fragmented international trade union federations would not be able to prevent such threats to the national working classes.¹¹ In the end, however, most of the trade union leadership in connection with all five Danish referendums about Europe have recommended the (ever deeper) European integration.

To no great effect. In large numbers the rank and file, across trades and private or public employment, have rejected the European communities. In this matter they tended to listen much more to the arguments of the non-social democratic left, the small but very effective Danish Communist Party and the bigger Socialist People’s Party than to the recommendations of their party and trade union leadership. The opposition of the two parties touched all imaginable chords. At the root lay the principle of national self-determination. This idea, they claimed, was an old socialist standpoint which would be violated just in order to obtain some doubtful economic advantages. Threats to the independence of the Danish state implied dangers for the survival of the Nation and the People. Further, they voiced concern for the Danish/Nordic labour market, the national culture and, first and foremost, for the Nordic democratic traditions and the Nordic welfare state. They turned the arguments about international solidarity upside down, claiming that only outside the EEC would the Danish socialists be able to demonstrate solidarity with the oppressed people and continue the aid to Third World countries. The EEC represented a capitalist and conservative obstacle to true socialist internationalism. Any loss of national independence would reduce the possibilities of international solidarity.¹²

To the socialist opposition – within and outside the Social Democratic party - some kind of Nordic co-operation represented an alternative much more in harmony with both the historical traditions of the labour movement and the socialist goals for the future. Thus, when a plan for a Nordic economic community (the NORDEK) was announced in 1968 all socialist parties and groups seized the opportunity to establish an (socialist) alternative to the EEC. Could the NORDEK be realised they were willing to disregard the arguments about national independence. A Nordic union would constitute a platform for the common goals of all socialist parties: parliamentary democracy with deep historical roots and traditions for a high degree of popular participation, social equality and welfare. The Nordic nations were outstanding examples of homogeneity in terms of ethnicity, religion and culture, and a community among the Nordic countries would be free of the political and cultural conflicts which could be observed within the EEC. The firm and overwhelming popular support for the NORDEK tended to overlook the fact that the Nordic countries would still remain capitalist, even if the Social Democratic ‘politics against markets’ had been rather successful.

In the end, the NORDEK-plan collapsed, thus confirming the historical fact that Nordic co-operation functions extremely well at a day-to-day level but it stops before bigger projects like a defence union, a customs union or an economic union materialize.

The collapse of the NORDEK-plan left a divided *Norden*. As the only country, Denmark joined the EEC in 1973 after a referendum with a clear majority of yes-votes. The Norwegian refused membership in a referendum, Sweden and Finland for different reasons did not even consider joining. (The two countries joined in 1995). The referendums in Norway and Denmark in 1972 revealed deep divisions within the labour movements. While the party leadership and most of the trade union leaders recommended a yes-vote the party members and the trade union rank and file were split in two halves. The non-Social Democratic left were unanimously against EEC-

¹¹ Sebastian Lang-Jensen: The Left and European Integration, unpublished paper, University of Copenhagen 2002.

¹² Søren Hein Rasmussen: Modstanden og det national. In: *Den jyske historiker*, no. 93, September 2001, pp. 96-112.

membership. The divisions among the traditional working class and the rapidly growing groups of public employees became extremely visible.

The interesting thing is that the divisions and arguments have been reproduced during the last three decades and through several referendums in both Denmark and Norway.

The Welfare State – a Social Democratic Utopia?

The defence of the welfare state had become the common denominator for both supporters and opponents of the European integration, even if their arguments and conclusions differed radically. Behind their backs, however, unintended consequences of the welfare policies began to undermine some of the essential values which during most of the 20th century had placed the labour movement in a central position in the Nordic countries. Solidarity had been the key concept in the building of the comprehensive network of organisations covering all areas of society and the lives of the working people from the cradle to the grave. Solidarity was absolutely necessary for the trade union movements in their struggle for recognition as an equal partner in the industrial relations. Solidarity was the solid foundation in the parties' struggle for power and their exertion of power once they had obtained government positions.

The state oriented and universalistic welfare policy, however, tended to transfer the solidarity from the class organisations to the state. The Nordic welfare systems were intended to cover all citizens, irrespective of class and social status, and solidarity became a concept which covered the whole people and which was mediated through the state/the public sector. From the 1970s and especially from the 1980s the influence of the trade unions was gradually reduced in favour of the parties and the state. The impressive organisational network of working class culture began to disintegrate. It did not happen as a result of a frontal attack as it was the case in Britain. It was rather the effect of an internal weakening of the traditional class consciousness.

One other effect of the welfare policy helped to promote this process. The aim of the welfare reforms had been to guarantee social security and freedom of material need for the individual. To a large extent this aim was fulfilled in the golden age of welfare. Even during the serious economic crises in the 1970s, '80s and early '90s very few people suffered serious material hardships. The Social Democrats had envisaged that the general social security would ultimately lead to an overall social solidarity. Contrary to these expectations, the individual social security and feeling of freedom turned into an individualism which exposed large numbers of working people to the new liberalistic siren songs from the Liberals and Conservatives.

The Social Democratic response to these tendencies was twofold. On the one hand they placed themselves in a position where they defended the welfare state as their achievement. They and no others had created 'the good society' for everyone and established the foundations for the strong national cohesion characterising the Nordic societies. The parties to the Right threatened this very cohesion by appealing to individualism, egoism and competition, and the rights of the stronger.

On the other hand, the Social Democrats in their programmes for new welfare strategies tried to integrate the new individualism by emphasizing the responsibility of the individual to the further development of the welfare state. If the community should act with solidarity towards the those in distress. They, on their side, should demonstrate their willingness to perform their duties as full members of society.

In fact, in the 1990s, the Social Democrats to a great extent succeeded in harmonising these two lines of the welfare policies. They represented the guarantee of both the continuation of the national welfare and 'modernisation' and adaptation to the new economy, to the new technologies, and to 'globalisation'. With some justice, the Social Democrats could claim that they had injected a new dynamism into the Nordic countries and, at the same time, preserved and extended the basic social security.

‘Work’ was the key concept which tied together the welfare reforms of the 1990s. Activation of the unemployed, the disabled and all those on welfare who were able to work became the mantra during the successful economic expansion of the 1990s. But the Social Democrats, as well as other forces on the political left, found it extremely difficult to formulate platforms for welfare which pointed towards radically new goals for the labour movement. It seemed as if the ability to formulate visions for the 21st century had been exhausted. And below the temporary social democratic successes lay some landmines that detonated around the turn of the century.

A Poisonous Cocktail

There were two important problems which the relative successful social democratic governments in the 1990s did not succeed in solving: the attitudes towards further European integration and the question of immigration. The internal division over the European question was demonstrated in all the Scandinavian labour movements in the various referendums and at party or trade union congresses. Norway still kept out of the Union and Sweden and Denmark refused to join the EURO.

In all of the three countries, the immigration issue were at the centre of the political and ideological debates, most acutely in Norway and Denmark. With various intensity a new nationalism surfaced claiming respect for alleged national traditions and values. *Danskhed* and *Norskhed* (‘danishness’ and ‘Norwegianess’ – the concepts really cannot be translated) became evermore frequently emphasized in the public discourse. Parties like the Norwegian *Fremskrittspartiet* and *Dansk Folkeparti* in Denmark gradually managed to conquer the political agenda by presenting a platform which combined the following political attitudes: anti-EU, anti-immigration – in particular anti-Moslim – and pro-welfare.

It is a platform which strikes right into the centre of the social democratic labour movement by appealing to the long tradition for opposition against European integration and to the equally long tradition for pride of the national welfare. Both the EU and the immigrants are supposed to threaten the national values and not least the welfare state. The charismatic party leaders targeted their campaigns direct to the to older generations of social democrats claiming that the new leaderships of the labour movements had betrayed the proud results of the former generations by promoting the integration in Europe and, not least, by allowing so many foreigners into the countries, people who only wanted to exploit the welfare systems.

Moreover, the new parties have placed themselves as defenders of the common people against the élite to which they invariably count the present social democratic leadership. They thunder against ‘globalisation’ and multi-culturalism and for a re-introduction of Christian values against Islam.

These nationalist-populist campaigns have been extremely successful. They have managed to set the agenda in the political debate, they have forced the other parties to the right, in Denmark the social democrats in particular, - and at the general elections they have conquered tens of thousands voters from the social democratic parties.

At the recent general elections in Norway and Denmark the social democratic parties have carried votes from less than 50% of the trade union rank and file. A majority now vote for either the liberals or for the national-populist parties who have now conquered the role as parties of the people and even of what remains of the traditional working class. The successes of the new Right are not limited to the elections. More importantly, they have managed to paralyse the Left, in particular the Social Democrats who cannot understand how the parties to the Right managed to usurp the social democratic crown jewel, the national welfare.

The social democrats, not only in the Nordic countries but all over Europe are certainly at a crossroads. It will require much fantasy, social imagination and hard work if they shall not land at a dead end.

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Finally, if we venture to make a short assessment of the losses and gains of socialism in the 20th century we must admit that many of the ‘extremes’ were carried out in the name of socialism, many of them ruinous to the whole idea. However, if we limit ourselves to the Nordic social democratic tradition the balance appears unambiguously favourable. I will point out only three basic achievements: the elimination of elementary poverty, the contribution to the introduction and stabilising of political democracy, and the essential role in the completion of the nation-building. Of course, the social democrats are not the only ones responsible for the relative affluence and stability in the Nordic countries. But it is impossible to imagine today’s Norden without the contribution of the labour movement.

What then, were the characteristics which gave them the strength to become such a dominant force?

First of all, they were imbued with the idea of progress and optimism. The future belonged to socialism. Of course, they shared this optimism with the liberals and other democrats. Secondly, however, what distinguished the socialists’ optimism was the combination with a clear vision, a utopian idea of the good society which was to be created by the combined forces of science, democracy and the labour movement. When the material preconditions were at hand it would be the task of the labour movement to deliver the new society. Thirdly, the Nordic social democratic labour movements were not restricted by the determinism which more or less paralysed some of the bigger parties in the Second International. The Nordic socialists acted from the belief that the day-to-day struggles were essential for obtaining the socialist goal. Fourthly, there was an ‘organic’ link between working class and labour movement. If you considered yourself as working class you were almost invariably a member of a trade union. Fifthly, the intimate interplay between the trade union movement and the social democratic parties endowed both of them with a unique ability to mobilise broad social groups behind their causes.

Today all of these factors have disappeared or are in a process of disintegration. It is high time that the Nordic social democrats reconsider their goals, their strategy and their means to mobilise large segments of the population behind their programmes.