

All eyes on the Swedish coronavirus experiment

Their more moderate response to the pandemic is as much about politics as science

BY [Freddie Sayers](#)



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My Swedish passport has always felt a bit like a secret weapon. As a half-Swede who grew up in England, I have wielded it on countless occasions to get out of scrapes and escape judgement. As a national brand, it is almost beyond reproach — you flash your passport and sail through customs in countries from Israel to Sudan, greeted by special smiles of welcome like a visiting dignitary. Survey after survey confirms the same thing: everybody [loves the Swedes](#).

Politically, the Swedes have long served as pin-ups for both the Left and Right. Bernie Sanders [makes constant reference](#) to Sweden as a model for his brand of 'democratic socialism', while David Cameron used to regularly seek inspiration from his Swedish counterparts on ideas as diverse as free schools, the Big Society and doing away with inheritance tax. More recently, the Right has invoked Swedish concerns about mass immigration as proof that it's not only baddies who worry about that issue. Whatever your politics, if the Swedes are doing it, it must be OK.

Suddenly, in its response to the Coronavirus, the behaviour of my mother country is not meeting with the usual chorus of approval. By taking a radically different approach, have the Swedes finally lost their famed good sense... or should the rest of the world once again be looking to their example?

The coronavirus epidemic in Sweden — with 10 million population — is already relatively advanced: 3,500 certified infected and over 100 dead. But the Government refuses to 'lock down' the country as a response to the virus. They are following something closer to the 'mitigation' strategy that Boris Johnson's government initially seemed to favour, before the sudden pivot to 'suppression'.

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Today, Sweden stands alone in Europe. Schools remain open (except for over 16s and universities, which are judged to function well remotely and don't take key workers out of circulation) restaurants and bars are open (although only for table service to avoid throngs gathering at the bar). Gatherings of up to 50 people are still allowed, and there is much discussion over whether families all over Sweden should travel North for their annual Easter skiing trips at resorts in the mountains — all open for business as usual.

In theory, the difference in approach is a technical one: the Swedish scientists simply take a different view. The Swedish strategy is being led by 'State Epidemiologist' Anders Tegnell, who rather like Messrs



Whitty and Vallance in the UK, has become something of a national leader and is on the television every day. The public health authority which he represents has [released detailed modelling](#) on a region-by-region basis that comes to much less pessimistic conclusions in terms of hospitalisations and deaths per thousand infections than the [infamous study](#) by Imperial College, about which Tegnell is vocally sceptical. "It's not a peer-reviewed paper," he has [said](#). "It might be right, but it might also be terribly wrong. In Sweden, we are a bit surprised that it's had such an impact."



Sweden's number of hospital beds per thousand is the lowest in Europe (the UK is the second lowest), but despite this, Tegnell has identified a number of factors that he thinks make Sweden well placed for the coming epidemic. The number of multi-generational households is very low, compared to say Italy, slowing transmission to the more vulnerable older generation; there is a large geographical spread of the population; and there is an observable tendency for Swedish people to follow advice, rather than need legal imperatives to do so. Families have been *advised* to avoid visiting older relatives where possible and *urged* to work from home if they can. It's roughly Boris Johnson, circa three weeks ago.



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Tegnell doesn't like to [describe his strategy as 'herd immunity'](#) but he talks openly about the inevitability of the disease passing through a large chunk of the population, and even says that containing the disease like South Korea is doing [would not even be desirable](#), since it will surely only come back. His stated goal is to slow the spread of the infection to a manageable pace, and he doesn't believe a mandated lockdown is necessary to achieve that.

So far, so technical. But look more closely and the difference between the UK and Swedish approaches is as much about politics as science.

I spent much of the weekend on the telephone to friends, family and journalists from both Left and Right in Sweden and it felt like I'd fallen through the looking glass into an upside-down world. It almost could be the UK, just with a few political factors flipped over.

First, the fact that they are standing apart is a point of pride as much as concern. There is a note of Swedish exceptionalism, particularly when contrasted with longstanding competitors Denmark and Norway (both of whom have opted for a very thorough lockdown). I heard multiple theories as to why their Scandinavian neighbours were different, ranging from Denmark and Norway's occupation during the Second World War having given them have a residual mistrust of authority, to the Danish government's political desire to look strong. It couldn't be further from the UK instinct, which is to take any differences with other countries as proof of our own sluggishness and inadequacy.

Second, the Government is a centre-Left coalition, which changes everything. Alongside a deep-seated Swedish respect for technical experts, this means that support for the more moderate strategy is considered the enlightened left-liberal position; unlike the UK or the US, the knowledge class are fully on-side. Anders Tegnell himself has a left-of-centre feel about him, making regular reference to the importance of *equality* in the government's chosen course. This means, although he continues to meet with criticism, there are no online hoards of political activists demanding a lockdown.

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[By Peter Franklin](#)

The political critics, such as they are, are more likely to come from the Right, such as populist anti-immigration MP Hanif Bali (an occasional guest on Tucker Carlson's Fox News programme), controversial *Dagens Nyheter* editor-in-chief Peter Wolodarski and *Quillette's* Paulina Neuding. But they are few and far between: even the populist Swedish Democrats have largely kept quiet. One 30-year-old Stockholmer I spoke to said that the only advocates of a lockdown she had noticed in her social media feeds were "a few far-Right guys and the climate deniers".

It's the opposite of the political landscape in the UK, where deep mistrust from the long Brexit battle meant that whatever the Cummings-Johnson government initially proposed was instinctively suspected as bad and wrong by its political opponents; so the virtuous Left-liberal position quickly came to be calling for a more draconian shutdown. Rival experts were found, a campaign developed, and the Government ultimately changed course against a background of huge political pressure.

It is possible — perhaps likely — that as the death toll increases in Sweden in coming weeks they will also fall into line and impose a stricter lockdown. But if they don't, the experience of that country will offer a vital way of knowing whether or not the unprecedented cancellation of life, population-wide house arrest and destruction of the economy that the UK and so many other world powers have chosen will have been the correct response to this threat.

If, at the end of this grisly period, the deaths per capita in Sweden are much higher than neighbouring Denmark and Norway, the more draconian approach will seem to have been worth it; but if the Swedish experience remains roughly in line with those countries, justifying the enforced lockdown will be much harder, and questions with profound consequences will rightly be asked about the decisions of the UK and the wider world.



Comment



[Scott Allan](#)

April 6, 2020

Hi Alex, I do understand your figures are the official ones (60% Swedes live in cities) but my use of "semi-agrarian" is meant to refer to the structure of many neighbourhoods on the edge of these towns. Many countries use 80,000 persons to define a city. I know this is not the case for Sweden...



[Dino Ventrali](#)

April 5, 2020

The current UK lockdown baffles me. We have been told many times that the elderly and the vulnerable are most at risk, while the vast majority of the rest of the population will suffer very little if at all. In that case why lockdown everyone? Why not simply lockdown the elderly and the very...



[Pauline K.](#)
Or privatize it.

April 4, 2020

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