



Climate Obstruction in Sweden: The Green Welfare State— Both Progressive and Obstructionist

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Climate Obstruction in Sweden

The Green Welfare State—Both Progressive and Obstructionist

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INTRODUCTION: A MEOIOCRE ENVIRONMENTAL MIDDLE WAY

In the spring of 1972, in Stockholm, just months before the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment was held, leading experts gathered in the house of the Worker's Educational Foundation (ABF) for a conference. The Club of Rome's *Limits to Growth* report had just been released and environmental issues had recently become a subject of public debate.¹ The meteorologist Bert Bolin, Sweden's foremost climate scientist who would later become the first chair of the International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), and then-Prime Minister Olof Palme were among the experts who had come together to discuss the theme 'Is the future possible?' Palme opened the conference by reflecting on how Sweden could find a balance between those arguing that 'Man's ingenuity is unlimited' and those who believed 'the coming catastrophe is inevitable if not the present society is completely overthrown'.²

Palme contended that, between what he considered an idealist and defeatist reaction and a cornucopian illusion, there was a compromise: a planned social democratic society which limited the ill side effects of modern

society while expanding the wellbeing of its citizens. It was a continuation of a form of compromise with corporatist tendencies, which in this chapter we call ‘middle-way politics’. This was a type of politics that Sweden had promoted and for which it had become internationally renowned and was based firmly in the Swedish Social Democratic Party. The Social Democrats had dominated Swedish politics, holding government in the consecutive years between World War II and 1976; since then, it has been an opposition party for a total of seventeen years, until 2022. This middle way included military neutrality, a labour–industry compromise negotiated through collective agreements, and the idea of ‘the people’s home’ (*folkhemmet*), adopted in the 1930s as a metaphor for the inclusive welfare state.³ Palme argued that the middle way would improve society through a successful compromise between radical reform and business-as-usual, which also applied to environmental politics. In hindsight, the policy resonates with the argument of historian Kasimierz Musiał, who claimed that ‘in Scandinavia there exists a certain frame of mind, a mental capacity by virtue of which a change for the better comes to be regarded as inevitable’.⁴ In a similar vein, historian Melina Antonio Buns and sociologist Dominic Hinde have recently argued that ‘this [Nordic environmental model] allowed for the creation of an image of a green modernity, one that not only incorporated environmental protection into welfare but made environmental protection itself the catalyst for technological innovation, political progressiveness, and economic growth’.⁵

In this chapter, we use the term ‘Swedish middle way’ to signify a political compromise that, simply by virtue of being Swedish, would lead to a brighter, low-carbon future.⁶ What the main political parties, labour unions, and corporate associations all tacitly agreed upon was that environmental concerns and climate change were important but could be fixed incrementally with technical solutions, challenging neither economic growth nor contemporary lifestyles. It was a compromise aiming for an energy transition rather than a social transformation. At the same time, it was a compromise inherently devoid of internal coherence, a void that was filled by different actors according to their political preferences. For the Social Democrats in the 1970s, the promised future would be achieved through state-led investments, while the conservative party and corporate interests promoted mainly market mechanisms and consumer choice, especially after the neoliberal trends of the 1990s.⁷ The middle way, we argue, became a hegemonic discourse that dictated from above what constituted reasonable actions to deal with climate change. It marked a kind of common-sense position between outright denial and an urgent push for transformation to a low-carbon society.

Middle-way policies managed to slowly reduce territorial greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions. They peaked in 1970, but declined over the next decade and a half as oil for household heating and industry was replaced, mainly by nuclear power and biomass, and industrial production was outsourced. Since the mid-1980s, the production of electricity has been dominated by nuclear and hydropower.⁸ Since 1990, territorial GHG emissions have continued to fall (Figure 5.1), from 72 million metric tonnes of carbon dioxide equivalents (MMT CO₂e) to 44.1 MMT CO₂e, but consumption-based emissions have not declined at the same rate.

For a long time, the slow downward trend in emissions of roughly 2% per year⁹ was enough to curtail the influence of those who argued that Sweden needed to do more on climate. Toward the end of the 2010s, however, it became obvious that the track record was compliant with neither the climate pledges the parliament had made when ratifying the Paris Agreement in 2016 nor the rules of the Swedish Climate Act, passed in 2017. The Swedish Climate Council, which has the mandate to evaluate whether the Swedish government is doing enough to meet the climate law goal of reaching net zero emissions in 2045, argued in its 2019 report that ‘the pace [of emissions reductions] is way too slow to be in line with the climate-policy goals’.¹⁰ A year later, professor of energy and climate change Kevin Anderson and colleagues published a study arguing that the climate law goal itself is ‘less than half of what is the absolute minimum necessary to deliver on the Paris Agreement’.¹¹ The unchanged policy culture, weak governance of transport and consumption, and unrecognized potential of the forest as a natural carbon sink have since been highlighted as examples of the lack of transformative climate policies in Sweden.¹² The latest calculations regarding Sweden’s carbon budget show that emission reductions need to increase nearly tenfold to 20% per year (from 1 January 2022) to be in line with the 1.5° threshold in the Paris Agreement, or 12% per year to contribute to limiting warming to 2°C.¹³ Similarly, decoupling rates would need to quadruple by 2025 if Swedish policy is to be compliant with the Paris Agreement while still pursuing economic growth.¹⁴

Analyses such as these lend weight to the position of activists such as Greta Thunberg, who started her school strike in 2018 by saying that the Swedish parliament is not treating the climate crisis as a crisis. At the same time, there has been an increasingly vocal opposition to more ambitious climate policies, such as that of then-conservative opposition leader (and later prime minister) Ulf Kristersson, who said in 2019 that ‘I don’t believe that you can say that we have a specific time to act. I am scared of the alarmistic’.¹⁵ Hence, the end of the 2010s marked a period when the climate compromise ultimately broke down.

Sweden Greenhouse Gas Emissions

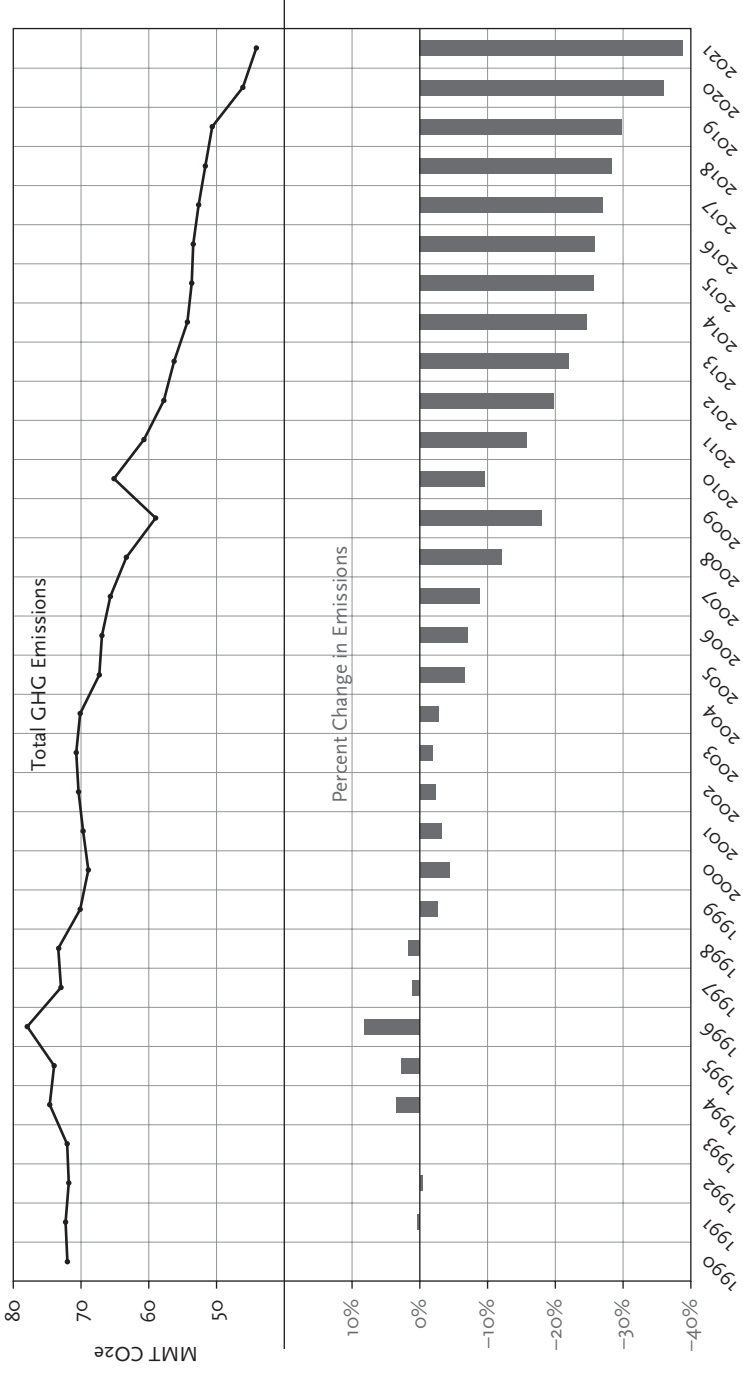


Figure 5.1 Total greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions (in MMT CO₂e) and percentage change in emissions in Sweden between 1990 and 2021, inclusive. Source: Total GHG emissions based on data provided by Gutschow and Pflüger (2023) for Kyoto Six Greenhouse Gas Totals.

THE MIDDLE WAY AS SECONDARY OBSTRUCTION

This chapter conceptualizes climate obstruction using a three-part typology two of us (Ekberg and Hultman) developed with colleagues. Here, *primary obstruction* denotes the '[d]enial of the scientific evidence of human-induced climate change, and consequently, actions which undermine climate policy'. In *secondary obstruction*, '[s]cience is at least tacitly accepted but meaningful climate action is delayed because of for example ideological, economic or political reasons'. *Tertiary obstruction* denotes '[c]ultures, hierarchies and values, as well as for example infrastructures that stand in the way of necessary action'.¹⁶ It is important to emphasize the notion of delay in secondary obstruction as actors often claim to be content with current policies as a delaying tactic to oppose additional reform.¹⁷ This means that policies that can be seen as progressive when implemented, such as the Swedish carbon tax, can later be used to obstruct further action by arguing that Sweden has already done enough. To exemplify tertiary obstruction, this chapter discusses the roles of gender and industrial/breadwinner masculinities enacted by those (mainly men) who have gained the most from extractivist policies.¹⁸ These tertiary obstruction identities are also part of, and shape, secondary and primary obstruction.

Using this classification system, we make two arguments. The first is that certain aspects of the Swedish middle way can be seen as secondary obstruction. By displacing actions in time and space (e.g. relocating policies from the national to the international arena and limiting the space available for socially transformative politics and more radical climate movements), it has provided the public with a comfortable sense that the problem is being addressed.¹⁹ In this way, secondary obstruction policies have helped to create cultures of tertiary obstruction, and vice versa. To put it bluntly: Sweden's incremental emissions reductions have allowed the nation to claim to be a frontrunner by pouring a little less fuel on the burning planet compared with most other wealthy, Western industrial nations. The second argument is that whenever primary obstruction narratives have appeared, they have usually been directed toward those who have argued for climate policies more ambitious than the middle way. In this way, primary obstruction often takes the form of a countermovement.

While we acknowledge that it makes sense to talk about climate obstruction in Sweden from the late 1980s onward (the period when the IPCC was formed and carbon tax discussions began), we start our story in the 1970s for two reasons. The first is to show how the idea of Social Democratic middle-way politics was expanded to apply to the environment and later influenced climate policy. The second is because contemporary

climate debates evolved from contestations of the middle way that have existed from the start, especially by certain actors close to the Swedish Employer's Confederation, Svenska Arbetsgivarförbundet (SAF, later the Confederation of Swedish Enterprise), which organizes all major businesses and industries in Sweden. Indeed, Swedish corporate interests and the high concentration of wealth and capital among a few actors stand out in comparison with many other nations.²⁰ This means that industry opposition to strong environmental policies is generally to be found in centralized business organizations such as SAF and its affiliated actors. It is important to note that Sweden has been an export-oriented country. Large portions of this small nation's gross domestic product (GDP) still stem from energy-intensive industries: manufacturing, mining, and forestry.²¹ Therefore, especially after the 1970s, Sweden's economy has been highly dependent on international competitiveness.

From oil to nuclear: Early contestations of Swedish environmental policies

As a country without viable fossil fuel reserves, Sweden has been entirely dependent on imports. When the oil embargo of 1973 increased pressure on the Swedish energy system, the state-led response was decarbonization. Nuclear expansion had been planned since the early 1950s and was in progress. The rise in the price of oil gave the project further impetus, which in turn spurred an anti-nuclear movement. The concern over energy issues also incentivized energy-saving measures and triggered refurbishments of the existing building stock, while industries such as pulp-and-paper and forestry reduced their carbon emissions by substituting biofuels for oil.²²

This early transition coincided with Sweden's attempt to showcase itself as a frontrunner in environmental policy leadership. In the early 1970s, Sweden and its Nordic neighbours were pushing for international agreements on transboundary pollution.²³ While anthropogenic global warming was not a top priority at that time, it had been recognized (due in part to climate scientist Bolin, then a government advisor) and utilized to promote the expansion of nuclear energy.²⁴ The opening paragraphs of the government's 1975 statement outlining future energy policies stated that 'according to some scientists, this [fossil fuel combustion] could lead to climatic change that in time could bring about catastrophic consequences for our way of life'.²⁵ Historians have pointed out that the business community in Sweden was generally not as antagonistic to environmental legislation and regulation as its US counterpart until the 1980s. Instead, corporatist

structures emerged, such as the public–private research institute IVL (formerly known as the Institute for Water and Air Quality research, now the Swedish Environmental Research Institute), in which the state and industry shared knowledge and costs.²⁶

Simultaneously, mobilization against the strong state had been mounting among industry and affiliated think tanks. By 1971, SAF had begun advocating direct engagement with public opinion, and, in 1978, it founded the free market-oriented think tank and publisher Timbro as part of this push.²⁷ Researchers have described the creation of Timbro as an ‘undisguised attempt to pursue the interests of the capitalist class in opposition to the Swedish labour movement and to counter any ideas connected with socialist economic planning and the rapid expansion of the welfare state’.²⁸

Proponents of nuclear energy, including the Social Democrats, argued in the 1970s that newly built and planned reactors would increase energy use and living standards while phasing out oil and its polluting emissions.²⁹ Industry-affiliated thinkers even pushed the sort of cornucopian narratives that then-Prime Minister Palme had brushed off as an excuse for inaction. Most prominent among these pundits were physicist Tor Ragnar Gerholm and PR firm Kreab; together with SAF and the Confederation of Swedish Industry (Industriförbundet, since 2001 part of the Confederation of Swedish Enterprise), they initiated early efforts to counter a growing environmental and anti-nuclear movement that contested the idea that economic growth and environmentalism could go hand in hand.³⁰ The response from economists and business-affiliated experts signified the first anti-environmental opposition and shaped the debate in the following decades.³¹

In 1980, a national referendum on the future of Swedish nuclear power was held. A narrow majority voted for a controlled phase-out, allowing nuclear power to be used until 2010. A year later, parts of the anti-nuclear movement were consolidated into the Green Party, which promoted itself as an ecological alternative to the left–right political divide. Environmental themes grew in importance among voters, and, in 1988, the party gained seats in the Swedish parliament for the first time.³² At the same time, the environmental discussion became more pronounced within the Social Democrats, with some members of the party leaning toward the Greens’ position and others remaining closely tied to the industrial unions and promoting continued economic growth and expansion of the welfare state.³³ There was joint opposition to the environmental movement from some of the unions and business actors, primarily in export-oriented industries.³⁴ Simultaneously throughout the 1980s, Swedish businesses

promoted themselves as part of the solution to climate change, in line with the rise of sustainable development discourse internationally.³⁵

Sustaining the unsustainable

As climate change became more prominent in the public debate, Swedish voices echoed some of primary obstructionist tactics and arguments prevalent in the United States. The Swedish business organizations and their allies, which in the mid-1980s had been successful in countering wage earner funds that would guarantee a degree of union ownership in companies, now turned their focus to the environment. In the 1980s, Gerholm joined forces with physicist and climate sceptic Fred Singer, becoming scientific advisor to Singer's Science and Environmental Policy Project (SEPP) as well as its transatlantic counterpart, the European Science and Environment Forum (ESEF).³⁶ The two organizations aimed to relativize and question the science of environmental and medical hazards such as climate change and tobacco.³⁷ In 1992, Gerholm was one of the authors of a SEPP report challenging the work of the IPCC.³⁸ Pushing scientific uncertainty to the Swedish public, Gerholm wrote in 1990 that 'We know too little about the workings of carbon in the biosphere. Nature—predominantly the oceans—seems to manage the increased amount of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere. Without facts every effort to strike international agreements is pointless'.³⁹ Similar arguments were made by prominent resource economist, Marian Radetzki, who, like Gerholm, had been a vocal member of the pro-nuclear camp in the 1970s.⁴⁰ As early as 1987, Radetzki portrayed climate change as a potential blessing and, in the early 1990s, authored the book *Growth and Environment (Tillväxt och miljö)* promoting growth as compatible with, or even a prerequisite for, environmental protection.⁴¹ The book was published by SNS Energy, a part of SNS (Centre for Business and Policy Studies), which was led by Radetzki and founded in collaboration with the publicly owned utility company Vattenfall. Later, SNS Energy was funded by major energy companies, among them the Swedish branches of Preem and Shell.⁴²

While some voices were trying to fend off regulation through pushing scientific uncertainty, or what we define as primary obstruction, other industry actors, including representatives from fossil fuel companies such as Shell, were promoting sustainability through business self-regulation and consumer citizenship, a strategy we call secondary obstruction.⁴³ In Sweden, such efforts were visible in reports like 'The Citizens Environmental Manifest' (*Medborgarnas miljömanifest*) part of a series called MOU, or

Medborgarnas Offentliga Utredningar, published by Timbro in collaboration with the new think tank New Welfare (*Den nya välfärden*).⁴⁴ The abbreviation mimicked SOU, the letters used for official government reports. The MOU report promoted a 'green business' model wherein consumer choice would steer production in a more sustainable direction. The lead author, Lars Bern, was an engineer who had worked with Volvo's ethanol projects in the 1970s and had been CEO of the IVL, the joint industry- and state-run environmental research institute. The promotion of consumer preferences was part of a wider shift toward depoliticization of environmental issues in the 1990s, following neoliberal government reforms and the implementation of Agenda 21 after the 1992 UN conference on environment and development in Rio de Janeiro. Using the discourse of 'sustainable development', Agenda 21 was framed as an initiative to promote citizen participation but was pushed from above. Emphasizing cooperation rather than conflict, it fit well with the idea of the Swedish middle way.

The idea of a middle way in environmental politics has continued during the era of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and international climate negotiations. In 1991, the Swedish carbon tax came into effect. The origin of the proposal is unclear, but it has been argued that its implementation was the result of a compromise between business interests (evident in the mobilization described earlier) and environmental concerns during an era of tax reform.⁴⁵ In the late 1980s, the planned nuclear power phase-out, which had been decided in the 1980 referendum, became a pressing issue, at a time when nuclear power amounted to around 45% of Sweden's total electricity production. While certain actors argued that it was impossible to address climate change, maintain welfare, and shut down nuclear power, others claimed that energy efficiency and renewable energy should be the way forward.⁴⁶ The carbon tax thus became a compromise that would lower emissions while keeping the possibility of a nuclear phase-out alive. In the words of political scientists Roger Hildingsson and Åsa Knaggård: 'Although no party got exactly what they wanted, the proposal was balanced enough to prevent any stronger opposition'.⁴⁷ A reduction in the tax rate and other deductions were initially granted to heavy industry and, in 1994, were replaced by a general discount implemented by the conservative government. This arrangement allowed exceptions for heavy industry up until the implementation of the European Union's Emissions Trading System (EU ETS) and the subsequent phasing out of discounts between 2011 and 2018. The carbon tax has been raised continuously since its inception, and per capita territorial emissions from fossil fuels and industry have declined, but consumption-based emissions are still high.⁴⁸

SWEDISH CLIMATE DEBATES IN THE UNFCCC ERA

In 1991, the Social Democrats lost the election, and a weak liberal/conservative government took power. The same year a key feature of the middle-way compromise waned as SAF withdrew their representatives from the boards of government agencies.⁴⁹ As the Swedish economy entered a crisis during the 1990s recession, environmental issues were not a priority.⁵⁰ Nonetheless, the Climate Delegation (Klimatdelegationen) was formed in 1993 and, in 1994, was given the task of producing an official government report that would guide Sweden's position on the UNFCCC.⁵¹ The following year Bolin, who had become the IPCC's chair, and his co-authors stated in the panel's second assessment report that 'the balance of evidence suggests a discernible human influence on global climate'.⁵²

The formal obligations of the Climate Delegation and the IPCC's alarming scientific statements intensified the conflict between pro-business actors who wanted to stave off all environmental considerations and pro-market supporters who argued for consumer power rather than state-enforced regulations on business. In 1995, a public rift emerged between the green growth and market-friendly Bern and the corporate greening consultancy The Natural Step (Det naturliga steget) on one side and Gerholm and the think tank Timbro on the other. It was essentially a battle between primary and secondary obstruction. Gerholm, who refuted the IPCC consensus on climate change, got support from the political editor of SvD, a newspaper closely affiliated with SAF that has a history of giving space to contrarian voices on its opinion pages.⁵³ Following the conflict, Bern, who had published his *Citizens Environmental Manifesto* at Timbro, slowly adopted a more sceptical attitude toward environmental issues. As we will show, he was later key in launching a more clearly defined movement of primary obstruction in the 2000s.

In 1996, the think tank Timbro sharpened its focus on environmental issues. With Gerholm's attack on The Natural Step and the promotion and distribution of the book *The True State of the Planet*, Timbro claimed to 'describe the actual state of the world and push back prophecies of doom'.⁵⁴ According to later accounts, the environmental movement was seen as the latest iteration of an anti-intellectualism that Gerholm fiercely resisted.⁵⁵ Part of Timbro's campaign was to launch an attack on the Social Democrats, who had returned to government and were now led by Göran Persson. Persson, while no classical Keynesian, envisioned using the transition toward sustainability to take Sweden out of the early 1990s financial crisis. This plan included removing part of the heavy-industry reductions in the carbon tax. Drawing on the Social Democratic welfare project of

the 1930s, Persson's idea was quickly labelled 'the green people's home' (resembling later international calls for a Green New Deal). The state-led environmental agenda, according to Timbro, was a religion, privileging nature before humans. The think tank used this argument to question both specific subsidies and local investments as well as Sweden's goals for the forthcoming COP 3 meeting in Kyoto.⁵⁶

After the meeting, Gerholm and colleagues made a concerted effort to oppose the Kyoto Protocol, the international treaty to limit GHGs, by gathering leading contrarians in Sweden and international actors such as atmospheric physicist Richard Lindzen and Shell-funded Frits Böttcher to write the edited volume *Climate Policy after Kyoto (Klimatpolitik efter Kyotomötet)*, published in 1998.⁵⁷ The same year, the neoliberal Atlas network proposed to Exxon that Timbro could be an important European ally in promoting market-friendly policies and engagement with environmental issues.⁵⁸ However, these efforts from Swedish businesses and other actors failed to gain political party support for primary obstruction.

After the Kyoto Protocol was signed, Swedish actors who rejected climate science and opposed mitigation policies concentrated on minimizing Swedish domestic efforts, thereby shifting from Gerholm and colleagues' strategy of primary obstruction to secondary obstruction. While few voices argued that no action should be taken, a fear of free-riding and the comparative disadvantages to the Swedish export-oriented industry were often highlighted by opponents of climate action. According to EU ETS, the cap and trade emissions trading system then being developed within the European Union, Sweden would be permitted to increase its emissions by 4%, but the Swedish government argued that the country should be an environmental frontrunner and instead proposed a target of *decreasing* emissions by that amount. During the early 2000s, the carbon tax was also raised substantially. Industry actors who voiced their opposition argued that it was important that Sweden follow the same pace as others and, perhaps even more importantly, that it was more effective to finance mitigation abroad rather than at home.⁵⁹

A PUBLIC CLIMATE CHANGE COUNTERMOVEMENT

During the second half of the 2000s, climate change rose on the political agenda in both Sweden and internationally. Following the release of Al Gore's film 'An Inconvenient Truth' and the *Stern Review* on the economics of climate change in the autumn of 2006, along with the publication of IPCC's fourth assessment report the following year, climate change

became a central political issue. One example of this trend is that the conservative prime minister and leader of the centre-right coalition, Fredrik Reinfeldt, who had hardly spoken about climate change during the 2006 election, soon thereafter began to argue that Sweden could and should be an environmental leader. In this way, Reinfeldt adopted the idea of a compromise between economic growth and environmental protection, now focused mainly on company-led innovation and consumer power rather than regulation. Once again, nuclear power was seen as the core technology that would lead to environmentally sustainable economic growth. The Liberal and Conservative parties, both part of the government coalition, and the Swedish Trade Union Confederation argued that Sweden should invest in nuclear in the name of fighting climate change.⁶⁰ A new energy plan was developed by the centre-right coalition, and, for the first time since the referendum in 1980, new reactors would be allowed to be built to replace retiring ones.

During the years when the climate issue was high on the political and media agendas, there was activity on both sides of the carbon compromise. While several of the big environmental nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), which had been institutionalized since the 1990s, were holding regular meetings with the Swedish government to discuss climate strategies, newer activist organizations were taking climate campaigning to the streets, demanding much more rapid emissions reductions than the incremental steps of middle-way politics.⁶¹ At the same time, a more concerted and open Swedish climate change countermovement revived doubt about the science, thereby shifting their strategy from secondary to primary obstruction.

Several conservative think tanks spread arguments and materials previously distributed in the United States. For example, in 2007, the think tank Eudoxa (now defunct) translated and published the Competitive Enterprise Institute's report 'What Every European Should Know about Global Warming'.⁶² The think tanks Timbro and Captus, both financed by the Confederation of Swedish Enterprise, now argued that the climate had always been changing and that the science regarding human influence was not settled.⁶³ In 2008, Sweden's foremost climate denialist network, the Climate Realists (formerly known as The Stockholm Initiative) had their first public event, a seminar titled 'Time for Reason/Common Sense Regarding the Climate Issue'. The seminar was organized by the PR firm Kreab, mentioned earlier. Several of the people involved in the Climate Realists network held prominent positions within media, academia, and industry. One was a former board member of the car manufacturer Volvo and president of the large industrial component manufacturer Sandvik;

another was a well-known TV presenter. They were mainly men who had enjoyed careers closely connected to the modern industrial Swedish welfare state that had expanded in the post-World War II era. Their influential positions also helped them attract attention in national media through op-eds and a series of programs on Swedish public radio.⁶⁴

Shortly after the Climate Realists' first public seminar, its leading figures published an opinion piece titled 'Don't Throw Money on the Climate Scam' while Bern co-authored the book *Chill Out*, arguing that human influence on the climate was negligible and increased carbon dioxide levels in the atmosphere were positive.⁶⁵ In the book, Gerholm, with whom Bern had been in a public dispute a decade earlier, was now praised for his fight 'against unscientific opinions'.⁶⁶ The network was also given media space in connection with the event labelled Climategate: representatives were asked to comment on public radio and in local media on the stolen e-mails and the state of the science as part of the run-up to the COP 15 in Copenhagen.⁶⁷ As they were based in a country lacking major fossil fuel interests, the Climate Realists' primary obstruction campaign was not solely about economics. Their counterclaims about climate science appeared to be rooted in deep-seated values connected to industrial modernity, which are in turn connected to rationality, economic growth, patriarchy, and industrial progress. In this way, the men of Climate Realists were enacting industrial/breadwinner masculinities and, through these gendered identities, upholding white, male, patriarchal privilege.⁶⁸

Together with conservative think tanks, another network called Klimatsans (Climate Sense), and a few independent opinion makers, the Climate Realists formed an organized Swedish climate change counter-movement that took shape as a response to the heightened public awareness of and increased activism around the issue during the second half of the 2000s. This Swedish countermovement contained some contrarian scientists who, like Gerholm, had international connections. For example, the retired geophysicist Nils-Axel Mörner was the former head of the paleogeophysics and geodynamics department at Stockholm University. Mörner claimed to be an expert in sea-level rise and argued against the IPCC's conclusion that climate change contributes to sea level change. In 2011, he published a cover story in the UK magazine *The Spectator* titled 'The Sea Level Scam: The Rise and Rise of a Global Scare Story', in which he insinuated that the then-president of the Maldives was not truly concerned about climate change as '[the president] has authorized the building of many large waterside hotels and 11 new airports. Or could it perhaps be that he wants to take a cut of the \$30 billion fund agreed at an accord in Copenhagen for the poorest nations hit by "global warming"?' Mörner's

use of ironic quotation marks—or scare-quotes—around *global warming* is noteworthy, as this tactic would later become commonplace in Swedish far-right media.⁶⁹ Mörner had been a speaker at events organized by US countermovement organizations such as the Cooler Heads Coalition and The Heartland Institute. In 2017, he conducted research paid for by a US contrarian advocacy organization, the CO2 Coalition, which he later published in journals with little or no peer review.⁷⁰

The far right as a countermovement ally

Despite the media visibility of the Swedish climate change countermovement at the end of the 2000s, their views and arguments were not adopted by any of the seven parliamentary parties. But, in the autumn of 2010, the far-right Sweden Democrats, an anti-immigration party with roots in the neo-Nazi milieu of the late 1980s, entered the parliament. Influenced by opinion makers connected to the Climate Realists, most notably Bern, party representatives started spreading denialist arguments within the Swedish government. The Sweden Democrats thus became the political ally the countermovement needed to be heard.⁷¹ The party saw itself as the only opposition party in parliament, claiming all the others were part of the political establishment. Hence the Sweden Democrats could use its populist, anti-establishment rhetoric in the climate debate, where it argued that middle-way politics were alarmist. In January 2013, the party's environmental spokesperson, Josef Fransson, used the well-known and thoroughly debunked 'hiatus' argument (the claim that global warming stopped in 1998) to argue that the 'apocalyptic future scenario' would not happen, something which should be good news 'unless you are one of plenty who have built a lucrative career in warning humanity about the doom of the planet'.⁷² He thereby repeated the anti-environmentalist trope that concern for climate or the environment was nothing more than a thinly veiled project of 'the new class' to gain power.⁷³ This argument—that environmental issues were pushed by an educated middle class—was also present in Timbro publications of the late 1980s and early 1990s.⁷⁴

During the coming years, representatives of the Sweden Democrats would mix primary and secondary obstruction, arguing both that there was no anthropogenic global warming and that Sweden's carbon emissions were too low to matter. In 2016, the party also used ironic quotations marks around 'climate' in its proposed budget bill.⁷⁵ During the 2010s, the Sweden Democrats gained support in every election. After the election of 2014, the party held the balance of power in parliament and would have

become a kingmaker were it not for a parliamentary agreement between the other parties to minimize its influence. But the agreement lasted only a year, after which conservative parties started talking and negotiating with the Sweden Democrats.

Deploying a far-right media ecosystem

Aiding the Sweden Democrats in its popularity was an influential, far-right, alternative digital media ecosystem. The ecosystem consists of a plethora of news sites and video channels, often with personal and organizational ties to both the Sweden Democrats and the extreme-right party Alternative for Sweden. Just as movements and countermovements need political allies, they can also be advanced via social and partisan media, where traditional gatekeepers have been removed.⁷⁶ In the summer of 2018, Sweden and large parts of Europe experienced a record-breaking heat wave and drought, which had become more likely due to human-induced climate change.⁷⁷ Forest fires swept the country and the total area burnt, approximately 25,000 hectares, was an anomaly during the era of the modern fire defence.⁷⁸ The country was also on the verge of a national election scheduled for early September. Three weeks before the election, a fifteen-year-old girl named Greta Thunberg sat down outside the parliament building bearing a sign saying: ‘School strike for climate’. In line with scientific assessments, she demanded policies that went beyond the middle way.

During the same period, SwebbTV, a nationalist and conspiracist online video channel, aired an interview with Bern under the headline ‘The Environmental Movement’s Scare-Mongering’. The channel, with personal ties to both the Sweden Democrats and the extreme-right Alternative for Sweden, had been launched as a YouTube channel three years earlier but was later expelled from the platform because of broadcasting disinformation about the COVID virus. From the start, the channel was focused mainly on immigration, but, after the summer of 2018, climate change became a prominent issue. Bern, who in 1990 had said that ‘[t]he emerging environmental commitment is really nothing more than another step in the long civilizational process of humanity’, was now enlisted as the channel’s political and scientific commentator. As such, he continuously spread doubt about climate science. During 2018–2019, the channel hosted several prominent members of the Swedish climate change countermovement, such as the former president of Sandvik, as well as the contrarian scientist Mörner. Indeed, many prominent industry leaders and academics with highly distinguished careers have been guests on a far right, conspiracist

video channel.⁷⁹ One recurring guest was a former employee of the Ministry of Enterprise and Innovation, Elsa Widding. As a writer for the Climate Realist blog and through videos on her own YouTube channel, Widding had just emerged as a leading voice in the climate change countermovement, standing out as the female exception in a culture of older males. On these shows, SwebbTV often discussed the science of climate change, using contrarian graphs which used cherry-picked or obsolete data to deny the trend, attribution, and negative consequences of climate change.⁸⁰

Through these interviews, SwebbTV became a nexus of primary obstruction, connecting the organized Swedish climate change countermovement with the far-right alternative media ecosystem. Other news sites, such as Samhällsnytt and Fria Tider, which at the time reached roughly 10% of the Swedish online population, started reporting widely on climate change in the autumn of 2018, and, during 2019, the issue became prominent across such media. But compared with SwebbTV, these news sites didn't discuss the science per se; instead, they occasionally referenced SwebbTV or some international contrarian source to create an anti-establishment discourse in which it was tacit knowledge that climate change was a hoax. By scare-quoting climate and related words, they signalled to the reader that this was a non-existent problem and thereby attacked anyone who was talking about it—usually those they marked as belonging to a globalist elite.

The fact that primary obstruction, led by the far right, has lately become conspicuous in Sweden should not be taken as a sign that secondary obstruction has disappeared. Rather, these forms are often advanced simultaneously, sometimes by the same actors. Industry actors who publicly accept the reality of climate change have continued to use secondary obstruction to promote emissions reductions abroad, which they deem 'efficient climate policy'. This argument has also been the most important among the conservative and far-right think tanks and parties' critiques against domestic climate policy.⁸¹ Similarly, the research institute Ratio, closely affiliated to Timbro and the Confederation of Swedish Enterprise, has disputed a growing interest in planning and entrepreneurial state thinking.⁸² In so doing, these actors continue to promote a neoliberal critique that in recent years has included attacks on the state-led HYBRIT-project, an ambitious plan to use (vast amounts of) electricity to produce steel using hydrogen instead of coal. Another argument that has appeared since the European Union adopted its new climate framework, 'Fit for 55', is that national climate policy is superfluous, ineffective, and expensive and that Sweden will be doing its part simply by remaining a member of the European Union.⁸³

FAR-RIGHT NATIONALISM DEFENDS SWEDISH INDUSTRIAL MODERNITY

Discourses of the far right are based on a nostalgic longing for a lost patriarchal and homogenous national community, a community now perceived as decaying and further threatened by immigration, feminism, and a corrupt elite. This idealized community is also an industrially prosperous one. The reactionary nostalgia of the Sweden Democrats is for a world before globalization, a world built around nation-states, nuclear families, and industrial capitalism where the male breadwinner benefitted and gained security through his work in successful industries.⁸⁴ It was also a supposedly rational world where scientific progress and innovation improved living conditions and material welfare for everyone in the Swedish 'people's home', but where racism and discriminatory policies ensured that that home was ethnically homogenous.⁸⁵

The far right's claim to rationality also ties into an argument that they stand for the common-sense position while everyone else is alarmist. The Sweden Democrats often claim to be truth tellers, arguing that other parties were wilfully blind to reality until their recent adoption of more restrictive immigration policies. The party leader, Jimmie Åkesson, has thus compared immigration with climate, using the familiar trope of climate change as a religion: '[the climate change debate] is very reminiscent of how the immigration debate sounded some years ago. You can't question or lay down different perspective because then you are called a climate denier'.⁸⁶

The Swedish climate change countermovement and the Swedish far right meet in defending the values of patriarchal, industrial capitalism. Their national industrial project is based on domination of nature and extraction of resources. It is also an industrial/breadwinner masculinities project, in which those men who have earned the most from the burning of fossil fuels are the ones holding prominent positions within industry and working in high-emitting, high-resource-use sectors.⁸⁷ In far-right media discourses, masculine rationality is often pitted against feminine emotionality, with the latter now portrayed as destroying the nation. One example comes from the digital media site *Samhällsnytt*, which claimed that the social democratic government was leading a destructive cultural process by 'moving from a rational patriarchy to an emotional feminism'.⁸⁸ Feminine, irrational climate 'hysteria' is seen as a threat to an industrial world built by generations of hard-working, white, Swedish men.⁸⁹ Similar sentiments have also been found in Norway and several other countries.⁹⁰

The collaboration between the far right and the climate change countermovement has recently resulted in the Swedish government's backtracking on its climate policies. In the 2022 national election, the Sweden Democrats received 20.5% of the vote and became the biggest party in the winning nationalist-conservative block. While not part of the government, the Sweden Democrats hold direct influence over its policies, which include reducing taxes on petrol, lowering standards on the amount of biofuels required in diesel fuel, dismantling subsidies for electric vehicles, withdrawing state support for connecting offshore wind power to the electricity grid, and initiating a massive investment in building new nuclear reactors. The Swedish Climate Council has already asserted that the new policies will increase Sweden's emissions and make it even harder to meet existing climate goals.⁹¹ The conservative minister for finance, Elisabeth Svantesson, however, has shrugged off the consequences of not meeting these targets, saying that 'if we don't do it, we don't do it'.⁹²

Probably the most explicit example of how the far right and the climate change countermovement have joined hands is the election, in September 2022, of Elsa Widding as an MP for the Sweden Democrats, making her one of the party's main voices in the climate and energy debate.⁹³ Apart from writing on the Climate Realists blog and frequently appearing on SwebbTV, Widding has also been named a member of the Norwegian Climate Realists' scientific board.⁹⁴ She was also a signatory to the international CLINTEL declaration, which stated that there is no climate emergency and that 'The Little Ice Age ended as recently as 1850. Therefore, it is no surprise that we now are experiencing a period of warming'.⁹⁵ In her 2022 book *Common Sense about Energy and Climate*, Widding argued that common sense in the Swedish climate debate had disappeared because the politicians and media often talked about the problem as a crisis, a view she strongly opposed. In Widding, the Swedish climate change countermovement gained its first member of parliament.⁹⁶

Several surveys have shown there is an electoral base for far-right obstructionist policies in Sweden.⁹⁷ A recent study showed that 6% of Sweden's population doubt that climate change is anthropogenic, a majority of whom sympathize with the Sweden Democrats.⁹⁸ There is also a clear trend of a growing left-right divide in climate change public opinion, with voters to the right recently becoming less concerned.⁹⁹ This is another sign that Swedish climate politics has moved further away from the compromise of incremental change and middle-way politics, instead becoming fiercely contested.

CONCLUSION: NATIONAL PROTECTIONISM AND THE ALLURE OF THE MIDDLE WAY

If we are to take seriously the question of why countries are failing on climate mitigation, we need to understand the different forms of obstruction.¹⁰⁰ In this chapter, we have seen how the Swedish ‘middle way’ of ‘balancing’ environmental and economic concerns has led to incremental reductions of territorial GHG emissions that were more substantial than those of many other countries of the Global North, but far short of Sweden’s commitments in the Paris Agreement. Therefore, we argue, these climate policies can in part be seen as secondary obstruction: through being concerned primarily with technical solutions and economic growth, they have limited the space available for discussion and implementation of more ambitious policies.

While the strategies and tactics of those opposing climate and environmental policies in Sweden have shifted over time, there is also continuity. From the 1970s onward obstruction has been expressed and organized as a countermovement in response to environmentalists’ demand for more radical and transformative policies. Central throughout the period was the countermovement’s positioning of neoclassical and neoliberal economic doctrine and industrial practice as the main sources of knowledge and containers of reasonable action. During the 2010s, the far right became the political ally the Swedish climate countermovement needed to be heard, and the latter has, to a large degree, seamlessly merged with the former. The countermovement did so first by giving advice to far-right politicians and later through appearing in far-right media. Today, the far right is the driving force of primary obstruction in Sweden, which has led the current government to leave behind the middle way of incremental, but insufficient, reductions in carbon emissions. Instead, the government has adopted policies that will increase Sweden’s territorial carbon emissions for the first time in two decades (if we exclude the rebound years after the financial crises and the pandemic). In the crosshairs of both conservatives and the far right are not only policies but also activists, often deemed ‘alarmists’. Efforts to portray climate activist groups as extremists have sought to conflate the position of business interests and the protection of domestic exporting companies with common sense. The concept of common sense plays to the allure of a middle way, prominent in Swedish cultural self-understanding. But as we have shown, it has more recently been used to defend a primary obstructionist position.

Moving forward, it is important to further study secondary obstruction. We have argued that certain aspects of Sweden's climate policies, which have often been hailed as progressive, can also be seen as obstructionist in that discussion of the deep societal transformation needed to reach the Paris Agreement targets remains strictly off limits. This reality suggests that consensus in climate politics can sometimes be problematic, as it usually means that incumbent interests gaining the most from the status quo remain unchallenged. More research is needed to distinguish how, why, and when certain policies can become both progressive and obstructionist, and what can be done to overcome such obstruction. Studies examining certain industries in Sweden (e.g. forestry, pulp-and-paper, and the auto industry) could be helpful to determine which sectors have been most active in pushing obstructionist perspectives.

Finally, further analysis is needed to understand how to facilitate policies that go beyond ecomodernism, green growth, and technological change. The current state of the planet requires Sweden to reduce its emissions by more than 12% per year to deliver on its commitment to a 2° warmer future, as stated in the Paris Agreement, and by 20% per year if the country intends to help limit warming to 1.5°C.¹⁰¹ The middle-way politics of the Swedish welfare state has mainly served to obstruct discussion of such levels of mitigation.

The few times this obstruction has been overcome and more concerned climate voices have been heard, it was often regarding the science on mitigation and the need for rapid carbon phaseout. The most obvious example is the activist campaign of Greta Thunberg who, during the early days of her school strike, argued that it made no sense for her to be in school because 'Facts don't matter any more, politicians aren't listening to the scientists, so why should I learn?'¹⁰² Another example is the Stay on the Ground movement, which helped create a widespread debate about the climate impact of aviation.¹⁰³ One thing that both Thunberg and Stay on the Ground had in common was the appeal to morality and to adjusting lifestyles accordingly. Leading by example, they managed to break through the noise of obstruction.

NOTES

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10. Klimatpolitiska rådet, 'Årsrapport 2019' (Stockholm: Klimatpolitiska rådet, 2019), 6.
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