

Chapter 12 : The bourgeois state

*'Tis a blot on our flag that we reckon worth
by wealth, and poor men are no men.*
Verner von Heidenstam. *Fellow-citizens* (1899)

Q: What is politics?
A: The throne, the altar, the sword & money
Knut Wicksell (1908).

1809-1865, a transition from the four-chamber-Parliament of the Estates to some form of English or French two-chamber parliament was discussed, but since this would mean that the political estates would have to abandon their remaining privileges, it was slow going. Meanwhile, the group of upper class commoners grew. Regular adjustments were made to the composition of the estates, but eventually it became impossible to form homogeneous political estates according to the old functional model, which presupposed an almost medieval society. In 1865, the composition of the estates was:

The nobility consisted of service nobility, hereditary nobility (the aristocracy proper) and (noble) landowners. The priesthood of ordained priests and academics. The burghers of traders, craftsmen & (non-noble) old time industrialists (related to raw materials; milling, mining, timber, etc.). The peasant estate of small farmers & (non-noble) landowners. Each estate had a vote, but: The nobility represented 0.3 per cent of the population, the clergy 0.4 per cent, the burghers 2 percent and the peasants 33 per cent. The remainder were landless rural dwellers (crofters, soldiers, farmhands, tenants), agricultural and industrial labour and large parts of the non-noble middle class (officials, teachers, doctors, industrialists proper, publicists & officers), two-thirds of the population.

There were several proposals as to how this should be dealt with within the framework of the old system. In 1848, Count Henning Hamilton proposed to form two more estates of officials & industrialists. MPs would then be divided into two chambers with different terms.¹ Such proposals were however considered to just postpone the inevitable. The estate representation had to go! All other countries had already abolished it.

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A. KARL XV

Under Charles XV, a series of constitutional reforms was carried out in a liberal spirit. These eventually opened five paths to popular power: Municipal elections, county council elections, 1st chamber elections (indirect), 2nd chamber elections & church elections (from 1930). This took time though. In 1866, the general election requirements was:

MPs of the 1st Chamber must have reached the age of 35 and have property or income above a certain limit - the "line". They were elected by indirect suffrage with the county councillors as electors. The term of office was eight years. Since the number of votes in the county council elections was graded according to the taxes paid - "the fyrk number" (an old time coin) - it meant an excess of wealthy if not necessarily

¹ Hamilton 1848.

conservative voters. Women and legal entities also had the right to vote. The number of eligible voters was initially about 6000, 0.2 percent of the population. The number of elected MP was initially 100. The 1st chamber was thus an even more exclusive assembly than the nobles during the Parliament of the Estates (c. 1200 although normally only 200 participated) and initially meant a real push for noble influence.

MPs of the 2nd Chamber were eligible for election from the year of their 25th birthday. Wealth was mandatory, but the "line" was lower than that of the 1st Chamber. They were elected by direct (male) universal suffrage. The term of office was four years. Voters must be 21 years old, live within the constituency & with real estate or income above the "line". The number of eligible voters was initially 250 thousand, about 5.6 percent of the population. The number of elected MPs was initially 190. However, the state's ambition to raise taxes by increasing the graded value of real estate later gave small farmers an increased influence. When the grading & "line" in 1918 was removed, workers & lower officials also gained an increased influence.

The 2nd Chamber was long considered more "popular", but in 1933 the "line" was abolished also for the 1st Chamber, which gradually eliminated its character of "upper class reserve".

The system's creator, Minister of Justice Louis De Geer (1818-1896), thought that the two chambers would balance each other. The 1st Chamber would have a "calming" influence over the longer term. I quote from Count Henning Hamilton's criticism:²

- The old estate representation was in fact socially broader than the present proposal.
- The criteria of birth had been replaced by income and wealth, i.e. aristocracy had been replaced by plutocracy. Hardly progress.
- Through the current social structure, the Parliament would be dominated by farmers and other groups would find it difficult to assert themselves. The Swedish experience of such estate rule was not good. The tyranny of the majority was as abhorrent as the tyranny of the minority.
- This new system was a precursor to parliamentarianism. It would weaken royal power and the 1809 balance between King and Parliament would be destroyed. Much always wants more!

De Geer defended himself by stating that his proposal did not involve any disruption or change in the relationship between the King and the people's representation. He only wanted to change the structure of the Parliament, not the king's position in society: "The strength or weakness of kingship does not depend on the form of representation; and in a country where the kingship has such deep and secure roots as ours, it seems to have more to gain than to lose, from brining the form of representation closer to its purpose, which is to form as true an expression of the people's opinion as possible."³

De Geer has since been described as some sort of "liberal in disguise" who, against the will of Charles XV, intrigued his political system into existence, but to get it accepted, watered it down with so many conservative compromises, that its true nature did not emerge until much later. That seems quite incredible. His aim seems to have been to delay universal suffrage.⁴

² Hamilton 1865.

³ Segerstedt 1986: s. 133-134.

⁴ Lundstedt 2014.

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As De Geer's political system only guaranteed the richest 5-6 percent of the population political influence, you may be forgiven if you think the Socialists in retrospect would be negative to it. In the Social Democratic history writing, however, it was regarded as progressive because according to Marxist theory the bourgeois class society was a precursor to the coming proletarian people's state. As the first "bourgeois king" of Sweden, Charles XV was very popular:

"As a curiosity, it is worth mentioning that Hjalmar Branting showed greater understanding of the reign of Charles XV than of Oscar II. Admittedly, he praises Charles XV in order to further emphasize how deeply reactionary he considers Oscar II and his epoch to be. On the occasion of the 25th anniversary of Oscar, Branting states that the time of Charles XV was The Period of Youth and Power. During the spire of Charles XV they moved ever upwards. Yes, then the great breakthrough took place, when the reign of money, hidden behind the mantle of civil equality, took precedence over the old feudal social order. With the reform of representation, Sweden became a modern bourgeois state. And we, states Branting, who an age later want to go forward and on the basis of universal suffrage build the democratic society that leads us into the higher development of social democracy, we have a right, and may we say a duty, to remember with gratitude those who did the deeds of their time and brought our old, sluggish people to a new milestone in its history."⁵

This positive view of Karl XV was shared by many. At the time of his death, Charles was both popular and respected. I quote Aftonbladet:

"[It] is an irrefutable fact that King Charles was very popular, that he was loved by the people, as only few kings before him have ever been. The basis for this immense, ever growing, ever more ingrained and unshakable popularity was undoubtedly his person. In addition to human errors and imperfections, King Charles had some qualities, which greatly endeared him to the people. Above all, he had the ability to be truly *Swedish*, more Swedish than any king of the 150 years. ... In addition came the great simplicity, straightforwardness and heartiness of his being. He did not like etiquette, posturing or subterfuge, and in that respect he rather resembled his late friend, King Frederick VII of Denmark. ... But apart from these personal qualities there is another, political and more lasting basis for this great popularity. King Carl was *the most constitutional king* our country has ever owned."⁶

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B. OSCAR II

The popular Charles XV died prematurely and his brother Oscar II took over. Oscar was unpopular from the start and it got worse. It seems to have been due to the monarchy's dual roles in his time, as both initiator of the new Sweden & symbol of the old. As a political

⁵ Segerstedt 1986: s. 21.

⁶ Aftonbladet, 1872-09-19, s. 2.

actor, Oscar II was ill regarded by both by the high and the low nobility, the old & the young generation of liberals and inevitably the social democracy:

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The high nobility (the aristocracy; old lineage & rich)

The reluctance of the high nobility seems to have been due to Oscar II's political support for the new corporate and peasant right-wingers, but has also been interpreted as a lingering bitterness against the Bernadotte dynasty's seizure of power. The bitterness is said to have remained Oscar II's entire life and e.g. Crown Prince Gustaf's marriage to Victoria of Baden has been portrayed as an attempt at national reconciliation, because her grandmother was King Gustaf IV's daughter Sofia. In 1892, Oscar's reputation abroad was such:

“It is a great mistake to believe that King Oscar is popular in his own country. He is hated in Norway, which aspires to become a republic, and regards the Crown as an incubus, while he is treated with downright disdain by the Swedes, especially by the nobles, who object to him both as a foreigner and a parvenu. Indeed, many of the great Swedish nobles absolutely refuse to go to Court, or in any way to pay him honour. They ignore him completely.”⁷

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The low nobility (non-titled; poor)

Even the low nobility, the part that once formed the basis of the bureaucracy, blamed the royal house for the bad times. In the past, they had at least had a guaranteed income. Now everything depended on their own efforts. Many were radicalized during the narrow student years, but changed their minds when they needed work. Verner von Heidenstam is often mentioned in this context. There was already a debate about the need for them to accept non traditional work and social mobility, even if the direction was downwards.⁸

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Old liberals

The reluctance of the older generation of Liberals was more of a contempt for weakness. Best known was the MP Adolf Hedin (1834-1905). In 1868, he published his speeches, ”Fifteen letters from a democrat”, which was a general attack on the now by definition bourgeois state and its officials: This was oversized, incompetent & ruined the country. As for the monarchy, he felt that it no longer had any purpose. The constitutional monarchy was theatre for the masses:

”There was a time, when the kingdom, so to speak, was society and progress depended on it; this was due both to the nature of the style of government and to the great personalities. But times have changed enormously. Now, if the citizens obey the law, if taxes are paid, if the public spirit is encouraged to make great efforts for patriotic ends, in a word, if society holds together and moves forward, no one can now say that

⁷ de Fontenoy 1892: s. 436.

⁸ Rudenschöld 1845.

in a constitutional monarchy this is due to the personality of the monarch, which without any particular inconvenience to the country can be very insignificant; nor is the form of monarchy of any importance. Under such circumstances, it seems to me most correct that the royals do not seek to maintain an external facade, which is not matched by internal content.”⁹

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Young liberals

Political scientist S. J. Boëthius explained the reluctance of the younger generation of liberals vis-à-vis Oscar II by saying that under him they never gained the influence they felt they were entitled to under the new constitution:

”When Charles John's system of government, which made the ministers almost to a man bend the the personal will of the king (the so-called “One man rule”), no longer could be maintained, it became necessary to change how the government legitimized its decisions, and in so doing it became clear that the Parliament somehow must be involved. However, its role was not clear. Two principles were in conflict: on the one hand, the King's constitutional right to govern the kingdom, and on the other hand, the Parliament's growing claims and influence. An effective attempt to solve the problem was not made under the governments of Oskar I and Karl XV, not even under the latter, since the 1866 constitutional reform made the need for change even greater. Parliamentary confidence was not essential for forming a government, but its absence was detrimental to authority. Oskar II's statesmanship is that he attempted to solve the problem. It consisted in that the king, while keeping his right of appointment [of the Council of State], would use it in such way the the government was assured support within the Parliament's both chambers, which was in accordance with the new two-chamber-parliament. This principle was behind the tentative attempts at the beginning of his government, and during Boström's first cabinet it was almost completely implemented. Only twice – by naming Posse and Staaf Prime ministers- did he depart in favour of a purely 2nd Chamber parliamentarianism, but it was unsuccessful, soon-to-be-abandoned experiments, and Staaf's government ended with a strong assertion of what had been the main thread of Oscar's policy, when he rejected Staaf's demand, through dissolving the 2nd Chamber, to thwart the constitutional veto of the 1st Chamber and brought about the Lindman ministry, whose representative reform [increased middle class influence in the 1st Chamber], however, pointed towards a new time. Therefore, the government of Oskar II has a place in our history, comparable to the Carolingian and Gustavian epochs, not only by its length but also because like them, it had a definite constitutional character: two-chamber-parliamentarianism.”¹⁰

[Boëthius is a bit cryptic. The Staaff's incident is better known in Axel Brusewitz's version: On Monday, May 14, 1906, began the Parliamentary debates on the voting rights bill of Staaff's government. In the 1st Chamber, the proposal was the same rejected by an overwhelming majority. In the 2nd Chamber it was the following day adopted by a considerable majority. On this occasion, Staaff, in a speech towards the end of the debate, characterized it with the notorious antithetical question: ”Should

⁹ Hedin 1868: s. 64.

¹⁰ Boëthius 1925: ss. 260-261.

king rule his Swedish kingdom with popular power or by lords?"¹¹ By dissolving his government, Staaff believed he could force a new election & once again present his proposition, this time possibly with a more positive result in the 1st Chamber. He assumed (or at least hoped) that it would be impossible for Crown Prince Gustaf (who at the time was deputizing for King Oscar II) to form an alternative government, but there he made a mistake. It also turned out that the resistance in the 1st Chamber was more due to him as a person than to the actual proposition, which went through under the successor Arvid Lindman.]

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King Oscar II thus succeeded through the 1st Chamber (where the Conservatives were in the majority) for almost his entire reign blocking the 2nd Chamber where the Liberals were in the majority), and this was possible for King Gustaf V to continue until the 1919 general election. Subsequently, the changes to the electoral system left the Conservatives of the 1st Chamber in the minority. However, it is unclear what all this manipulation was served for purpose. Two-chamber-parliamentarianism was like an eternal equilibrium parliament. Some issues were completely impossible to pursue. Oscar II regretted his role:

"In my conviction, there can be nothing more demoralizing for a character than being a constitutional monarch. I have been one for twenty years and I know that. To own an opinion and yet so rarely be allowed to act on it – is there something more destructive for character than having that as duty."¹²

The quote is from September 6, 1892, when after 20 years of discussions the 1st & 2nd Chamber finally agreed on the issue of conscription & basic taxes. That it took so long was due to the MPs voting according to their own convictions. Although King Oscar II was able to choose loyal prime ministers & these his councillors, it was not a given that it resulted in support in the chambers. In 1905, prior to the negotiations with Norway on the dissolution of the union, the Parliament actually forced the dissolution of the government and neither Oscar II nor Crown Prince Gustaf (who at the time was deputizing for Oscar II) had any role in the negotiations of forming a new government. A harbinger of things to come.

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Social Democracy

The social democratic reluctance seems to have been due to political persecution. This came in two stages: Stage 1 c. 1878-90. Stage 2 c. 1907-14. Stage 1 under Oscar II began with the military being deployed during the Sundsvall strike & concluded with several members of the Social Democratic leadership being convicted for crimes of opinion: Agitators August Palm (2 ½ months 1887/88) & A H Janhekt (seven months 1888). Editors Per Eriksson (nine months 1888), Axel Danielsson (1 ½ years 1888) & Hjalmar Branting (3 ½ months 1889). Stage 2 under King Gustaf V is known as the "prosecution rage" & included 30 or 300 prison sentences depending on how you count. The prosecutions were about all sorts of things: Pamphlets, blasphemy, demonstrations, conscientious objection, Lèse-majesté, assassination, etc. Half of the sentences were related to the general strike of 1909.¹³ Afterwards it can be

¹¹ Brusewitz 1951: s. 15.

¹² Hadenius & Nevéus 1960: s, 134. [Politikern Sigfrid Wieselgrens minnesanteckningar, 1899-07-26.]

¹³ Karlbom 1979; Haste 1988: ss. 108-145; Bosdotter m.fl. red. 2012.

said that the sentences - prison 3-6 months & fines - were not very dissuasive, but that they delayed democracy & poisoned the atmosphere.

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The proletarians

There are many explanations as to why Sweden during Oscar II did not have any major social unrest. This is usually inevitable when population growth cannot be absorbed within the old confines. The American emigration seems to have been a social safety valve. Emotions ran high though: There were American writing agencies specializing in infamous letters & submitting them to the old country. Small revenge is also revenge.

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The Legacy

The myriad of details and the long time span means that Oscar II's reign is either described as an ongoing process or a before-after. Since he himself operated behind a smokescreen of words, court secrecy, conflicting messages, appointment powers, brokers, corridor politics, political pressure, Orders, royal dinners, cronyism & festivities, his actions have been difficult to get at. It is repeatedly pointed out that Oscar is "underexplored" - code words for the letters of the time, diaries, memoirs, diplomatic reports, protocols, etc are incomplete or misleading. Possibly his surroundings felt like idiots for being extras in Oscar II's grandiose theatre performance. Strindberg describes Oscar's modus operandi as:

"The constitutional monarch, with its autocracy on paper and the name stamp on the Council table, has sought to instead exercise power through influence. As he appoints all senior officials, civil, ecclesiastical and military, [a total of 15 thousand posts] the regent owns an enormous influence, partly by mentioning and partly by bypassing. ... the Kings formal power has ... fallen to zero, but it retains its influence through the right to bestow social prestige."¹⁴

In 1873, Norway provided for the government to be led by a prime minister who also appointed the ministers. In 1876, Sweden introduced the same system. In 1884 Norway also introduced that their prime minister must have the support of a majority in the parliament. In 1917, Sweden introduced the same. In addition, a number of reforms were introduced to make the functioning of the government office more effective.¹⁵ Oscar II & later Gustav V found it increasingly difficult to assert their will, but since the government, in the manner of the period of liberty, legitimized its decisions through the king's authority, it was important that this was maintained. The distance between the fact & fiction became ever greater.

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Oscarian Sweden was also described as a case of uneven development & bunker politics:

"In our days, the conditions in Sweden are quite strange. Since 1866 the political power is largely in the hands of the rich farmers, in this case one can talk about a new

¹⁴ Järv 1968: ss. 29,618. [Artiklar publicerade 1910.]

¹⁵ Heckscher 1929; Departementshistoriekommittén 1990.

peasant heyday. The strangest feature here is that Swedish farmers exercise this power themselves, not through trustees from other social classes. In the Swedish Parliament, more than a hundred MPs are farmers - a situation that has precedent only in Norway and Denmark, if not on as a large scale as in Sweden. In contrast, a very significant proportion of the working population is without political voting rights. Thus, from a political point of view, Sweden is both modern ultra-democratic and old-fashioned aristocratic.

As for the ever-numerous nobility, a large number of noble families have sought to sustain their economic strength through entailed estates; since 1809, however, the establishment of new such foundations is prohibited by law.”¹⁶

In any case, the industry went ahead & people got it better. At a slow pace, however, because the Swedish market was too small. The expansion had to wait until the war years under Gustaf V. Depending on what it is measured, the country's income 1907-1917 increased by 50-100 percent. According to *Maktutredningen* (the Power Survey) (1990), the combined industrial & political expansion after 1905 is still with us because the two new elites were too busy with their own to have time to compete & the old elites from the days of the estate society had collapsed (see next chapter 13).

¹⁶ Sundbärg 1901: s. 133.

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