

Background: Mona Sahlin - Swedish Social Democrats Elect a Woman Leader

By Roger Hällhag and Uwe Optenhögel*

Elected undisputed on 17 March 2007, Mona Sahlin has become the first woman leader of the Swedish social democratic party (SAP) since its foundation in 1889. She takes over a party with a long tradition and one of the most successful parties in Europe. She also is the first leader for a century to be appointed while the party is in opposition. All previous leaders (Branting, Hansson, Erlander, Palme, Carlsson, Persson) have been Prime Ministers - not exactly an easy heritage for Mrs. Sahlin.

The state of affairs after the election defeat in September 2006

Mona Sahlin was selected after a search for a candidate inspiring sympathy for her personality, confidence in her competence and an open, consultative leadership style. The long half-year interregnum since Persson announced his plan to resign on election night has only seen half-hearted policy discussions. Neither Mona Sahlin nor any other 'prospect' for the leadership was required or even asked by the party to present any policy ideas or priorities. Such a peculiar situation is based on:

(1). Social democracy does not see itself as defeated ideologically or over policies. Instead the centre-right Alliance could only win a majority by promising to retain the fundamentals of the social democratic Swedish Model of publicly financed welfare, as well as job security for most

people. The [New Moderates] could only win the election through a decisive move to the centre ground and PM Fredrik Reinfeldt proudly recognises this.

(2). The electoral defeat is largely attributed to the personality of Göran Persson, not his policies. A domineering style, loosing his popular touch and looking tired, made many enough opt for the fresh and young political alternative. Therefore many believe that a new face and a wrapping is enough to restore social democratic power.

Most in the party leadership and Persson himself have in practice stuck to such limited interpretations of the defeat, playing down the need to review policies in an open debate. Nor did Persson loosen his grip on the party apparatus. Some

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policy debate has existed, but forward-looking party processes to cater for it has not been organised while in waiting.

The result has become a strong focus on personalities and finding a nice face. The urge for a woman has been overwhelming both, for the comprehensible reasons and for blocking some male candidates. The consensus culture is very strong in Swedish society and even more in the party. Displaying unity is cherished, whereas open votes, negative criticism and defining internal differences are normally sanctioned negatively.

The candidates for party leadership

Mona Sahlin was not the preferred nice face. The over-whelming favourite was Mona's close friend Margot Wallström, at present Vice-President of the European Commission. Her early 'no thanks', saying that she was not up to the task in spite of her obvious competence and achievements, just made her even more popular and fit for the job. A personal dispute with Persson, including his hesitation to retain her for a second period in the Commission, was no liability. Wallström won much sympathy, remarkably and importantly in spite of her EU-enthusiasm, which is not happily shared by the Swedish people and all social democrats.

Other preferred candidates excusing themselves were Carin Jämtin, former Minister for International Development Cooperation and now leader of the opposition in Stockholm city; and Wanja Lundby Wedin, president of the Swedish Trade Union Confederation, LO.

Mona (as she is called by everybody) only coming next reflects lingering doubts. Nevertheless she is the most well-known social democrat, after Persson, with outstanding and broad experience. Everybody, even those with faint political interests, knows her and people tend to have an opinion on her. She generates strong feelings and gets attention. She sticks out in the media. That is of course an

enormous political asset, but also a liability.

All candidates were extremely careful not to declare any candidacy or even open willingness to stand for the leadership. Self-doubt was preferred to self-confidence! Code and tactics required a very humble approach. Instead the election committee solicited nominations from the party for their further consideration, which should distil one candidate. However, Mona was the only candidate with broad acceptance not saying 'no thanks'.

From a democratic point of view, the leadership selection process has left a lot to desire. In form it has been very open and participative, but at the same time it has lacked political substance. Therefore, little ground is laid for what a professed 'renewal' of the party should contain in terms of priority issues and understanding of conflicting interests and objectives.

Mona's background: an eventful political career

- Grown up in a family active in the party. Leading positions in various youth organisations, including social democratic youth – SSU.
- Member of parliament at 25, minister of labour at 33 and groomed by then PM Ingvar Carlsson as possible successor during a year of deep economic crisis and labour market disputes. Secretary General of the party 1992-1994 while in opposition. The 1994 election was won, but reputation for being disorganised became rooted in the party.
- Mona Sahlin became Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Gender Equality and looked even more as Carlsson's successors. He announced resignation in August 1995, less than a year after winning the election and in the middle of

very tough measures to restore public finances.

- At that time Mona was accepted, even though grudgingly by party and unions, as new leader and presented her candidature, nobody willing or likely to stand against her. In the autumn Mona was accused of misusing a government credit card to pay for minor personal expenses, not even illegal if having it deducted later (“the Toblerone affair”). Messy personal finances (paying bills late, including many parking tickets and traffic fines) were turned public. As a result very few stood up for her in the party. At the same time political misgivings about painful welfare cutbacks due to the economic crisis contributed to a decline in support, even if that was a collective responsibility by party leadership. Mona has just been more honest about hard measures than most.
- Under that pressure Mrs. Sahlin resigned from government, but not the party posts, and became a freelance ‘entrepreneur’. Göran Persson was elected leader of the party and PM in March 1996.
- After the elections in 1998 Persson brought her back to government as deputy minister and over the years she held several portfolios with increasing weight.

Mona’s message:

jobs, welfare, environment and peace

Mona Sahlin is consistently reaffirming the need for constant ‘renewal’ of social democratic policies, in order to stay on top of change. That renewal has often been seen with much suspicion from those emphasising traditional social democratic values and policies. However, Persson governments’ success in saving the welfare system by reshaping its finances and some of its structures is a powerful example of

the experience that ongoing reforms and change can be in harmony with tradition and values.

Mona is pushing ahead in this perception of renewal, stressing other elements with the code words of feminism and the fight against discrimination in all senses (ethnic, sexual orientation, as well as social and gender), ability for self-criticism, combining rights with duties, praising individual freedom (in contrast to ‘the Right’s limited concept of freedom of choice’). She wants social democrats to no longer be the ‘defenders of systems’ but defenders of individuals – a remarkable swing in a party that has traditionally stressed collective values and convictions as the organizing principle of Swedish society. She also stresses the task of renewal of the party itself and a need to start listening to ‘the caring critics’.

In her much awaited congress speech Mrs. Sahlin solidly reconfirmed her priorities: jobs and labour market, environment (referring to Persson’s vision of a ‘Green Welfare State’), welfare as keeping Sweden together and a more active Sweden in Europe and the World.

Demonstrating her excellence as communicator she skilfully referred to tradition, hardly referring to her predecessor, but framing her whole speech on a visionary message ‘to the youth’ by Olof Palme in 1984. Mona closed with a recording of an anti-racist speech by him, popularised and put to music by Latin Kings – a suburban rap group.

Strategic allies: The unions

Mrs. Sahlin confirmed the fundamental importance of the collective agreements governing the labour market, it’s connection with a strong trade union movement and – rhetorically and ideologically important – the link between work and work conditions on one hand, and individual freedom on the other hand. Those feeling most vulnerable to the message of renewal are the unions for local

government employees. 'Kommunal' is the largest trade union, as local governments are the largest employers everywhere, providing schools, health care, child and elderly care and many other public services and administration.

They are in a defensive battle against both outsourcing and cutbacks of tax-financed public services. This sector has a large proportion of women on relatively low-paid jobs with almost no career prospects. By signalling a joint party-union battle against the government over the labour market, stressing the importance of the public sector's role in the growing service economy and backing down from supporting tax reductions for private demand and supply of household services Mona reached out.

Sahlin gets steadfast support from Wanja Lundby Wedin, who is loyal to her member's interests but in attitude an open-minded renovator, not a defensive traditionalist. Therefore Mona can start with a period of grace with unions. Her first public act, minutes after her election, was to attend a joint demonstration with unions in defence of collective agreements – highly symbolic even if the party never has wavered on that issue. SAP does not want to be "like any continental socialist talk shop party" by severing ties with labour unions.

The party

No other leadership changes of any significance took place. For this extraordinary congress all other members of the top leadership refused calls for their resignation, insisting that they were elected in late 2005 for a four year period. Most importantly, Marita Ulvskog, a former Minister of Culture imposed by Persson as Secretary General, did stay on. A reformed eurosceptic and leftist, she became seen as a useful balancing ideological voice against government pragmatism in Persson's time. When nominated, Mona made immediately clear that she prefers Ulvskog to stay.

The lack of change in the party's governing bodies might be ambivalent for Mona Sahlin, who promised 'change in leadership, not just the leader'. It could help depersonalise the discussion about the future of the party, forming the basis for a strong yet open leadership of shared responsibility based on the wide experience of several leading lights. However, if former ministers and other local government administrators are unwilling to let their own practice being questioned, real policy development might yet again be postponed. Mona might find herself in a rather heavy straightjacket.

Even if most of the leadership understands the dangers, the good opinion polls for the party can be poisonously comforting. Nothing is as easy as postponing difficult political choices.

As for the party itself, Mona made several statements which were both encouraging and demanding:

- We want to have an open, exciting post-election debate – the report of the analysis committee (which has been suspected of intentions to downplay uncomfortable results) will be the starting point, not the endpoint.
- We need new working groups and networks.
- Open up to society, new knowledge and other groups of people!
- Let people participate not out of duty, but out of desire, in ways which fit with their lives!

Discussion at this congress should already suggest the new style. Advisory only, they were supposed to start a wide internal debate about the politics and policies for the future. These might be the signals of a revitalised internal democracy that the party is yearning for. However, nothing of what was said is really new, so the answer lies in the practical application of Mona's suggestions.

With her strong congress performance Mona Sahlin has certainly not overcome all scepticism in the party. Traditionalists – for example in Skåne where the party is most threatened from the right and extreme right – are ready to soon again pick up their complaints if policies are not to their liking and if they feel not listened to.

On the other hand, her move to bring Margot Wallström (Sweden's popular EU Commissioner) back into the party is genuinely popular. Together with the also popular former foreign minister Jan Eliasson, Mrs. Wallström shall be foreign policy faces to counterbalance Sweden's internationally known foreign minister Carl Bildt. At the same time Sahlin intelligently compensates for her own lack of experience in foreign affairs and underlines the necessity of a more proactive Swedish approach in Europe and the world.

Public Perceptions and Reactions

The massive attention from media at the congress, as well as measured government comments, confirmed that all Swedish politics still relate to Social Democracy.

PM Reinfeldt has announced that he will tour work places in the public sector in order to talk to women (“not their male bosses”) about their jobs and prospects. Deputy PM Maud Olofsson stressed that SAP is almost last in getting a women leader, welcoming but downplaying the fact. The government has also kept a line of downplaying Mona Sahlin by questioning results of hers, “good at talking but little else”. In his first comments Reinfeldt invited her for a broad agreement with Social Democracy on the environment and European policies, which is a proposition that Mona will need to consider very carefully.

On environment, this would be of help to the government which has tried to be in the driving seat fighting climate change. Social Democrats are leading public opinion on that issue. They are considered more credible not least because they are familiar with dilemmas of the right balance

between industrial and environmental interests that particularly the Greens care less about.

In reaching out to Social Democrats the Moderates pretend to be the safer alternative for industrial workers by questioning the notion of Sweden heading first in industrial restructuring. Sahlin - as Göran Persson before - are vehemently arguing for the industrial benefits of being the first to produce and profit from environmentally friendly technologies.

On European policy, the social democrats are the more divided and therefore troubled party. However, the key to overcoming left (and green) scepticism to even using the EU as a political instrument might not lay in cooperation with the liberal right, but in differentiating oneself from the government.

Mona Sahlin will certainly be hard on the government when it comes to ideological issues. Nevertheless, she signals a readiness to find broad agreements and her willingness to review positions should leave room for such. She provocatively offers Reinfeldt a deal supporting his increased subsidies for higher earners' (fathers') parental leave against ditching local government grants to stay-at-home parents (mothers) favoured by Christian Democrats.

However, as Mona now has to prove herself as the opposition leader and the government still has time to hope for reform results favouring them, agreements on any importance are unlikely to occur in the short run.

A more important factor might be reactions of public opinion regarding the way politics is presented. If the floating middle class voters seem to favour less confrontation, that might temperate both government and opposition positions. On the other hand, if Sweden Democrats (a right-wing populist party) continues to grow, the rationale for Social Democrats

might be to stay more traditionalists, while still hammering an anti-racist message.

Media has given Mona a fairly positive and kind reception. Questions are correctly put about what her renewed policies will really be about. For now her signalling of priorities seems to be good and credible enough. Old affairs do not seem to be sufficiently promising to be recycled for the moment. However, if she again proves to be careless, the media might easily come back to haunt her. Swedes and the media are not exactly very tolerant in this respect, even if Mona has acquired more Teflon than many other public figures.

To sum it up:

Sweden – media, public opinion, her party, unions – is greeting Mona Sahlin with positive expectations and the benefit of doubt. The government is apprehensive of her.

Mona will still have a battle to establish herself in her new role, winning the sceptics in a more profound way. For Göran Persson it took five years to reach his peak. Mona does not have that time. She should be at the top of a party in full swing in two years time, being in a position to announce a government alternative for elections in September 2010 – defining relations with Left and Greens in a credible way.

Party polls are favourable at the moment. Two thirds of Swedes even assume that Social Democrats have the best chance to win next time. But that is far off. And maybe another poll is more sobering correct: 40% believes that social democrats have a better chance with Mona, 24% that the chance has shrunk and 30% say that she does not make a difference.