

Guest editorial

Ed Miliband's Rubik's Cube: One Nation Labour and Sweden's 'people's home'

Katrine Kielos

Apparently Ed Miliband can do a Rubik's Cube in one minute and thirty seconds. Impressive to many. Just another proof of the Labour leader's geekiness to others.

The original Rubik's cube is a 3 x 3 x 3 array made up of 26 smaller cubes in six colours. It was invented by the Hungarian architect Ernő Rubik in 1974 and went on to become the world's biggest-selling toy. Puzzles fascinate us because we know they have an answer. If they were random chaos with no discoverable pattern they wouldn't be interesting – they would just be junk. You don't create a solution to a puzzle, you discover its pattern. What you do create by solving it, though, are instructions on how that specific puzzle works.

Sometimes politics is like this too. There are patterns: things that have worked that might work again. With many political problems, just as with Rubik's Cubes, the solution lies not in *what* to think but *how* to think.

During his conference speech in Manchester in October Ed Miliband said the words 'One Nation' 46 times. By using the phrase made famous by the Conservative Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli, Miliband was not only rolling his tanks onto the Conservatives' lawn, he was also trying to claim the mantle of national unity for Labour.

To a Swede like myself the strategy seemed familiar. For 80 years the term 'the people's home' (*Folkhemmet*) was the most powerful idea in Swedish politics. Just like 'One Nation', it was a concept first used by the right. But the Social Democrats claimed it as their own in the 1920s and it went on to become the foundation for decades of social democratic rule in Sweden.

Swedish social democracy and the nation

The Swedish Social Democratic Party was founded in 1889. Unlike many of their European counterparts, they advocated a rather mild view of class conflict almost from the start. For various reasons the party never cultivated an image exclusively as a workers' party. Hjalmar Branting, party chair (1907–25) and Prime Minister (1920, 1921–3, and 1924–5) wrote in 1886: 'In a backward land like Sweden we cannot close our eyes to the fact that the middle class increasingly plays a very important role' (Branting, 1927 [1886], 33).

The party gradually abandoned both historical materialism and class struggle. During the 1920s it was actively reaching out to groups beyond the industrial proletariat. The key



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figure during this period was Per Albin Hansson. Hansson became party leader in 1928 and went on to become Prime Minister twice in four governments between 1932 and 1946 (1). His most memorable political contribution was the concept of ‘the people’s home’. Even today, this term is what most Swedes immediately associate with social democracy.

The 1920s were chaotic times in Europe. The radical right was successfully exploiting ideas of ‘people’ and ‘nation’. In Sweden, the Social Democrats were accused of being unpatriotic and dangerous: a party that would surely betray Sweden to the Russians. Per Albin Hansson recognised the great danger of this narrative. If the social democrats were attacked for fostering social divisions and working against the national interest, they would not be trusted to govern.

The term ‘the people’s home’ had originated on the right and was frequently used by the most influential Swedish nationalist of the time: Rudolf Kjellén. The concept was central to his movement’s critique of liberal capitalist society. Capitalism and liberalism tore up the fabric of the country at the expense of unity and security, the argument went. It was a powerful one. In many parts of Europe this critique became the foundation on which fascist movements were built.

Per Albin Hansson recognised the need to fight this charge. The Social Democrats could not be perceived as disloyal to the national interest. What Per Albin Hansson did by taking the term ‘the people’s home’ from the right and claiming it as his own was a case of what today’s political consultants would call ‘reframing’.

Reframing the nation

For the past 30 years sociologists, cognitive psychologists, political scientists, and communications scholars have been writing about how issues are ‘framed’ and why it matters. Popular books such as cognitive linguist George Lakoff’s *Don’t Think of an Elephant* have made the idea that defining the terms of a debate can determine the outcome into popular wisdom (Lakoff, 1990).

A political frame, just like a picture frame, holds things together and provides coherence to an array of images, symbols and arguments. It does this through an underlying idea that tells us what consequences and values are at stake. Every frame gives the advantage to certain ways of thinking and talking while placing others ‘out of the picture’.

In 1921 Per Albin Hansson remarked: ‘There is no more patriotic party than [the Social Democrats] since the most patriotic act is to create a land in which all feel at home’ (quoted in Hallberg and Jonsson, 1994). Hansson took the term ‘patriotic’ and put it in another frame. ‘National unity’ can be spoken of as a project that brings people of a specific ethnicity together, or it can be spoken of as a project that creates an equal society that doesn’t divide people. In other words, these are two very different ‘frames’ that make people think in very different ways.

The iconic explanation of the concept of ‘the people’s home’ is contained in a 1928 speech by Per Albin Hansson:

The basis of the home is community and togetherness. The good home does not recognise any privileged or neglected members, nor any favourite or stepchildren. In the good home there is equality, consideration, co-operation, and helpfulness. Applied to the great people’s and citizens’ home this would mean the breaking down of all the social and economic barriers that now separate citizens into the rich and the poor, the propertied and the impoverished, the plunderers and the plundered. Swedish society is not yet the people’s home. There is a formal equality, equality of political rights, but



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from a social perspective, the class society remains and from an economic perspective the dictatorship of the few prevails. (Quoted in Berkling, 1982, 227)

Under Per Albin Hansson's leadership communitarian and even nationalist appeals became associated with the left in Sweden. Equality was reframed from something threatening and revolutionary into a necessary foundation for national unity. When Ed Miliband speaks about 'One Nation Britain' he is trying to achieve something very similar.

The communitarian and nationalist tones of Per Albin Hansson are an often overlooked piece of the puzzle that is Swedish social democracy (2). The social democratic tradition in Sweden is well-known for its progressiveness on social issues and its commitment to free trade. What many people tend to forget is how this progressiveness was originally framed as a communitarian and patriotic project and expressed using the language of the right (see Berman, 2006).

To borrow the words of Tony Blair, the Swedish Social Democrats set out to become the 'political wing of the Swedish people'. The first social democratic newspaper was called *Folkviljan* ('people's will') and the party's first paper was entitled the 'people's paper' (*Folkbladet*). Public places built by the party were called 'the people's house' and 'the people's park'. The term 'the people's home' still evokes strong emotions in Sweden. No concept in the last century has had more impact.

Modern research into metaphors and how our minds work tells us that it's no coincidence that political metaphors based on the home and family are so powerful. George Lakoff argues in *Moral Politics* that these metaphors come naturally to us in a political context because our earliest experience with being governed is in the family (Lakoff, 2002).

Our parents protect us, educate us, and tell us what we can and cannot do. They make sure we have what we need and that we do our part around the house. Many nations are therefore metaphorically seen as families. We talk about Mother Russia, Mother India and of course the Fatherland. The United States of America have their Uncle Sam, their founding fathers, and their Daughters of the American Revolution.

So it's not surprising that our political beliefs are structured around the same concepts. 'The people's home' is an expression that carries a political vision in itself. When you say that a nation should be like a home you automatically imply that the values of the family should be at its core. We are not on our own: we have a responsibility to ourselves and to each other and we should organise our economy and society around this fact. Solidarity, togetherness, co-operation and consideration are all evoked.

For the last three decades the right has been undermining this way of thinking. Where Per Albin Hansson was applying the values of the home to the market, the right has been applying the values of the market to everything else – including the home.

The idea animating much of neo-classical economics is that everything can be explained (and governed) using the logic of the market. When the Chicago School economist Gary Becker first started to express these thoughts in the late 1970s, the French philosopher Michel Foucault said in a famous lecture that not even the new right of Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan could possibly take such aggressive economic imperialism seriously (Foucault, 2008, 269-70). Thirteen years later, in 1992, Gary Becker was awarded the Nobel Prize in economics. His definition of economics – that it was a logic that could be applied to all of existence – had become almost universal. Bestselling books like *Freakonomics* now teach us how to apply the logic of the market to every part of our lives. New Public Management was founded on the same line of thought, as were much of the public sector reforms undertaken during the 1990s. The values of the market are assumed to be 'neutral' and therefore not up for debate.

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When Ed Miliband talks about ‘One Nation Britain’ he is challenging this and trying to accomplish what Per Albin Hansson did when he introduced ‘the people’s home’. Miliband is bringing morality and values back into the discussion about how the economy works, and he is doing this through an appeal to national unity and belonging. It’s a longing that could just as easily be exploited by the radical right. However, it is ‘reframed’ in terms of the need for greater equality and solidarity.

Nobody knows if Ed Miliband will succeed. His project is a big one to say the least. These complicated puzzles of longing for unity and searching for a place to belong run deep in the human psyche. They don’t really have an answer.

Historically, the proposed solutions have varied. One of them, fascism, almost destroyed humanity. Another one, Swedish social democracy, created one of the most decent and progressive societies the world has ever seen.

It’s complicated – but then again you don’t ever create a solution to a puzzle, you just discover its pattern. However, this one will take Ed Miliband longer than one minute and thirty seconds.

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Notes

1. Per Albin Hansson governed for that entire period except for a short crisis in the summer of 1936, which he ended by forming a coalition government.
2. A leading social democratic politician, Richard Lindström, even referred to what the party was striving to achieve as ‘national socialism’, a term that soon became problematic for obvious reasons.