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An independent Scotland may turn to Sweden for inspiration

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On a level playing field? Lynne Cameron/PA

What sort of political system could Scottish independence produce? The debate in the referendum of 2014 shares with debate on the devolution referendum in 1997 a focus on the Nordic experience. In both cases, at least one country is portrayed as an ideal to which Scotland might aspire – usually while rejecting Westminster-style politics.

This was a feature of the push for “new politics” in Scotland in the 1990s, associated with the hope of the Scottish Constitutional Convention that:

The coming of a Scottish parliament will usher in a way of politics that is radically different from the rituals of Westminster: more participative, more creative, less needlessly confrontational.

Yet, **the experience so far** is that Scottish politics is much more like Westminster than this statement predicts. This is partly because the Scottish political system was designed by bodies set up by the UK government, not grass roots reformers.

Things might be different the second time round if the system is designed by a wider range of people in Scotland. Or, an independent Scotland could inherit many of its existing institutions, cultures and practices. Let's take the example of Sweden to explore the extent to which Scotland should and would emulate the politics of another country. We can identify three main practices we associate with Sweden.

Cross-party negotiation

Cross-party negotiation, in which there is a meaningful degree of cooperation between government and opposition groups before and after legislation is introduced to parliament. This does not happen in Scotland.

It still has a Westminster-style government versus opposition culture (the old cliché is that Labour in particular feared and loathed the SNP). Further, opposition parties do not get much involved before a bill reaches parliament. Instead, they scrutinise bills when they have been drafted. So, to be more like Sweden, Scotland would have to give up its existing parliamentary style. This is not likely if an independent Scotland inherits the Scottish parliament.

The occasional debate on this topic has arisen since devolution, but the Swedish style continues to be rejected to maintain traditional Westminster lines of accountability between government and parliament. MSPs and parties are also proud of their committee system in which they scrutinise policy by gathering evidence and examining witnesses. Swedish-style cross-party negotiation takes place before a bill is introduced, so the Scottish-style evidence gathering role is not as important.

Commissions of inquiry

Sweden excels at this - bringing a meaningful degree of formal co-operation (co-ordinated by civil servants) between government, organisations such as interest groups and political parties. Sweden is also associated with corporatism, or relatively close relationships between government, business and labour groups during economic policy making.

If we take out the role of opposition parties, the Scottish and UK governments already have similar systems. Most policy is made by civil servants in consultation with groups at a level of government not particularly visible to the public, parliament and senior policymakers. The difference may be in the detail and the formality of the process. So, independence would not alter these relationships significantly.

Universalism and the welfare state

When many people look to Sweden, it may be more for its policies than its policy making. We often associate Sweden with high-tax, high-spend policies and a welfare state with universal coverage. So, current debates in Scotland are often about the extent to which we can afford to maintain a universal system (although most parties shy away from the idea that they are proposing service cuts).

Perhaps an alternative to a focus on Swedish-style high-tax-high-spending is to consider the possibility of innovative ways to raise taxes or unusual sources of income.

In 2008, both were summed up by the idea of the "Arc of Prosperity" following a speech by first minister Alex Salmond to Harvard University. Salmond argued that small (and "high skilled") states were relatively flexible and able to adapt more quickly to economic

circumstances. More specifically, he placed great emphasis on Scotland's ability to grow by encouraging enterprise and foreign direct investment through tax cuts to business.

Salmond mentioned Sweden briefly, but the greater focus was on countries such as Ireland and Iceland - which helps explain why the speech subsequently appeared to backfire (following economic crises in those countries) and Salmond's opponents - including Labour MP Jim Murphy, then Scottish secretary - made great play of the phrase **Arc of Insolvency**. Consequently, the SNP is now more likely to focus on the example of Norway, which - unlike the UK - set up a **sovereign oil fund**.

These comparisons could form an important part of the independence debate if done correctly. We need to get beyond the idea that Nordic countries provide broad inspiration. They should be researched in detail to see what would work – and what people would prefer - in Scotland.

This is important because modern Sweden is not like its postwar romantic caricature. Scotland will never look like a Swedish-style consensus democracy if we compare it to a Sweden that no longer exists. Drawing lessons from the politics and policies of another country should be based on one-part hope and nine-parts research.



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