

'Swedes give a half-hearted "Yes" to Europe' from La Croix (15 November 1994)

Caption: On 15 November 1994, the French Catholic newspaper La Croix comments on the decision taken by the Swedish people to ratify the Treaty of Accession to the European Union and emphasises the relief of Sweden's neighbouring countries.

Source: La Croix. 15.11.1994. [s.l.]. "Le oui résigné des Suédois à l'Europe", auteur:Bernard, Catherine.

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Swedes give a half-hearted 'Yes' to Europe

'But how does all this affect the price of bread?' Barely 90 minutes after having voted by 52.2% to 46.9 % in favour of accession to the European Union, the Swedes, via the television, were wondering about its impact on their shopping baskets. That attitude is a fair reflection of their 'pragmatism'. They were wavering up to the very last minute. Some 32 % made up their minds in the final week of the campaign. It was not so much out of enthusiasm as of resignation and also out of the fear of being left isolated that they finally gave in to the entreaties of their political leaders.

On Sunday evening, the earlier fear amongst Swedish leaders was matched by their feeling of relief. This was particularly the case with Ingvar Carlsson, the Social-Democratic Prime Minister, because it was his supporters who were most in doubt. But, in the end, they also seem to have mostly voted 'Yes'.

The fact remains, however, that his party, just like Sweden itself, is divided. The split is first and foremost geographical. The north, which accounts for half of the country in terms of surface area but only 15 % of the population, voted overwhelmingly 'No'. In one of the constituencies of Jamtland, in the southern part of the north, the 'No' vote exceeded 71.5 %! In Stockholm, on the other hand, 61 % voted 'Yes'. In fact, there was a majority 'Yes' vote in only three urban areas: the capital and its outskirts, Scanie in the far south-east near Denmark and on the west coast where lies Gothenburg, the second largest city.

The second split is between older men and everyone else. Young people and women, who were thought to be against the Union, only grudgingly changed camp. If the exit polls, which had overestimated the 'Yes' vote, are to be believed, 53 % of women compared with 63 % of men, and 53 % of the 18 to 30-year-olds compared with 59 % for older people, supported accession.

The man in the street's revolt

According to the sociologist, Maria Oskarsson, 'Just as in Norway in 1972, when the country said "No" to joining the EEC, it is a revolt by ordinary people against the Establishment.' 'Those who voted "No" were undecided until the very last moment, and these are all people who, because of their type of work or where they live, are far from the centre of power. Logically, they are, therefore, the least optimistic about Sweden being able to influence the work of the Union. In their mind, Europe is not for them, it is a hobbyhorse for the politicians. In terms of women's attitudes, it shows the importance that they attach to the nanny state and the public sector, whereas men are more interested in the private sector and the economy in general.'

It seems that the debate in the country is not yet over, despite the calls for unity, especially from Ingvar Carlsson. Gudrun Schyman, the leader of the left-wing party opposed to the Union, said that, 'We'll take our criticisms with us to Brussels.' Already, some 'No' supporters are demanding a fresh vote in Sweden in two or three years to decide on the future of Economic and Monetary Union. At all events, Sweden will be sending the 'anti-Union' Margareta Winberg to Brussels this afternoon to take part in the Council of Agricultural Ministers.

Leaders in neighbouring states, particularly Norway, greatly welcomed the 'Yes' vote. The Prime Minister, Gro Harlem Brundtland, said last night that, 'Clearly it is important to be aware of what our Finnish and Swedish neighbours have done.' Sweden's accession to the Union was the only remaining hope for the tiny minority of Norwegians who favour a 'Yes' vote.

Relief amongst Finns

The latest opinion polls, published on Saturday, show only 29 % intending to vote 'Yes' against 48 % for a 'No' vote in the referendum on 28 November. But, when you ask them how they would vote if Sweden joined the European Union, they become a little less categorical. It is neck and neck between the 'Yes' and 'No' votes. 'This', according to Gro Harlem Brundtland, 'is because it is now clear that we shall face bigger changes by staying out rather than by joining.' She is careful not to encourage voters to 'follow' the Swedish, since she knows how ill-disciplined her fellow Norwegians are. 'We are not going to let the

Swedes decide for us,' protests Anne Enger-Lahnstein, a central figure amongst opponents of accession. 'Nevertheless,' says the 'Yes' activist, Arve Thorvik, 'whichever side convinces people that it represents stability will win.' The Norwegian Ambassador to Sweden, Anders Helseth, adds that, 'I don't see the Norwegians voting in favour of limiting cooperation to Iceland and Liechtenstein (as part of the European Economic Area).'

The Finnish Prime Minister, Esko Aho, also heaved a sigh of relief. Although, on 16 October last, the Finns said 'Yes' to the European Union, the Members of Parliament have not yet ratified their country's Accession Treaty, something which requires a two-thirds majority in Parliament. The 'anti-EU' camp, led by the former Minister for Foreign Affairs, Paavo Väyrynen, succeeded in slowing down the process. But even if Paavo Väyrynen still maintains that he will vote 'No' in Parliament, he will not, henceforth, have enough supporters.

Finally, the Swedish 'Yes' vote is welcomed by the three small Baltic Republics of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. 'We need a country like Sweden that can be our advocate inside the Union,' said recently the Latvian Minister for European Affairs, Olgerts Pavlovski. In fact, the presence in the European Union, of three Scandinavian countries, Denmark, Finland and Sweden, could accelerate the integration of these countries belonging to Western Europe that the European Union tends to overlook.

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