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## SWEDISH SAGAS

By Allan Carlson\*

### “NEW IDEAS IN FAMILY POLICY: A PRESENTATION TO MEMBERS OF SWEDEN’S PARLIAMENT”

In 1932, the young economist Gunnar Myrdal wrote an important article for the Swedish idea-journal, *Spektrum*. Entitled “Social-politikens dilemma,” the article laid out the argument for a radical new form of social engineering.

Over the prior decade, Myrdal said, policy experts armed with the new apparatus of social science research had called for policies that would prevent social problems from emerging, rather than confront these problems after they existed. This preventative approach to social policy required the radical rebuilding of human institutions. As Myrdal argued: “When based on human-oriented value premises and a rational social science, preventive social policy leads to the natural union of the correct technical with the politically radical solution.” Myrdal pointed specifically to Sweden’s family crisis of

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### TAXING THE FAMILY: A FAIRY TALE WITH LESSONS FOR THE U.S.A.

Once upon a time, there was a happy and prosperous Kingdom, filled with contented families and beautiful children. The land was ruled by a wise and kindly old King. This King had a venerable Prime Minister, as well, who had been in office even during the reign of the old King’s father. Some people from other lands criticized the Kingdom for being too generous to its subjects. Yet, by every measure, this Kingdom was perhaps the richest on earth. The Kingdom’s workshops made and sold wonderful things that all the world wanted. Others came from nearby lands to work in this felicitous place. The old Prime Minister called this land “The People’s Home.” As his predecessor had once explained: “It is a matter of creating comfort and well-being..., making [the home] good and warm, light and cheerful and free. To a woman there should be no more attractive mission.”<sup>1</sup>

*(Continued on page 6.)*

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## NEW IDEAS IN FAMILY POLICY

(Continued from page 1.)

the 1930's, seen most vividly in the falling birthrate, as an example of what he called "social lag": where an old institution — the family — had failed to adjust to new social and economic realities. Here, in particular, social science would lead to the overthrow of the traditional family ways and the creation of a new reality grounded in radical policy solution.<sup>1</sup>

Gunnar and Alva Myrdal made several intellectual errors in crafting their family and population policies for Sweden during the 1930's: mistakes discussed in some detail in my book, *The Swedish Experiment in Family Politics: The Myrdals and the Interwar Population Crisis*. But their biggest error, I believe, was this assumption that social science would show the weakness or failure of traditional institutions and affirm the need for radical policy solutions. In truth, modern social science actually shows the power, value, and necessity of traditional family arrangements: specifically, it shows marriage to be the giver of health, wealth, and success to adults, and this social science research also shows that children who grow up with their married natural parents are healthier, happier, and more successful in school and in life than children living in any other circumstance.

Let me be more specific. New research shows:

- that children growing up with their married natural parents are the least likely to be sexually, physically, or mentally abused (indeed, one Canadian study finds children living in stepparent or single-parent families to be at 40 times greater risk of abuse);<sup>2</sup>
- that children in married couple homes are the least likely to attempt suicide;<sup>3</sup>
- that children living with their natural, married parents are far

less likely to abuse alcohol or use illegal, mind-altering drugs;<sup>4</sup>

- that children in married couple homes are the least likely to commit delinquent or criminal acts;<sup>5</sup>

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*These social gifts from traditional family structures extend to adults, as well.*

*Here, too, we find that married parents are healthier, in mind and body, than their cohabitating, never-married, or divorced counterparts.*

- that children in married couple, natural parent homes are much more likely to be healthy and happy and to do well in school than children reared in any other setting.<sup>6</sup>
- And that all measures of child wellbeing show, on balance, negative or damaging turns following divorce.<sup>7</sup>

These social gifts from traditional family structures extend to adults, as well. Here, too, we find that married parents are healthier, in mind and body, than their cohabitating, never-married, or divorced counterparts.<sup>8</sup> We find that among divorced adults, physical and mental health also deteriorate, among women and men alike.<sup>9</sup>

Some of the data I cite here comes from the United States and Canada, some from European and interna-

tional surveys. Allow me, at this point, to provide some specific examples of recent social research regarding Sweden which underscore my point.

- First, from the journal *Social Science and Medicine* (2000): "Whether they lived in Sweden, which has generous welfare benefits for single mothers, or Great Britain, which has considerably less generous welfare benefits, single mothers had significantly poorer health than married mothers. This health gap held constant between 1979 and 1995. Lone mothers had between 61 and 74 percent greater health risks than married mothers in Britain, and between 39 and 92 percent greater risk in Sweden."<sup>10</sup>
- Second, from *The American Journal of Epidemiology* (1989): A research team at the University of Gothenberg found that married Swedish men live longer than divorced and never-married Swedish men. Looking at the health statistics for about 8,000 middle-aged Swedish males, the researchers found the married men to have a mortality rate of 9 percent compared to 20 percent for divorced men. "Death from alcoholism and liver cirrhosis, as well as suicide and other violent death, were all considerably more common in divorced men" than among the married. So were cancer and cardiovascular or heart disease.<sup>11</sup>
- Third, from *The Journal of Socio-Economics* (1997): The researcher found that "the higher the rate of Christians in a Swedish city, the lower the rates of divorce, abortion, non-payment of debt, and children born out of wedlock." Moreover, even non-religious Swedes with a high

number of religious neighbors acted different than their counterparts in other cities with less-religious neighbors. They, too, were much less likely to get divorced, have an abortion, beget a child out of wedlock, or default on a debt.<sup>12</sup>

- And fourth, from one of the world's premier medical journals, *The Lancet* (2003), research results that might have drawn press attention here. A study of over 1 million Swedish children between 1991 and 1999 found that "children with single parents showed increased risks of psychiatric disease, suicide or suicide attempt, injury, and addiction." Even after adjusting for factors such as socioeconomic status and parents' health status, the article reports that "children in single-parent households [still] had increased risks compared with those in two-parent households for psychiatric disease in childhood, suicide attempts, alcohol-related [and] narcotics-related disease...[and] mortality" [death!].<sup>13</sup>

What do social science studies such as these tell us regarding public policy? If the state's goals are to aim at household equality, encourage human health, happiness, and success, renew the population through children, and give children the best possible start in life, the Swedish government should:

- Encourage the marriage of young men and women and the long-term maintenance of married-couple homes;
- Discourage divorce and the unstable status of cohabitation; and
- Welcome the presence of traditionally religious people.

These policies are in the state's best interest and they are the logical prod-

uct of social science investigation.

How might you, as lawmakers, gain access to this sort of data? I can point you to three powerful sources:

- First, I refer you to *The Family Portrait: A Compilation of Data, Research, and Public Opinion on the Family*, recently published by The Family Research Council of Washington, DC. This book contains a wealth of research findings showing the positive social gifts of the traditional family and the great price paid when it is abandoned. The majority of the data in this source is American, but not all. In every case, the research finding is backed by a full citation of the source. It is an easily used and effective tool for legislators and journalists.<sup>14</sup>
- Second, The Howard Center provides a CD-ROM containing the abstracts, or summaries, of about 1000 journal articles from around the globe in the fields of sociology, psychology, and medicine. While called The New Research Digital Archive of The Family in America, it is international in scope. These research findings show the positive power of the family. A simple key-word search can be used to call up specific research findings such as "marriage" and "health." Again, it is a useful tool for lawmakers to mobilize social science research on behalf of families.<sup>15</sup>
- Third, I want to bring your attention to a related resource, available on-line via the worldwide web. This is the Family and Society Database, developed by The Heritage Foundation of Washington, DC, in cooperation with The Howard Center. This database includes many of the abstracts found on the CD-ROM, plus others. It can also be searched via key

word or subject categories. It is available, without cost, through The Howard Center's website at [www.profam.org](http://www.profam.org) (click on the "New Research" icon at the upper right of the Home page).

Allow me to turn to one other matter. A great issue facing Sweden, and the European Community as a whole in the early years of the 21st century is the same issue analyzed by Alva and Gunnar Myrdal in the 1930's: the falling birthrate, or depopulation.

Curiously, the United States is the only developed nation in the world which recorded an increase in its total fertility rate between 1981 and 2000: from an average of 1.81 children born per woman in 1981 to 2.10 in 2000, an increase of 16 percent, just back to the replacement or zero-growth level. This fertility increase was not a function of America's greater ethnic or racial diversity. Indeed, the increase in fertility among Americans of European stock was actually higher than this, or 19 percent, to 2.065. Since 1996, even the U.S. marital fertility rate has been climbing, something not seen since 1957.

Briefly, why is this happening? And are there policy lessons for other nations?

Part of the explanation is the higher degree of religious identification and behavior shown by Americans, compared to other developed peoples. But family creation as an expression of religious belief also requires a favorable policy environment. What American public policies appear to make a difference? I see three:

1) First, the joint taxation of married couples, also known as income splitting. In general, United States tax law still requires that married couples file a joint tax return, where tax brackets are substantially wider for joint returns than for individual returns. Between 1948 and 1969, the U.S. had a system of pure income splitting, where income tax brackets

were fully twice as wide for married couples as for single persons. Such policy treats marriage as a true economic partnership (just as any other business partnership) and recognizes and protects spouses who devote themselves to labor in the home, such as childcare. There is good evidence that this law encouraged both the Marriage Boom of this period and, indirectly, the Baby Boom where the U.S. total fertility rate nearly doubled. The weakening of income splitting in the U.S. coincided with falling marriage and fertility rates. The most recent American tax reform act of 2001 took steps toward restoring full income splitting by reducing the so-called “marriage penalty.”

Sweden had a similar policy before 1971, the year in which your nation switched to mandatory individual returns. What you may not know is that Swedish social analysts are nearly unanimous in seeing the abandonment of income splitting and the joint return as — in Sven Steinmo’s words — “the most significant” and “radical” reform of the turbulent 1970’s, because “it meant that the Swedish tax system would ignore family circumstances” in calculating tax burden.<sup>16</sup> And in the case of modern taxation, to “ignore” usually means to damage and discourage.

2) Second, tax exemptions and credits for children. The effect of the child-allowance (or *barnbidrag*) on encouraging fertility is minimal, at best; some recent European analysts find no positive effects at all.<sup>17</sup> In contrast, there is evidence that the tax exemption for dependent children found in the U.S. tax code has a “robust” or strong effect on fertility. When the real value of this exemption has risen, U.S. fertility rose also; when its real value fell, so did fertility. Analyst Leslie Whittington shows that a 10 percent rise in the exemptions real value generates 8 percent more births. Whittington explains this by noting that the exemption (now at about \$3000 per child) provides

about 15 percent of the annual cost of raising a child.<sup>18</sup> In 1997, the U.S. Congress also created an additional child tax credit: \$400 per child then; \$600 per child in 2003; and currently scheduled to reach \$1,000 by 2010. Preliminary results suggest that this credit has a pronatalist effect, as well.

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*Sixty-two percent of homeschooling families have three or more children, compared to only 20 percent of the nationwide sample.*

In fairness to Gunnar Myrdal, whom I criticized earlier, I should note that he was the primary author in 1936 of a government report on family taxation that had many good ideas: indeed, ideas fairly close to those now found in my country; and in some ways, better still. Issued by the Population Commission of 1935, the report proposed a large increase in the tax deduction for all children; and for third, fourth, and subsequent children, the report suggested doubling the base tax deduction again. It also proposed a new tax that would fall largely on the unmarried and the childless. Myrdal was deeply disappointed when the government rejected the tax aspects of his population program.<sup>19</sup> You might look at this plan again.

3) My third example is homeschooling. This development is growing rapidly in the U.S.: over two million children are now homeschooled, a number growing at about 15 percent a year. Homeschooling can be called the most important American folk movement (or *fölk rörelse*) of the last 20 years, but the process seems to be little understood in Europe. Most non-American observers worry that the children will be too sheltered or isolated. In fact, survey after survey show homeschooled students to be — on average — more involved in group activities than their counterparts in the state schools. And the educational results are impressive. In grades one through four, according to a University of Maryland study, median test scores for homeschooled children are a full grade above those of public and private school students. By grade eight (or the age of 13), the median scores of homeschoolers are almost four grade levels above those of children in state and private schools.

The more important traits of homeschooling may be the social and familial. Over 97 percent of homeschool students have parents who are married, compared to a 72 percent figure nationwide. Sixty-two percent of homeschooling families have three or more children, compared to only 20 percent of the nationwide sample. A full third (33.5 percent) of homeschooling families actually have four or more children, compared to but six percent nationwide. These are unusually child-rich (*barnrika*) families.<sup>20</sup>

Are these examples of effective pro-family and pro-natalist policies relevant to Sweden in this time? That is, of course, for you to judge, not for me. But I suggest that they may be.

More broadly, I urge you to trust social science. Honest research, honestly reported, reinforces the tremendous social power and positive gifts of the traditional, or natural, family, one built on marriage and an openness to the birth of children. **FIA**

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> In two parts: Gunnar Myrdal, "Socialpolitikens dilemma," *Spektrum* 2 (No. 2, 1932): 1-13; and (No. 3, 1932): 13-31.
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- <sup>7</sup> See: Paul R. Amato and Danelle D. DeBac, "The Transmission of Marital Instability Across Generations: Relationship Skills or Commitment to Marriage?," *Journal of Marriage and Family* 63 (2001): 1038-51; Jane Mauldon, "The Effect of Marital Disruption on Children's Health," *Demography* 27 (Aug. 1990): 431-46; and Ronald L. Simons, et al., "Explaining the Higher Incidence of Adjustment Problems Among Children of Divorce Compared with Those in Two-Parent Families," *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 61 (Nov. 1999): 1020-33.
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- <sup>12</sup> Niclas Berggren, "Rhetoric or Reality? An Economic Analysis of the Effects of Religion in Sweden," *Journal of Socio-Economics* 26 (1997): 571-96.
- <sup>13</sup> Gunilla Ringbäck Weitof, Anders Hjern, Bengt Haglund, and Mons Rosen, "Mortality, Severe Morbidity, and Injury in Children Living with Single Parents in Sweden: A Population-Based Study," *The Lancet* 361 (25 Jan. 2003): 289-95.
- <sup>14</sup> This book is available through: The Family Research Council, 801 G Street, NW, Washington, DC, 20001; 202-393-2100.
- <sup>15</sup> The CD-ROM is available from The Howard Center, 934 N. Main Street, Rockford, IL 61103; 1-800-461-3113, at the cost of \$19.95.
- <sup>16</sup> Sven Steinmo, "Social Democracy vs. Socialism: Goal Adaptation in Social Democratic Sweden," *Politics & Society* 16 (Dec. 1988): 430. For similar judgments, see: Anne Lise Ellingsaeter, "Dual Breadwinner Societies: Provider Models in the Scandinavian Welfare States," *Acta Sociologica* 41 (#1, 1998): 66; Maud L. Edwards, "Toward a Third Way: Women's Politics and Welfare Policies in Sweden," *Social Research* 58 (Fall 1991): 681-82; Annika Baude, "Public Policy and Changing Family Patterns in Sweden, 1930-1977," in Jean Lipman-Blumen and Jessie Bernard, eds., *Sex Roles and Social Policy: A Complex Social Science Equation* (Beverly Hills: SAGE Studies in International Sociology, 1979): 171; and Jane Lewis and Gertrude Åström, "Equality, Difference, and State Welfare: Labor Market and Family Policies in Sweden," *Feminist Studies* 18 (Spring 1992): 67.
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- <sup>18</sup> See: Leslie Whittington, "Taxes and the Family: The Impact of the Tax Exemption for Dependents on Marital Fertility," *Demography* 29 (May 1992): 220-21; and Leslie A. Whittington, James Alm, and H. Elizabeth Peters, "Fertility and the Personal Exemption: Implicit Pronatalist Policy in the United States," *The American Economic Review* 80 (June 1990): 546.
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Jane Lewis and Gertrude Åström argue that the “most important change designed to promote women’s employment was the introduction of separate taxation.”<sup>15</sup> Using a different interpretive lens, it is fair to conclude that Sweden’s current regime of few and weak marriages, fragile homes, widespread cohabitation, extensive day care, low fertility, and universal employment of young mothers derives — to a significant degree — from this one change in tax policy.

Why should we care? Sweden is a relatively small country with a population about half that of Illinois. Does the Swedish example really matter?

It does. First, Sweden is the model held up by virtually all Americans arguing for a radical change in this nation’s family structure and/or family policy. Sweden is “the progressive al-

ternative,” “the feminist paradise,” the “one nation that takes gender equality seriously,” the home of universal day care, paid parental leave, and purposeful gender-role engineering. Given this status, it is vitally important that advocates for traditional families understand the origin and content of the Swedish model.

Second, this story about Sweden underscores the ideologically charged nature of modern taxation. Given the vast intrusion of tax collection into daily life, tax policy is no longer simply about the best or most efficient way to raise funds to pay for necessary government functions. Tax policy today is just as much about the nature of the social order and the direction in which this (or any) society will move. Twenty-first century tax policy can reflect a normative social order or it can engineer it in one or another direction. But it cannot be impartial.

Third, advocates for the traditional family must enter the tax policy fray with eyes open and with purposeful goals. For it is over tax policy — almost uniquely — that all special interests collide. Families cannot count on the U.S. Congress to do the right thing here, working by group instinct alone. Joint-stock corporations, churches, unions, small businesses, charities, feminists, schools, environmentalists, sexual minorities, families: all of these categories — and countless more — have a stake in almost every round of significant tax reform. Indeed, it is in this issue area — perhaps more than any other — that the relative strength of “special interests” can best be tested. Family advocates must have their priorities clear and their coalition firm if they are to protect families from harm and gain their share of any “reform.” **FIA**

## Endnotes

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<sup>2</sup> From: Lewis and Åström, “Equality, Difference, and State Welfare,” p. 67. The marginal tax rate for two-income households became 68 percent.

<sup>3</sup> On the unique status of Sweden in this regard, see: Irene Dingeldey, “International Comparison of Tax Systems and their Impact on the Work-Family Balancing,” at <http://www.iatge.de/aktuellveroeff/am/dinge100b.pdf>.

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<sup>5</sup> Dorothy McBride Stetson and Amy Maxur, eds., *Comparative State Feminism* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 1995): 241.

<sup>6</sup> Quoted in Stetson and Mazur, *Comparative State Feminism*, p. 241. See also: Baude, “Sex Roles and Social Policy,” p. 166; and Lilja Mosesdottir, “Pathways Towards the Dual Breadwinner Model: The Role of the Swedish, German, and the American States,” paper prepared for The Social Sciences Educational and Research Center, Luleå University of Technology, Luleå, Sweden; 2000, pp. 15-16.

<sup>7</sup> Sörensen and Bergqvist, “Gender and the Social Democratic Welfare Regime,” p. 9.

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<sup>9</sup> From: Lewis and Åström, “Equality, Difference, and State Welfare,” p. 67.

<sup>10</sup> Alva Myrdal, et. al., *Toward Equality: The*

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<sup>11</sup> Sven Steinmo, “Social Democracy vs. Socialism: Goal Adaptation in Social Democratic Sweden,” *Politics & Society* 16 (Dec. 1988): 430.

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<sup>13</sup> Maud L. Edwards, “Toward a Third Way: Women’s Politics and Welfare Policies in Sweden,” *Social Research* 58 (Fall 1991): 681-82.

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<sup>15</sup> Lewis and Åström, “Equality, Difference, and State Welfare,” p. 67. For similar judgments, see also: Phyllis Moen, *Working Parents: Transformations in Gender Roles and Public Policy in Sweden* (Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1989): 24-25.