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Press Watch - How Sweden became an example of how not to handle immigration

We've taken in far too many people and we're letting them down badly – especially the children, Tove Lifvendahl writing in The Spectator

For a British boy to be killed by a grenade attack anywhere is appalling, but for it to happen in a suburb of Gothenburg should shatter a few illusions about Sweden. The murder of eight-year-old Yuusuf Warsame fits a pattern that Swedes have come slowly to recognise over the years. He was from Birmingham, visiting relatives, and was caught up in what Swedish police believe is a gang war within the Somali community. Last year, a four-year-old girl was killed by a car bomb outside Gothenburg, another apparent victim of gang violence.

For years, Sweden has regarded itself as a ‘humanitarian superpower’ — making its mark on the world not by fighting wars but by offering shelter to war’s victims. Refugees have arrived here in extraordinary numbers. Over the past 15 years, some 650,000 asylum-seekers made their way to Sweden. Of the 163,000 who arrived last year, 32,000 were granted asylum. Sweden accepts more refugees in proportion to size of population than any other nation in the developed world — when it comes to offering shelter, no one does it better. But when it comes to integrating those we take in (or finding the extra housing, schools and healthcare needed for them), we don’t do so well.

It may be news to the rest of the world, but gang warfare has been a feature of our country for years now. Stockholm has been witness to Dickensian scenes of young pickpockets and thieves playing games of cat-and-mouse with the police, who feel powerless. Until fairly recently, Sweden was admired for its progressive social policies. Today, one in seven voters supports the Sweden Democrats, a populist party until recently reviled in polite Swedish society.

The problems relating to immigration have been building up for years, but the country’s left and

right were united in maintaining employment regulations and rent controls that kept immigrants unemployed in ghetto-like suburbs. As a result, we lost valuable time. Three years ago, there were riots in socially deprived areas of Stockholm, and it's only got worse since then. A parallel society is emerging where the state's monopoly on law and order is being challenged. 'Today, the gang environment is — well, I don't want to exactly call it the Wild West, but something in that direction,' says Amir Rostami, an authority on Swedish organised crime who teaches at Stockholm University.

Integrating adults into Swedish society has been tricky enough, but a much more difficult problem is how to deal with all the unaccompanied children. During the Iraq war, about 400 children arrived without their parents each year — and all of them needed a place to live, social support and proper schooling. In 2014, when the number of children arriving annually hit 7,000, there were serious questions about how Sweden would cope. Last year, just over 35,000 unaccompanied children registered with the authorities.

The children are every age and arrive from all kinds of countries. Afghans and Somalis are currently the two biggest groups. Then come

Syrians, Ethiopians, Iraqis, Moroccans and Eritreans. Some are fleeing war; many are fleeing poverty and misery. Strikingly, boys outnumber girls by about five to one. And it's far from clear how many may in fact be adults — unlike other countries, Sweden doesn't test for age. Whatever age the applicant gives is accepted, unless it's 'obviously' untrue. The definition of 'obvious' is unclear. During one recent interview on Swedish radio, several asylum-seekers confessed to lying about their age to improve their chances of settlement. One, called Dawood, put it bluntly: 'If I say I'm grown-up, they'll deport me.'

The cost of accommodating our child refugees is enormous: £160 per child per day. That could be money well spent, if it worked. There are serious concerns, though, about children falling victim to predatory adults who have lied about their age. Earlier this year, a boy of 12 was raped in refugee accommodation by another refugee who claimed to be 15. A dental X-ray suggested the attacker was closer to 19. Later that month, a 22-year-old Swede (herself the daughter of immigrants) was stabbed to death by one of the refugees she was caring for — another adult claiming to be 15.

Such horrific stories raise the fear that the authorities have lost control. This is reflected in the extraordinary rise of the Sweden Democrats. There have also been a spate of attacks on refugee centres, some of which have been burnt down. For many, this seems like history repeating itself — similar attacks occurred in the 1990s, after a rapid influx of Balkan refugees. Such acts cast a dark shadow over our reputation for tolerance.

A while ago, I spoke to Lasse Siggelin, a social worker living in Gotland, who is alarmed at how many unaccompanied children are being placed in refugee care homes that seem hopelessly unfit for the task. Carers are instructed not to talk about the asylum process, or even to ask about the children's backgrounds. 'We can't ask about their home, or about their parents,' says Siggelin. 'But such things occupy 90 per cent of their thoughts.'

Child refugees are sent to Swedish schools, but they struggle to integrate and are sometimes placed in separate groups, because of their vastly different learning needs. It's pretty hard to bond with your classmates if you have to return every night to a care home. Even if school staff want to help, they seldom have the time or capacity to offer a shoulder to cry on. Instead,

the children are directed to scheduled appointments with a child psychiatrist. As Siggelin explains, ‘If we don’t acknowledge the hurt and sadness that is there, then there are always people queuing up prepared to lead them astray.’

Those ‘queuing up’ include drug dealers, pimps, gangmasters and even jihadists. Sweden’s care homes have become a rich source of vulnerable young men who are full of frustration and hopelessness and lacking in direction. They may be open to the temptation of easy rewards, or of a path that they are promised will bring new meaning to their lives. There have been reports of Islamic State recruitment drives, not just in public places, but inside Swedish government programmes. Last year my newspaper, Svenska Dagbladet, exposed how some official schemes had been infiltrated by jihadists.

But stories of shocking abuse, the kind that would be front-page news in Britain, are relegated to the inside pages of the Swedish press. Tragically, the reason for this is that there is so much of it. In the last few weeks, we have heard about child prostitutes being pimped out in parking lots, and a Palestinian 15-year-old who, it is feared, was forced into prostitution while living in a care home in Malmo. For some

time now, children in care homes have been notoriously easy prey and many of them simply vanish — over the past five years, well over a thousand have done so. These children face a sickeningly high risk of being sucked into a life of crime or even sex slavery. As their abusers well know, there is virtually no chance of anyone coming to look for the ones who go missing.

‘There is basically nothing we can do,’ says the head of Skane border police. ‘In some cases, we don’t even have descriptions of the children. So there is no means of identifying them… no information about relatives. We have nothing to work with.’ Lisa Green, who monitors human trafficking in Malmo, has reported 40 cases of suspected child trafficking to the police over the past few years but says her complaints were not even recorded. ‘Nobody is dealing with human trafficking,’ says Mattias Sigfridsson, head of the police department that deals with missing persons. ‘We have no ability to do that right now — there are no staff.’

In response to the crisis that threatens to overwhelm it, Swedish politics has become more realistic, less romantic. Passports are now being checked on the famous Oresund bridge that links Sweden with Denmark. As a result, the journey time has doubled, horrifying Malmo

residents who like to regard their city as a satellite of Copenhagen, and making cross-border business more difficult. These new checks have helped fight other crimes, such as drug dealing and drink driving. (Sweden's minister for sixth-form education failed a breathalyser test and later resigned.)

And still the authorities struggle to deal with the problem of what to do with migrants whose asylum claims are rejected. Between January and April this year, the Migration Agency handed over some 2,645 cases to the police for deportation. Just 1,255 of these are classified as complete — two thirds were deported by force, while the rest left the country voluntarily. Police estimate they will deport 4,000 people this year, up a third from last year, but not much of a dent in the 22,000 cases currently under consideration. Many, of course, will have been summoned and then suddenly disappeared into the expanding Swedish underworld.

As the refugees have arrived, ordinary Swedes have responded in an extraordinary way; individuals and families have opened up their homes, donated clothes and supplies, invested time and effort. Businesses have also found ways to help child refugees to integrate properly into Swedish society by offering opportunities for

work. But with the best will in the world, it's still a race against time.

'If you are not prepared, you are unprepared.' These are the words of Fredrik Reinfeldt, our former prime minister, and perfectly sum up Sweden's migration crisis. We still hear politicians defiantly claim that our country is a humanitarian superpower — but they don't do so as often, and they sound distinctly less smug when they do. The Swedish Way might not shine quite as brightly as a beacon to the world. But anyone who wants to find out how not to handle a migration crisis is welcome to pay us a visit.

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