Social Policy, Social Democracy, and the Lessons of History

A Case Study of Gareth Stedman Jones' *An End to Poverty?*

LARRY PATRIQUIN
Nipissing University, North Bay, Ontario

Abstract

Gareth Stedman Jones argues in *An End to Poverty? A Historical Debate* that it is important to reconsider Enlightenment thinkers, in particular Antoine-Nicolas de Condorcet and Thomas Paine, because they can inform current debates on social policy as well as contribute to a renewal of social democratic philosophy. In contrast, this article suggests that the proposals of these writers are of little value in addressing the contemporary challenge of eradicating poverty and are unhelpful in rethinking the central commitments of social democracy. This article will conclude with a brief examination of the lessons we can draw from Sweden, which has produced the most comprehensive welfare state in the advanced capitalist societies.

Résumé

Gareth Stedman Jones soutient dans son article *An End to Poverty? A Historical Debate* qu'il est important de revisiter les penseurs du Siècle des lumières, dont en particulier Antoine-Nicolas de Condorcet et Thomas Paine, parce qu'ils peuvent éclairer les débats actuels sur la politique sociale et contribuer ainsi au renouveau de la philosophie social-démocratique. Cet article suggère, en revanche, que les propositions de ces écrivains n'ont que peu de valeur au sujet du défi contemporain de l'éradication de la pauvreté et ne sont d'aucun secours quand il s'agit de repenser les engagements fondamentaux de la social-démocratie. En conclusion, cet article examine brièvement les leçons à retenir de la Suède qui a produit l'État-providence le plus avancé des sociétés capitalistes progressistes.

Larry Patriquin

Introduction

Social democracy has been deemed by its critics and some of its advocates to be in crisis, an intellectual turmoil that, at least in the British case, began with the election of Margaret Thatcher's Conservatives in 1979. Almost two decades of soul searching within the Labour Party culminated in the victory of Tony Blair's "New Labour" in May 1997. The rejuvenated party went on to win reelection in 2001 and 2005. Shortly after becoming prime minister, Blair said that one of his main objectives was to marry "an open, competitive and successful economy with a just, decent and humane society" (cited in Driver & Martell, 2006, p. 2). With such comments in mind, many of the party's detractors viewed Blair as an opportunist, the leader of a government whose policies would turn out to be so centrist as to barely deserve the name "social democratic." Some were hopeful that Gordon Brown, Blair's successor, might move the party leftward, if only slightly. However, this did not happen. The ideological malaise that continued into the post-Blair period has been summarized as follows: "Gordon Brown's government has suffered from the prime minister's failure to adequately articulate his vision for a social democratic Britain" (Beech & Lee, 2009, p. 101). Brown began this task at a party conference in September 2008 when he declared that a new political "settlement" was required, one in which the focus would be on "the advancement of the public interest" and "where at all times we put people first." The purpose of government, he added, "is not to provide everything, but it must be to enable everyone" to succeed (cited in Beech & Lee, 2009, p. 101). Beech and Lee (2009, p. 102) bluntly concluded that this vision is "at best conceptually underdeveloped and at worst superficial." This vision, such as it is, will not be implemented for the time being anyway because the government was defeated in the 2010 general election, ending New Labour's run at 13 years.

Gareth Stedman Jones' book, *An End to Poverty? A Historical Debate*, was published in 2004, on the eve of Labour's third consecutive election victory, to accompany a history conference on the theme of "Wealth and Poverty."[1] He appears to recognize that there is something amiss in the politics of social democracy, particularly as it pertains to social policy. He suggests that it is important to analyze debates, such as the one on poverty that took place at the end of the eighteenth century, because such debates help illuminate present-day concerns. He focuses on the era of the French Revolution, a time when one group of writers put forward a theory that, if put into practice, would have avoided turning the world "upside down," a theory that was not a "dream of an unreachable place." Instead, they proposed a system of income redistribution that would have been "measured, moderate and gradual" (p. 16). Unfortunately, these writers were drowned out by a conservative assault on the Revolution, led by Edmund Burke and Thomas Malthus, which offered up a dangerous laissez-faire philosophy that went beyond

the margins of acceptability, so much so that one "extreme bred another" as Malthusianism "produced by way of reaction the genesis of revolutionary socialism" (p. 5).

Stedman Jones clearly prefers the middle ground, noting that there were alternatives to the extremes in the late eighteenth century, specifically in the works of Antoine-Nicolas de Condorcet in France and Thomas Paine in England. However, in both countries, the middle as an alternative "was virtually smothered at birth" and for the most part disappeared in the ensuing two centuries, with its proponents "relegated to a romantic twilight zone beyond the pale of respectable economics" (p. 8). What Stedman Jones values most about this alternative is its goal of reproducing "on European soil the conditions of existence of a viable commercial republic akin to [the] United States" (p. 224). His main argument is that "the moment of convergence between the late Enlightenment and the ideals of a republican and democratic revolution was a fundamental historical turning point" (p. 9). The importance of this turning point in the history of ideas is not sufficiently appreciated, he maintains. This is regretful because discussions of the poor in this period resulted for the first time in the recognition that poverty could be abolished. What is notable about the new discourse of this era is that it marked "the beginnings of a language of social security as a basis of citizenship" (p. 13). This is why he laments the fact that even among later social democrats, who should have been kindred spirits, both Paine and Condorcet "were only recalled as oddities of no programmatic relevance" (p. 9).

Stedman Jones makes a case for studying the history of ideas, however this article suggests that the proposals of the two main writers he surveys are of little value in addressing the contemporary challenge of eradicating poverty. This article will conclude that social democrats must focus on the present, not the past, and will end with a brief examination of the lessons to be drawn from Sweden, which has produced the most comprehensive welfare state in the advanced capitalist societies.

Paine and Condorcet

Thomas Paine echoed the confident view, most famously propagated by Adam Smith, that generally unfettered exchanges between economic actors could solve many of the world's problems. In *Rights of Man*, Paine (1791–2/1969, p. 234) argued that if "commerce were permitted to act to the universal extent it is capable, it would extirpate the system of war, and produce a revolution in the uncivilized state of governments." On the occasions when commerce failed, social policy would come to the rescue by redistributing income, hence supplementing what workers earned, or didn't earn, in the labour market. Paine's (1797/1967, p. 337) social democratic perspective was neatly summarized in his pamphlet *Agrarian Justice*

when he stated: "I care not how affluent some may be, provided that none be miserable in consequence of it." In other words, the question of who owns the means of production, the accumulated wealth of a society, is not pertinent.

In Part 2 of *Rights of Man*, Paine detailed a number of social policy measures which he believed would contribute to the reduction of poverty. He began by noting that annual expenditures on the system of poor relief in England were about £2 million, according to the most recently available data. He proposed doubling that amount and distributing it, for the most part, to help support children and the elderly. Allowances would be given to poor families for each child under 14 years of age, at a projected cost of £2.5 million per year. A further £1.1 million would go to the aged who were unable to work and who required assistance (he estimated that these individuals comprised one-third of the total number of elderly). They would receive £6 a year starting at age 50, increasing to £10 a year at age 60. He proposed that this support "is not of the nature of a charity, but of a right" (Paine, 1791–2/1969, p. 265).

A major economic crisis struck Britain in 1795; it gave Paine an opportunity to rethink his views. In *Agrarian Justice* (1797), he extended the argument of *Rights of Man* to emphasize that people who own landed property were obligated to contribute to the community. However, that contribution must not entail going back to a time when property was held in common. To do so would mean returning to a primitive state when humans were not engaged in cultivation. Instead, he proposed a National Fund which would be used as a form of compensation to those who lost access to land as a consequence of the development of absolute private property. He now advocated a one-time payment of £15 to all individuals who turned 21 years of age, to assist with their transition to adulthood, and a payment of £10 per year to every person aged 50 and over (and not just the poor). This was different from the poor relief system in effect as well as the plan articulated in *Rights of Man*, because it was a call for a universal benefit, one that would prevent some of the "invidious distinctions" that permeated society (Paine, 1797/1967, p. 332).

Thomas Paine's recommendations for improvements in income security were made in a country that already had a nationwide, taxpayer-funded social policy in the form of poor relief, which was generally understood as a "right" by rich and poor alike, similar to the current "right" to receive assistance (where, in both cases, the right to relief is not part of a formal constitution). His suggestions would have involved a slightly greater redistribution of income, though this type of redistribution had been in place in England from the late sixteenth century and had become quite substantial over time. For example, relief expenditures in Great Britain were roughly £2 million annually in 1783–85 and £4.3 million in 1802–03, with the latter amount equivalent to about 2 per cent of the gross national product (Patriquin, 2007, pp. 111, 205).

Stedman Jones acknowledges that, given England's relief system, "Paine's detailed proposals do not seem so outlandish" (p. 78). Indeed, Paine's views on social policy might be regarded as hardly radical at all,[2] as perhaps a slightly more liberal revision to the status quo, if they are assessed while keeping in mind his specific socio-economic milieu. This lack of attention to historical context highlights a key drawback of Stedman Jones' method and greatly limits the lessons we may learn. Paine lived in a society that was vastly different from the one inhabited by Condorcet, yet there is little suggestion in *An End to Poverty?* that England and France had fundamentally different states and different economic systems, with England by the end of the eighteenth century having virtually completed its transition to capitalism while France remained a peasant-dominated society (Patriquin, 2007, pp. 45–78). The recognition of this difference could have produced more pertinent recommendations for today's policymakers (though perhaps not, as shall be argued below).

Given Paine's important revisions to his social and political thought in the five or six years between *Rights of Man* and *Agrarian Justice*, one might expect him if he were alive today to subject the tenets of social democracy, New Labour or otherwise, to a trenchant critique. If his views remained unchanged and he were writing now, one might dismiss Paine as irrelevant, having little to teach us when it comes to the formulation of social policy in the twenty-first century (though he could still educate us on many other matters). Nevertheless, one could feasibly argue, similar to Stedman Jones, that Paine's works are worthy of discussion in current debates on poverty. However, it is a stretch to make a comparable claim for Antoine-Nicolas de Condorcet, a man who lived and wrote in a nation that had barely seen the glimmer of capitalism on the horizon.

The purpose of Condorcet's *Sketch for a Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Mind* (1795/1955) was to draw out what he considered to be the ten stages of humanity. The second-last stage was "From Descartes to the foundation of the French Republic" while the last stage, "The future progress of the human mind," was to be a time when prejudices will be removed, when reason will triumph, when "truth alone will obtain a lasting victory." He argued that much progress on the question of rights had been made in more liberal countries, where some positive rights existed, though these were distributed unequally. Unfortunately, with one exception, even in nations that had established positive rights, there was still no acknowledgement from rulers that man had any "natural rights." The result was that man "can no longer be said to be a slave though he can be said to be not truly free." It was the American Revolution that broke this historical pattern, where we first saw "a great people delivered from all its chains" as a consequence of their creation of a constitution that facilitated the happiness of everyone (Condorcet, 1795/1955, pp. 126, 144).

What will happen in the tenth stage of human history? Condorcet, like Paine,

was optimistic that commercial exchange would contribute to social and economic well-being. For example, he maintained that the "sugar industry, establishing itself throughout the immense continent of Africa, will destroy the shameful exploitation which has corrupted and depopulated that continent for the last two centuries." Peace and prosperity will receive a boost from the European love of freedom and Europeans' apparent superior knowledge, which will in turn have a positive influence on other countries. Many lands in Africa and Asia, he ventured, "are inhabited partly by large tribes who need only assistance from us to become civilized" (Condorcet, 1795/1955, pp. 176–7).

Condorcet (1795/1955, p. 179) wanted to see greater equality within and between nations. At the same time, he warned that attempts to completely eliminate disparities are "foolish and dangerous." He briefly outlined a handful of social welfare proposals that would help reach the goal of ameliorating inequality, including old age pensions, which would be based on the savings of individual workers combined with the savings of workers who died young and hence would not collect any money. He attempted to formulate how this would operate, using friendly societies as a basis, in terms of contributions, risks, probabilities, and payments to retirees. He also proposed that all children should receive a basic education, though he did not specify how many years they should be in school. In a line that could have come from Thomas Paine, a line that could be put in the mouths of many modern social democrats, he was convinced that with "greater equality of education there will be greater equality in industry and so in wealth" (Condorcet, 1795/1955, pp. 183–4).

Lessons from History?

Stedman Jones regrets that two key voices of moderation have gone missing. Indeed, by the time *Agrarian Justice* was published in 1797, Paine's proposals "had been consigned to oblivion" (p. 79). A renewed attack by conservatives was fortified with the publication of Malthus' *An Essay on the Principle of Population* in 1798, and discourses organized around notions of "rights" soon receded. In the mid-nineteenth century, specifically in debates during the economic depression of the 1840s, Condorcet's reforms and especially Paine's social insurance proposals "had either been wholly forgotten or dismissed as wildly impractical" (p. 193). There was still no sign of these two gentlemen as we entered the twentieth century; the "welfare legislation of the Liberal governments of 1906–14 owed nothing to the ideas of Paine or Condorcet" (p. 211). Britain's National Insurance Act seemingly "did not draw in any way upon the forgotten social insurance proposals of the French Revolutionary era" (p. 216). In sum, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the opposing extremes of laissez-faire individualism and Marxian socialism pushed aside the discourse of moderation.

Stedman Jones wants to rescue writers like Paine and Condorcet. Moreover, the whole point of his book is "an argument for the relevance of history to the present, an attempt to demonstrate — especially in the history of ideas — that the long term matters" (p. 231). Yet what is it in the past that is of relevance to the present? What can we learn, for instance, from Condorcet? He envisaged the human race "emancipated from its shackles, released from the empire of fate and from that of the enemies of its progress, advancing with a firm and sure step along the path of truth, virtue and happiness" (1795/1955, p. 201). Because this Enlightenment notion in some form or other would be embraced by most people, it is not clear what historical lesson we need to absorb. It is especially not clear what Condorcet, despite his importance as a philosopher, has to say to present day social democrats. Stedman Jones grasps at straws in an attempt to establish the significance of Condorcet, through a brief survey of friendly societies (pp. 195–8). However, if we are to learn from history, it is that these societies, for the most part, were failures. The poor could not afford to pay subscriptions, and the typical society had extremely limited funds which enabled it to support only a handful of members at any given time. Stedman Jones acknowledges this, so it is not evident why he highlights these voluntary organizations, as opposed to England's well-developed poor relief system, a veritable welfare state, other than to note that the societies could have made use of Condorcet's "calculus of probabilities" (p. 198). That's it, apparently. But surely at the beginning of the twenty-first century we require little edification on technical matters such as the construction of actuarial formulas (which was the central focus of Condorcet's writings on social welfare).

As for Thomas Paine, Gregory Claeys (1989, p. 215) has noted that the economic landscape had changed by the mid-nineteenth century to the point where few radicals believed Paine's notion "that the 'corruption' of pensioners and placemen explained unemployment, a blighted industrial landscape, glutted markets, widespread misery in the factory districts, long hours of labour and low wages, and the steadily increasing gap between rich and poor." Many of his ideas remained popular and relevant, such as his call for a written constitution, but by 1850, "from an analytical rather than merely symbolic viewpoint, the age of Paine was at an end" (Claeys, 1989, p. 215). When it comes to social policy, Paine was not forgotten; he was superseded.

Social Democracy

If Paine and Condorcet have little to tell us about social policy, can they at least offer insights on social democracy? The final sentences of Stedman Jones' conclusion are a call for adherents of this political philosophy to reexamine the "greats": "Contemporary social democracy has too long attempted to navigate between these two extremes [laissez-faire and socialism], both elaborated in the chilly and

anti-political aftermath of the French Revolution. It should instead revisit its original birthplace and resume the ambition of the late and democratic Enlightenment to combine the benefits of individual freedom and commercial society with a republican ideal of greater equality, inclusive citizenship and the public good" (p. 235). Leaving aside the New Labourite vagueness of phrases like "inclusive citizenship" or the question of how we would assess the "public good"; overlooking the use of the obfuscating term "commercial society" in place of "capitalism"; ignoring the problem of what a "republican ideal of greater equality" would look like and how we would obtain it; we can still ask, why Paine and Condorcet? Surely the failures of modern social democracy cannot be attributed to the inability to learn lessons from writers of the past. Nevertheless, if we are to travel back a few hundred years, why not, for example, consider the works of the popular political economists of the early nineteenth century? We might especially want to draw on Thomas Spence (1750–1814), someone who radicalized Paine's work, defending the right to subsistence by arguing that in order to make this right effective, changes in the ownership of property were necessary (see McNally, 1993, pp. 104–38). Or if social democrats are to extract ideas from long-dead theorists, why not choose writers like Beatrice and Sidney Webb or R.H. Tawney, whose works were geared toward the question of social justice in advanced capitalist societies?

Furthermore, do *any* of these writers have much to tell us about an economic system in which the power of capital has grown immensely in recent decades while labour has been aggressively attacked? This attack has come in the form of, among other things, capital flight, de-unionization, deindustrialization, the increased use of incarceration, cutbacks to social welfare, rising unemployment, tax reductions for the wealthy, a growing maldistribution of income, and a monetary policy that preserves the assets of the rich at the expense of job creation (Harvey, 2005). If we want to emulate societies that have virtually abolished poverty while maintaining a thoroughly capitalist system, why not forego reading the "greats" entirely and simply cast an eye toward Scandinavia? Shouldn't social democrats be drawing their inspiration from apparently successful models of their philosophy in action, rather than attempting to mine nuggets from texts that are often outdated?

This is more so the case given that New Labour engineered only slight improvements in key social indicators, such as rates of poverty. While the Labour government enhanced tax credits for families and introduced and increased the minimum wage, the result was only a small reduction in "social exclusion." For example, poverty rates for children in Great Britain fell from 34 per cent in 1996–97 (4.3 million children) to 30 per cent in 2005–06 (3.8 million children) (Leaman, 2008, p. 50).[3] A decade after assuming power, New Labour had made little progress in moving Britain toward the low levels of child poverty attained by the Nordic countries. Granted, the situation would be even worse without some of the policies implemented by the government. Nevertheless, the slow pace of

improvement is a function of the fact that, when addressing the problem of poverty in a world now dominated by capitalist social relations, the state has to run hard just to stand still. It is also a function of accepting, as New Labour did, the rule of the market,[4] while trying desperately to repair (at no small expense to the government) the damage caused by that market.

Drawing on current models seems to be a better prescription for what ails us. I do not know about Condorcet, but I suspect Thomas Paine would not object to the notion that many of his ideas are passé. He would also encourage us to dispense with history, when necessary. In *Rights of Man*, he argued that the main question of his day was whether or not people were prepared to initiate a new world: would man "inherit his rights"? He suggested that the past would not provide any answers: "No question has arisen within the records of history that pressed with the importance of the present" (1791–2/1969, p. 239). In other words, there are no precedents on which we can rely. We could say much the same for our time. The current crisis of global capitalism has forced a rethinking across the political spectrum. We can be assisted in this rethinking by drawing on the insights of writings from the past, be they hundreds or even thousands of years old. But those writings must speak to our time; they must go beyond bestowing "lessons" that are mere platitudes, ideas accepted as givens by virtually everyone.

The Labour Party had been in power for seven years when *An End to Poverty?* was published. One must assume it is the British variant of social democracy that Stedman Jones finds wanting, yet he suggests no reasons why this is the case. One must also assume, given his brief critique of the "extremes" in the introduction to the book, that he is a proponent of some form of "third way" between laissez-faire and substantial state control of the economy. If that is so, then why would an advocate of moderation critique New Labour, a party that proved to be an exemplar of post-Conservative tinkering? What issue does he have with New Labour? Is it that they did little to challenge the Thatcher-Major legacy and that they "out-conservatived" the Conservatives in some areas (for instance, by implementing tuition for university)? That New Labour uncritically endorsed the market, reducing government's role in employment policy to the education and training of men and women for jobs that often did not exist? That New Labour gave up on the state's responsibility to facilitate full employment, never mind provide a sufficient number of public sector jobs to substitute for those that "free enterprise" fails to create? That New Labour in many ways adopted the Tories' "underclass" discourse to refer to the "work shy," a group that apparently requires little more than a close monitoring of its benefits claims and an occasional résumé-writing workshop? That New Labour did not embrace the high-tax Swedish model with its emphasis on maximizing income redistribution? In sum, that New Labour was not radical enough?

At the end of the day what unites social democrats of all stripes is their claim that capitalism can be both efficient and fair, that it can "deliver the goods" and

eliminate harmful social inequities. That claim is likely to come under scrutiny in the next decade or so. The global recession that began in 2008, and the coming to power of the Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition in 2010, will end any possibility that poverty in Britain can be eradicated by 2020, as New Labour promised. Historically, during "difficult times," those who are well-off keep their secure jobs and healthy assets; these enable the relatively privileged to ride out the economic storm. Meanwhile, the bottom one-quarter or so of the population see their market incomes fall and in some cases collapse. They have been forced to the back of the jobless queue by what is turning out to be an increasingly toxic form of capitalism, while poverty rates are sure to once again trend upward. If adherents to the social democratic philosophy want to make a coherent case that their objectives are still attainable, they will need to do more than re-read classic texts. They will have to examine the various models that currently exist if they hope to demonstrate that a socio-political system grounded in their values is still viable and sustainable. In making this case, social democrats will need to learn more from the present than from the past.

Sweden

Some capitalist societies, in particular Sweden, have succeeded in reducing their poverty rates and keeping them low for at least 30 years. If countries like Britain (and Canada) want to emulate "best practices," then it is the Swedish model they should be following — or at least using as a jumping-off point to even better things — rather than scouring the collected works of Paine, Condorcet, et al. In other words, if we want to build a Cadillac, we should be working from a Cadillac blueprint. Sweden's social welfare is both comprehensive and universal; it is a major feature of this relatively egalitarian country, which has 72% of its population in the middle class, compared to 56% in Canada (Olsen, 2011, pp. 71–2).[5] Sweden also has relatively greater gender equality in the home, in the workplace, and in government. Canada mirrors Swedish poverty rates for some groups, such as senior citizens, but for other groups, such as children in single mother families, Canada (at 48%) is far behind Sweden (at just 10%) (Olsen, 2011, pp. 83, 85).

There have been, not surprisingly in the neoliberal era, some cost-cutting measures implemented in Sweden. For example, income replacement rates for programs like unemployment insurance and parental leave were reduced in the mid-1990s from 90% to 80% (Olsen, 2002, p. 168). However, even after these cutbacks are taken into account, Sweden's welfare state remains generous. Perhaps the most important alteration to its cradle-to-grave social system occurred in the late 1990s when the Social Democratic government reformed the pension system to put it on a more solid financial footing. The main change was a move away from a defined benefit plan to a defined contribution plan, though standard social

insurance provisions, such as survivors benefits, were maintained, while the total contribution rate of 18.5% of income was chosen to mirror the pensions received under the old plan (Palme, 2005).

This relatively minor tinkering in Sweden demonstrates that, thus far at least, intense economic competition has not produced a "race to the bottom." In 2007, Sweden's taxes were 48.2% of gross domestic product (GDP), barely unchanged from 47.4% in 1977 (though down from a high of 52.2% in 1990) (OECD, 2009). Even within global capitalism, a nation can put in place, and keep in place, institutions, policies, and practices that not only protect people from the worst excesses of the "free market," but also provide citizens with comprehensive services and income supports which produce a standard of living for the least well-off that goes far beyond biological minimums, that provides a level of security that enables almost everyone to live with dignity.

In contrast to this way of life, each year millions of people in Canada and Britain find themselves going without, standing on the doorsteps of their local food banks. Given their routine social policy failures, then, why don't these nations simply copy the Swedish model? That seems like an obvious strategy, though we have to conclude that the model cannot be replicated easily, at least in the short run. Einhorn and Logue (2010, p. 7) have suggested that social policy "models rarely can be transplanted from one national experience to another without considerable modification." Social policy can be transplanted, but "macro" structures must be modified in advance of, or in conjunction with, that transplanting process. In brief, vastly diminishing poverty will first require a substantial augmentation in *democracy* (Patriquin, in press). This means, among other things, completing the following five tasks:

(1) We must convert electoral systems, rooted in the British legacy, to proportional representation (PR), which Sweden has had for over 100 years. PR would enable smaller political parties, such as the NDP and Greens in Canada, to have a greater voice in Parliament and more influence in setting the policy agenda. Perhaps more importantly, PR would prevent conservative parties, with occasionally less than 40% of the vote, from obtaining a "majority" government, enabling them to cut social welfare, while the centre-left MPs, sometimes representing almost two-thirds of the electorate, sit helplessly in opposition.

(2) PR would likely produce a modest increase in support, of perhaps a few percentage points, for the NDP, as it would eliminate the fear of "wasting" one's vote, which is an aspect of the current first-past-the-post electoral system. PR would also enable the Greens to win seats (likely close to 10% of what's available, based on where they currently stand in the polls) and might lead to the creation of a viable socialist (anti-capitalist) party that could win enough votes to earn representation in the House of Commons. At a minimum, electing a social democratic party to govern, typically with the support of smaller, centre-left and far left parties,

and keeping those parties in power for decades, is imperative if we are to achieve anything close to the Cadillac model of social welfare. If the NDP had won Canada's federal election in 2008, it would have to remain in power for 44 years, until 2052 (!), to match the unbroken governance record set by its Swedish counterpart (from 1932 to 1976). That thought experiment alone should tell us how difficult it will be to establish anything remotely resembling the Swedish model in Canada or Britain.

(3) A social democratic government, perhaps over the course of a couple of decades, would need to raise taxes substantially. To illustrate, Canada's taxes as a percentage of GDP would have to increase from 33% (where it was in 2007) to something that mirrors the Swedish rate of 48%. If we did so, that extra 15%, based on an estimated GDP of $1.6 trillion in 2010, would produce an additional (and jaw-dropping) $240 billion to be spent each year by Canadian governments (federal, provincial, and municipal). In a country where a party would have difficulty getting elected if it promised a tax increase one-tenth the size of this, we can see, once more, how much spade work remains to be done. And yet we cannot obtain social goods simply by waiting for the magic wand of the market to be waved. If we long for what the Swedes have, we must be willing to pay for it.

(4) Social democratic governments must not only make it easier for workers to establish trade unions, they must actively encourage such unionization. Unions are a form of democratic self-organization, which give labourers some power to negotiate improved wages and benefits. We should not forget that having a healthy social system is achieved not only through the direct actions of government. A high unionization rate, which facilitates greater redistribution of income at the point of production, is critical to developing something akin to Sweden's broadly middle class society. Stronger unions can also lead to stronger social democratic and socialist parties, as the two tend to feed off each other. In 2003, the percentage of workers covered by a collective agreement was 32% in Canada compared to 93% in Sweden (Olsen, 2011, p. 186). The two rates could not be much further apart.

(5) In 2007, 47% of Sweden's members of Parliament were women; the comparable rate for Canada was 22% (Olsen, 2011, p. 112). Higher female representation in elected office typically results in more "women friendly" policies and practices, specifically in the area of social welfare, such as universal, accessible child care. If Canada were to double the number of female MPs tomorrow, it would still not equal the Swedish rate.

For those who live in "liberal" societies, Sweden's social democratic welfare state seems like an unattainable dream, yet despite its achievements and its high ranking internationally on indices of equality, Sweden remains a highly inequitable society, and one that since the recession of the early 1990s has not had full employment (a key aspect of its model that seems to have been lost for good). Sweden only appears to be equal in comparison to nations like Canada, Britain, and especially

the United States. Still, Sweden is the best that capitalism has to offer, and it has a social welfare system that is superior to the ones in the Anglo-Saxon countries. In recent years, many have argued, from both the left and the right, that the Swedish model is either dying or dead. However, we can say that a recognizably distinct model exists as long as taxes remain at roughly half of annual GDP and as long as that money is used to provide relatively generous income supports and high-quality social, health, education, and other services to all citizens. The basic elements of the Swedish welfare state have been solidly entrenched for close to half a century and are likely to survivè as far as the eye can see. Canada — or Stedman Jones' Britain — can begin moving down a path toward the Swedish model, but, given the five tasks just noted, the odds are long that either country will be able to reach the end point of this journey in the next two or three decades, never mind go anywhere beyond.

Notes

1 In-text references without an author and year of publication refer to Stedman Jones (2004).

2. This is especially the case given that Paine seems to have based his proposals on the 1783–85 amount for poor relief (£2 million annually). He likely was not aware that relief expenditures were increasing dramatically at the time he wrote, something only definitively revealed with the publication of the amount for 1802–03 (£4.3 million). So, barely a decade after *Rights of Man*, spending on relief in Britain was already more than the "doubling" of the £2 million proposed by Paine.

3. For both children and pensioners (see n. 4), poverty is defined relatively and includes those living in households with incomes below 60 per cent of median income after housing costs.

4. The importance of rejecting the market in order to reduce poverty is evident in the one major success story of New Labour. The poverty rates for pensioners, few of whom are active in the workforce, fell from 29 per cent in 1996–97 (2.9 million individuals) to 17 per cent in 2005–06 (1.8 million individuals) (Leaman, 2008, p. 50). It is a significant accomplishment to have moved more than one million pensioners above the poverty line in less than a decade.

5. The "middle class" includes those who earn more than 62.5% but less than 150% of median income.

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