

# Local Government in Sweden

By ROY V. PEEL

SWEDEN is one of the largest states in Europe, but its population of 6,267,000 is not great, and neither, therefore, is the density of its population. Long a nation of farmers and fishermen and lumbermen, it has undergone an industrial revolution, and to-day, fifty-four per cent of the people are engaged in industrial pursuits. The trend toward urbanization is not so strong, since many of the industries are located in small towns, with many workers living on small subsistence homesteads and small farms in the country-side. Still, the cities have grown rapidly in the past two decades; and thirty-four per cent of the people are now reckoned as urban. If the smaller towns and "urban districts" are also regarded as municipal, forty-two per cent of her population is urban.

The government of Sweden is one of the oldest in Europe enjoying a continuous independent existence. Sweden is also famous for its democracy. Notwithstanding the existence of a monarchy, Sweden is now basically a democratic country, as it has been for centuries. The common people, from the time when decisions were made by the independent *odalbonden* in the provincial *ting* down to the legislative assemblies of our own day, dominated by trade unionists, have always played a prominent role in Swedish government. Despite periods of retrogression, the Swedish people have cherished and defended their liberties. Their regard for law and order has been greater than that of the English, whom they resemble in so many ways; but like the members of the British Commonwealth of Nations, they have ever held fast to "local-self-government" as the citadel of freedom. In many respects, the struc-

ture of Swedish local government is Latin rather than Anglo-Saxon. The whole system might properly be described as a harmonious blend of Gallic classicism and English libertarianism. The form is sired by Paris, but the substance stems from London.

One might consider Sweden as the proving-ground for theories of governmental organization. Broadly speaking, there are two types of local government: those units which are areas of national administration for local purposes, and those which are preponderantly local government agencies. But Sweden has not escaped the universal tendency toward governmental centralization, and the whole problem of jurisdictional boundaries is accordingly confused by national institutions supported by local funds and local officials working closely under state supervision.

The administrative counties (*län*) are twenty-four in number and together with the city of Stockholm constitute the intermediate units of government. In each there is an "administration" (24 county Governors and the Governor-General of Stockholm) and a county council<sup>1</sup>. Six cities (including Stockholm) do not participate in the county councils, and, since one of the council's duties is the election of Senators, these cities choose "electoral colleges" for the purpose. These councils vary in size from twenty to seventy; the members being elected by proportional representation, as are all legislative bodies in Sweden. They convene annually in the autumn in the provincial capitals and pass acts of legislation with reference to hospitals, public health, midwifery, education and poor relief. Certain measures of a financial character require the approval of the Crown, and two kinds of measures

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1. There is no council in Stockholm, but there are two in *Kalmar län*; hence there are 25 county councils.

(election districts and civil service) must have the assent of the county administration to be valid. The administrative committee of the Landsting carries out its commands.

The county governors (*landshovdingar*) individually exercise the authority of the "county administration", but they are assisted each by a County Clerk and a County Treasurer, as well as a number of minor officers—sheriffs, bailiffs, constables, assessors, tax collectors, surveyors and clerks. In addition to the duties suggested by these titles, the governors perform various functions with reference to the general registration (*mantalsskrivning*), health, poor relief, trade and industry and the national defense. Though appointed by the Crown, governors are supposed to be chosen without regard for political affiliations and to exercise their duties impartially.

Alongside of the county council districts there are districts for the so-called "economic societies" (*hushollings sällskapen*). These are agencies for agricultural organization, and they are staffed with farm bureau agents who are responsible to the ministry of agriculture but work in close cooperation with the governors.

The primary local governments of Sweden, or the communes, are the towns, (287 in number), market-towns (116), and the rural communes (2,361). The secondary units are the urban districts (225), the highway districts (170) and a variable number of associations of towns and special districts. All the primary communes are legally equal in power, with some differences in definition of duties and structure; the secondary communes have nearly the same organization but, as a rule, only one function.

Legislative power is vested in councils (15-100 members) although provision is made in the law for town meetings of all the citizens. Legislative bills and reports are prepared by the town administrative authorities, or by committees of the council; and administration is entrusted to a communal board (*kommunalnämnd*) in the rural communes,

hitto Finance Committee (*dratselkammaren*) and the magistracy in the towns, to the municipal college (*Stadskollegiet*) in Stockholm, and to administrative boards in the special communes. Special boards may further be established for health, poor law, building, school and harbor administration. On these boards and committees frequently are found co-opted members, so that the influence of laymen over local government is very great. Laymen also constitute the membership of the rural grand juries; but there are no petit juries except in cases involving the freedom of the press. Since it is an old principle of Swedish law that no one may refuse to accept a position to which he is elected—with certain exceptions—there is never any lack of competent and popular representation in local government legislative and administrative bodies.

The magistracy, which is found in all towns, is both a court of first instance and a supervisory and administrative agency. Its chairman is the burgo-master, who must have legal training. However, not all the members need be lawyers. Magistrates are not elected; they are designated by the Crown, and as such exercise the Royal supervision over local government under the governors. In Stockholm the magistracy has only judicial functions (again exceptions) and the supervisory power is lodged directly with the Governor-General. Obviously, this system does not integrate management and probably does not develop leadership. The Swedes have not experienced any difficulty with lack of responsibility, which is elsewhere thought to be a unique characteristic of unitary control or single entities. But they have taken steps to reorganize the government of Stockholm in the direction of greater integration, and there are a number of smaller towns which have adopted the communal burgo-master, or single mayor, form of government.

The chief functions of local government are to manage its own property, assess and collect taxes, care for the poor and the children, preserve public health and maintain hospitals, protect against

fire, promote public order and regulate public utilities or provide the services themselves. On the whole, police is a state function. The regulation of the sale of alcoholic beverages is primarily the duty of the State, but, since local option laws are in force, the communes enjoy certain powers in this field. They control the sale of beer almost exclusively. The communes act as agents of the State in the administration of the General Pension Act (Social Security), of the acts setting aside funds for housing, and of other acts providing subsidies. Poor relief has ceased to be of much importance; and unemployment relief is maintained chiefly by the State. But the communes have contributed generously to the measures for combatting unemployment, by participating in the mixed State-Communal public works (*heredskapsarbeten*) and the emergency works (*reservarbeten*)—of which there are three kinds—State, State-Communal, and Communal.

Formerly, the parish was the most important unit of local government, but to-day it retains only a few duties in connection with schools and libraries, and is the agency for managing the General Registration. Practically all Swedes are members of the Established Church, and, although only a minority actually participate in its government, opportunity is offered everyone to take part in the deliberations of the congregational meetings.

Most of Sweden's public utilities are publicly owned. This is particularly true of the public works: water-supply, sewage disposal, street construction and street cleaning, refuse removal, snow-removal, and parks. It is also true, to an ever-increasing extent, of gas works, hydro-electric stations and electricity distribution systems, a few towns operate restaurants and some towns have funds invested in railways, which will soon be completely nationalized. Tramways are municipally-owned, as are the alcoholic liquor companies, but private capital is invested in these enterprises as well. In the management of public utilities, the principle of self-liquidation is recog-

nized. It is sometimes felt that reserves are too ample, resulting in rates higher than they need be; but municipal public enterprises are, on the whole, conservatively and satisfactorily administered.

The revenues of the communes are derived mostly from taxes. The income tax includes the property tax. Although the latter tax is sometimes higher than the American tax on real estate, it is more fair, being based more clearly on the income derived from property. There are, also, a supplementary progressive income tax, various motor vehicle taxes, a road tax, a dog tax, a forest exploitation tax, and a hospital fee. The total local debt amounted to 1,666,274,000 kronor in 1933. In that same year, total revenues were 927,440,885 kronor, which the total expenditures balanced. Subsidies from the State were nearly 158,000,000 kronor.

Many of the local governments in the northern counties, in Gotland and in some of the Middle Swedish districts, have complained of the excessive burden of taxation. This burden is partly relieved by preferential State expenditures, but even more important are the refunds received from the local tax equalization fund. Local governments generally maintain budgets and accounting systems, which are in the process of reformation with the end in view of making them uniform. It has not been found necessary in Sweden, as it has in Norway, to set up a municipal debt adjustment office. Apparently, the continuous scrutiny of local accounts by governors and magistrates has sufficed to prevent collapse. It must be borne in mind, however, that the depression was not severe in Sweden, and that during the past few years, the nation has enjoyed unprecedented prosperity.

Electoral participation has not been especially good. On the average, sixty to eighty per cent of the qualified voters take the trouble to go to the polls. But the results have been eminently encouraging. The bulk of the local government officialdom enjoys security of tenure. Civil servants are paid somewhat less than the average workers but enjoy high prestige. (*Continued on page 147*)