All public power in Sweden proceeds from the people, and the Riksdag is the foremost representative of the people.

THE SWEDISH SYSTEM OF GOVERNMENT

All power proceeds from the people. This is the foundation of parliamentary democracy in Sweden. Everyone has the same rights, the same opportunity to have their say, and everyone is free to scrutinize how the politicians and public agencies exercise their power.

In Sweden, general elections are held every four years, with the next one due in September 2014. Around 7 million people are entitled to vote and thereby influence which political party will represent them in the Riksdag (the Swedish Parliament), county councils and municipalities. People can also influence Swedish politics in other ways – by taking part in referendums, joining a political party or commenting on reports presented by the Government.

The Swedish Constitution defines how Sweden is governed. It regulates the relationships between decision-making and executive power, and the basic rights and freedoms of citizens. Four fundamental laws make up the Constitution: the Instrument of Government, the Act of Succession, the Freedom of the Press Act and the Fundamental Law on Freedom of Expression. Among other things, the Instrument of Government guarantees citizens the right to obtain information freely, hold demonstrations, form political parties and practise their religion. The Act of Succession regulates the right of members of the House of Bernadotte to accede to the Swedish throne.

The Freedom of the Press Act sets out the principle of public access to official documents in order to guarantee an open society with access to information about the work of the Riksdag, the Government and public agencies. This law allows people to study official documents whenever they wish. Another principle in the Freedom of the Press Act is the freedom to communicate information. Under this principle, everyone in Sweden is entitled to give information to the media that they consider important and that they feel should be made public. The publisher of the material is not entitled to reveal the source if the individual in question wishes to remain anonymous.

The Law on Freedom of Expression, which came into force in 1992, largely mirrors the Freedom of the Press Act, in regards to the prohibition of censorship, the freedom to communicate information and the right to anonymity.

Fundamental rights
To amend a fundamental law, the Riksdag must pass the amendment on two separate occasions, separated by a parliamentary election. The fundamental laws take precedence over all other statutes and no law may contravene the Constitution.
Sweden is one of the largest contributors to the United Nations and one of the few countries to meet the UN’s aid target of 0.7 per cent of GNI (gross national income). Sweden became a member of the UN in 1946 and active involvement in the UN has been a central plank of Swedish foreign policy ever since.

FOREIGN POLICY
Throughout the 20th century, Swedish foreign policy was based on the principle of non-alignment in peacetime and neutrality in wartime. Since 1995 Sweden has been a member of the European Union, and as a consequence of a new global security situation, Sweden has modified its foreign policy doctrine, including playing a more active role in European security cooperation.

NATIONAL REFERENDUMS
A total of six national referendums have been held in Sweden. These polls are consultative in character and the Riksdag may reach decisions that run counter to their outcome. This has only happened on one occasion, in 1955, when a referendum was held on the introduction of right-hand traffic. The Swedish people voted against it but the Government chose to introduce it nonetheless.

Sweden’s last two referendums:
1994: Membership of the EU
Result: Yes
2003: Introduction of the euro
Result: No

THE RIKSDAG – REPRESENTING THE PEOPLE
The Riksdag makes the decisions and the Government implements them. The Government also submits proposals for new laws or law amendments to the Riksdag.

The 349-member Riksdag is Sweden’s primary representative forum. The entire Riksdag is chosen by direct elections based on suffrage for all Swedish citizens aged 18 or over who are, or previously have been, residents of Sweden. Since 1971, Sweden has had a unicameral (one-chamber) Riksdag. General elections to the Riksdag are held on the third Sunday of September every four years. Eligibility to serve in the Riksdag requires Swedish citizenship and the attainment of voting age. All elections employ the principle of proportional representation, to ensure that seats are distributed among the political parties in proportion to the votes cast for them across the country as a whole.

Four per cent required
There is one exception to the rule of full national proportionality: a party must receive at least 4 per cent of all votes in the election to gain representation in the Riksdag, a rule designed to prevent very small parties from getting in.

There are currently eight parties represented in the Riksdag: the Moderate Party (Moderaterna), the Christian Democrats (Kristdemokraterna), the Liberal Party (Folkpartiet Liberalerna), the Centre Party (Centerpartiet), the Green Party (Miljöpartiet de Gröna), the Social Democratic Party (Socialdemokraterna), the Sweden Democrats (Sverigedemokraterna) and the Left Party (Vänsterpartiet).

Appoints the Prime Minister
The Government governs the country but is accountable to the Riksdag. The Riksdag appoints a Prime Minister, who is tasked with forming a Government. The Prime Minister personally chooses the ministers to make up the Cabinet and also decides which ministers will be in charge of the various ministries. Together, the Prime Minister and the Cabinet ministers form the Government. Under the Constitution, the Government – not the head of state (the monarch) – is empowered to make governmental decisions.

Ministers usually represent the political party or parties in power. In many cases, they have a seat in the Riksdag, which they retain during their period in the Cabinet, although an alternate takes over the duties of a Riksdag member appointed to Cabinet. In other words, a Cabinet minister must abstain from voting in the Riksdag. All ministers are, however, entitled to participate in parliamentary debates. At the official opening of the Riksdag each September, the Prime Minister delivers a Statement of Government Policy. In it he presents the Government’s policy...
2008: The non-socialist parties form a four-party coalition government called the Alliance.

2002 and 1998: The Social Democrats remain in office after both elections, but in order to implement their policies are forced to form a parliamentary alliance with the Left Party and the Green Party.


1991: A non-socialist minority government of the Moderates, Liberals, the Centre Party and Christian Democrats is formed.

1988 and 1985: The Social Democrats remain in power after both elections.

1982: The non-socialist parties lose their majority and a Social democratic minority government is formed.

1979: The non-socialist parties retain their parliamentary majority, and a new three-party government is formed. In the spring of 1981, the Moderate Party leaves the Government.

1976: The Social Democrats are defeated by a coalition consisting of the Centre Party, the Moderates and the Liberal Party.


The regional level
At the regional level, Sweden is divided into 20 counties. Political tasks at this level are undertaken by the county councils. The county councils are responsible for overseeing tasks that cannot be handled at the local level by municipalities but which rather require coordination across a larger region, most notably health care. The county councils are entitled to levy income taxes to cover their costs. At the regional level there are also county administrative boards, the government bodies for the counties.

The local level
At the local level, Sweden is divided into 290 municipalities, each with an elected assembly or council. Municipalities are responsible for a broad range of facilities and services including housing, roads, water supply and waste-water processing, schools, public welfare, elderly care and childcare. The municipalities are entitled to levy income taxes on individuals. They also charge for various services. As a result, municipalities have significant latitude in deciding what services they should offer. They are however legally obliged to provide certain basic services.

The European level
On entering the EU in 1995, Sweden acquired a further level of government: the European level. As a member of the European Union, Sweden is subject to the EU acquis communautaire – the accumulated legislation, legal acts and court decisions that constitute the cumulative body of European Union law. Sweden takes part in the decision-making process when new common rules are drafted and approved. The Swedish Government represents Sweden in the European Council of Ministers, which is the EU’s principal decision-making body. Some issues previously decided by the Riksdag are nowadays decided at the EU level.
FOUNDATIONS OF SWEDISH DEMOCRACY

In Sweden, parliamentary democracy evolved during the earliest decades of the 20th century. Voting rights reforms in 1909 created universal male suffrage and introduced proportional elections. In 1921, universal suffrage was extended to women. After World War II, democracy became the wholly dominant concept in Swedish politics.

HEAD OF STATE WITHOUT FORMAL POWER

The monarch occupying the Swedish throne under the Act of Succession is the country’s head of state. The Swedish head of state, since September 1973 King Carl XVI Gustaf, exercises no political power and does not participate in political life. As head of state, he is the representative of the country as a whole, and in that capacity performs mainly ceremonial duties and functions. The monarch’s duties include chairing meetings of the Advisory Council on Foreign Affairs.

THE PARLIAMENTARY OMBUDSMAN

The Parliamentary Ombudsman, commonly known as the Ombudsman for Justice (JO), handles complaints from anyone who feels that he/she, or somebody else, has been wrongly treated by a public authority or a civil servant. The person concerned does not have to be a Swedish citizen or be a certain age; even children can lodge a complaint.

www.jo.se

A NEW POLITICAL LANDSCAPE

Sweden’s general election in September 2010 produced a historic result. The ruling centre-right Alliance beat the left-of-centre coalition, but failed to gain an outright majority.

For many decades, the Social Democratic Party had a dominant role in Swedish politics. However, over the past 30 years, power has changed hands several times between the Social Democrats and the “non-socialist” political bloc.

In the general election of September 19, 2010, Fredrik Reinfeldt became the first conservative prime minister to be re-elected – although his centre-right Alliance could not gain an absolute majority. The Prime Minister’s Moderate Party garnered 30.06 per cent, far ahead of its previous result of around 20 per cent in 2006. The centre-right Alliance, which also includes the Liberal Party, the Centre Party and the Christian Democrats, collected 49.28 per cent of the vote. In a historic setback, the Social Democrats won only 30.66 per cent, far below previous levels of around 40 per cent. It was their lowest percentage since World War I. The left-of-centre bloc, comprising the Social Democrats, the Left Party and the Green Party, won 43.6 per cent of the vote.

The 2010 election could well have marked the beginning of an era of sharper political division in Sweden, as the country became one of several European nations where far-right parties have entered parliament. Until 2010, Swedish voters had not given the Sweden Democrats enough support to overcome the 4 per cent Riksdag threshold.

USEFUL LINKS

www.government.se Government and the Government Offices of Sweden
www.manskligarattigheter.gov.se The Government’s website on human rights
www.riksdagen.se The Swedish Parliament – the Riksdag
www.skl.se The Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions

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