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'They are leading us to catastrophe': Sweden's coronavirus stoicism begins to jar

Saturday 4 April 2020, by [ROBERTSON Derek](#) (Date first published: 30 March 2020).

There's a surreal calm in the last country in Europe to hold out against lockdown. But the death toll is rising and some are voicing dissent.

The Øresund Bridge - yes, that bridge - is an engineering marvel linking the Swedish city of Malmö and Copenhagen that normally transports 70,000 people daily. It has fallen eerily silent. Denmark is under coronavirus lockdown, and the Danes have imposed strict border controls. On the Swedish side, the Øresund remains open, although, understandably not many are making that journey.

It feels surreal in Sweden just now. Working from my local cafe, I terror-scroll through Twitter seeing clips of deserted cities, or army trucks transporting the dead in Italy, surrounded by the usual groups of chatty teenagers, mothers with babies and the occasional freelancer.

Outdoors, couples stroll arm in arm in the spring sunshine; Malmö's cafe terraces do a brisk trade. On the beach and surrounding parkland at Sibbarp there were picnics and barbecues this weekend; the adjoining skate park and playground were rammed. No one was wearing a mask.

The global pandemic has closed down Europe's economies and confined millions of people across the continent to their homes. But here, schools, gyms, and (fully stocked) shops remain open, as do the borders. Bars and restaurants continue to serve, and trains and buses are still shuttling people all over the country. You can even, if you wish, go to the cinema (it's mainly indie fare: The Peanut Butter Falcon and Mr Jones were on at my local arthouse over the weekend).

The precautions that Swedes have been advised to adopt - no gatherings of more than 50 people (revised down from 500 last Friday), avoid social contact if over 70 or ill, try to work from home, table service only in bars and restaurants - seem to have allayed public fears that the shocking images from hospitals in Italy and Spain could be repeated here.

The prime minister, Stefan Löfven, has urged Swedes to behave "as adults" and not to spread "panic or rumours".

Panic, though, is exactly what many within Sweden's scientific and medical community are starting to feel. A petition signed by more than 2,000 doctors, scientists, and professors last week - including the chairman of the Nobel Foundation, Prof Carl-Henrik Heldin - called on the government to introduce more stringent containment measures. "We're not testing enough, we're not tracking, we're not isolating enough - we have let the virus loose," said Prof Cecilia Söderberg-Nauclér, a virus immunology researcher at the Karolinska Institute. "They are leading us to catastrophe."

Strong words, but stoicism is a way of life here, as is unflappability. A 300-year history of efficient and transparent public administration, and high levels of trust in experts and governing officials, have left the public inclined to believe what they are told, and that those doing the telling have their

best interests at heart.

"I trust that the doctors working with the government know what they are doing, so I suppose we're as well prepared as we can be," Robert Andersson, 50, a vendor manager in IT who lives in Södermalm, Stockholm, said. "This 'hysteria' that the media is launching is far more dangerous than the virus itself."

Simon Strand, 30, a business consultant in Östermalm, Stockholm, agrees. "There is no reason to believe the authorities are not paying attention," he said.

Anders Tegnell, Sweden's chief epidemiologist, who is leading the government's handling of the crisis, advocates a strategy of mitigation: allow the virus to spread slowly without overwhelming the health system, and without recourse to draconian restrictions. Just don't call it "herd immunity", a phrase that Tegnell, and the authorities, have steadfastly refused to use.

It says much for the transparency and accountability that Swedes expect from public figures that Tegnell remains so accessible to the media. With criticism of Sweden's response to Covid-19 mounting, he has the slightly exasperated tone of a man tired of repeating the obvious when asked what he thinks of the growing concern and calls for a city-wide quarantine of Stockholm, given the very recent spike in cases there. On Monday, Sweden said it had recorded 3,700 cases and 110 deaths.

"Yes, there has been an increase but it's not traumatic so far. Of course, we're going into a phase in the epidemic where we'll see a lot more cases in the next few weeks, more people in the ICU, but that's just like any other country - nowhere has been able to slow down the spread considerably."

Sweden's nearest EU neighbours - the Danes, Finns, and Norwegians - have accepted a lockdown strategy, closing schools, workplaces, and borders weeks ago. "The problem with that approach is you tire the system out," Tegnell said. "You can't keep a lockdown going for months - it's impossible."

But such a situation may become inevitable. "The government thinks they can't stop it, so they've decided to let people die," Söderberg-Nauclér said. "They don't want to listen to the scientific data that's presented to them. They trust the Public Health Agency [*Folkhälsomyndigheten*] blindly, but the data they have is weak - embarrassing even."

"We are seeing signs of a higher doubling rate than Italy, Stockholm will soon have an acute ICU shortage, and they don't understand that by then it will be too late to act. All of this is very dangerous."

Tegnell gives such criticism short shrift: "There is no evidence whatsoever that doing more at this stage would make any difference. It's far better to introduce stringent measures at very specific intervals, and keep them running for as little time as possible."

While there is a constant reappraisal of the situation, Tegnell says Sweden has the crisis under control. "We believe we have the most important measures in place already. Of course, we might have to do more things, but we're not there yet."

For now, Swedes seem to believe him, going about their daily routines wondering if - not when - that point might be reached. Tegnell and the government have set their course, and while it is hard to doubt their sincerity, it is difficult to reconcile Sweden's response with efforts across the rest of Europe. Perhaps other Swedes privately feel the same, but so far are unwilling to give voice to such concerns.

Orla Vigsö, a professor of crisis communications at Gothenburg University, sums up the dilemma. "People are starting to ask: are others stupid and paranoid? Or is Sweden doing it wrong?"

Derek Robertson in Malmö

P.S.

- The Guardian. Mon 30 Mar 2020 18.38 BST :
<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/30/catastrophe-sweden-coronavirus-stoicism-lockdown-europe>

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