

Are the Swedish state family policies delivering?

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Statement at Familyplatform conference in Lisbon
May 25-27, 2010

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Thank you for the opportunity to speak. My name is Jonas Himmelstrand. I am a member of the national board of the Swedish family organisation Haro. It is in this role that I am a member of the Family Platform Advisory Board. I have personally been interested in family policies for more than decade because I saw signs of problems in my work as a management consultant and trainer in business and education. Eventually I wrote a solid book attempting to make sense of the impact of Swedish family policies. One is brought to ask, "Why does Sweden looks so ideal and so idyllic in statistics and at conferences, when at the same time we in Sweden see real difficulties manifested in other statistics and, more practically, in daily Swedish life as it is lived out in workplaces, schools and daycare centres?"

Professor Kimmo Jokinen from Finland ended his presentation this morning by saying that Sweden is regarded as the perfected welfare State with the best State family policies. This is indeed the picture that Sweden enjoys worldwide. I will challenge that picture with statistical information and with observations from my professional and personal experiences in Sweden. My conclusion will be that the Swedish model should be researched carefully by people from outside Sweden if anyone is truly to know what the model actually delivers.

Most of you are familiar with the Swedish model. Our daycare is subsidised up to 90% by the State. A place in daycare is guaranteed within three months for any requesting parent of a child between ages 1 and 5. Sometimes the demand for daycare expands so quickly there is no time to build new buildings. Instead we now have daycare centres on buses, which are promoted to the public with the idea that it is good for children to travel around and see new environments.

Sweden has a definite trend of de-familiarisation. This is openly stated as being a good thing, because parents are not deemed able to train and foster the development of their children on their own. State intervention is deemed necessary from one year of age on. This has been a very clear message, voiced continuously by our State institutions, and it is now a part of Swedish culture.

This message also takes the form of encouragement to go to work directly after a mother's 16-month parental leave. When a mother takes her soon to be one year-old baby for a medical check-up she will typically be asked: "How do you feel now about going back to work soon, because you are going back to work aren't you?" When the child is 18

months of age many nurses will say: "You really need to go back to work now, because your child needs to be in daycare and you need to work."

Now deeply rooted in the culture in Sweden is the notion that State professional care is needed for a child to develop properly and that family care is not enough. At the foundation of this argument you typically find notions of gender equality, in Sweden only seen as women working in paid employment equally as much as men.

About Jonas Himmelstrand

- ❑ **Self-employed management consultant since 1981**
- ❑ **Author of "Following your heart – in the social utopia of Sweden"**
- ❑ **Member of the Haro National Board, www.haro.se**
- ❑ **Founder of the Mireja Institute, www.mireja.org**
- ❑ **President of Rohus, www.rohus.nu**



Let me provide some background information to help you understand how I came from a focus on management consultancy and training to concerns about State family policies and child development. I have been a self-employed management consultant for nearly 30 years. About ten years ago I was struck by the increasing frequency and intensity that people in Sweden were getting burnt-out in their jobs. In nearly every work place where I intervened, I would hear the story of an enthusiastic co-worker who had "hit the wall" as it is expressed in Sweden. At the same period in time a large political debate was in process on the subject of sick-leave. Sweden had the highest sick-leave in all of Europe in the years around 2002, and still ranks among the highest. The facts seemed incongruous. Sweden being materially rich and having admired social policies should not be having these problems. Also at the time I was leading study days for faculty in the public schools, and teachers kept coming and saying to me: "The

psychological health of our pupils has deteriorated alarmingly in the last 20 years. We don't know what to do any more. How do we manage this in our classrooms? What is happening in our society?"

At the same time as the high sick-leave rates were being debated there were young mothers in my training groups who had just come back to work with a one year old child now in daycare. Again and again they were saying: "I felt so bad leaving my child to daycare, only one year old, and so small and tender." The hidden, unexpressed question seemed to be: "Can this really be the right thing to do?" As a management consultant I asked myself how productive these women could be when they were feeling so much guilt and stress inside. Such guilt is one more added factor of stress and increases the likelihood of succumbing to a stress related infection or disease and going on sick-leave.

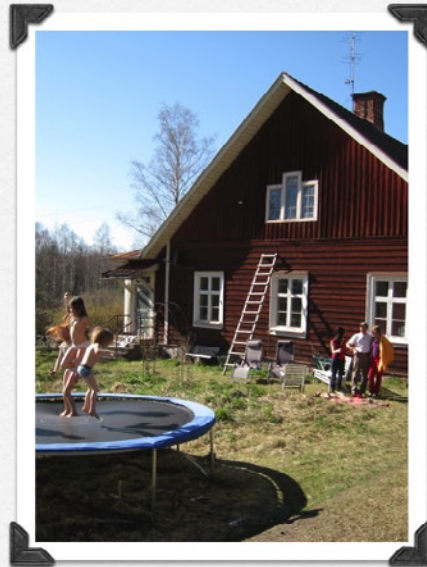
I saw other signals of societal change. Among other sorts of workshops, I give training on presentation technique. This training can be quite stressful, especially when we use a video camera. Over the years I noticed changes in how participants behaved. I began my workshops of this kind in the mid-eighties. Participants were mainly 25 to 30 years old, born in the sixties, and they were becoming managers. In the early days, participants did not really have a problem with the training. They thought my courses were a bit tough because the expectation to become inspiring presenters stretched them and it was a challenging experience to be filmed. But almost all of them were basically okay with the situation. By the end of the nineties I was receiving trainees from a later generation born in the seventies. The training process became more difficult. On nearly every course there was a participant or two with serious self-esteem issues. These were still highly educated people, often with a masters degree in business administration or similar. Every now and then, it began to happen that a participant would leave the course early, because the experience had become too stressful for them. This had never happened in the eighties. I began asking myself, "Am I starting to get a generation with greater difficulties to handle this typical personal growth stress? Why could this be happening? What is it in our life that sets our threshold for handling stress? When does it happen?"

These experiences and others and the questions they provoked drove me to try and understand what was happening and to write my book about it. My investigation led back to our youngest age and earliest experiences in life. I have three children of my own who have been at home most of the time, and during this investigation, my experience with them has been a form of personal reference. If my book had an English title it would be *Following your heart – in the social utopia of Sweden*. A shorter version of the book in English may become available in the future.

To finish my personal introduction, in addition to my consultancy and being on the Haro national board, I also run a small think-tank, The Mireja Institute, and I am the president of the Swedish Association for Home Education known – Rohus.

The great Swedish statistics

- ❑ **Lowest infant mortality**
- ❑ **Very high life expectancy**
- ❑ **Relatively high birth rate**
- ❑ **Low child poverty**
- ❑ **High spending on education**
- ❑ **Equality and gender equality**
- ❑ **The best parental leave**



The great Swedish statistics

Let us now turn to Swedish statistics. First let's look at the well-known Swedish statistics that has made Swedish social policies famous.

- Sweden has the lowest infant mortality in the world. In Sweden we take care of pregnancy relatively well and pregnant mothers will easily find support in our public medical system. There are only three deaths among a thousand children before the age of five. No country has a lower number than this.
- Swedish people enjoy a long life expectancy. A Swedish man's life is on average 79 years, and a women's is 83 years. Still, Japanese women live even longer with an 86 year life expectancy.
- Sweden has a relatively high birth rate in the European context with 1.7 children per woman of child rearing age, although I hear that Finland is now surpassing Sweden. Many other European countries have a much lower birth rate. But 1.7 is a quantity measure. Based on what I will share later in this presentation it makes sense to also add a quality measure. Are we actually producing a next generation which has the psychological maturity, and the ability to handle stress, that life in a future knowledge society will require? I will let that be an open question for now.

- Sweden has a low level of child poverty: 13%. It is not as low as one may expect, but it is still lower than the European average.
- Sweden has a very high spending on education. We have among the highest expenditures per child, if not the highest, whether in daycare or in school. But we are not getting the learning results from that spending that we should be getting.
- Sweden has a strong culture of equality and gender equality. The Nordic countries have hardly ever had any class system, so there is a strong tradition of equality. Also gender equality has a very strong position in our public debate since about 30 years back.
- Perhaps someone can contradict me, but Swedes say that we have the best parental leave in the world. We have 13 months at 80% of our salary up to a certain level, with an additional 90 days at a lower level. Perhaps this makes people believe that Sweden is the best country for families. What most people outside of Sweden don't understand, however, is that after these 16 months the door closes. Finland has a general home care allowance. Other countries have lower taxes or tax benefits making home care financially possible. During the last two years in Sweden there has been an allowance which is not national and only discretionary for every municipality. The allowance is small by Swedish standards, about 300 euros per month, with no pension benefits. Only one third of all Swedish municipalities currently offer this home care allowance. This voluntary allowance is not fully supported by Parliament. If there is a shift in Government in this year's coming elections, the home care allowance will probably be taken away completely. Other than this there are no tax benefits of any kind for parents not wanting to use the public daycare system.

The Swedish system is designed for the dual earner household. This is the expressed policy of our Government and is supported by both sides of the political spectrum. Our current Government calls it the "work policy" and signifies that everybody should be engaged in full-time paid employment after parental leave. Most parties also argue that parental leave should ideally be split in half between the mother and the father, and some parties want to make such an equal split a requirement.

Now let us take a look at the neutral statistics.

The neutral statistics

- **Nearly 90% of all 18 month–5 year old children are in day care, frequently 6-10 hours a day.**
- **Day care group sizes for under 3s are never below 10 children, often 14 and sometimes 17 children.**
- **Average day care child-staff ratio all ages is 5:1, but 7:1 and even 10:1 exist – no regulation.**
- **The cost of the Swedish day care system is € 15000 per child and year – 90% subsidized to parents.**
- **A new school law will forbid home education – and make family travel during school hours difficult.**

The neutral statistics

- Close to 90% of all children between 18 months and 5 year old are in daycare, often for 6 to 10 hours a day. There are even cases of 11 hours per day. Depending on your values, this can either make you happy, because it shows that Sweden has managed to implement a system of daycare for nearly every child. But it can also make you sad. A couple of weeks ago I was at a family conference with child psychologists and family counsellors in Canada. They were in tears about these facts.

- Daycare group sizes for the under-3s are never below 10 children, except perhaps in some transitory phases. In the eighties the group size for small children was regulated to 10 children or fewer. But since the responsibility for daycare was moved to the Ministry of Education there are no longer any national regulations on either group size or child-to-staff ratios. According to regulations, quality has to be good, but it is up to every municipality to decide what "good quality" means. The consequence is typically that the finances of the municipality determine daycare group sizes and child-to-staff ratios.

A common group size for the under-3s is 14 children, but there are groups of up to 17 small children. Such groups often have three staff, of which one may be part-time. When one of the staff is on sick-leave, which is common among day-care staff and

pre-school teachers, there is often no replacement for financial reasons. There are even situations where there is only one staff for 17 small children below three years of age.

Three Swedish experts recently wrote a book collecting all these statistics. Their conclusion is that Swedish daycare is no longer of the quality required for a healthy development in children. They say there are many children at risk because our daycare is no longer of sufficient quality. It should be added that these three experts all hold a positive general view on daycare.

- The average daycare child-to-staff ratio for all ages is 5:1. This is pretty good for older children. But Swedish daycare regulations lack awareness that the under-3s demand much more adult attachment – and thereby higher staff-to-child ratios – than older children. Awareness of this fact is more profound in other countries, for example in England and the US. In the US there are recommendations of child-to-staff ratios of 3:1 or 4:1 for smaller children in group sizes of six or eight children. Some states in the US have implemented these recommendations. In England there are regulations of similar child-to-staff ratios for small children.

Sweden has no regulations on child-to-staff ratios, and ratios of 7:1 and even 10:1 do exist in Swedish daycare.

- The cost of the Swedish daycare system, according to a recent study by the Swedish Parliament research department, is 15000 per child per year, of which more than 90% is paid by the State. When you consider the group sizes and child-to-staff ratios mentioned above, you realise that bringing Swedish daycare to high quality for under-3s would probably bring the price tag close to 25000 per child per year. Of course, the question then is at what price is it more profitable to pay the parents to take care of their own children rather than put the children in daycare and send both parents to work. The price of high quality daycare for the under 3s could provide a fairly generous home care allowance.

- Our present centre-right government is presenting a new school law expected to be passed by Parliament in June. The new school law further strengthens the ideas that the State fosters child development better than parents and that daycare is a form of school. The new school law will severely restrict home education, which has become a growing and very successful educational trend in the Western world. Home education is already highly restricted in Sweden compared to most other countries in Europe. Also pupils will be severely restricted from obtaining time off from school during winter to join their family for a long family trip, thus lessening the opportunities for families to have common family experiences. The penalties for breaking the school law will be fines. The new law also makes prison a possibility. One member of Parliament has raised the concern that making daycare a form of school, could be a first step to making daycare compulsory in Sweden.

This brings us to the more uncomfortable statistics.

The uncomfortable statistics

- ❑ Severe decrease in psychological health among youth.
- ❑ Very high rates of sick leave among women.
- ❑ Day care staff at the top of sick leave statistics.
- ❑ Rapidly decreasing quality in Swedish day care.
- ❑ Plummeting educational results in Swedish schools.
- ❑ Severe discipline problems in Swedish classrooms.
- ❑ Deteriorating parental abilities, even in middle-class.
- ❑ Highly segregated labour market.

The uncomfortable statistics

- During the last 30 years Sweden has seen a severe decline in the psychological health among our youth. Mild psychological disorders such as re occurring headaches, stomach aches, worries and anxiety have tripled from about 9% to 30% since the eighties for girls, and slightly less for boys. Several studies by Government institutions confirm these statistics. However, no plausible official explanation has been given.

During the years 1986-2002 the psychological health for 15 year old's in Sweden declined faster than in ten other comparable countries: Finland, Denmark, Norway, Hungary, Switzerland, Austria, Belgium, Wales, Spain and Scotland.

- Sweden has very high rates of sick-leave, especially among women, and particularly among women over 50 years of age, statistics which are at the top in Europe. Psycho-social explanations dominate. Few women today actually work until 65 years of age. Many take early retirement of some form as soon as age 55. This is, of course, the first generation of women who have had to combine motherhood with full-time work, excepting for parental leave. These data are shown in a study published in the Swedish medical journal, *Läkartidningen* in 2005.

- Educational outcomes in Swedish schools are plummeting. Twenty-five years ago

Swedish children were among the best in the world in reading, writing and mathematics. Today, we just about make it to average, and in mathematics we are below average.

- Swedish schools have severe discipline problems. According to our present Minister of Education, Jan Björklund, Swedish schools have among the highest truancy, the greatest classroom disorder, the most damage to property and the most offensive language of all comparable nations. Björklund has been criticised for exaggerating, but official reports confirm that these problems in Swedish schools are significant. Also, one who visits Swedish schools for professional reasons can bear witness to the situation.
- The parental skills of Swedish parents are deteriorating. Britta Johansson was one of several researchers in a EU-sponsored study of Swedish schools and daycare. One thousand five hundred teachers and daycare staff were interviewed. Britta Johansson wrote an article about the results in one of Sweden's national morning papers, Svenska Dagbladet. The interviewed educators voiced deep concern about the lack of parental skills in the parents of their pupils. The survey results showed that even healthy, intelligent and reasonable Swedish parents have difficulties in being parents today. According to Britta Johansson they lack knowledge about children's needs and they cannot set limits. She writes (my translation):

The public offer of full day child care seems to make many parents loose the grip on their own responsibility. They trust that their children are better fostered by the pre-school and school and that the experts on their children are found there.

Britta Johansson also says that pre-school and school cannot fill the gaps caused by lack of parental time with their children and trust in parents role in rearing their children.

- Sweden has a highly segregated labour market, with men mostly working in the private sector with reasonable salaries, and women mostly working in the public sector at low salaries. Many women never made their own choice to work, rather they were more or less pushed into the labour market when the tax benefits for families with home mothers were abolished in 1971. Even forty years afterward, today's polls regularly show that a majority of Swedes would prefer the financial possibility for parents to be at home with their children for the first four years.

Possible causes based on current knowledge

- ❑ **Early separation of infants can create chronically low thresholds for stress throughout life in some children.**
- ❑ **Early exposure to large groups of peers, creates peer-orientation with detrimental results on maturation.**
- ❑ **The culturally endorsed early separation of infants causes stress in parents, and for some – sick-leave.**
- ❑ **High level of state intervention in family life, reduces parents sense of responsibility for their children.**

Possible causes based on current knowledge

I will now offer an attempt to explain the possible causes of these statistics using some available theoretical models.

- Today we know from child psychology and neuroscience that early separation of infants from parents can create chronically low thresholds for stress in some children. This can lower the threshold for anxiety for the rest of the child's life. Early separation would be expected to lead to a less resilient future generation. Medical technology today can actually measure stress levels in the saliva easily and clearly, making stress research easy to perform, also in small children.
- We also know today that early exposure to large groups of peers leads to peer-orientation, which has detrimental results on psychological maturation, learning, and the transference of culture between generations. Canadian psychologist Dr. Gordon Neufeld has explored in detail the causal connections of the sorts of phenomena we have been discussing. His work is reported in his book *Hold on to your kids – why parents need to matter more than peers..*

How does peer-orientation happen? Consider a typical day in the life of a ten year old in a Stockholm suburb. The child is left by his parents at 7.00 in the morning at

the school for before-school-child-care. When school begins the child is already tired and hungry. After a long day in school there is after-school-child-care while the child waits for the tired parents to return at perhaps 5.00 or 6.00 in the late afternoon. In the evening the child may be having another activity outside home, which most ambitious Swedish parents believe is good for their children. Where does the child find emotional security? One needs someone for comfort and closeness. The parents are inaccessible for too long. In the best case scenario there will be a caring adult in school. But for most children it will be a peer or a gang which offers emotional support during school hours. This is the genesis of peer orientation. It fills the lack of meaningful relationships with trusted adults interested in the development of the child. The problem with peer orientation is that peers, especially during the teens, do not have the maturity themselves to handle the difficult feelings about differences, conflicts, failure, rejection and deceit. The limited maturity of peer-orientation results in conformism, gangs, bullying, aggression, and sometimes violence. Also as youngsters attach themselves to peers, they are in the process emotionally detaching themselves from the adult world, including their parents.

- The culturally endorsed separation of infants in Sweden causes stress in parents, manifested in many as sick-leave. According to a meta-study by Dean Ornish, M.D, high-quality, close relationships are the strongest health factor, superior to and more important than all other health factors combined. In Sweden we don't have much time for close relationships in families. The high frequency of stress related disease can be seen as a consequence.

According to research by Sir Michael Marmot too little control over one's personal life situation is another risk factor to health. Through its family policies Sweden has given the State a controlling position in the bedroom of every Swedish family – a clear risk factor to health.

- High levels of State intervention in family life reduce parents' sense of responsibility for their children. Swedish Governmental agencies have been very successful in promoting the idea of daycare as more than a convenience and as the best child care solution for everyone. Unfortunately, unintended drawbacks and consequences have not been anticipated. When parents loose their sense of responsibility, they do not develop in younger years the strong relationships with their children which are essential for them to provide guidance to them especially through adolescence.

Effects on democracy

*Once in place,
Swedish state family policies
have proven difficult to discuss
through normal
democratic processes.*

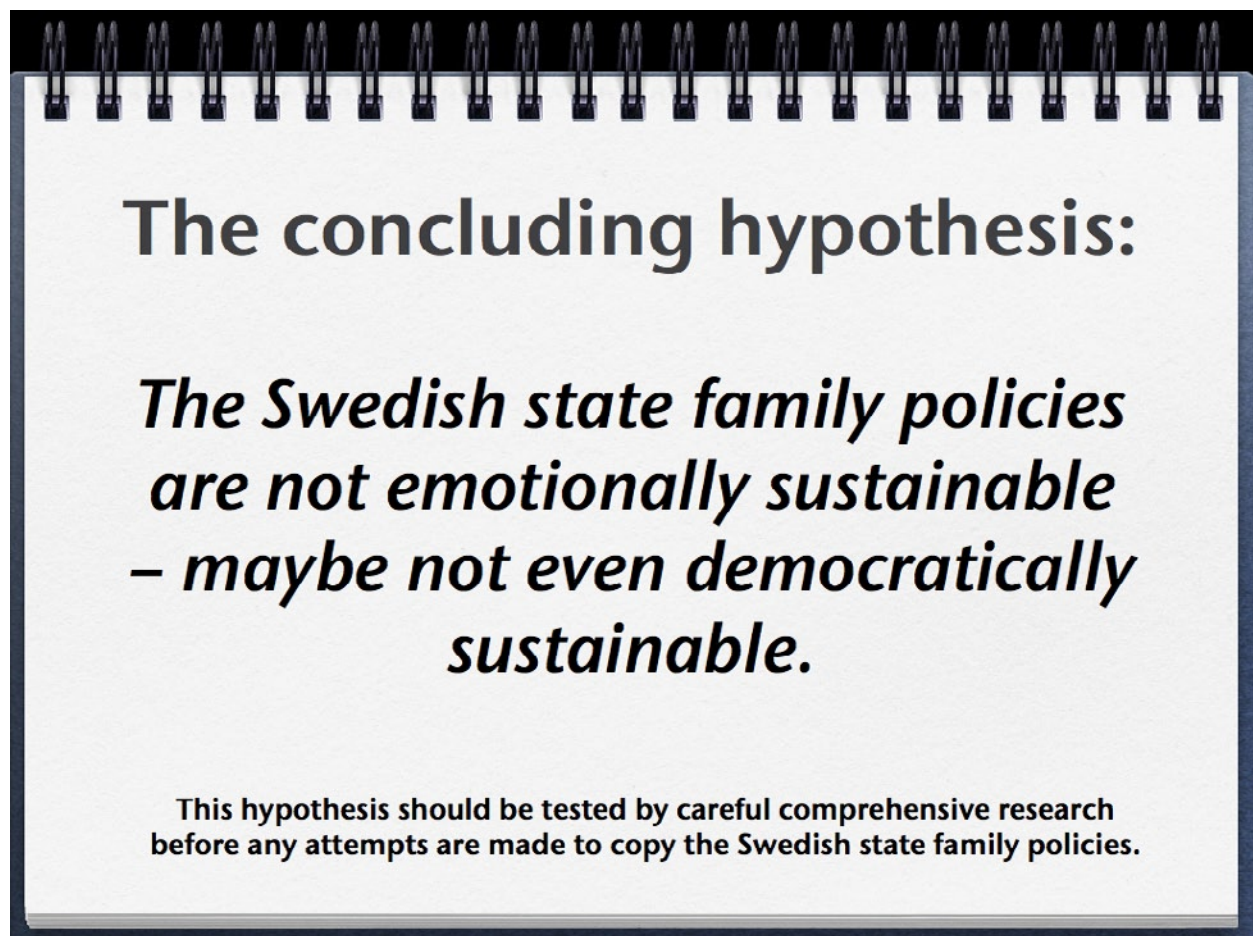
Effects on democracy

The three experts on daycare referred to previously also raise a sensitive subject about our democracy. They report that discussing this whole issue is very difficult in Sweden because it brings up feelings of guilt in parents. The Swedish people have had the daycare solution largely forced upon them both culturally and financially after parental leave. They seldom made their own considered choice because of lack of options. They saw no choice but to accept the situation and suppress their feelings, and they don't want to be reminded of this. Similarly, the media seldom discuss this topic. One might compare the Swedish situation to a dysfunctional family where everyone may know that daddy drinks too much, but no one admits it. They cover it up because talking about it is too uncomfortable. In Sweden most people know in their hearts that our family policies are seldom in our children's best interest, but no one talks about it. It is simply too painful.

I confess that it would be nearly impossible in Sweden to have a presentation like this one, except for certain specialised groups. These matters are not supposed to be talked about. It makes parents uncomfortable to awaken the thought that they may not have made the choice they wanted, so they get defensive. Staff at daycare centres do not tell parents of the hardships their child may have suffered during the day because they do not want to disturb the parents' feelings. Instead they say that the day was wonderful

even it is was not, and even if the child had to face some painful situations. There are many witnesses of this behaviour. The three experts write extensively about it. I have seen it myself. I get told completely different stories whether I go to daycare in the role of a parent or in the role of a consultant.

This means that we have created a family policy that is difficult, or not at all possible to discuss through normal democratic processes. This is in itself is a serious democratic problem. A democratic country should never implement policies that cannot be discussed through democratic means.



The concluding hypothesis

My concluding hypothesis is that Swedish State family policies are not emotionally sustainable, and thus not sustainable in either health, psychological maturation or learning. Quality of parenthood is very strongly a matter of intergenerational inheritance, and we are already seeing definite problems in the Swedish parental generation today. Many of them have never had a close relationship with their mother or father in the way that their grandparents had. Swedish State family policies may not even be democratically sustainable as there are definite difficulties in even discussing these policies.

The consequences of Swedish family policies should therefore be investigated through thorough, comprehensive, and comparative procedures conducted by research institutions outside Sweden before any other nations attempt to copy the Swedish State family policies.

Jonas Himmelstrand in May 2010

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