

Will Sweden's herd immunity experiment pay off?

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Unflappable: Sweden's state epidemiologist Anders Tegnell has become an unlikely celebrity during the pandemic © Jessica GOW / TT NEWS AGENCY / AFP

If I've learnt one thing in a decade living in Sweden, it is that it is boring. Its respectful, consensus-driven politics has little of Westminster's drama, and the highly-independent government bodies responsible for the day-to-day running of things—known collectively as *myndigheterna* (the agencies)—value rule and procedure above radical ideas.

So Swedes bristle as the world depicts the country as “playing Russian roulette” by not enacting a draconian coronavirus lockdown and by pursuing a herd immunity strategy that's supposedly only considered elsewhere by wild-eyed mavericks. That's just not how Sweden thinks of itself.

As Anders Tegnell, the country's unflappable state epidemiologist has repeatedly argued, it is the rest of the world that is running the experiment. No previous pandemic has seen countries shut down to the extent seen in 2020.

From Sweden's own perspective, it is taking a restrained, middle-of-the-road approach while others panic and put in place knee-jerk border controls and school closures that are neither backed by the evidence nor sustainable. Sweden denies having a herd immunity strategy, with Tegnell arguing that its aim, like that of everyone else, is simply to suppress the pandemic to a level the health system can cope with.

So where I live in Malmö, life continues—almost—unchanged. Many now work from home. Most who fall ill, like my family did, have quarantined themselves. Most elderly people have self-isolated. But parks are full of groups enjoying the spring, the local football pitch echoes with excited shouts. “It feels like it’s all back to normal now,” my son’s teacher beamed in the crowded schoolyard last week. “We *all* have coronavirus,” joked the waitress in my local café, which is as busy as ever, when I asked if there are any hygiene measures. “Would you like some extra coronavirus with that?”

The immediate price of Sweden’s less-restrictive policy, however, has become harder to ignore. The death rate has soared far above those of its more heavily locked down Nordic neighbours, standing—as I write—at roughly triple that of Denmark and six times that of Norway and Finland. At one point, it looked like the curve was stabilising, but as the weeks ground on, Tegnell conceded it had now reached “a higher level.” The death toll hit 2,355 by late April.

But Swedes continue to rally behind the authorities. A recent study found that confidence in the government officials who comment in the media on coronavirus had actually jumped 12 percentage points over the preceding fortnight to 72 per cent.

Things could have got dicey when a group of 22 respected researchers wrote a public letter calling for the government to seize control of pandemic policy from Tegnell and his team, but he picked a technical hole in their death rate statistics and came out on top in the PR wars. The media accused them of “behaving like scandal-mongers.”

Tegnell now has two competing fan pages on Facebook, with a combined 110,000 members, where his supporters call on his many critics at Sweden’s universities to “leave the academic arguments until afterwards” and throw their support behind the man appointed to lead. There is a booming market in Tegnell T-shirts. Someone even tattooed the epidemiologist’s profile on his forearm.

And Sweden has not yet lost the argument. As Denmark, Norway and Finland begin lifting restrictions, their own academic experts are taking aim at Tegnell’s counterparts. “We are pushing the problem out in front of us,” the Norwegian epidemiologist, Eiliv Lund, warned in April, after the country’s public health institute estimated that only one per cent of the population had been infected. “If we had done what the Swedes have done, we would have had a higher infection rate, and thus a higher immunity.”

Christian Wejse, an epidemiologist at Denmark’s Aarhus University, argues the results of Sweden’s voluntary social distancing measures have in fact been “impressive.” The pandemic has put Sweden’s hospitals under pressure, but it has not overwhelmed them.

The real advantage to Sweden’s approach may not begin to reveal itself until a little later on. Modelling by Tegnell’s agency suggests that the number of infections peaked on 8th April, that 26 per cent of Stockholmers will have had the virus by 1st May, and that the city population will have a degree of herd immunity from mid-May.

“If it’s really the case that the amount of immune Swedes is triple the amount of immune

Danes,” Wejse said, “then Sweden will be in a better situation if there’s a new wave.”

If this does happen, it won’t be down to a daring maverick approach. Quite the opposite. It will come down to *lagom*, the quintessentially Swedish concept of doing just enough to get what you need done, but not so much as to waste energy or cause problems. In other words, to being boring.

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