



Sweden: a “Ministry of the Future” to think about tomorrow’s public policy

As early as 1973, Sweden, in a ground-breaking move for future planning, appointed a Minister of State to review the role of future studies¹. A Commission on the Future of Sweden, set up in 2011, which was tasked with identifying the challenges facing Sweden in the longer term, up to 2020 and 2050, submitted its report in March 2013². Created in November 2014, Sweden’s “Ministry of the Future” makes it, along with South Korea³, one of the few countries to have such a body. Headed up by Kristina Persson⁴, it has a mandate to think about public policy in the very long term.

Sweden, a cutting-edge country that anticipates social change

Bookended by elections, political terms of office are short and government is not always able to offset this by a thought process and suggestions regarding the long term which would be of great use to decision makers. Many topics such as the environment, demographics and labour throw up very long term issues. With this in mind, the Swedish Prime Minister, Stefan Löfven, set up a Ministry for Strategic Development and Nordic Cooperation, known as the “Ministry of the Future”, headed up by Kristina Persson, who was Minister of State for future studies from 1973 to 1976⁵.

The overriding goal of this initiative is to “ensure that Sweden remains competitive in 50 years’ time”⁶. This is proof positive that the country has opted for change with forward planning for technical and social shifts. In this respect, the “Ministry of the Future” is positioning itself as a think tank within the government⁷. In the Ministry, a Council on the Future, a secretariat and strategic analysis groups assist the Minister and State Secretary, Maja Fjaestad⁸, with their work on the future of public policies. The teams focus on a timeline of five, ten or fifteen years depending on the sector under consideration. For climate change, the timespan is 50 years⁹. According to Kristina Persson “if politics wants to remain relevant and be useful to its citizens it needs to change its approach to decision making”¹⁰.

An innovative, cross-cutting and consensual working method

The Ministry is organised in three working groups: the future of work; the green transition and competitiveness; global cooperation. These groups are very outward-looking to cater for the expectations of all the stakeholders and to ensure maximum effectiveness. Each group brings together people from different backgrounds: the business sector,

- 1 <https://www.futuribles.com/fr/revue/6/prevision-et-planification-a-long-terme-en-suede/>
- 2 <http://www.regeringen.se/contentassets/389793d478de411fbc83d8f512cb5013/future-challenges-for-sweden--final-report-of-the-commission-on-the-future-of-sweden>
- 3 https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2016/03/should-countries-have-a-minister-of-future/?utm_content=buffer9b199&utm_medium=social&utm_source=twitter.com&utm_campaign=buffer
- 4 <http://www.government.se/government-of-sweden/prime-ministers-office/kristina-persson/cv-kristina-persson/>
- 5 <http://www.perfil.com/columnistas/Suecia-y-su-Ministerio-del-Futuro-20150606-0102.html>
- 6 <http://www.wearestim.com/blog/linnovation-en-politique-quand-la-suede-cree-un-ministere-du-futur>
- 7 <http://www.nordiclabourjournal.org/artikler/portrett/portrait-2015/article.2015-01-29.7607548889>
- 8 <http://www.government.se/government-of-sweden/prime-ministers-office/kristina-persson/state-secretary-to-kristina-persson/>
- 9 <https://albertomucci.com/2015/11/10/how-sweden-ministry-of-the-future-works/>
- 10 <https://albertomucci.com/2015/11/10/how-sweden-ministry-of-the-future-works/>

the civil society, the trade unions as well as academics and researchers. They work independently¹¹ but in close cooperation with other ministries.

The strategy is cross-cutting and overlaps with the responsibilities of other ministries. This highly innovative working method functions in a concerted manner as all the government departments have taken on board the need to think about the future. What is more the method is democratic with no decisions being imposed.

Bold goals for major work topics

There is no doubt that new technology, automation and digitalisation will have ramifications for the labour market. The analysis group on the future of work examines the impact of these changes on income distribution trends, companies' conditions for hiring and the role of government. The goal is to table tangible and sustainable proposals leading to high employment and better working conditions¹².

Climate change calls for an overhaul of energy policy. The working group on the green transition will put forward proposals to place Sweden at the forefront of policy development for green growth¹³. In this respect, in November 2015, Kristina Persson announced: "By 2030, Sweden plans to become a fossil-free country and will be one of the world's first fossil-free welfare nations"¹⁴.

The strategic group on global cooperation is tasked with having the sustainable development goals, which were adopted in 2015, applied. Together with the other two groups and various countries, it analyses major issues such as global working conditions, gender equality and children's rights, corruption, reforms of the international institutions and cyber issues¹⁵.

These three core topics are supplemented by other high-profile issues that the "Ministry of the Future" has to address. One of these is demographics as the aging population in all European countries is a serious cause for concern, in particular, for the sustainability of the pension system. Moreover, a report entitled "Algorithms in Society" was published by the Ministry in March 2016 as algorithms affect our absorption of information and thus the public debate and, ultimately, democracy¹⁶.

The first proposals from the analysis group on the future of work are already available. They underscore the fact that future job security will be increasingly dependent on skills. This means that lifelong learning will have to be strengthened and supplemented. There must be an adequate training offering and, for instance, the number of study places in municipal adult education should be increased, and it should be better tailored to demand and the requirements of businesses, as part of well-functioning interaction between education and working life. Lastly, "lifelong learning insurance" would provide financial assistance for all¹⁷.

Is having a "ministry of the future" an example to be followed?

At the 2016 World Economic Forum in Davos, Marc Benioff, founder and CEO of Salesforce, argued that every country should have a "minister of the future", and mentioned Sweden as an example. He maintained that the current unprecedented technological advances mean that we have to rethink our relationship to time and anticipate social change¹⁸. Others such as Ian Kerr, the Canada Research Chair in Ethics, Law & Technology at the University of Ottawa¹⁹, are in favour, at the dawn of the Fourth Industrial Revolution, of all government departments having the resources to think very long term on future issues.

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11 <http://www.government.se/articles/2015/05/policies-have-to-change-from-within/>
12 <http://www.government.se/government-policy/mission-the-futre/the-future-of-the-work/>
13 <http://www.government.se/government-policy/mission-the-futre/the-green-transition/>
14 <http://www.lesechos.fr/industrie-services/energie-environnement/021505173258-la-suede-sengage-a-se-passer-totalement-des-energies-fossiles-1178106.php>
15 <http://www.government.se/government-policy/mission-the-futre/global-cooperation/>
16 <http://www.government.se/articles/2016/03/state-secretary-maja-fjaestad-on-algorithms-and-their-impact-on-society/>
17 <http://www.government.se/contentassets/d7b68454ed83417aa913c0e2450837f8/life-long-learning-for-the-future-labour-market.pdf>
18 https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2016/03/should-countries-have-a-minister-of-future/?utm_content=buffer9b199&utm_medium=social&utm_source=twitter.com&utm_campaign=buffer
19 <http://ipolitics.ca/2016/04/10/a-minister-of-the-future-some-tech-experts-want-a-one-stop-shop-for-disruptors/>