

Excerpt from the Swedish evening newspaper EXPRESSEN:

Meet one of SD's significant opinion makers

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Three days after the election, when the Sweden Democrats became Sweden's second largest party, Expressen's Jens Liljestrand talks to Dick Erixon, one of their most important representatives.

He is editor-in-chief of *Samtiden* and publisher of *Riks*, known as the party's main mouthpiece on television and radio.

Meet him in an in-depth conversation about the background in the Center Party, the enterprise think tank Timbro and the work at the Red Cross AIDS Foundation.

On a Wednesday in mid-September, I step into a condominium in Stockholm central district of Vasastan. The well-kept two room apartment – a small kitchen, a living room with sofa and TV, a combined bedroom and office – testifies to a neat, single man with cultural and political interests. In a glass cabinet, all seasons of the "White House" are stored in a stack of VHS boxes under a bottle of Chivas Regal.

On the wall a signed photo of the jazz legend Louis Armstrong. The nameplate from the local Rotary Club. Former Prime Minister Tage Erlander's diaries with author Vilhelm Moberg and Tom of Finland are crammed into the fully stocked bookshelf. An exercise bike.

- Although I mostly use it as a clothes hanger these days, says Dick Erixon and smiles widely.



Foto: Cornelia Nordström

One in five voted for Sweden Democrats

Three days have passed since the election, which has finally normalized the Sweden Democrats into the bourgeois cottage heat. Despite repeated revelations and controversies surrounding the party's members, they now have the support of more than one in five voters. The great pariah in Swedish politics is currently in government negotiations with Ulf Kristersson.

If you want to point to a single person who has made this possible, you have to look beyond Åkesson, Söder, Karlsson, Jomshof and Bylund, people who have neither moved significantly ideologically nor softened their rhetoric. Rather, it is in here, on 60 square meters, with a view of the same roof trusses that Astrid Lindgren let Karlsson-on-the-roof float over with his propeller, that the Sweden Democrats have packaged and sold to the Swedish people.

How did you celebrate on election night?

Dick Erixon smiles again.

- I didn't celebrate, I went to bed at 11 in the evening and then the left parties was still in the lead. The next morning I was supposed to get up and comment, I had seven live broadcasts on Monday.

Dick Erixon is 60 years old, single and childless. He has lived in this apartment since 1995 and spends most of his time here, or at his country estate in the Stockholm archipelago. He does the work from the computer that is on the desk next to the neatly made bed. He is not a spin doctor in the traditional sense. He does not belong to any office, but is editor-in-chief and responsible publisher of the party's web magazine Samtiden, which also includes the media channel Riks.

For the average Swede, he is probably best known for representing the party as a commentator on radio and television. From initially being a controversial voice – it became a news article in the mainstream press when he was first invited to the Swedish Radio's "Good morning, world" in September 2016 – he is now a recurrent feature in the panels when the week's current events are discussed. The other participants vary; there is no shortage of talkative social democratic or liberal thinkers. The national conservative side has only one, and with a slightly nasal, hoarse voice, often in a good mood, he is the mouthpiece of the Sweden Democrats in millions of Swedish homes.

Poverty helps you see more clearly

But you must still have been happy when you woke up in the morning?

Dick Erixon shrugs.

- I can keep my distance from all that. I mostly think it's sad that it's so even, I like it when democracy gives a clearer result. The smaller the margins, the more fuss. In addition, I hate taking any victories in advance, my starting point is always that it will be worse than I hoped. My basic attitude is that you have to live with everything.

Dick Erixon had his first home in the small village Sikfors in Norrbotten, the wilderness near the arctic circle in northern Sweden, where his grandparents lived above the railway station. As a one-year-old, he moved to the inner-city district Annedal in Gothenburg, where the family lived simply.

- No, you don't have to have been poor to understand society, but it helps you gain a broader perspective. That spirit of anxiety today, the concern about the climate, the fear of SD... I don't understand it. My grandparents toiled on the railway, after grandma passed away I found her schedule, she had been on duty most days from four in the morning until half past eleven at night.

Dick Erixon taps firmly with his hand on the table.

- Get a job. Fix clothes. Forty degrees cold in the winters, newspaper in the shoes. People are ungrateful today. Solve the task instead of complaining. We would not have had democracy today if people had been full of anxiety and offense and fears!

Admire of down-to-earth political leaders

He studied economics and, like others in his family, worked for the State Railways. When he came to Stockholm in the mid-1980s, he became the treasurer of the youth union in the Center Party. From there he advanced to the county council and became political secretary for public transport.

With twinkling eyes, Erixon tells a story about an action-oriented politician. About his admiration for the former party leader and Prime Minister Thorbjörn Fälldin, and his down-to-earth, laconic style, such as during the Russian nuclear-submarine crisis in 1981, when he instructed the military commander with the words "Hold the border".

- There were interesting people in the Center party at that time! Grounded in reality, no fuss, concrete. Not a lot of fucking platitudes, I loved it, when politicians do things instead of talking so damned much. Politicians are the people's representatives, they should make sure to solve problems.

He stopped working for the Center Party in 1999 and got back to working as an accounting economist. At the same time, he took on assignments for the business think tank Timbro and wrote a stream of reports on various administrative issues. The titles, 21 in total, are such as "Behind the healthcare policy's fog curtains" (2000), "Care and school without consumer power" (2003) and "State opinion formation is discriminatory" (2008). In 2003, as something of a pioneer in political communication, he started the blog erixon.com where his polemical talent was given free rein.

Saw the shift in popular opinion

When the Sweden Democrats began to approach the parliament Riksdag, with almost 3 percent in the 2006 election, he saw that something was about to happen in politics.

- I told several high representatives in the center-right parties that the establishment had gotten caught up in the globalist frenzy after the fall of the wall and missed the Swedish perspective. The Swedish culture is not better than any other, but it is ours and we have the right to have it as much as the Kurds have theirs. We have a passive, withdrawn culture that is easy to attack with an extroverted, male-chauvinist culture such as from the Middle East. When I was growing up, it was obvious to be able to leave the bike unlocked. My grandparents never locked the front door. And because we're quiet and passive, you can think it's just a matter of coming here and taking what you want - but it's not!

In the 2010s, Dick Erixon was one of the first people in the Swedish center-right establishment to welcome the election of Donald Trump in 2016. It was at the same time he began working for the newspaper owned by Sweden Democrats.

- During the refugee crisis in 2015, all the old parties ended up as if in a state of psychosis, as long as you gave the refugees coffee and stuffed animals at the railway stations, everything would work out, nobody thought about tomorrow - but if you've grown up in economic scarcity, you know that it's damn important to think on what happens the next day. Sweden cannot be the social welfare office of the whole world. The only one who said something sensible was Jimmie Åkesson and I thought: Now I have to help. So, via an official I knew, I got a dinner with Mattias Karlsson. My plan was to maybe write reports, do investigations, things like I've done before. But then I was asked to take over the newspaper Samtiden.

Is it like you recognize the old Center Party and Fälldin in SD and Åkesson?

- Exactly. When Fälldin broke the Social Democrats' grip on power, it was because he was not afraid of Palme. A lot of bourgeois politicians are afraid of the Social Democrats, they shit themselves when they are attacked, they run and hide! As when Göran Hägglund gave his speech about "real people" in Almedalen in 2009, The Cristian Democrats had only dared to develop that line, the Sweden Democrats had never entered the Riksdag the following year. But the cultural left got angry and then the Cristian Democrats backed down.

But Åkesson is not afraid?

- No, he is like Fälldin, lives outside Stockholm, has no interest in being liked by the establishment, he is relaxed, grounded in his views. And he is not afraid to face opposition.

Exaggerations have been removed

We sit at the table in the small kitchen and talk about the controversies surrounding SD, one by one. Erixon's method is consistently to gloss over, forgive or deny – or move on to talking about what other parties have done.

- When I joined, I had read the old party programs and they are not as extreme as they have been reported to be. Of course, there are expressions like "inherited essence", which opens the door to misunderstandings.

In the party's old program they were in favor of the death penalty and opposed non-European adoption.

- Yes, it's outside of what we have reason to talk about at all, it's stupid. But I have a forgiving attitude, because it was people who had not been part of the establishment, grass roots, who built something up. Then it will be tentative, it will not be perfect. But I haven't met anyone who has any ... like this ... all the things you describe.

Not a single one? But you clean out and exclude people all the time?

- Those who are reported in the media are those who never had any influence. The kind you wouldn't have written about if it had been in other parties.

But when the leading layer of today's SD gathered in the 1990s in Lund, it revolved a lot around their craze for a romantic and authoritarian nationalism. Thorbjörn Fälldin didn't stand and read poems about Karl XII, did he?

- It is about a simplistic way of making visible what is so invisible. A tentative seeking. An ideological position that has been very repressed, you have to try your way, develop, find ways. A stage of searching, before you can formulate yourself in a more thoughtful way.

Kent Ekeröth spoke Hungarian in the Swedish Riksdag. How did it feel to you?

- I understand why he did it, even if I wouldn't do it myself. He wants to tease, he wants to mess with the establishment. It is a trait of wanting to provoke that is found in a number of these older SD-politicians, who have experienced violent oppositions when they have held public meetings.

During the course of the conversation, Dick Erixon returns several times to how much he dislikes the "opinion corridor" and tries to stick labels on his opponent.

- It should be an open debate, if you don't like what is said, you should come up with counter-arguments. Not saying that someone is so-and-so. As soon as someone paints someone as a fascist, Nazi, racist, anything like that, then you lose all my respect. That person is not a Democrat.

But if a person IS a Nazi, you must be able to tell, right? It was a veteran of the Waffen-SS who co-founded the SD...

- Deputy auditor, was he?

But he was still there, right? It's not a lie, is it? Shouldn't you be able to say that then? That SD has Nazi roots?

- I think it is problematic with the word "roots". What the hell are "roots" for something? It's a concept you can put whatever you want into it. Rather look at what the party stood for and stands for in its programs.

Minorities have no reason to be afraid

But can you understand that a person who, for example, comes from a non-European country feels worried when a party that has expressed hostility towards such people gains power in Sweden? That you experience insecurity or fear then?

- No, I can't understand that. I myself belong to a minority that has not had particularly great rights. As a homosexual, when I came out in the mid-1980s, there was very little understanding, not from any parties, not even the communists. But I was not afraid of any party for that. You have to deal with things as they appear. I could quickly see that even if no one accepted it, there wasn't either...well, there were people, late at night...

There are many homosexuals who have testified about how exposed to violence and abuse they have been, and how afraid they are of violence.

- Yes, I have also been beaten but not for that reason, it was a robbery, it happens when you are drunk and out late at night, it is a risk you take.

But now we talked about the threat to homosexuals, the threat to minorities, which is real.

- Well... I feel that Sweden doesn't have any big problems like that, and not even then. All types of violence are, of course, completely reprehensible, and all societies have problems, but you CAN'T go around being afraid, you have to deal with the problems and solve them, and what emerged then was...

Dick suddenly falls silent and stops himself. Looking down at the table.

-... the AIDS problem. When people died. I started working on Noah's Ark [Red Cross AIDS Foundation, eds. note] as an economist. There was a huge support for those affected by many, I have a completely opposite opinion than Jonas Gardell in the TV-drama "Don't ever wipe tears without gloves". Those who got involved were siblings, parents, friends, in a non-profit organization, a huge amount of volunteers who made great efforts. There, my opinion was strengthened that civil society is strong when it is needed, while the state and the healthcare system had a hard time dealing with it. I always remember the positives, the support, the families. It was mostly the mothers who stood up. Dealing with this decline from young and healthy to terminally ill, which is terrifying and...

It gets quiet in the kitchen. Dick Erixon has tears in his eyes. Collecting.

- I haven't talked about this for a long time.

It's okay, take your time.

- ...but everyone stood up. And that's what's so nice about people. That everyone stood up, it was about life itself. There is such power in caring for those closest to you. It is the deepest core of conservatism.

Have you never found it difficult to be openly gay in the bourgeoisie, or now in SD?

- I always keep a distance from my surroundings, I don't let in people I don't know or trust. But no, I never saw myself as a victim. I accept that sometimes others don't understand. And the prejudices about the Sweden Democrats are much more open than those I encountered as a gay person.

At the same time, you don't seem to experience it as a social stigma to be a Sweden Democrat, something that many of them have otherwise testified about?

- Well, because I'm not a social person. When I became a Sweden Democrat, invitations from established actors as Axess events stopped coming, but I still don't care about mingling and afterwork and stuff like that. I'm like to take part in concrete seminars, but I'm happy to skip the mingles.

What does the future look like?

We have been talking for a long time and pause for the photographer to take his pictures. Dick Erixon shows how to tie a bow tie - he almost always wears a bow tie when seen in public, never a tie, and always hand tied.

What does the future look like?

- The important thing is not to be elected, but to be re-elected. Now the point is that SD can deliver, especially in the area of criminal policy, they must succeed there.

Should SD demand ministerial posts?

- Yes, I think you should push that line hard. And Ulf Kristersson would benefit from the party taking responsibility.

And for yourself?

- I am ready to do something else. I've been doing this for six years, I've never had an assignment for that long, I'm used to changing between industries and tasks. Something that affects politics. It would have been fun to join in and do something.

You have written that you want to see Mattias Karlsson as Minister of Culture. How do you view public service?

- What you invest in with tax funds is one thing, what you are free to do with your own money is another. I have nothing against menstrual-blood-art, as long as I don't have to pay for it with tax money. But as a conservative I want public service, it belongs to the democratic infrastructure, even if the rules for impartiality should be reviewed.

Dick Erixon smiles again. The eyes twinkle.

- I have a nostalgic love for all that: The big TV-shows like "Hyland's Corner" that gathered the Swedish people around the campfire. I'd like that back.