

DARTH VADER AND THE VIKINGS**The Rise of Sweden's Pirate Party***By Hilmar Schmundt*

The success of Sweden's Pirate Party is probably one of the biggest surprises in the European parliamentary elections. As more and more middle class voters declare their solidarity with these modern-day buccaneers, will the established parties now take up its call for a free Internet?

"Hey Christian!" a passerby calls out, as he approaches Christian Engstrom and enthusiastically shakes his hand. This has been happening a lot lately to this leader of the Pirate Party, who is regularly approached by complete strangers in Stockholm eager to congratulate him on his election to the European Parliament.

Engstrom doesn't exactly look like a pirate. An affable man in his early fifties, with a cheerful white cowlick above his forehead, he is sitting in a street café in the Swedish capital, munching on a piece of warm blueberry cake.

The future member of the European Parliament (MEP) is one of his country's top computer scientists. Even his parents were programmers, and Engstrom himself developed software for patent offices. But then he switched sides.

His campaign platform could fit on the beer mat in front of him: abolish patents, limit copyrights to a few years and protect citizens' data privacy. Despite the narrow scope of his message, the effects have been impressive. In the European election, the Pirate Party captured 7.1 percent of votes in Sweden. Its supporters are mainly male and under 30, and among schoolchildren the party is much more popular than Sweden's mainstream parties.

Many European countries have sister parties that are also fighting for a free Internet. The Pirate Party captured 0.9 percent of the vote in Germany and in one Berlin district attracted an impressive 5.1 percent of the vote.

"The name Pirate Party sounds silly at first," says Engstrom. "But it means something for everyone," especially in the land of the Vikings. It owes much of its popularity to its opponents. In April, the party's membership suddenly tripled when a lower court sentenced the operators of thepiratebay.org, a Swedish data exchange site, to one year in prison and ordered them to pay damages.

Protest Vote by 'Angry Young Men'?

Are the Pirate Party's more than 200,000 voters all criminals? "Of course not, but it was a protest vote by 'angry young men,'" says Henrik Ponten of the Anti-Piracy Office, a lobbying group for the film industry. Ponten, who sports a short, military-style haircut, is the man the Nordic pirates love to hate. "The right-wing extremists did very poorly in this election," he says. "Many angry young men voted for the Pirates instead."

Ponten has barricaded himself behind a mirrored security door in his office in the north of Stockholm. He is unwilling to speak on camera or be recorded. A poster for the film "Terminator 3" hangs on the wall outside his office. Pontén is as much a part of the founding myth of the Pirate Party as Darth Vader is part of Star Wars. Bitter controversies over the Internet have divided the country since the Anti-Piracy Office was established in 2001. Ironically, liberal Sweden enacted tough surveillance laws to censor Web sites and allow government officials to read private e-mails.

In protest, civil rights activists founded the Pirate Office, a discussion forum, in 2003. This was followed by the founding of Pirate Bay, a commercial file-sharing site, which operates independently today. Finally, the Pirate Party was founded three years ago, essentially serving as the political arm of the resistance movement, but also independent of the others.

"What all three organizations have in common is that we have turned the word 'piracy,' which would normally have negative connotations, into a positive concept, just as homosexuals in America have done with the word

'queer,'" says Engstrom.

"The pirates portray themselves as victims, but they are in fact perpetrators who are harming the film industry," argues Ponten, who says that he has even received death threats via text message. "Unfortunately, many politicians don't know much about the Internet and are easily influenced by lobbying groups."

In this regard, at least, he and his opponents see eye-to-eye. "The clueless offline politicians are the problem," says Pirate Party founder Rick Falkvinge. "That's why we decided to circumvent the politicians and address voters directly."

New Kind of Middle Class

Stockholm Airport is the site of his mobile campaign office today, as he sits in front of a glass of beer and his laptop. The party has no offices of its own.

Falkvinge, who is in his late 30s, once earned his living as a software expert and worked for Microsoft, among other companies. He founded his first company at 16. Today, he is on his way to a conference in Canada. He plans to run for the Swedish parliament next year.

"The founders of the Pirate Party stand for a new kind of entrepreneurial-minded middle class," says Anders Rydell, who has just published a book about the Internet pirates. "Ever since the liberal-conservative government of (former Prime Minister) Carl Bildt in the early 1990s, Sweden has been a pioneer on matters of the Internet," says Rydell. This has changed Swedish society, he adds. "More and more members of the educated classes, authors and newspapers are now declaring their solidarity with the Pirates."

Internet politician Engstrom hopes that his election victory was only the beginning. "Since the election, we have received offers to cooperate with the major parties." This is part of the plan, and it explains the party's slim campaign platform.

But what if the established parties simply plagiarize his demands? "We're pirates," says Engstrom. "We love copying! If that happens, then we will have reached our objective and we will abolish ourselves."

Translated from the German by Christopher Sultan