The Competent Cabinet? Ministers in Sweden and the Problem of Competence and Democracy

Ludvig Beckman*

The competence of Cabinet members in general, and of Swedish Cabinet members in particular, is frequently put into doubt despite the fact that little systematic research exists on the topic. The meaning of ‘competence’ in this context is of course controversial. This study is confined to the occurrence of ‘expertise’: indicators of professional experience from the subject areas for which the minister is responsible. The sample includes 182 Swedish Cabinet appointments from 1917 to 2004, covering the full range of ministers concerned with economic and social affairs. The indicators used include previous political experience from the relevant policy field as well as relevant educational and professional backgrounds. When these measures are used, the resulting pattern is that few government ministers are truly amateurs at the time of entering the Cabinet. Moreover, there are few signs that the level of expertise so understood has undergone any dramatic changes during the time period. These results speak against the views endorsed by some scholars that ‘the problem of power of politicians is power without competence’. If it is true that political experience has the potential to breed expertise in particular policy fields, it cannot also be true that the recruitment of full-time politicians as Cabinet Ministers indicates the absence of expertise.

Introduction

Democracy is vulnerable to criticism from many directions. Perhaps the most persistent objection to the principle of rule by the people is the notion that democratic governments are bound to be incompetent. The association of democracy with incompetence constituted anathema to leading intellectuals in the nineteenth century – liberal as well as conservative. Indeed, even today, the suspicion remains that leaders elected by ordinary citizens will not be of top quality. Thus, Robert Dahl (1979, 131) argues that ‘the doctrine of meritocracy [is] the enduring rival to democratic ideas’. An example of the continuing relevance of this line of thought is the notion that governments should de-regulate social and economic spheres of society exactly because

* Ludvig Beckman, Department of Political Science, Stockholm University, 106 91 Stockholm, Sweden. Tel.: +46 8 16 26 31; E-mail: ludvig.beckman@statsvet.su.se
they tend to lack accurate information and knowledge about how these spheres work. From that point of view, the perceived incompetence of government ministers is a further indication of the correctness of the ideology of deregulation. At the same time, it is not only critics of democracy that have reason to be concerned with the competence of the ministers in government. Political parties that do not have recourse to individuals competent enough to head government departments may be less likely to influence government formation – even if in an otherwise strong position (Laver & Shepsle 2000). Moreover, when in power, the government should not merely represent the political programme of the prevailing parliamentary majority. Democratic governments should also have the capacity to promote, defend and implement these programmes. And to this end, competencies of various kinds are undoubtedly of some importance. For example, Paul Pennings (2000) has recently noted that the level of experience of Cabinet members affects the duration of the government under certain conditions. Although government performance generally depends more on the shape of political, legal and other institutions, the effects of the skills, experiences and knowledge of the people acting within them are not without significance. There are, in other words, a number of reasons why securing the professionalism and competence of the members of the Cabinet should matter for democrats too. Is there a basis for concern in this respect?

Complaints about the lack of expertise of particular members of Swedish Cabinets are commonly heard in public debate. Moreover, in memoirs and personal recollections, some ministers give testimony to these suspicions. Thus, the former Minister of Finance Kjell-Olof Feldt (1982–1991) pointed out that many ministers’ lack of experience of the policy fields for which they found themselves responsible caused much trouble for the government (Feldt 1991, 85ff.). Readers of the memoirs of another minister may be surprised to learn that the lack of ‘previous experience of the issues dealt with’ at the time of appointment gave no cause for concern about the ability to accomplish the designated task (Leijon 1991, 120–3).

Clearly such scanty remarks provide no basis for general conclusions about the lack of expertise among Swedish Cabinet members. And there is some better-argued evidence to this effect as well. With particular reference to Swedish governments, the argument has been made that there are ‘few specialists’ and consequently more amateurs to be found here compared to most other democratic governments. The tendency is found to be prevalent among ministers with responsibilities in the fields of social and economic policy. Few of the Ministers of Finance, Trade or Industry and other similar offices are said to have adequate professional training in or experience of the relevant fields. This is said to be ‘somewhat surprising’ since Sweden is well known for historically having pursued particularly ambitious policies in these fields (Blondel 1985, 208).
To complain about the lack of expertise among ministers is not to accept that the presence of expertise is the only or even the most important indicator of a competent government. The tasks of government ministers are complex and varied; they undoubtedly call for political and managerial skills as well. Perhaps the ability to establish personal relations and proficiency in the ‘oral presentation of ideas’ are among the chief characteristics of a successful minister (Rose 1971, 403). And perhaps having a ‘great intellect’ could be a disadvantage since being able to see ‘both sides of the problem’ tends to make the minister indecisive (Marsh et al. 2000, 310). These are just some examples of the recommended mixture of character traits, social and professional backgrounds of the competent minister that are found in the literature.

Even though the criteria of the competent minister remains contested, there is clearly a case for assuming that some level of expertise or previous experience from the field of responsibility is a good thing. To make that assumption is not to say that other experience and skills are necessarily less important. In this article, I will therefore accept Blondel’s (1985, 191) remark that ‘the question of technical competence cannot altogether be avoided’. The question I will ask is not how to evaluate the effects of expertise, but how to describe its occurrence. In fact, I believe there are important problems of validity involved in using Blondel’s measures of amateurs and experts. In this article, I present a new approach to the incidence of expertise among members of the Swedish government in charge of social and economic issues. Moreover, this study includes all ministerial appointments of that subset from the introduction of democratic rule in 1917 until today (2004).

Competence as a Democratic Dilemma

The study of rulers is as old as the study of politics itself. From Plato onwards attempts have been made to identify the skills necessary to the art of ruling. The question ‘who is best qualified to rule?’ is among the most basic for the study of politics according to Robert Dahl (1963, chapter 8). Long ago, this equalled the study of the skills and strategies that were useful for princes or kings. With the growing importance of more popular representative bodies, especially since the breakthrough of democracy, the attention has shifted to members of parliament. However, the people selected as members of the Cabinet are still very much the actual rulers. This is illustrated not the least by the wordings found in the Swedish constitution: ‘The government rules the country’ (RF 1:2). From this standpoint, it is somewhat surprising that the study of the government ministers has attract so little systematic attention among political scientists. The composition of the Swedish riksdag has been described in a number of recent studies (e.g. Holmberg & Esaiasson 1989). With few exceptions (cf. Bergström 1987; Larsson 1990), no corresponding
effort has, in recent years, been devoted to the study of members of the Swedish government. Some 70 years ago, the agenda among the community of political scientists in Sweden looked very different. Following the important social and political developments in Sweden during the first decades of the twentieth century, the study of the recruitment of government ministers temporarily enjoyed high prestige.²

However, characterizing the social backgrounds of ministers must be kept clear from a concern with their skills and competencies. Many studies of Cabinets focus on the former set of variables only (e.g. Laski 1928; Secker 1994). Such approaches are evidently based on the assumption that ‘policy formation and policy decisions are influenced by the political and social backgrounds of the policy shapers’ (Lewis 1970). From a democratic point of view, it is consequently regarded as potentially problematic that the Cabinet should be recruited exclusively from the higher ranks of society, some particular profession, or other groups whose interests and belief-systems diverge from those of the general population. Yet, as we have seen, the competence of cabinets is imperative from a democratic point of view too. Competent cabinets are needed in order to effect the visions of the ruling majority of the parliament. More importantly, proficiency in the art of ruling is a prerequisite for the sociological legitimacy of the democratic system of government. Incompetence in dealing with the issues calling for government intervention in society could discredit not only the particular cabinet, but the democratic idea itself.

The dilemma, however, is that the demands of competence may appear to be in conflict with the ambition to secure representativeness. Thus Joel Aberbach et al. (1981, 255) have argued that ‘the dilemma of policy making by politicians is power without competence’. The personal qualities needed to empower the government with skill and experience may require that the members of the government are recruited from social and educational backgrounds that are highly exclusive. The ambition to secure competent governments and hence the legitimacy of the democratic system would, in other words, be in tension with the notion that Cabinets are foremost political bodies that should be inhabited by individuals that aptly represent various interests. The members of the government could, for example, be selected by the Prime Minister in order to satisfy the interests of rural voters, unions or big business, or in order to meet the expectations of gender or ethnic equality. These are considerations that are regularly taken into account in the formation of a government in a parliamentary democracy. The point is, however, that the aim to ensure representativeness is distinct from the aim of securing expertise and competence in the Cabinet. Because the rule of the people is not equivalent to the rule of experts, the dilemma of competence and democracy appears inescapable.³

The existence of a dilemma receives some support from cross-national studies of political elites. The observation has been made that nations
characterized by highly educated politicians were also characterized by an exceptionally low educational level among citizens generally. That is to say that high formal competence among leading politicians is correlated with low levels of representativeness. So, for example, all members of the Tunisian Cabinet were university graduates at the same time as two-thirds of the population remained illiterate (Putnam 1976, 35ff.). A similar pattern is found in Blondel’s comparative study of the Cabinet ministers of the world. From his analysis emerges the conclusion that authoritarian governments, whether military regimes, one-party states or autocracies, include a larger number of ‘expert’ ministers than do democratic governments (Blondel 1985, 196). Hence, the more ‘competent’ the Cabinet, the more we can be certain that the political system is defective in terms of representativeness. Accordingly, a potential explanation for the assumed meagre incidence of experts in Swedish Cabinets could be that the political system in Sweden is much less exclusionary – more representative – than in other places. One indication to this effect is that the Swedish political elite has been found to be the least self-reproducing of the different elites in Swedish society (SOU 1990:44, 324ff.; Petersson et al. 1996).

Yet there is a tendency in many studies to make inferences about the competence of Cabinets on the basis of observations about the extent to which they are constituted of full-time politicians. It is assumed that the level of competence in the government is inversely related to the number of professional politicians found among its ranks. The idea seems to be that the greater the number of full-time politicians in the Cabinet, the less competent the Cabinet is likely to be. However, even on a narrow understanding of ‘competence’ (i.e. as specialized knowledge in the field of responsibility), this conclusion follows only when two additional assumptions are made. The first is that all non-politicians are in fact experts in some relevant field. Of course, this cannot simply be assumed to be true. From the fact that a minister has not previously served as a political representative it does not follow that he or she is endowed with a great amount of expertise. The second assumption is that professional politicians never satisfy the criteria of expertise. Yet why should we assume this? It may well be the case that a full-time politician possesses an education and professional experience that fits his or her current position in the government. In such a case, a political background does not forestall expertise in the subject matter of the minister’s department. When both assumptions are questioned, the result is that we should be less confident in saying that policy making by politicians means ‘power without competence’. The problem may well be what Wilma Bakema and Ineke Secker argue is the mistake involved in conceptualizing competence and representativeness unidimensionally – as mutually exclusive categories (Bakema & Secker 1988, 156ff.). Individual ministers may indeed be neither representative nor competent and the opposite should as well be a possibility worth taking.
seriously. Whether or not representativeness and competence are competing qualities is an open and, in the last resort, empirical question.

Amateurs and Experts

The aim here is not to explain variations in ministerial competence, but to describe its occurrence among one particular subset of members in Swedish Cabinets. It should be remembered that, in general, the term ‘competence’ simply refers to the ability to perform a certain task satisfactorily. To be competent does not imply being excellent. The more pressing concern for our purposes is, however, what measures are to be used in characterizing ministerial competence. As stated above, we are only concerned with one aspect of the many competencies that could be essential – namely the extent to which the minister is familiar with the particular policy issues in his or her field of responsibility. In Blondel’s study ministers are characterized as either ‘experts’ or ‘amateurs’ with respect to the particular policy issues dealt with by the department they are heading. Thus what we need is to identify measures that are indicators of, for example, how well the Minister of Finance is acquainted with economic issues or the extent to which the Minister of Health and Social Affairs is aware of social and health-related problems in society. A reasonable indicator is of course to examine the educational background of the minister. An individual with a doctorate in economics that is appointed to be Minister of Finance will quite naturally be considered an ‘expert’ in economics. Yet in order to maintain the focus on expertise, it makes sense to include only educational achievements that are formally relevant to the particular policy field of the minister. This is to say that, for example, a degree in economics, but not a degree in law, should be considered a relevant indicator of expertise for a Minister of Finance.

Nevertheless, the distinction between amateurs and experts made by Blondel is primarily based on an assessment of the occupational roles of the individual minister before entering the Cabinet. The description ‘amateur’ applies where there is ‘no relationship between the previous occupation of the minister and the position he or she holds in government’ (Blondel 1985, 23). The primary example of this is, according to Blondel, when politicians or civil servants take charge of a ministry of a technical character. An example of an amateur in Blondel’s sense would be an MP who is appointed Minister of Trade. Obviously the previous occupation of that individual is unrelated to the business of promoting and regulating trade. Given this characterization of an ‘amateur’, it would seem as if ‘expertise’ requires professional experience. Thus, an expert on the subjects dealt with at the Department of Finance would presumably be one with a previous occupation in financial institutions or in the economy department of a firm or organization. Moreover, expertise
in the issues dealt with at the Department of Health and Social Affairs would require previous experience of work with care of the elderly or children, other health institutions, or perhaps the social services, and so on. Similarly, Bruce Headey (1974, 67) argues that evidence for ‘specialized knowledge of particular policy areas’ is found only by looking at data on the educational and occupational backgrounds of ministers.

Now it seems rather clear to me that relevant insights into social and economic issues can also be achieved through political work. In particular, I believe we should take into account the fact that politicians are frequently engaged in specific fields of policy as MPs or on government committees. An individual with a long record of political activism in a given policy field is not necessarily more amateurish than an individual with a previous occupation in that same field. Indeed, politicians themselves occasionally affirm the notion that politics as such may provide deep insights into major societal problems. For example, although the former Prime Minister Torbjörn Fälldin (1976–1979, 1980–1981) is notable for not having any university education at all, he is also famous for having made the remark that: ‘The parliament was my university!’ (quoted in Ruin 2001, 259; Fälldin 1998, 163ff.). To the extent that only somewhat specialized political positions are considered, it seems reasonable to take this possibility seriously. In contrast to what Blondel recommends, we should therefore be concerned with all relevant previous experience. This would include that achieved through political work and not be confined to non-political occupations.

There is in fact a further implication of the idea that political experience may potentially breed expertise. It should lead us to accept that individuals with experience from previous Cabinets that later resume responsibility for similar duties in a new Cabinet are to that extent no longer as amateurish as they may have been at the time of their first appointment. If political experience generates ‘expertise’, surely serving in the Cabinet does too. To sum up, three indicators of expertise are used in this study. In addition to relevant previous occupations, I will examine the character of educational backgrounds and, more importantly, previous political experiences of parliamentary and governmental committees as well as of the Cabinet itself.

Changing Patterns of Expertise

Nils Edén’s Cabinet in 1917 was the starting point for an unbroken tradition of democratic government in the sense of being dependent on the approval only of elected representatives. Since then, 32 Cabinets have taken office and 306 individual ministers have been members of them. Yet in analysing how expertise and amateurism has varied over time, the appropriate level of analysis is not necessarily either the individual minister or the Cabinet as a
collective body.⁶ Individual ministers change Cabinet positions over time and being an ‘expert’ in relation to one position does not imply being an ‘expert’ when appointed to a different ministry. Nor could the Cabinet as a collective be our primary focus since we are investigating only a subset of ministers. Thus, what we are interested in is Cabinet positions and the distribution of relevant competencies among them. It is, in other words, offices that we are investigating or, as I shall refer to them, ‘ministerial appointments’. The total number of appointments made in the years 1917–2004 is 668.

In this study, a selection has been made that includes the full range of appointments to the Ministries of Economic and Social Affairs. The total number of appointments included is 182, of which 140 are heads of ministries and 42 are so-called ‘deputy ministers’ that are equivalent to ministers without portfolio (103 individuals). It should be noted that ministers without portfolios used to serve as legal and administrative advisers to the Cabinet and were consequently not attached to any particular department. Their role in the Cabinet gradually changed during the twentieth century, however (Larsson 1986; 1990, 191). They are now responsible for specific policy fields and serve together with the minister heading the department. This means that no ministers without portfolio that are included in the sample served before 1946, and most of them were actually appointed after 1976.⁷

The sample is chosen in order to be comparable with Blondel’s claim that these ministers are particularly amateurish in Sweden.⁸ This is why only ministers appointed to the Departments of Economic and Social Affairs have been included (see Table 1). There is naturally some difficulty in being precise about what departments properly belong in the sphere of social and economic affairs. In this sample, departments responsible for housing policy, issues of infrastructure and labour policy have been excluded on the perhaps controversial assumption that they are more concerned with handling public benefits and subsidies than with tackling social and economic problems per se.
It would certainly be of some interest to note the degree to which expertise has been prevalent among other ministerial appointments too. It has been noted that, in the first decades of the twentieth century, expertise was most prominent among Ministers of Justice and Agriculture (Andersson 1935, 242). This trend has persisted, at least in the case of Ministers of Justice since all appointees made between 1917 and 2004 have had degrees in Law apart from one (Anna-Greta Leijon, 1987–1988). As regards Ministers of Agriculture, the continuation of the trend is not equally clear. Of 41 appointments made since 1917, 19 (45 percent) were either educated in agricultural sciences or/and had extensive experience in farming or forestry and similar professions. These experts are not divided symmetrically over time, however. Most of them (90 percent) are to be found in Cabinets prior to 1982 (representing 75 percent of the Ministers of Agriculture). This indicates a sharp decline in the number of experts appointed to this office in the last decades.

The continuing importance of specific educational backgrounds in the appointment of Ministers of Law is reminiscent of the general practice before 1905 of giving priority to expertise in all Cabinet appointments (Andersson 1935, 242; Linnarsson 1935, 18; Larsson 1990, 133). That there is a clear historical trend at play is illustrated by a brief look at sequences of appointments where the pattern is marked by a clear rupture. Take, for example, appointments to the Minister of Defence. In the nineteenth century, the Minister of Defence was without exception a high-ranking military officer with an outstanding career. However, since 1917, only three out of 36 appointments were of individuals that received their education in the armed forces (all of them in the 1920s).

Is the declining importance of expertise also true with respect to ministers in social and economic departments? Turning now to these issues, we should be aware of the fact that identifying valid operational measures of expertise is more difficult in this case. Provided that educational background is a valid indicator of expertise, we find that 74 (or 40 percent) appointees were educated in the social sciences. This includes some that never completed a university degree, but also those with postgraduate degrees. Adding to this the occurrence of previous professional experiences, it appears that little is changed. The total number of ministerial appointees with previous employment in the fields of social and economic affairs is only 24 (or 13 percent) (see Table 2).

When brought together, we find that 84 appointees (or 46 percent) had either relevant educational or professional backgrounds or both.

At this point, the results are arranged following a simple division over time where no account is taken of the number of Cabinets or their political colour. The pattern that emerges is that expertise is indeed increasing over time. Since 1976 there have been more experts than amateurs, whereas the opposite was true in the previous years. However, there is clearly a case for taking into account the political colour of the Cabinets. In doing this (Table 3), we
discover a somewhat different pattern. It now appears that the common assumption that non-socialist governments harbour more well-educated ministers than socialist governments is confirmed. Whereas all non-socialist Cabinets include more experts than amateurs, this is true of no socialist government. The impression of a striking imbalance is further strengthened when socialist and non-socialist appointments in the sample are distinguished at the individual level. It appears that 65 percent of non-socialist but only 36 percent of socialist appointees belonged in the category of experts.\footnote{These results depend on a rather generous interpretation of expertise. Following a stricter view, only university graduates in the social sciences or people with a highly professionalized career should count (see Table 4).\footnote{Does this affect our results? The stricter view reduces the occurrence of experts to some extent. Still no less than 65 (36 percent) of the appointments are properly named ‘experts’ when these measures are used. It is noteworthy that the difference between the generous and the strict interpretation is most}}

Table 2. Relative Frequencies of Expert Ministerial Appointments in Social and Economic Affairs Following the ‘Generous’ View (Percentages Arranged by Time)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Experts</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>46 (N = 84)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amateurs</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>54 (N = 99)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difference</td>
<td>–8</td>
<td>–30</td>
<td>–22</td>
<td>–40</td>
<td>+10</td>
<td>+6</td>
<td>–12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total appointments</td>
<td>N = 39</td>
<td>N = 23</td>
<td>N = 17</td>
<td>N = 20</td>
<td>N = 51</td>
<td>N = 32</td>
<td>N = 183</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3. Relative Frequencies of Expert Ministerial Appointments in Social and Economic Affairs Following the ‘Generous’ View (Percentages Arranged by Political Colour)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Experts</th>
<th>Amateurs</th>
<th>Difference</th>
<th>Appointments (Cabinets)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Coalitions</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>–42</td>
<td>N = 21 (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caretakers</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>+33</td>
<td>N = 6 (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Socialist, prior to 1946</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>–64</td>
<td>N = 17 (5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-socialist, prior to 1945</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>+30</td>
<td>N = 20 (6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-socialist, after 1976</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>+38</td>
<td>N = 32 (5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Socialist, 1982–2004</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>–10</td>
<td>N = 51 (6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total, 1917–2004</td>
<td>46 (N = 84)</td>
<td>54 (N = 99)</td>
<td>–12</td>
<td>N = 182 (32)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: ‘Coalitions’ include Cabinets with both socialists and non-socialists members (Edén 1917–1920, Hansson 1936–1939, 1939–1945 and Erlander 1951–1957). ‘Caretaker governments’ (occasionally referred to as ‘professional Cabinets’) include the two Cabinets of 1920–1921 (Louis de Geer) and 1921 (Oscar von Sydow) that were non-political and staffed mainly by officials, although sympathies were largely with the non-socialists.
visible among non-socialist ministers. For example, 65 percent of the non-socialist ministerial appointments before 1945 were experts according to the generous view, but when the stricter measures are used, this figure falls dramatically and is now only 30 percent. This leads us to the surprising result that the difference in expertise between socialists and non-socialist ministers is much less pronounced the stricter our definition of an ‘expert’ is. The generous interpretation produced a difference of 30 percent (67 percent non-socialists to 37 percent socialists) that is reduced to 14 percent (46 percent non-socialists to 32 percent socialists) on the stricter measure. One explanation is that many professions included in the generous view, but excluded on the stricter account, were more typical for non-socialists (e.g. industrialist, landowner). Another explanation is that the tendency to study at university without taking a degree is more visible among non-socialists.

Accepting the stricter interpretation of expertise, the overall result is that 36 percent of the ministers in social and economic departments are properly named ‘experts’. Blondel recorded 30 percent experts among all ministers in what he terms the ‘Atlantic area’, which includes Sweden. From that standpoint, the conclusion that Swedish Cabinets are generally more amateurish than is the case in other Western democracies seems unwarranted. Moreover, as I have argued above, there is an assumption implicitly accepted by using measures based exclusively on previous occupation and educational level; this is that political experience cannot breed expertise in departmental subject areas. When this assumption is questioned, a different spectre of potentially relevant experiences becomes available. The idea is that some political positions provide opportunities for learning about the technical aspects of particular policy fields.

Thus, I maintain that there are three kinds of political experiences that should reasonably be considered. The first is the extent to which the minister has previously served in a standing parliamentary committee within the

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Experts</th>
<th>Amateurs</th>
<th>Difference</th>
<th>Appointments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Coalitions</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>−52</td>
<td>N = 21 (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expeditionary</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>−34</td>
<td>N = 6 (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Socialist, prior to 1945</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>−64</td>
<td>N = 17 (5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-socialist, prior to 1945</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>−40</td>
<td>N = 20 (6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Socialist, 1946–1976</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>−26</td>
<td>N = 36 (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-socialist, after 1976</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>+12</td>
<td>N = 32 (5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Socialist, 1982–2004</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>−30</td>
<td>N = 51 (6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total, 1917–2004</td>
<td>36 (N = 65)</td>
<td>64 (N = 118)</td>
<td>−22</td>
<td>N = 183 (32)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: See Table 3.
relevant policy field. Generally, MPs remain within the same committee for an electoral period (i.e. four years) and are expected to ‘follow developments in their committee’s area of responsibility’. The second indication of experience of the particular policy field is whether the minister has been a member of any government committee of inquiry. The government committee is appointed in order to prepare for new legislation by investigating particular events, laws or practices in public administration. The members of government committees work closely with experts in the field for quite a number of years, although the time available has been condensed in the last decade. The third and last measure that will be used here is whether the minister has previously served in the Cabinet in relevant fields. The usefulness of these standards is of course open to some dispute. For example, it seems hard to tell whether membership in a parliamentary committee as such promotes expertise in the particular policy field. Clearly, it would depend more on motivation and the level of activity of the individual. Yet the same question could be asked in relation to other professional experiences as well. The focus on certain well-defined political positions is no more indirect an indicator of expertise than observations based on ministers’ educational or occupational backgrounds.

To what extent have Swedish Ministers of Economic and Social Affairs previously been members of standing committees in the relevant policy fields? In accounting for experience from relevant parliamentary committees, it appears that 102 out of the 185 appointees included here (or 56 percent) served as a member of at least one committee. The progress over time reveals a mostly steady pattern (Table 5). Yet, there is a higher proportion of former committee membership among non-socialist Cabinet members after 1976. This is clearly accounted for by the fact that the non-socialist government that took office in these years relied heavily on the parliamentary experience of its ministers. No other sources of high-profile experience from government affairs were

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Parliamentary committees</th>
<th>Government committees</th>
<th>Cabinet experience</th>
<th>Appointments (Cabinets)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Coalitions</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>N = 21 (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expeditionary</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>N = 6 (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Socialist, prior to 1946</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>N = 17 (5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-socialist, prior to 1945</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>N = 20 (6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Socialist, 1946–1976</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>N = 36 (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-socialist, after 1976</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>N = 32 (5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Socialist, 1982–2004</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>N = 51 (6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total, 1917–2004</td>
<td>56 (N = 102)</td>
<td>75 (N = 137)</td>
<td>43 (N = 79)</td>
<td>N = 183 (32)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: See Table 3.
available to the parties that took office for the first time in 40 years (Bergström 1987). Furthermore, there seems to be somewhat less committee experience represented among socialist ministerial appointments in the last period (1982–2004). Out of the 51 appointments made in these years, 26 (or 51 percent) had ever before worked in committees with issues from the same policy field that they were later in charge of as ministers. The trend is even clearer when our analysis is confined to the last two Cabinets (1996–2004) headed by Prime Minister Göran Persson. In this period, no more than 7 out of 15 appointed ministers in social and economic affairs (or 33 percent) had any experience of the relevant parliamentary committees.

Yet the appearance of a rather steady level of relevant committee experience in the preceding time period is not quite correct. Whereas 90 percent of ministers with relevant committee experience before 1976 were permanent members or chairmen, this figure falls to 28 percent for the remaining period. This is to say that since those with committee experience after 1976 had mostly been deputies, they are likely to be less experienced than the ministers of previous times. There is nevertheless a marked difference between the number that have some experience of the subject area of their ministerial responsibility in this sense and the number that appeared when the traditional measures of ‘expertise’ were used.

Adding now the occurrence of participation in government committees, there are even more signs of relevant experience. In contrast to what is the case with parliamentary committees, there is no indication that previous work in government committees is becoming less widespread in recent times. In fact, it seems as if there is a rather strong tendency to recruit ministers that have previously participated in government committees from the specific policy field. No less than 75 percent of all appointed ministers in the period from 1917 to 2004 had such experience. Only the period 1957–1976 deviates from this pattern. Among the ministerial appointments made in social and economic affairs during the two Cabinets that held office in these years (Tage Erlander followed by Olof Palme in 1969), no more than 35 percent had served in relevant government committees. The average for the remaining Cabinets is more than twice as high, or 80 percent!

The third source of practical experience of the social and economic issues dealt with as a minister is obviously that of having previously been a minister with similar responsibilities. Appointing a Minister of Business who was a Minister of Business in a previous government undoubtedly secures some expertise on these matters in the Cabinet. It turns out that the re-circulation of ministers has undergone a sharp decline in the last decades. It is of course unsurprising to find that there are few ministers with previous Cabinet experience in the non-socialist government after 1976 (in fact, the first non-socialist Cabinets in 1976 and 1991 included none), but it is perhaps more surprising to find that the socialist governments that followed scores low on
this measure too. Whereas 60 percent of the appointees in socialist governments from 1946 to 1976 were former ministers, only 35 percent of the ministerial appointees from 1982 to 2004 had a similar background. As has been noted before, capitalizing on Cabinet experience is apparently becoming less and less attractive (Larsson 2004, 57ff.).

Bringing together the three dimensions of political experiences relating to social and economic issues, a rather clear pattern emerges. It turns out that very few ministerial appointments in the years from 1917 to 2004 were of individuals with no previous experience whatsoever. No more than 12 percent of the appointments made had never before worked in a parliamentary committee on social or economic issues, never participated in a government committee preparing social or economic reform, and never been in charge of social or economic issues in the government (see Table 6). This is to say that 88 percent of the ministers did have at least some political experience of the policy field. Among them there is of course much variation. Some may have been a deputy of a standing committee for three or four years; others may have been chairmen of numerous committees, served as members of many government committees and held more than one Cabinet position before being appointed (again) a Minister of Social or Economic Affairs.

The essential conclusion of this analysis is that there is far more experience, skill and knowledge to be found among these ministerial appointments than is revealed by the traditional measures of expertise. When only relevant educational and professional backgrounds are included, the result is that no more than 36 percent (Table 3) of the appointments made indicate some previous acquaintance with the policy field. It is of course disconcerting that so few of the highest officials responsible for Swedish economic and social policy seem to be knowledgeable of the social and economic nature of society, but as should be clear by now, this picture is not that telling if we are really interested in what knowledge and expertise ministers are equipped.
Finally, let us take a brief look at the appointments coming out as the true amateurs (least experienced) and the true experts (most experienced) according to the measures used. As has already been noted, most ministerial appointees (161 out of 183 or 88 percent) have some political experience of dealing with the subject matters in the policy field. What about the remaining appointments (22 in all)? Did they compensate for their lack of political experience with a strong professional or educational background? This is in fact the case for a little more than half the number. All that remains then is a gang of 13 ministerial appointments that possessed neither previous political experiences, nor an education in the social sciences or a relevant professional background. Among them are eight social democrats, three liberals, one conservative and one non-partisan. The distribution of true amateurs over time reveals no significant change. About as many amateurs were appointed in the 1920s as in the 1990s – that is, between 5 and 10 percent of the total. The two most recent incidences of ‘amateurs’ are Morgan Johansson (Minister of Public Health and Social Services, 2002–) and Hans Karlsson (Minister of Industry, 2002–). None of them are head of departments and none of them seem to have any previous experience of the policy field.

The suggestion has been made that smaller parties may suffer from the lack of ‘ministerables’ in their ranks (Laver & Shepsle 2000). This claim is consistent with the observation that three out of 13 true amateurs are found in the Cabinet formed in 1978 by Ola Ullsten of the Liberal Party. In the sample, no other government has a weaker parliamentary basis at the time of formation (39 seats in parliament). The over-representation of amateurs among the ranks of this particular government is thus the natural implication of the fact that the ranks available for recruitment were exceptionally small. It is somewhat interesting to find that the former Minister of Finance Gunnar Sträng is among the amateurs. Sträng served in the Swedish Cabinet for 31 years and his achievements are widely recognized. How then could he possible be found among the true amateurs? It should be remembered that the level of analysis here is ministerial appointment, not individuals. Sträng figures as an amateur when appointed Minister of Supply in 1947, but not, for example, when later appointed Minister for Health and Social Affairs and Minister of Finance (twice). In 1947, he had no recorded experience of dealing with economic or social affairs – experience that he was surely to achieve in the years to come. Moreover, it is clear that Sträng’s competence was initially put in doubt by some of his contemporaries. When his name appeared in discussions about recruiting new members to the government in the late 1940s, some Cabinet members objected that he was ‘incompetent’ (Lindström 1970, 77).

Next, let us turn to the ministerial appointments that score high on all or almost all indicators that have been used. There are 14 appointments (including nine individuals) that appear as exceptional in this regard. There are no
ministers without portfolio to be found among the true experts, although they constituted almost half the number of true amateurs. It is, in other words, clear that ministers without portfolio are generally less experienced than their colleagues who are given the responsibility of heading government departments. Among the true experts, we find eight social democrats and six non-socialists. This is of course surprising to anyone who believed that social democrats were generally less competent ministers. For instance, the fact that Per-Edvin Sköld is to be found among the true experts is congruent with what seems to have been the public perception of his performance in government. When Sköld retired as Minister of Finance 1955, even the non-socialist editorials cherished him as being ‘the most knowledgeable in the Cabinet’ and ‘incomparable in terms of experience and administrative skill’ (quoted in Möller 1996, 386–92).

As to the distribution of these few true experts over time, we find that most of them were appointed in the period 1976–1994, which includes a number of both socialist and non-socialist governments. There are comparably few true experts to be found among the Cabinets that held office in the first 50 years of democratic government. And there are in fact no true experts at all to be found among the ministers appointed in the last decade (1994–2004). In terms of historical trends, it can thus be said that there has been an increase of expertise in the appointment of ministers of social or economic affairs, although this trend may have come to an end in the last decade.

Concluding Remarks

There is a common assumption that ministers are experts only to the extent that they have pursued a professional (non-political) career and are well educated in the relevant subjects. Even on accepting the assumption that people with these backgrounds have achieved expertise, it does not follow that only they should be named as such. In this article, I have argued that we are well advised to consider the possibility that political experience is also a source of expertise in particular policy fields. When this broader conception of expertise is used, the impression is no longer that Swedish Cabinet Ministers in the social and economic fields are inexperienced in relation to the issues dealt with by their departments. This conclusion stands in sharp contrast to what Blondel has previously argued with direct reference to the Swedish case.

The more general theoretical significance of these results is that we should reconsider the notion that there is a dilemma involved in achieving a representative Cabinet that is at the same time competent. The thesis of Aberbach et al. (1981) that ‘the problem of power of politicians is power without competence’ cannot readily be assumed to hold – at least not for the ministers examined in this study. If it is true that political experience has the potential
to breed expertise in particular policy fields, it cannot also be true that
the recruitment of full-time politicians as Cabinet Ministers indicates the
absence of expertise.

Yet we cannot confidently conclude that the study of expertise among
Cabinet Ministers is also a study of their overall competence. As stated at the
outset of this article, there are clearly many other skills, experiences and
properties required in a minister. Perhaps most importantly, a minister
heading a large department and in charge of promoting a variety of often
controversial policies is bound to need political skills. The proposals and
decisions made have to be defended against criticism, and allies from a
variety of political and other groups need to be mobilized in their support.
Perhaps even more importantly, a sense for the politically possible – what
Isaiah Berlin (1996, 26) has termed ‘political judgment’ – may be a prerequisite
for any ambitious member of the Cabinet. However, the extent to which
these political skills are to be found among today’s rulers of the Swedish
nation remains to be demonstrated.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS
I am very grateful to Sofia K. Jonsson for her assistance in collecting the data used in this
article. Moreover, I would like to acknowledge the helpful comments received on earlier
versions of this article from Olof Ruin, Daniel Tarschys and the anonymous reviewers of
this journal.

NOTES
1. In what follows, I will speak interchangeably of ‘the government’ and ‘the Cabinet’
although there is clearly a distinction to be made between them. Since ‘the government’
normally refers also to the Prime Minister’s Office, the ten ministries and the Office for
Administrative Affairs, its level of competence would depend on the competencies of
all its personnel and not just on the members of the Cabinet.
2. In the 1920s and 1930s a number of studies appeared on the social backgrounds of the
‘new’ ministers that followed the introduction of parliamentary democracy in Sweden
(e.g. Kihlberg 1922; Heckscher 1933; Andersson 1935; Linnarsson 1935).
3. Of course, the dilemma will not appear as such to anyone convinced that representa-
tiveness is the only relevant democratic value. So argues Marion Smiley (1996), for
example, (perhaps for good reasons) that ‘talk of competence’ and faith in the need for
expertise reveals anti-democratic sentiments.
4. A good discussion of the various meanings associated with ‘competence’ is found in
5. See also Rose (1971, 403) for a discussion of the view that the parliament serves as a
‘school for ministers’.
6. Although Cabinets are not the level of analysis, the distinction between various Cabi-
nets is occasionally referred to in order to structure the data. In defining a Cabinet, I
have followed the booklet published by the Swedish government (Larsson 2003). A
Cabinet is said to have terminated whenever a new prime minister is appointed or the
government resigns for any reason.
7. Whereas ministers without portfolios constitute 50 percent of the appointments
examined since 1976, they constitute only 11 percent from previous periods.
8. Whereas Blondel (1985, 208) includes Ministers of Agriculture in his sample, I have
deliberately excluded them and included the Ministers of Health and Social Affairs
instead. One reason is that it increases the consistency of the sample since educational and professional backgrounds can now be assumed to be relevant to any ministerial position of the subset. For example, a degree in economics could now be treated as relevant for Ministers of Trade as well as for Ministers of Health and Social Affairs, whereas that assumption would scarcely hold for a Minister of Agriculture (let alone that a degree in forestry or agriculture would indicate expertise for a Minister of Finance!).

9. Cf. Kihlberg’s (1922, 82) remark that political considerations were becoming increasingly important in the appointment of Cabinet Ministers already in the 1860s.

10. The dominance of military officers ended with the appointment of a civilian as Minister of Defence in 1911 (note, however, that there were always two Defence Ministers before 1920: Lantförsvarsministern and Sjöförsvarsministern). See also Linnarsson (1935, 43ff.).

11. Among these 13, we find well-known academics such as Gunnar Myrdal and Bertil Ohlin, but also Nils Wohlin, Björn Molin, Karin Kock-Lindberg, Vilmar Ljungdal, Henning Elmqvist and Rickard Sandler.

12. The occupations recorded as relevant include: social worker, economist, accountant, business manager, bank clerk, industrialist, wholesaler, landowner and director. Landowners should here be understood as similar to industrialists or directors in that they are concerned with the management of economic goods and values. These categories are certainly crude though, and many potentially relevant occupational careers are in fact excluded (e.g. university lecturer, journalist, public official).

13. The distribution is significant at the level of 0.01 (less than 1 in 100 samples will show an equal distribution by chance).

14. In this sample only economists, business managers and social workers were included.

15. Out of the 27 parliamentary committees that existed during the time period investigated, eight were included in this sample (Bankoutskottet, Bevillningsutskottet, Näringsutskottet, Socialutskottet, Statsutskottet, Finansutskottet, Skatteutskottet and Socialförsäkringsutskottet).

16. Government committees were categorized into ten distinct policy fields whereof three were used in this study (financial policy, social policy and business policy).


19. Further indication to this effect is the fact that whereas 46 percent of the heads of departments had previously been members of the Cabinet in relevant policy fields, this could only be said of 21 percent of the deputies. Moreover, 21 percent of the deputies, but only 9 percent of the heads of departments, had no previous political experience at all. Expertise is clearly seen as being less important in the appointment of minister without portfolios.

20. The importance of political competence as opposed to expertise among Cabinet members is argued by Petersson (1993, 200) and Larsson (1986, 87) with specific reference to the Swedish case.
REFERENCES


