

# Why not make British politics more festive?

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Imagine a week long festival of Politics in a quaint British town where politicians, public and civil society organisations meet for a series of open seminars and debates on the issues of our time.

Outside the Westminster bubble – perhaps somewhere like Swanage in the Isle of Purbeck – the dress code relaxes, the jargon dissipates and you brush shoulders with Michael Gove in the queue for the fish and chips.

It's like a party conference without the pressure of 'making decisions' and without the security to keep the public out and the paid lobbyists inside the ring of steel. There's plenty of media attention and corporate hangers-on but it has a holiday atmosphere as everyone enjoys themselves in the sunshine away from the office and the Parliamentary timetable.



## Almadalen Week

That's what the Swedish Almadalen week is like. It was started when Prime Minister Olaf Palme needed to make a speech while on the holiday island of Gotland in the Baltic. From that piece of rhetoric on the back of a tractor trailer has emerged a huge event that almost swamps the historic town of Visby and its charming fish restaurants.

There is a smorgasbord of 2000+ events over the five days. Hotel space is so short that I've been given an apartment in a wonderful 70s apartment block overlooking the seaside a 20 minutes bicycle ride away.

It's a kind of political Hay Festival/conference fringe and each day one of the parties gets to own the main festival fairground, a charming piece of parkland just outside the medieval gates. Even the dodgy right wing party gets its turn. The fact it is on an island increases the sense that this is a special space for the politicos, activists, lobbyists and students that attend. Mixed in are 'real' Swedes either here for the debates or on holiday.

Last night I watched a small crowd enjoying a politician being grilled by a TV presenter and a comedian in the open air. It was kind of Glasto meets Newsnight.

## Could It Happen Here?

Of course, Sweden is not Britain. Despite recent riots this is a more cohesive society. There is a tradition here of openness and tolerance in politics. You might call it a bit bloodless. Even with the Brevik shootings in Norway and the fate of Olaf Palme himself back in '86, they are less frightened of terrorism. They tend not to start wars and, unlike some Danes for example, have been less aggressively ideological about their liberalism.

There are all sorts of practical reasons why it couldn't happen in the UK. However, just considering that should make us think what we have lost with the increasing distance between our politicians and the political class and the public. As I have said elsewhere, they are losing touch in many ways and something like this might at least help change the cut-off culture of British politics. Many people think British politics is already a circus, perhaps it's time to take the show on the road.

(I am speaking at 4.30pm on Monday and 10.30am on Tuesday)

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