

## **A biography on Ernst Wigforss**

Ernst Wigforss was a Swedish statesman, Social Democrat and intellectual. He was born on the 24<sup>th</sup> of January 1881 in Halmstad, Sweden. Through his great knowledge and humanity Wigforss came to make a significant impact on modern Sweden and the coming generations of Social Democratic politicians.

Wigforss was a man of many gifts. He was a keen reader of most subjects and performed excellently in school. In 1899 when he graduated from the upper secondary school in Halmstad, he was one out of ten graduates that year.

He did his academic studies at the University of Lund in Sweden and advanced to become a doctor and senior lecturer in Scandinavian languages. During his university years he also came into contact with social democratic ideas which formed his political identity. In particular the student association DYG (De Yngre Gubbarna, The Younger Old Men) influenced him. In this network he met personalities such as Albert Nilsson, Östen Undén and Malte Jacobsson. These men played important roles in the Swedish public life in the first part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Wigforss made his debut as an author in 1906 with “Materialistisk historieuppfattning och klasskamp” (Materialistic concept of history and class struggle). This was a general ideological summary. In 1915 he published “Världskriget och världsfreden” (The World War and the peace of the world) which was an analysis of the causes of the First World War. He continued by writing “Göteborgsprogrammet” (The Gothenburg Programme) in 1919. That year Wigforss was also elected into the first chamber of the Swedish parliament.

In 1924 Wigforss became a member of the cabinet. A year later he obtained the position as the minister for finance; however this government was forced to resign as early as 1926. Wigforss returned to the ministry of finance in 1932 where he remained until 1949. The only disruption in Wigforss’s time in power with the Swedish treasury was when the rural party temporarily formed a government during the summer 1936.

Wigforss developed into one of the greatest thinkers and ideologists within the Swedish social democratic party. As universal suffrage and a 48 hour work week were introduced, social democracy entered an ideological vacuum during the 1920s. However, during the 1930s Wigforss introduced the modern social democratic policies. The welfare state was the main objective. In the aftermath of the Second World War, Wigforss continued his work for social and economic fairness.

The economic policy formulated and employed by Wigforss can in short be described as comprising the following elements: unemployment was to be reduced and government spending was the key variable to stimulate the economy. Although John Maynard Keynes has been acknowledged for introducing ideas of demand-side policies, Wigforss to a certain extent independently expressed a theory of demand-side stimulation. During his time in office Wigforss also raised the taxes which were used for social reforms such as pensions, sickness benefits, etc. This made him a primary target in the right-wing media of that time. 1932, in the beginning of the campaign before the elections, Wigforss wrote a pamphlet named “Ha vi råd att arbeta?” (Can we afford to work?) He showed that a high level of employment is basic for the richness of both the society and the individuals. The pamphlet showed that economical and social developments have to be optimized together and this has been a base for the Social

Democratic way of thinking since that time. When Sweden became the leading welfare-state, it was a result of the theories of Wigforss and the close connected political practice.

Wigforss divided the different socialist theories into phases of development. First in line were the utopian socialists who were characterized by attempting to implement essentially unachievable social experiments. Marxism was the next step which was based upon rational social and economic premises. Social democracy, according to Wigforss, was a political theory which aimed at being scientific, hence making it a combination of rational thinking and empirical control of reality. The difference between Marxism and social democracy is thus that Marxism encompasses philosophical structures that cannot be revised or changed, while social democracy is open to criticism and change. This quality consequently enables social democracy to evolve in accordance with the development of society. Wigforss coined the expression “provisional utopias”, by which he meant political objectives to implement while waiting for a more perfect political theory.

After 17 years as the head of Treasury, Wigforss retired and began writing his memoirs in the 1950s. The chronicles consisted of both small and large scale perspectives. In one volume Wigforss depicts Halmstad during 1880-1900; his parents, childhood friends, school, environment and life in the town. In another volume he gives an interesting portrayal of Swedish politics during the Second World War. Wigforss recounts the Swedish anxiety after the German occupation of Denmark and Norway, the subsequent appeasement policy towards Germany and the consequence of this: the transport permission of German soldiers through Sweden and the grant for a German division to pass from Norway to Finland. The reader is accordingly provided with valuable information about governmental work during the war.

Even as a 90-year-old Wigforss was an active person, agitating for various political questions. He fought against Swedish development of nuclear weapons during the 1950s and 60s, and during his whole life he was a fervent defender of peace. Likewise, philosophy, politics and literature remained a lifetime interest. He made his last public appearance in Laholm, a town near his native Halmstad.

Wigforss passed away on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of January 1977.

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