

‘DENMARK, MY NATIVE LAND’

THERE’S NO PLACE LIKE HOME

The homeless man’s gangrenous leg spread a sickly-sweet smell throughout the subway car. Newly embarked, I stood at the far end of the car with several other unwitting passengers, as far away from the poor, wretched man as I could get. At the next stop everyone hurried out, glad to leave the cloying stench behind. I never saw or heard of the man again. He must have died soon after.

When I tell other Danes about this incident in New York City, they typically exclaim: “My goodness, aren’t we lucky to live in Denmark?” I have to reply: “Yes, we are.” In Denmark the homeless man would not have faced a slow, undignified death noticed only, and with reluctance, by random passers-by. He would probably not even be homeless.

That episode took place in 2008. Seven years later I was once again in the United States for the presidential primaries. The remaining contenders for the Democratic nomination were Hillary Clinton and Bernie Sanders, and suddenly my native country was on everyone’s lips.

When ‘public welfare’ came up in a televised debate,

Sanders said, “I think we should look to countries like Denmark, like Sweden and Norway, and learn what they have accomplished for their working people.” “But we are not Denmark. I love Denmark,” Clinton replied. “We are the United States of America.”

As a Dane I was proud, but puzzled too: proud that two prominent American politicians gave the Danish welfare state positive mention; and puzzled that Clinton did not support Sanders in learning from Denmark and its Scandinavian siblings.

I soon learned myself that many Americans share Clinton’s view, while Sanders is the odd man out. Advocates of welfare benefits for all are quickly labelled as ‘socialists’ touting a loony-left utopia. There is an ideological abyss here between Denmark and the US, which I have spent quite a bit of time studying.

On one side of the rift, my compatriots and I have become so thoroughly accustomed to living in a welfare state we can barely imagine life without it. *Would Denmark even be Denmark, land that we love, without its all-embracing social security system?* Curious foreigners often ask me about my country when they hear I am a Dane born and bred. In fact, my common surname, ‘son of Jens’, instantly reveals my ethnic roots. My personal list of other distinctly Danish things includes the cosy concept of *hygge*, a lovable film trio of small-time crooks called ‘the Olsen Gang’, a fairy-tale writer by the name of Hans Christian Andersen, communal singing and,

yes, our welfare system – the feature that really makes Denmark stand out in the crowd.

You could say my story of the homeless man and the Sanders–Clinton exchange only confirm what Jens, Ole, Anders and lot of other Danes already knew: “Denmark, my native land” is simply the best place in the world. We all take good care of each other, and “few have too much; fewer still, not enough”, as we sing in two well-known traditional songs.

Denmark is a good place to live. But tributes like these, from our ‘Golden Age’, soon take on a self-righteous, discordant tone when subjected to closer analysis. I use the word ‘smugness’ to describe this doubly sanctimonious faith in Denmark as (probably) the best *welfare state* in the world, and in our *motives* as the noblest ever.

After pondering Danish reactions to my subway story and Clinton’s measured response to Sanders, I sincerely believe most Danes who hear them reflexively think: “How egoistic those Americans are!” Alas, the real world is far more complex.

A SUCCESS MADE IN DENMARK

Before I get too critical, I owe it to myself and my country to affirm that the Danish welfare state is a success story. It has more financial equality than most other countries in the world. These days, the wealthiest 1% of Americans are earning about three times as much as the wealthiest 1% of Danes. And not only are rich Americans

richer than rich Danes; poor Americans are also poorer, and there are more of them, proportionately about twice as many as in Denmark.

Financial equality is not necessarily a goal in itself, but it does have various effects that most people see as positive. For instance, several studies show that parental income and education impact a child's future income and education more in the US than in Denmark. Small wonder, given that a good education in America (and many other countries) is pricey. One year's tuition at a decent university can easily cost 40,000 US dollars, living expenses not included. But the race begins much earlier, with wealthy parents often sending their children to expensive private schools rather than publicly funded alternatives.

Certainly, many talented Americans do better than their parents, but they are exceptions that confirm the rule – which, for most Americans, is that if they really want to live the American dream, they have to come to Denmark.

Inequality in health is also generally lower in Denmark than in the US, where most people have health insurance through their employer, with a higher pay cheque meaning better coverage.

The best insurance policies give almost unlimited access to private hospitals, therapy and expensive medication. Cheaper policies cover a smaller range of services, and if treatment costs exceed a certain limit,

treatment is terminated, even if the patient has cancer, diabetes or other serious conditions.

Even Americans with prime coverage can end up struggling if they fall ill, especially if they lose their job – often their source of health insurance in the first place.

Unfortunate citizens with no health insurance have Medicaid, a public programme that covers certain at-risk groups, including underprivileged pregnant women. Even after the introduction of ‘Obamacare’ many millions are left without protection.

FOUR QUESTIONS AND A DEFINITION

For most of today’s 5.9 million Danes, *equality* is the most defining trait in their special brand of ‘welfare’ – a term used in the positive sense of general happiness, health, well-being, prosperity and safety. Denmark has relatively few ‘poor’ people, and everyone has access to the same health care, education and old-age pension. But equality is not the only trait that sets Denmark and the rest of the Nordic region apart.

Welfare services in the Nordics are mainly provided by public institutions. In Denmark, for instance, the municipal authorities run the kindergartens and retirement homes, and the regional authorities run the hospitals. Hence the term ‘welfare *state*’.

Many modern Danes use ‘welfare services’, ‘welfare society’, ‘welfare state’ and similar phrases interchangeably, without really considering the differences. Verbally and mentally merging such terms

is another very Danish thing, and we do it almost instinctively. After all, the state, which fosters welfare and well-being, is our friend. Compare, again, with the US, where citizens are much more inclined to praise private initiative but reproach ‘the government’ for interfering in their lives.

The Danish welfare model is a success story because it has created a remarkable level of equality and forged strong links between the population and public institutions. This does not mean, however, that all is peachy in the state of Denmark.

In this book I reflect on four questions about the Danish welfare model. Each sheds light on certain aspects of it – some good, some debatable: Why do Danes support the welfare state? Which historic events and people have enabled such intimate links to arise between the state and our welfare? How much welfare do we actually get for our many tax *kroner*? And how has Denmark been able to combine welfare and wealth, and what of the system’s viability in the future?