

## Nothing is Rotten in the State of Denmark

I arrived in Aarhus, Denmark last week to the feeling that I had really not left Toronto. Tamil demonstrators, waving Tiger flags, banging drums, and chanting incomprehensibly, blocked traffic from crossing the square in front of the railway station. A few days later in Copenhagen, their leader dead, their resistance in Sri Lanka at an end, they were chanting "USA, USA" in front of the American Embassy. Polyglot Denmark is not, but multiculturalism is present everywhere in the cities.

Most of it is benign and hopeful. There are mixed race children playing happily together in both Aarhus and Copenhagen, teenagers moving in packs, and black and white couples walking with small children. There are women in chadors and Muslim men with beards, halal meat shops, and kebabs for sale everywhere. But after the controversy over the now-famous Danish cartoons in 2006, there is substantial unease among many Danes. They were frightened by the rage directed against them in the Muslim world—and the hints of violence they detected from the four percent of the Danish population of 5.5 million who are Muslim. And they worried about the threat to freedom of speech posed by the controversy and, more recently, bitterly resented Muslim Turkey's attempt to block the Danish prime minister from becoming Secretary-General of NATO in response to the cartoon controversy. Only in the face of Danish resistance will Turkey now make it into membership in the European Community.

Many Danes look to Canada as a model of multiculturalism, one country that they believe got it right. But even if almost everyone speaks English, few know much about Canada, and certainly they know nothing about this nation's problems in integrating immigrants or the difficulties with our refugee system. Still, when compared to racial and religious tensions in Britain, France, the Netherlands, and Denmark, from across the North Atlantic Canada's multiculturalism looks a great success.

What does seem clear is that the European Community has been good to Denmark, even if it has thus far refused to adopt the Euro as its currency. The tiny nation's GDP per capita in 2008 was CDN \$66,760 (well above Canada's at \$48,427), welfare benefits are generous, so much so that most Danes label their welfare state as their country's defining characteristic. Many cynics might declare that Denmark's taxes, "the highest anywhere," I was repeatedly told, are the true defining fact (and this tax burden is largely responsible for complaints about the costs of trying to integrate immigrants). But the Danish medical care system is good, the emergency room lineups relatively short, and cancer operations in first-class hospitals, for example, can be done quickly and well. Nonetheless, private hospitals advertise their up-to-date facilities and pleasant locations on the coast. Even more extraordinarily, university students who make it to higher education after tough competition for places get free tuition *and* a stipend. Graduate students get the same, and their stipend is enough to live on, no matter their subject of study.

The only drawback in this halcyon paradise? Everything is ridiculously expensive, notably clothing (though women are nonetheless stylishly dressed), with restaurant meals out of sight, and beer and liquor very dear. Copenhagen has a number of two star Michelin restaurants, but there seems a large gulf between the hot young chefs and most of the rest. Food is good but simple, though fresh fish seems available everywhere and Danish pork, proudly labelled as such, appears on almost every menu. The pastries are good, the breads wonderful. Unfortunately, a half-pint of Carlsberg costs around 30 kroner or \$6.50 and a glass of Italian plonk will run about \$12. With gasoline selling for almost 10 kroner a litre, taxi meters in Aarhus start at 30 kroner and even a short trip will hit \$25 Canadian.

On the other hand, the public transit system is first rate, with bus networks and subways operating in Copenhagen and an efficient rail network reaching into the country. If they're not riding their bicycle around town, people will commute a hundred kilometres to get to work and do so without a qualm, and Swedes take the train from Malmo, just a bridge away from Copenhagen, to work. Danes, in return, go to Malmo to buy houses and apartments, much cheaper there than in their capital city of Copenhagen.

Occupied without a fight by the Nazis in 1940, Denmark drew the appropriate lessons and joined the North Atlantic Treaty as a founding member. It dispatched troops to Iraq, and it has some 700 soldiers in Afghanistan's difficult Helmand province. The Danish casualty rate is comparable to Canada's, and people I spoke too worried that the Afghan mission's aims were hopelessly muddled. Others noted that Denmark, proud of its peacekeeping record, had trouble dealing with combat and its costs.

In other words, Denmark is much like Canada on the important issues. Politicians brag about Denmark punching above its weight, but ordinary Danes worry about the economy, the strains posed to the polity by immigration, and wonder if their taxes can possibly go higher. But it's a sweet life for now, everyone sitting outside cafes in the sun or lying stretched out in Copenhagen's superb parks. There really is nothing rotten in the state of Denmark.

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