Multiculturalism in Denmark

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ABSTRACT

Denmark is a small country and one which is still new to the realities of immigration and ethnic diversity. Unfortunately, recent years have shown a growing negative response to policies of multiculturalism. In this article, the author examines various factors surrounding the debate, including strong nationalist values, a well-developed welfare state, and a tradition of universal egalitarianism that is slowly eroding.

Despite relatively modest numbers of foreigners in Denmark, immigration and ethnic diversity has become, in just the last ten years, a highly charged issue. There has been, under successive governments, a growing rhetorical emphasis on the 'problem' of immigration, a strengthening of negative immigrant stereotyping, and a deepening fear that 'little Denmark' and Danish values are under assault by those with foreign values. In keeping with this rhetoric, policy changes over the past decade have produced a continual erosion of the social entitlements and political rights of non-citizens, and have gradually legitimized differential treatment of the population on the basis of ethnic origin and identity. These developments stand in stark contrast to the traditional view of Denmark as a country of remarkable ethnic tolerance.[1] Yet the very forces that have long been the strength of Danish society – its strong collective identity, universal egalitarianism, and enviable national welfare state – are significant factors behind Danish nationalism and xenophobia today.

Immigration and ethnic diversity in Denmark

Denmark is a small country, with fewer than 5.4 million inhabitants, a strong national and collective identity, an active civil society, and a generous welfare system. As is the case throughout the Nordic countries, immigration and cultural diversity is a relatively recent phenomenon in Denmark. Before 1960, the few foreign-born residents came almost exclusively from other Nordic countries, Germany and the United Kingdom. Large-scale labour migration to Denmark took place for the first time in the late '60s, when companies were permitted to recruit significant numbers of workers from abroad – mostly from Turkey, Yugoslavia, and Pakistan – in response to labour shortages.

A second wave of immigration began in 1983, after the Danish parliament liberalized the country's immigration laws and enlarged its acceptance of refugees. There was a considerable increase in the rate of immigration during this period, as well as a shift in source countries. Immigrants after 1983 came especially from Turkey, Sri Lanka, Iraq, Iran, Lebanon and the occupied Palestinian territories and, in the 1990s, from the Balkan states, Afghanistan and Somalia. The response with respect to asylum-seekers was especially generous. During the decade to 2002, Denmark ranked third among all industrialized countries (after Switzerland and Sweden, and ahead of Norway) for granting admission and refugee status to asylum-seekers, with 13.7 refugees accepted per 1,000 inhabitants.[2] During this period, Denmark also provided generous and immediate welfare assistance to all residents, including new arrivals.

As of January 2001, about 7.3% of the population of Denmark were immigrants or second-generation descendants of immigrants, and roughly three-quarters of these – 5.4% of the total population or a mere 300,000 people – have originated from countries outside of Europe and North America.[3] Demographic forecasters project that third-country immigrants and their descendants may comprise close to 10% of the population by 2020, and almost 15% by 2040.[4] While the Danish census bureau does not keep statistics on religion, it is clear that the majority of these second-wave immigrants are from Muslim countries. Finally, compared to other European countries, Denmark does not appear to have a significant number of illegal immigrants. One reason for this is that it has been historically easy for newcomers to receive financial assistance from the state, thus there is little economic advantage to remaining clandestine.

The welfare state and the goal of integration

One important explanation for the strong negative response in Denmark to immigrants and ethnic diversity lies in the particular Danish conceptual approach to citizenship and integration, and the key role for the welfare state within this approach. Historically, the Danish approach to citizenship has been to integrate all members of the society, and to do so through the triple mechanisms of a highly productive labour market, a strong welfare state, and a socially cohesive society. This formula worked successfully through much of the 20th century. The Danish welfare state ensured a high level of

public provisions accessible to all citizens and residents in the country. While costly (the tax rate for many Danes is around 50% of earnings), these programs were based on conceptions of social egalitarianism and universalism, and on the assumption that recipients earn their entitlements by contributing over a lifetime of active work to the maintenance and growth of the national wealth. The contributors and recipients within this system were assumed to (and generally did) behave responsibly, out of a collective orientation toward reciprocity and the long-term maintenance of the society.

Cultural belonging and political rights in Denmark have thus been conceptually entwined through the institution of the welfare state. There is one word in Danish – *lighed* – which means simultaneously: "cultural similarity" and "political sameness" with respect to civic rights. Similarity is believed to be a necessary condition for equality and one cannot, within this conceptual framework, be culturally different and politically equal.[5] The welfare state has also provided a degree of security for those inside Denmark, regardless of events occurring in the outside world. It is thus a cornerstone of Danish pride in the political independence of their small country.

As one commentator has argued, there lies within the political life of advanced democratic societies a central dilemma: the sharing and solidarity of a well-developed welfare state can conflict with cultural diversity.[6] This solidarity/diversity divide has been especially apparent in Denmark. While the social welfare contract proved effective at bridging class differences among workers, industrial capitalism and peasants, the arrival of unprecedented numbers of ethnically dissimilar, low-skilled immigrants beginning in the mid-1980s presented an uncomfortable challenge to the Danish welfare state and the goal of cultural integration. The relatively high level of welfare benefits has meant that many immigrants stand to gain little or nothing in terms of real income by getting a job, and the least skilled among them have been caught in a benefit trap. As well, Denmark's rigid bureaucratic regime has prevented the development and use of informal networks among immigrants. Immigrants have largely become dependent clients of the state and have rather failed to develop autonomous community resources. Finally, the close-knit nature of Danish civic society has tended to exclude culturally distinct immigrants from the social and informational networks that are frequently the gateway to participation in both the labour market, and in civic and political institutions.

The result is one of the largest gaps (compared to other OECD countries) in work-force participation between nationals and third-country immigrants and their descendants. Among the working-age population, just 59% of men and 43% of women who migrated from, or whose parents migrated from third countries are active in the workforce, compared to 83% for men and 75% for women among native Danes.[7] For some very recent immigrant groups, the rate of participation in the labour-force is lower than 20%.

In addition to high unemployment rates, immigrant groups are subject to residential crowding in areas with higher than average social problems. While there may be a preference among some immigrants for settlement into areas already inhabited by their own ethnic group, Danish policies have exacerbated this problem in a number of respects. First, municipalities have primarily allocated refugees to public housing estates and to neighbourhoods with already dense immigrant concentrations. Second, rent controls for private rented dwellings and cooperatives have kept rents under market value and produced long waiting lists and low turnover for desirable housing – making access for newer immigrants especially difficult.

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Immigration and minority policy

In this environment, political actors have come to focus on, and to ideologically exaggerate, the immigrant 'problem.' Specifically, they have concentrated their rhetoric on the financial burden which newcomers place on the provisions of the welfare system, on the lack of contact between immigrants and Danes and their unwillingness to integrate into Danish society, and on the apparent correlation between immigrant enclaves and rates of crime. The response has been to impose tighter restrictions on immigration and to roll back the social entitlements and political rights of non-citizens.

This policy turn can be traced back to the Social Democratic (SDP) led coalition, elected in 1992. The SDP began with piecemeal tightening of the old Immigration Act of 1983, and then introduced a comprehensive new Integration Act in 1999, intended to assist immigrants' integration into Danish society and to make them less dependent on welfare. In some respects, the goals of the policy were commendable. For example, the government introduced compulsory language courses and jobs training programs intended to facilitate integration through the labour market.[8] And it created local Integration Councils, with significant representation of ethnic minority residents, which served to mediate local issues and to provide advice to both municipal and national governments. Yet in other respects, the government capitalized on exaggerated public fears over immigration, and legitimized differential treatment of the population on the basis of their ethnic origin and identity. Its most significant step was to introduce lower welfare benefits for immigrants. Non-governmental organizations

and the left-wing opposition criticized the new law for effectively establishing a two-tiered system of social welfare. They complained to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees that the law violated the UN's 1951 Convention on Refugees, which stipulates that refugees are entitled to the same treatment as citizens. In mid-1999, the UNHCR confirmed this charge, and by year's end the government repealed its legislation on the grounds that it did not work.

But the boldest policy changes have come following the election in November 2001 of the present Liberal-Conservative government, with backing from the Christian People's Party and the far-right Danish People's Party (DFP).[9] The election itself – held, significantly, just two months after the events of September 11th – was remarkable. The issue of immigration dominated the general election campaign, and was projected as the most imminent and serious threat to the history, culture, identity and homogeneity of 'little Denmark'. The opposition capitalized on a political climate pervaded by diffuse fears, moral panic and unspecified enemy images. They created expectations that they could not only put a virtual stop to any further inflows of undesirable foreigners, but also that they would be able to reinstate Denmark to its former status as a peaceful, ethnically homogeneous and politically sovereign welfare state.[10]

The government has passed a number of laws since 2001 with the effect of restricting immigration and the rights of immigrants. These include a longer waiting period for permanent residency (seven years instead of three) and a higher threshold for Danish citizenship, including a nine-year waiting period and a Danish language history exam. Signalling the centrality of immigration within its policy framework, the government removed immigration from its traditional office within the Interior Ministry, and established a whole new Ministry for Refugees, Immigration and Integration Affairs.

In its most astonishing policy, the government introduced a rule barring any non-European applicant of family reunification through marriage who is less than 24 years of age. Even if both spouses are over 24, the law makes a visa for the spouse contingent on conditions that the couple is economically self-reliant, possesses a proper dwelling, and – a very subjective test – can demonstrate that they have closer ties with Denmark than with the country of emigration. The law also requires a deposit of about 6,500 Euros until the foreign spouse becomes a citizen. The law was intended to curb immigration through family reunification and to address the perceived problem of arranged and forced marriages among Muslims.[11] But, initially at least, it also caught native Danes in its restrictive web.[12]

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The government has also reduced welfare benefits for persons who have not lived in Denmark for seven of the last eight years, providing these individuals with the so-called 'introduction benefit'. It has halted all national funding for mother-tongue education in public schools, though some municipalities have continued to subsidize these programs. And, in an apparent attempt to secure itself against large-scale protests and anti-discrimination lobbies, the government eliminated financial subsidies to several ethnic minority and anti-racism organizations. None of these laws discriminate exclusively between citizens and immigrants. However, it is clear that the policies are carefully targeted against immigrants and potential immigrants from third countries. The Danish newspaper, *Politiken* (18 January 2002), has criticized these policies as focusing on "ethnic purity" and on "protecting the Danish tribe", which supposedly "cannot abide being mixed with other inhabitants of the globe."[13]

Danish national values and multiculturalism

As central as the welfare state has been in the debates and policy direction concerning immigration, the growing Danish opposition to immigration cannot be reduced simply to economic concerns.[14] There is, woven throughout the discourse on the immigration 'problem', a fundamental hostility toward the idea of a multicultural society, especially one which encompasses Islam. One source of this hostility is Danish nationalism. Nationalism is stronger in Denmark than in many other countries, as witnessed in Eurobarometer reports and, more symbolically, in flag-waving displays of Danish patriotism.[15] Historically, the particular style of Danish nationalism – with its consensual "small-is-beautiful" emphasis – has produced a reluctance to become enmeshed in international affairs.[16] The small size of the Danish state tends to produce a particularly strong sense of national vulnerability to the implications of globalization, including immigration.

The second source of hostility to immigration is Danish liberalism. Danes consider themselves to be thoroughly modern and progressive with respect to sexuality, marriage and women's rights. In contrast, many view immigrant values as stressing dependency, obedience, and lack of individual choice, particularly for young women. Migrants and especially Muslims are thus perceived as a threat at both the national level (to the identity of the Danish nation), and on the individual level (to the sanctity of personal freedom). The Danish People's Party has been most brazen in its anti-Muslim sentiment. A major representative of the DFP and vicar in the Church of Denmark, Søren Krarup, has argued that "Danes are increasingly becoming foreigners

in their own country… Parliament is permitting the slow extermination of the Danish people." He continued by predicting that "our descendants" will "curse" those politicians who are responsible for increasing the "alienation of Danes in Denmark."[17] But similar rhetoric is echoed by the main parties. In one comment during the 2001 election campaign, the former Interior Minister for the SDP, Karen Jespersen pronounced that Islam could not coexist with Danish culture. A Liberal Party member of parliament, Inge Dahl Sørensen, proposed interning a portion of Denmark's Muslim population to preserve national security. And the leader of the DFP, Pia Kjaersgaard, proclaimed that she would cross the street to avoid meeting a Muslim.

Participation in political life

One bright spot in Denmark is data suggesting that levels of political engagement among immigrants and their descendants are fairly strong, or at least not significantly lower than participation among ethnic Danes. Voter turnout appears to be somewhat lower among those of foreign origin than among indigenous Danes, but the figures vary widely from city to city, and across ethnic groups.[18] In some cities – Copenhagen and Aarhus – the percentage of ethnic minorities running for and elected to local council is virtually proportionate to or even higher than the percentage of minorities among eligible voters. And the proportion of candidates of foreign origin who ran for national Parliament and for the European Parliament was also fairly close to the proportion of eligible foreign voters in those elections.

One reason why the numbers are so high within local councils (more than 14% of the City Council of Copenhagen is of third country origin) is that immigrants are eligible to vote in local elections in Denmark after 3 years of residence.[19] Another explanation for fairly strong levels of political participation and descriptive representation of ethnic minorities at all levels lies in the Danish electoral system of proportional representation with personal voting. This system allows voters to alter the order of candidates on the list. They may give their vote either to the whole list (a list vote), or to a single candidate (a personal vote). Within such a system, the electoral success of an individual candidate depends critically on the candidate's ability to mobilize eligible voters both to participate in the election and to cast their personal vote for them. Ethnic minority competitors in Danish elections frequently focus their mobilization efforts on voters within immigrant communities, and are thus seen by most parties as fairly desirable candidates.

Voting rights for foreigners and, especially, the implications of personal voting for minority communities will become increasingly important over time – as newer migrants attain citizenship and as the second generation reaches voting age. Their participation in the political life of Danish society will be crucial for influencing the framework of their lives and the development of the country as a whole.

Notes

1 Denmark stands as an inspiring case in its efforts to protect Danish Jews during World War II. Virtually all Danish Jews survived the Holocaust, despite the country falling under German occupation. Most were spirited to neutral Sweden, while the few hundred who were transported to prison camps remained within the protective concern of Danish authorities.

2 UN Human Rights Commission Statistical Yearbook (2002), p. 43-44.

3 The Danish statistics bureau considers immigrants as persons born abroad, and of whom both parents are foreign citizens or born abroad. Descendants of immigrants are those persons born in Denmark to parents who are not Danish citizens born in Denmark. A Dane is a person born in Denmark who has at least one parent who is a Danish citizen born in Denmark. There are very few third- or fourth-generation immigrants in Denmark, but they would be considered Danes, as long as one of their parents is a Danish citizen born in Denmark. Throughout this article, the term "third country" refers to source countries of immigration outside of the Nordic countries, the European Union, and North America.

4 Deborah Roseveare and Martin Jorgensen, "Migration and Integration of Immigrants in Denmark," OECD Economics Department Working Paper, 30 April 2004.

5 Thomas Hylland Eriksen makes this terminological distinction in "The Colonial and the Post-Colonial: A View from Scandinavia on Italian Minority Issues." In Ralph Grillo and Jeff Pratt (eds.), *The Politics of Recognizing Difference: Multiculturalism Italian-style* (Ashgate, 2002), p. 219-236.

6 David Goodhart, "Too Diverse?" *Prospect,* February 2004.

7 SOPEMI report for Denmark, 2001. Reported in Roseveare and Jorgensen (2004), p. 16.

8 The Act imposed a requirement to attend a three-year introduction course on all immigrants.

9 The Liberal-Conservative bloc, led by Anders Fogh Rasmussen, won 98 seats in the 179-seat Danish Folketing. Within this governing bloc, the Liberal Party holds 56 seats, the Conservative Party holds 16 seats, the Danish People's Party holds 22 seats (though they have been excluded from cabinet), and the Christian People's Party holds 4 seats. The Social Democratic bloc, led by departing prime minister Poul Nyrup Rasmussen won 77 seats.

10 Ulf Hedetoft, "'Cultural transformation': How Denmark faces immigration." *Open Democracy* (30 November 2003). Reprinted at http://www.amid.dk/pub/debate/uh.html.

11 Two ethnic groups are the focus of family reunification concerns. Estimates are that among Turks and Pakistanis, some 80-90% of young people marry someone from outside the country and seek to bring them to Denmark. However, the problem of forced marriage appears to have been highly exaggerated within ideological and political discourse. See Garbi Schmidt, "The right to choose: Patterns of partner choice among ethnic minorities in Denmark." Paper presented at the 13th Nordic Migration Conference, Aalborg, Denmark (November 2004).

12 The marriage law was revised to apply only to applicants from third countries, after strong expressions of public dissatisfaction from young indigenous Danes who fell in love with foreigners and then were unable to bring them to Denmark.

13 Cited by Ulf Hedetoft (2003).

14 The role of the welfare state is similar in Sweden and Norway, and those countries have also experienced significant increases in immigration and ethnic diversity over the last 20 years. Yet anti-immigrant sentiment is not nearly as strong there as in Denmark.

15 Danes are proud flag-flyers. Strings of the red and white Dannebrog are almost always displayed along the main streets of cities and town, in shops and advertisements. At home, the Danes typically display the flag in their gardens, in decorative table-top presentations during the holidays, and strung like garland on their Christmas trees.

16 Denmark remained neutral in World War I, and did not fight in WWII (it was occupied by 1940). Though a member of the EU, it voted against the Euro and has retained its own currency. Significantly though, Denmark supported the U.S. war in Iraq and sent troops to fight there.

17 Cited in Hedetoft (2003).

18 Lise Tøgeby, "Migrants at the Polls: An Analysis of Immigrant and Refugee Participation in Danish Local Elections," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies,* Vol. 25:4 (1999), p. 665-684.

19 Denmark is one of just a few European countries (the others are Sweden, Finland, Norway, the Netherlands, Ireland and Belgium) to grant limited local voting rights to non-European nationals. Voting for national elections in Denmark is restricted to citizens and the residence requirement to acquire nationality is now, under the new immigration laws, 9 years.