

Bemidji Pioneer Article 10

Living in Denmark: The Farmers and the Danish Welfare State

Denmark was a dominant kingdom in the north of Europe, occupying Estonia, Norway, Sweden, and Iceland over the past 500 years. The Danish monarchy literally owned all of Copenhagen and much of the Danish countryside. The north, where I am, was wild and sandy with some outposts.

Many of the people in Denmark were serfs, owned by the monarchy. They farmed the land, which was quite fertile in the southern and mid-section of the country. Gradually, over time, the land came into the hands of the farmers which ultimately led to the end of royal reign in Denmark. There were 30,000 of these middle-sized farms of 75-300 acres each. This was half the area cultivated in the country.

Because these farms were small, they could not function without the owner. Production was limited, yet essential to the Danish economy. The middle-sized farmers banded together as farming collectives to buy the expensive machinery necessary to make a better living off of the land. These farming collectives began wielding power in the legislature, and soon ran Denmark. The social structure during this time was known as agrarian capitalism. During this transition time, Denmark was a very poor country, as was all of Scandinavia, with farming as its only asset. Farmers typically had six years of formal education, all that was necessary to work the land in a proper way.

Concurrently a socio-cultural dimension of Danish life emerged in the work of Grundtvigian (1783-1872). He was a Danish pastor, song-writer and philosopher who endorsed a philosophy of life known as the ideal of unassuming behavior. He taught a value orientation that placed as the ultimate ideals unassuming behavior and plain religiousness. These ideas emphasized the solidarity of the community while still respecting the spiritual freedom of the individual. Farmers, burgers, and nobility alike were all brothers in this egalitarian view. Hard work and modesty were the ways to a good life and spiritual salvation.

The Grundtvigian view gave self esteem to the farmers and all working people in the face of other classes. Under his views Danish farmers diversified production to dairy and slaughterhouse products which they distributed world-wide. The Danish economy expanded.

Education was prized. Schools were to educate people to live a more cheerful and active life. In this climate, the farmers realized that they needed to educate more people to diversity the economy and bring Denmark into the modern world. They promoted government to provide free educational opportunities for all Danes who wanted it.

It was a natural path to Democratic Socialism of the 1970's. The Danish Welfare State was fully formed in 1976. At that time, citizens agreed to pay 50% of their salary to the government in exchange for free health care, education, unemployment insurance,

disability payments, and retirement. The economy has continued to prosper and the country today runs efficiently and meets the needs of its citizens.

Being in Denmark reminds me of living in Minnesota. We have the DFL or Farm-Labor political party which is a legacy from the early days of the state when a large group of immigrants from Scandinavia came to live here. Our Senators were nationally respected politicians who were both liberal and progressive. Our state had generous social programs and our education system was one of the best in the country.

We had plenty to be proud of and knew we were living a positive life and helping others. This how Denmark is today. People know their tax dollars keep a balance in the country. Crime is low, delinquency is low, education is high, in fact 34 % of students in the social sciences now complete the masters degree.

But social pressures are growing in Denmark as the population ages and more people are becoming disabled. And now the Welfare State is facing huge challenges and must decide what is the right course. Should they raise taxes or reduce services? Whatever the future brings, Danes will think it through and make modest changes that encourage further growth and development of the economic sector to help cover costs.

The legacy of the farmers lives on in Denmark.