

Public Governance in Denmark

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Public Governance in Denmark: Meeting the Global Mega- Challenges of the 21st Century?

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Table of Contents

Foreword	vii
Chapter 1 Why Look North? Scrutinising the Danish Way of Governing Societal Challenges	1
<i>Peter Triantafillou, Andreas Hagedorn Krogh and Annika Agger</i>	
Section I: Economic and Social Equality	
Chapter 2 Redistribution, Inequality and Nordic Welfare States: Challenges in a Global World	21
<i>Bent Greve and Daniel Béland</i>	
Chapter 3 Reforming the Ideal(ised) Model(s) of Danish Labour Market Policies	39
<i>Magnus Paulsen Hansen and Janine Leschke</i>	
Chapter 4 Innovating Democratic Participation in Social Housing	57
<i>Elizabeth Toft Kristjansen and Jesper Ole Jensen</i>	
Section II: Democracy and Participation	
Chapter 5 Successive Minority Governments – Yet Cooperation and Policy Reform	77
<i>Flemming Juul Christiansen and Peter Heyn Nielsen</i>	
Chapter 6 Towards Hybrid Democracy and Interactive Political Leadership	93
<i>Eva Sørensen and Jodi R. Sandfort</i>	

Section III: Public Sector Effectiveness and Efficiency

Chapter 7 The Danish Control–Trust Balance in Public Governance 111
Jacob Torfing and Tina Øllgaard Bentzen

Chapter 8 Digitalising Denmark: Efficiency versus privacy 131
Peter Aagaard and John Storm Pedersen

Section IV: Climate Change and Biodiversity

Chapter 9 Climate Politics and Renewable Energy in Denmark 1975–2020 149
Karsten Bruun Hansen and Peter Enevoldsen

Chapter 10 Resilience and Adaptability Capacity in the Danish Agriculture and Food System: Continuity and Change 169
Sevasti Chatzopoulou and Kostas Karantininis

Section V: Demographic Changes and Immigration

Chapter 11 One of the Best Pension Systems in the World? 191
Fritz von Nordheim and Jon Kvist

Chapter 12 Ensuring Public Health Care and Tackling Growing Expenditures 209
Erik Bækkeskov and Peter Triantafillou

Chapter 13 From Homogeneity to Diversity: Societal and Political Responses to Immigration 227
Carina Saxlund Bischoff and Anders Ejrnæs

Chapter 14 Public Governance in Denmark – Current Developments and Ways Ahead 247
Andreas Hagedorn Krogh, Annika Agger and Peter Triantafillou

Index 263

Foreword

Denmark and its neighbouring Nordic nations have attracted a global gaze for the better part of a century, far greater than their relatively small size would seemingly merit. The reason for such significant attention is rooted in the recognised successes of the Nordic societies. ‘Nordic countries are a model of cooperation and they consistently punch above their weight in meeting the challenges of our time’, remarked United States President Barack Obama at the Nordic Leaders’ Summit in Washington DC in 2016.¹

The Nordic nations are positioned to receive an explosion of heightened global attention. The world needs leadership to tackle the international mega-challenges of the early twenty-first century as examined within this important volume: economic and social equality; democracy and participation; public sector effectiveness and efficiency; climate change and the environment; and demographic changes and immigration.

These mega-challenges are also expressed through the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) for which Denmark and its Nordic neighbours are measured as comparable global leaders, regularly topping the annual SDG Index. I stress the word *comparable* because as the young Swedish activist Greta Thunberg reminds us, Nordic societies do not live up to the utopian characterisations they are sometimes prone to receive. Overconsumption is a significant problem. Each Nordic country consumes resources at a level greater than the earth can support, exceeding planetary boundaries and contributing to climate change and loss of biodiversity; racism exists across Nordic societies with concerning levels of extreme nationalists having gained power; and inequalities are growing. Nevertheless, for all their flaws, Nordic nations are comparable global leaders from whom many important lessons can be learned.

Denmark deserves focused attention to better understand its comparable successes, its continued challenges and what lessons those of us elsewhere in the world can draw. Andreas Hagedorn Krogh, Annika Agger and Peter Triantafillou have pulled together a superbly edited volume, attracting the contributions of leading scholars that brings important messages both for academics

¹Remarks by President Obama, President Niinistö of Finland, and Prime Minister Solberg of Norway at the Nordic Leaders’ Summit Arrival Ceremony’. The White House Office of the Press Secretary, 13 May 2016. Retrieved from <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2016/05/13/remarks-president-obama-president-niinist%C3%B6-finland-and-prime-minister>.

and policymakers alike. Each chapter has a lessons learned section that serves as a space for reflection and most constructive context when considering potential paths forward.

The editors and authors throughout this volume go to quite some length in pointing out what could be learned while also taking care to share the particular historical conditions in Denmark. These contextual features are so important to consider in efforts to transfer policy to other countries with very different political systems, such as the United States and France. Transferring policy lessons is always a challenging task, and as every nation is uniquely unique, the lessons provided in this volume can help to better ensure more likely success in such learning efforts.

Denmark is often characterized as a welfare state, but I share the feeling with others that it is better characterized as a ‘well-being state’ or as an ‘enabling state’.² Denmark is constantly in development in order to meet new societal challenges – or ‘punching above its weight’ as President Obama put it. These changes mean that any easy characterisation of Denmark’s public governance system is difficult and calls for continued research and debate, something for which this volume makes a significant contribution.

The volume concludes with an indispensably important message: Even if Denmark is in no way a utopia, and it still faces all kinds of societal challenges, ‘The chapters in this edited volume go to show how the collaborative governance model in Denmark is relatively stable and largely based on socio-political cooperation, equality, trust, pragmatism and an inclusive compromise culture. Despite shifting minority governments and emerging political parties on both wings, the political middle, which embraces gradual reforms of the welfare state, is wide and strong. A generally content and happy citizenry along with both formal and informal institutions of cooperation and pragmatic compromise dampen the radicalism of new governments and ensure a steady reform path’ (see Chapter 14).

21 June 2021

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²Gilbert, Neil, and Barbara Gilbert. *The enabling state: Modern welfare capitalism in America*. Oxford University Press, 1989.