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Liberal, Harsh Denmark

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1.

In country after country across Europe, the Syrian refugee crisis has put intense pressure on the political establishment. In Poland, voters have brought to power a right-wing party whose leader, Jarosław Kaczyński, warns that migrants are bringing “dangerous diseases” and “various types of parasites” to Europe; in France, in December, only a last-minute alliance between the Socialists and the conservatives prevented the far-right National Front from triumphing in regional elections. Even Germany, which took in more than a million asylum-seekers in 2015, has been forced to pull back in the face of a growing revolt from Chancellor Angela Merkel’s own party and the recent New Year’s attacks on women in Cologne, allegedly by groups of men of North African origin.

And then there is Denmark. A small, wealthy Scandinavian democracy of 5.6 million people, it is according to most measures one of the most open and egalitarian countries in the world. It has the highest income equality and one of the lowest poverty rates of any Western nation. Known for its nearly carbon-neutral cities, its free health care and university education for all, its bus drivers who are paid like accountants, its robust defense of gay rights and social freedoms, and its vigorous culture of social and political debate, the country has long been envied as a social-democratic success, a place where the state has an improbably durable record of doing good. Danish leaders also have a history of protecting religious minorities: the country was unique in Nazi-occupied Europe in prosecuting anti-Semitism and rescuing almost its entire Jewish population.

When it comes to refugees, however, Denmark has long led the continent in its shift to the right—and in its growing domestic consensus that large-scale Muslim immigration is incompatible with European social democracy. To the visitor, the country’s resistance to immigrants from Africa and the Middle East can seem implacable. In last June’s Danish national election—months before the Syrian refugee crisis hit Europe—the debate centered around whether the incumbent, center-left Social Democrats or their challengers, the center-right Liberal Party, were tougher on asylum-seekers. The main victor was the Danish People’s Party, a populist, openly anti-immigration party, which drew 21 percent of the vote, its best performance ever. Its founder, Pia Kjaersgaard, for years known for suggesting that Muslims “are at a lower stage of civilization,” is now speaker of the Danish parliament. With the backing of the Danish People’s Party, the center-right Liberals formed a minority government that has taken one of the hardest lines on refugees of any European nation.

When I arrived in Copenhagen last August, the new government, under Liberal Prime Minister

Lars Løkke Rasmussen, had just cut social benefits to refugees by 45 percent. There was talk among Danish politicians and in the Danish press of an “invasion” from the Middle East—though the influx at the time was occurring in the Greek islands, more than one thousand miles away. In early September, Denmark began taking out newspaper ads in Lebanon and Jordan warning would-be asylum-seekers not to come. And by November, the Danish government announced that it could no longer accept the modest share of one thousand refugees assigned to Denmark under an EU redistribution agreement, because Italy and Greece had lost control of their borders.

These developments culminated in late January of this year, when Rasmussen’s minister of integration, Inger Støjberg, a striking, red-headed forty-two-year-old who has come to represent the government’s aggressive anti-refugee policies, succeeded in pushing through parliament an “asylum austerity” law that has gained notoriety across Europe. The new law, which passed with support from the Social Democrats as well as the Danish People’s Party, permits police to strip-search asylum-seekers and confiscate their cash and most valuables above 10,000 Danish kroner (\$1,460) to pay for their accommodation; delays the opportunity to apply for family reunification by up to three years; forbids asylum-seekers from residing outside refugee centers, some of which are tent encampments; reduces the cash benefits they can receive; and makes it significantly harder to qualify for permanent residence. One aim, a Liberal MP explained to me, is simply to “make Denmark less attractive to foreigners.”

Danish hostility to refugees is particularly startling in Scandinavia, where there is a pronounced tradition of humanitarianism. Over the past decade, the Swedish government has opened its doors to hundreds of thousands of Iraqis and Syrians, despite growing social problems and an increasingly popular far-right party. But one of the things Danish leaders—and many Danes I spoke to—seem to fear most is turning into “another Sweden.” Anna Mee Allerslev, the top integration official for the city of Copenhagen, told me that the Danish capital, a Social Democratic stronghold with a large foreign-born population, has for years refused to take any refugees. (Under pressure from other municipalities, this policy is set to change in 2016.)

In part, the Danish approach has been driven by the country’s long experience with terrorism and jihadism. Nearly a decade before the Charlie Hebdo attacks in Paris in January 2015, and the coordinated terrorist attacks in Paris in November, the publication of the so-called Muhammad cartoons by the Danish newspaper Jyllands-Posten had already turned Denmark into a primary target for extremists. Initially driven by a group of Danish imams, outcry against the cartoons gave strength to several small but radical groups among the country’s 260,000 Muslims. These groups have been blamed for the unusually large number of Danes—perhaps as many as three hundred or more—who have gone to fight in Syria, including some who went before the rise of ISIS in 2013. “The Danish system has pretty much been blinking red since 2005,” Magnus Ranstorp, a counterterrorism expert who advises the PET, the Danish security and intelligence service, told me.

Since the publication of the Muhammad cartoons, the PET and other intelligence forces have disrupted numerous terrorist plots, some of them eerily foreshadowing what happened in Paris last year. In 2009, the Pakistani-American extremist David Headley, together with Laskar-e-Taiba, a Pakistani terrorist organization, devised a meticulous plan to storm the Jyllands-Posten

offices in Copenhagen and systematically kill all the journalists that could be found. Headley was arrested in the United States in October 2009, before any part of the plan was carried out; in 2013, he was sentenced by a US district court to thirty-five years in prison for his involvement in the Mumbai attacks of 2008.

In February of last year, just weeks after the Charlie Hebdo attacks, a young Danish-Palestinian man named Omar Abdel Hamid el-Hussein tried to shoot his way into the Copenhagen meeting of a free-speech group to which a Swedish cartoonist, known for his caricatures of Muhammad, had been invited. El-Hussein succeeded in killing a Danish filmmaker at the meeting before fleeing the scene; then, hours later, he killed a security guard at the city's main synagogue and was shot dead by police.

Yet many Danes I talked to are less concerned about terrorism than about the threat they see Muslims posing to their way of life. Though Muslims make up less than 5 percent of the population, there is growing evidence that many of the new arrivals fail to enter the workforce, are slow to learn Danish, and end up in high-crime immigrant neighborhoods where, while relying on extensive state handouts, they and their children are cut off from Danish society. In 2010, the Danish government introduced a “ghetto list” of such marginalized places with the goal of “reintegrating” them; the list now includes more than thirty neighborhoods.

Popular fears that the refugee crisis could overwhelm the Danish welfare state have sometimes surprised the country's own leadership. On December 3, in a major defeat for the government, a clear majority of Danes—53 percent—rejected a referendum on closer security cooperation with the European Union. Until now, Denmark has been only a partial EU member—for example, it does not belong to the euro and has not joined EU protocols on citizenship and legal affairs. In view of the growing threat of jihadism, both the government and the opposition Social Democrats hoped to integrate the country fully into European policing and counterterrorism efforts. But the “no” vote, which was supported by the Danish People's Party, was driven by fears that such a move could also give Brussels influence over Denmark's refugee and immigration policies.

The outcome of the referendum has ominous implications for the European Union at a time when emergency border controls in numerous countries—including Germany and Sweden as well as Denmark—have put in doubt the Schengen system of open borders inside the EU. In Denmark itself, the referendum has forced both the Liberals and the Social Democrats to continue moving closer to the populist right. In November, Martin Henriksen, the Danish People's Party spokesman on refugees and immigration, told *Politiken*, the country's leading newspaper, “There is a contest on to see who can match the Danish People's Party on immigration matters, and I hope that more parties will participate.”

2.

According to many Danes I met, the origins of Denmark's anti-immigration consensus can be traced to the national election of November 2001, two months after the September 11 attacks in the United States. At the time, the recently founded Danish People's Party was largely excluded from mainstream politics; the incumbent prime minister, who was a Social Democrat, famously

described the party as unfit to govern.

But during the 1990s, the country's Muslim population had nearly doubled to around 200,000 people, and in the 2001 campaign, immigration became a central theme. The Social Democrats suffered a devastating defeat and, for the first time since 1924, didn't control the most seats in parliament. Anders Fogh Rasmussen, the ambitious leader of the victorious Liberal Party (no relation to the current prime minister, Lars Løkke Rasmussen), made a historic decision to form a government with support from the Danish People's Party, which had come in third place—a far-right alliance that had never been tried in Scandinavia. It kept Fogh Rasmussen in power for three terms.

From an economic perspective, the government's embrace of the populist right was anomalous. With its unique combination of comprehensive welfare and a flexible labor market—known as flexicurity—Denmark has an efficient economy in which the rate of job turnover is one of the highest in Europe, yet almost 75 percent of working-age Danes are employed. At the same time, the country's extraordinary social benefits, such as long-term education, retraining, and free child care, are based on integration in the workforce. Yet many of the qualities about the Danish system that work so well for those born into it have made it particularly hard for outsiders to penetrate.

Denmark is a mostly low-lying country consisting of the Jutland Peninsula in the west, the large islands of Funen and Zealand in the east, and numerous smaller islands. (It also includes the island of Greenland, whose tiny population is largely Inuit.) The modern state emerged in the late nineteenth century, following a series of defeats by Bismarck's Germany in which it lost much of its territory and a significant part of its population. Several Danish writers have linked this founding trauma to a lasting national obsession with invasion and a continual need to assert *danskhed*, or Danishness.

Among other things, these preoccupations have given the Danish welfare system an unusually important part in shaping national identity. Visitors to Denmark will find the Danish flag on everything from public buses to butter wrappers; many of the country's defining institutions, from its universal secondary education (*Folkehøjskoler*—the People's High Schools) to the parliament (*Folketinget*—the People's House) to the Danish national church (*Folkekirken*—the People's Church) to the concept of democracy itself (*Folkestyret*—the Rule of the People) have been built to reinforce a strong sense of *folke*, the Danish people.

One result of this emphasis on cohesion is the striking contrast between how Danes view their fellow nationals and how they seem to view the outside world: in 1997, a study of racism in EU countries found Danes to be simultaneously among the most tolerant and also the most racist of any European population. "In the nationalist self-image, tolerance is seen as good," writes the Danish anthropologist Peter Hervik. "Yet...excessive tolerance is considered naive and counterproductive for sustaining Danish national identity."

According to Hervik, this paradox helps account for the rise of the Danish People's Party, or *Dansk Folkeparti*. Like its far-right counterparts in neighboring countries, the party drew on new anxieties about non-European immigrants and the growing influence of the EU. What made the

Danish People's Party particularly potent, however, was its robust defense of wealth redistribution and advanced welfare benefits for all Danes. "On a traditional left-right scheme they are very difficult to locate," former prime minister Fogh Rasmussen told me in Copenhagen. "They are tough on crime, tough on immigration, but on welfare policy, they are center left. Sometimes they even try to surpass the Social Democrats."

Beginning in 2002, the Fogh Rasmussen government passed a sweeping set of reforms to limit the flow of asylum-seekers. Among the most controversial were the so-called twenty-four-year rule, which required foreign-born spouses to be at least twenty-four years old to qualify for Danish citizenship, and a requirement that both spouses combined had spent more years living in Denmark than in any other country. Unprecedented in Europe, the new rules effectively ended immigrant marriages as a quick path to citizenship. At the same time, the government dramatically restricted the criteria under which a foreigner could qualify for refugee status.

To Fogh Rasmussen's critics, the measures were simply a way to gain the support of the Danish People's Party for his own political program. This included labor market reforms, such as tying social benefits more closely to active employment, and—most notably—a muscular new foreign policy. Departing from Denmark's traditional neutrality, the government joined with US troops in military interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq; Denmark has since taken part in the interventions in Libya and Syria as well. (In his official state portrait in the parliament, Fogh Rasmussen, who went on to become general secretary of NATO in 2009, is depicted with a Danish military plane swooping over a desolate Afghan landscape in the background.)

Yet the immigration overhaul also had strong foundations in the Liberal Party. In 1997, Bertel Haarder, a veteran Liberal politician and strategist, wrote an influential book called *Soft Cynicism*, which excoriated the Danish welfare system for creating, through excessive coddling, the very stigmatization of new arrivals to Denmark that it was ostensibly supposed to prevent. Haarder, who went on to become Fogh Rasmussen's minister of immigration, told me, "The Danes wanted to be soft and nice. And we turned proud immigrants into social welfare addicts. It wasn't their fault. It was our fault."

According to Haarder, who has returned to the Danish cabinet as culture minister in the current Liberal government, the refugees who have come to Denmark in recent years overwhelmingly lack the education and training needed to enter the country's advanced labor market. As Fogh Rasmussen's immigration minister, he sought to match the restrictions on asylum-seekers with expedited citizenship for qualified foreigners. But he was also known for his criticism of Muslims who wanted to assert their own traditions: "All this talk about equality of cultures and equality of religion is nonsense," he told a Danish newspaper in 2002. "The Danes have the right to make decisions in Denmark."

3.

Coming amid the Fogh Rasmussen government's rightward shift on immigration and its growing involvement in the "war on terror," the decision by the Danish paper *Jyllands-Posten* in September 2005 to publish caricatures of the Prophet Muhammad seemed to bring into the open an irresolvable conflict. In the decade since they appeared, the cartoons have been linked to the

torching of Western embassies, an unending series of terrorist attacks and assassination plots across Europe, and a sense, among many European intellectuals, that Western society is being cowed into a “tyranny of silence,” as Flemming Rose, the former culture editor of *Jyllands-Posten* who commissioned the cartoons and who now lives under constant police protection, has titled a recent book.¹ In his new study of French jihadism, *Terreur dans l’hexagone: Genèse du djihad français*, Gilles Kepel, the French scholar of Islam, suggests that the cartoons inspired an “international Islamic campaign against little Denmark” that became a crucial part of a broader redirection of jihadist ideology toward the West.

Flemming Rose, the editor who commissioned the cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad that were published by *Jyllands-Posten* in September 2005
Roald Als Flemming Rose, the editor who commissioned the cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad that were published by *Jyllands-Posten* in September 2005
And yet little about the original twelve cartoons could have foretold any of this. Traditionally based in Jutland, *Jyllands-Posten* is a center-right broadsheet that tends to draw readers from outside the capital; it was little known abroad before the cartoons appeared. Following reports that a Danish illustrator had refused to do drawings for a book about Muhammad, Rose invited a group of caricaturists to “draw Muhammad as you see him” to find out whether they were similarly inhibited (most of them weren’t). Some of the resulting drawings made fun of the newspaper itself for pursuing the idea; in the subsequent controversy, outrage was largely directed at just one of the cartoons, which depicted the Prophet wearing a lit bomb as a turban. Even then, the uproar began only months later, after the Danish prime minister refused a request from diplomats of Muslim nations for a meeting about the cartoons. “I thought it was a trap,” Fogh Rasmussen told me. At the same time, several secular Arab regimes, including Mubarak’s Egypt and Assad’s Syria, concluded that encouraging vigorous opposition to the cartoons could shore up their Islamist credentials.

Once angry mass protests had finally been stirred up throughout the Muslim world in late January and early February 2006—including in Egypt, Iran, Sudan, Syria, Lebanon, and Afghanistan—the crisis quickly took on a logic that had never existed at the outset: attacks against Western targets led many newspapers in the West to republish the cartoons in solidarity, which in turn provoked more attacks. By the time of the Charlie Hebdo massacre in early 2015, there was a real question of what Timothy Garton Ash, in these pages, has called “the assassin’s veto,” the fact that some newspapers might self-censor simply to avoid further violence.² *Jyllands-Posten* itself, declaring in an editorial in January 2015 that “violence works,” no longer republishes the cartoons.

Lost in the geopolitical fallout, however, was the debate over Danish values that the cartoons provoked in Denmark itself. Under the influence of the nineteenth-century state builder N.F.S. Grundtvig, the founders of modern Denmark embraced free speech as a core value. It was the first country in Europe to legalize pornography in the 1960s, and Danes have long taken a special pleasure in cheerful, in-your-face irreverence. In December *Politiken* published a cartoon showing the integration minister Inger Støjberg gleefully lighting candles on a Christmas tree that has a dead asylum-seeker as an ornament (see illustration on page 34).

Explaining his own reasons for commissioning the Muhammad cartoons, Flemming Rose has written of the need to assert the all-important right to “sarcasm, mockery, and ridicule” against

an encroaching totalitarianism emanating from the Islamic world. He also makes clear that Muslims or any other minority group should be equally free to express their own views in the strongest terms. (Rose told me that he differs strongly with Geert Wilders, the prominent Dutch populist and critic of Islam. “He wants to ban the Koran. I say absolutely you can’t do that.”)

But Rose’s views about speech have been actively contested. Bo Lidegaard, the editor of Politiken, the traditional paper of the Copenhagen establishment, was Fogh Rasmussen’s national security adviser at the time of the cartoons crisis. Politiken, which shares the same owner and inhabits the same high-security building as Jyllands-Posten, has long been critical of the publication of the cartoons by its sister paper, and Lidegaard was blunt. “It was a complete lack of understanding of what a minority religion holds holy,” he told me. “It also seemed to be mobbing a minority, by saying, in their faces, ‘We don’t respect your religion! You may think this is offensive but we don’t think its offensive, so you’re dumb!’”

Lidegaard, who has written several books about Danish history, argues that the cartoons’ defenders misread the free speech tradition. He cites Denmark’s law against “threatening, insulting, or degrading” speech, which was passed by the Danish parliament in 1939, largely to protect the country’s Jewish minority from anti-Semitism. Remarkably, it remained in force—and was even invoked—during the Nazi occupation of Denmark. According to Lidegaard, it is a powerful recognition that upholding equal rights and tolerance for all can sometimes trump the need to protect extreme forms of speech.

Today, however, few Danes seem concerned about offending Muslims. Neils-Erik Hansen, a leading Danish human rights lawyer, told me that the anti-hate speech law has rarely been used in recent years, and that in several cases of hate crimes against Muslim immigrants—a newspaper boy was killed after being called “Paki swine”—the authorities have shown little interest in invoking the statute. During the cartoon affair, Lidegaard himself was part of the foreign policy team that advised Prime Minister Fogh Rasmussen not to have talks with Muslim representatives. When I asked him about this, he acknowledged, “The government made some mistakes.”

A playground in Mjølnerparken, a housing project largely for immigrants in north Copenhagen known for gang activity and high unemployment
Claus Bech/Scanpix
A playground in Mjølnerparken, a housing project largely for immigrants in north Copenhagen known for gang activity and high unemployment

4.

Last fall I visited Mjølnerparken, an overwhelmingly immigrant “ghetto” in north Copenhagen where Omar el-Hussein, the shooter in last year’s attack against the free speech meeting, had come from. Many of the youth there belong to gangs and have been in and out of prison; the police make frequent raids to search for guns. Upward of half the adults, many of them of Palestinian and Somali origin, are unemployed. Eskild Pedersen, a veteran social worker who almost single-handedly looks after the neighborhood, told me that hardly any ethnic Danes set foot there. This was Denmark at its worst.

And yet there was little about the tidy red-brick housing blocks or the facing playground, apart from a modest amount of graffiti, that suggested dereliction or squalor. Pedersen seems to have the trust of many of his charges. He had just settled a complicated honor dispute between two Somali families; and as we spoke, a Palestinian girl, not more than six, interrupted to tell him about a domestic violence problem in her household. He has also found part-time jobs for several gang members, and helped one of them return to school; one young man of Palestinian background gave me a tour of the auto body shop he had started in a nearby garage. (When a delegation of Egyptians was recently shown the neighborhood, the visitors asked, “Where is the ghetto?”)

But in Denmark, the police force is regarded as an extension of the social welfare system and Pedersen also makes it clear, to the young men especially, that he works closely with law enforcement. As last year’s shooting reveals, it doesn’t always work. But city officials in Copenhagen and in Aarhus, Denmark’s second city, describe some cases in which local authorities, drawing on daily contact with young and often disaffected Muslims, including jihadists returning from Syria, have been able to preempt extremist behavior.

Across Europe in recent weeks, shock over the arrival of hundreds of thousands of refugees has quickly been overtaken by alarm over the challenge they are now seen as posing to social stability. Several countries that have been welcoming to large numbers of Syrian and other asylum-seekers are confronting growing revolts from the far right—along with anti-refugee violence. In December *Die Zeit*, the German newsweekly, reported that more than two hundred German refugee shelters have been attacked or firebombed over the past year; in late January, Swedish police intercepted a gang of dozens of masked men who were seeking to attack migrants near Stockholm’s central station. Since the beginning of 2016, two notorious far-right, anti-immigration parties—the Sweden Democrats in Sweden and Geert Wilders’s Party for Freedom in the Netherlands—became more popular than the ruling parties in their respective countries, despite being excluded from government.

Nor is the backlash limited to the right. Since the New Year’s attacks by migrants against women in Cologne, conservative opponents of German Chancellor Angela Merkel’s refugee policy have been joined by feminists and members of the left, who have denounced the “patriarchal” traditions of the “Arab man.” Recent data on the anti-immigrant Sweden Democrats, who in January were polling at 28 percent of the popular vote, shows that the party’s steady rise during Sweden’s decade of open-asylum policies has closely tracked a parallel decline in support for the center-left Social Democrats, the traditional force in Swedish politics. Confronted with such a populist surge, the Swedish government announced on January 27 that it plans to deport as many as 80,000 asylum-seekers.

As the advanced democracies of Europe reconsider their physical and psychological borders with the Muslim world, the restrictive Danish approach to immigration and the welfare state offers a stark alternative. Brought into the political process far earlier than its counterparts elsewhere, the Danish People’s Party is a good deal more moderate than, say, the National Front in France; but it also has succeeded in shaping, to an extraordinary degree, the Danish immigration debate. In recent weeks, Denmark’s Social Democrats have struggled to define their own immigration

policy amid sagging support. When I asked former prime minister Fogh Rasmussen about how the Danish People's Party differed from the others on asylum-seekers and refugees, he said, "You have differences when it comes to rhetoric, but these are nuances."

In January, more than 60,000 refugees arrived in Europe, a thirty-five-fold increase from the same month last year; but in Denmark, according to Politiken, the number of asylum-seekers has steadily declined since the start of the year, with only 1,400 seeking to enter the country. In limiting the kind of social turmoil now playing out in Germany, Sweden, and France, the Danes may yet come through the current crisis a more stable, united, and open society than any of their neighbors. But they may also have shown that this openness extends no farther than the Danish frontier.

1.

A revised paperback edition of *Tyranny of Silence* will be published by the Cato Institute in September.

2.

See "Defying the Assassin's Veto," *The New York Review*, February 19, 2015.