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

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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

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).

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