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## 5

# The Nordic Welfare Model

Mary Hilson

The five Nordic countries are often imagined as a unit, especially by the outside world. As the final chapter in this volume discusses, external stereotypes of the Nordic region have been crucial in shaping the internal self-images found in the Nordic countries. Moreover, these external stereotypes have often – though never exclusively – been positive, or even utopian. From the 1930s, foreign observers praised the Nordic region as a stable and democratic ‘middle way’ between the extremes of capitalism and communism, while from the 1980s and especially since the turn of the millennium it has become common to refer to the Scandinavian or Nordic model (Jalava and Stråth 2017). The exact meanings of the term Nordic model are disputed. Most scholars would probably agree, however, that it refers to the similarities in social and political development in the Nordic countries, including, among other things, the stability of parliamentary democracy; the preference for consensual solutions to social conflicts, especially in the labour market; and the universal, tax-funded welfare state (Hilson 2008).

This chapter focuses on the welfare state as perhaps the best-known feature of the so-called Nordic or Scandinavian model. The organisation of the chapter is inspired by the large Nordic research network on the Nordic welfare states, NordWel, which operated in 2007–14 under the title ‘The Nordic Welfare State: Historical Foundations and Future Challenges’ (NordWel 2018). In the first section, I briefly examine some of the attempts to classify different welfare regimes, and ask to what extent it is justifiable to speak of a distinctive Nordic welfare model. In the second part of the chapter, I consider the historical foundations of the Nordic welfare states and the main influences on their formation. Finally, I examine briefly some of the future challenges for the Nordic welfare states.

## Welfare Models

The welfare state is not a Nordic invention. All societies have had to make some provision to take care of individuals who for reasons such as youth, old age, illness or accident are temporarily or permanently prevented from looking after themselves. Different societies have also developed more or less elaborate schemes by which individuals can either make provision for themselves (insurance against future ill luck) or others (for example religious codes on almsgiving). In the Nordic countries, like elsewhere in Europe, until the end of the nineteenth century welfare was provided through a combination of informal networks of family and neighbourhood, private philanthropy and locally administered Poor Laws (Christiansen and Markkola 2006, 15).

This changed from the late nineteenth century, as states began to take a greater interest in the welfare of their citizens. Their interest was triggered by several factors. First, the much greater scale of poverty and hardship engendered by urbanisation and industrial capitalism placed older poor relief schemes under great pressure. It also triggered fears of the consequences of ignoring such problems, whether this was of social unrest and potential revolution, or of the decline in the health and vigour of populations required to undertake productive work and to fight for their states. Second, democratic reforms and the mass mobilisation of new political parties representing the working classes created new political demands for welfare reforms, though it was often other parties that actually passed the necessary legislation. It should be noted, moreover, that although many of the European welfare states trace their earliest roots to the legislation on old-age pensions and other forms of social insurance passed during the two decades or so before the First World War, these provisions remained very limited. They were often means-tested and were intended to provide only the very basic minimum of assistance.

It is thus not until the mid-twentieth century that we can really begin to speak of welfare *states* as such, with the emergence of systems where the state became a major or even the main provider of welfare. Such arrangements were usually seen as part of broader socio-economic policy, a 'virtuous circle' where a healthy and well-educated workforce would contribute to increases in productivity, which would in turn stimulate economic growth and lead to greater welfare (Kettunen 2011). Here, the Nordic countries seem to stand out among other European countries for the comprehensiveness of their welfare systems and the extent to which welfare was provided by public institutions financed out of general taxation. But although

the nation state came to be the natural frame for the provision of welfare, its development was a transnational phenomenon. National debates on welfare legislation were informed by the transnational exchange of ideas, and especially the experiences of advanced industrial countries such as Germany and Britain. Notable examples include the social insurance legislation introduced by Bismarck in Germany during the 1880s, and the proposals for social security made in William Beveridge's 1942 report in the UK, which was widely discussed in Sweden and Norway (Åmark 2005; Kettunen 2011). Transnational exchange was also important within the Nordic region.

Although shaped by transnational events and debates that were broadly similar, national welfare states did not develop identically, but were also shaped by what scholars refer to as 'path dependencies', which is the legacy of nationally specific historical developments, as well as by specific political choices (Petersen and Åmark 2006). An extensive body of scholarship in the comparative social sciences has shown how welfare states differ, for example according to whether they provide only a basic safety net distributed through means-testing, or universal services available to all citizens regardless of need. In turn this is linked to how welfare is financed – whether through general taxation, compulsory social insurance or private philanthropy – and the extent to which the state has a role as the main provider of welfare services such as health-care and education, or whether it shares these responsibilities with other institutions. Many such typologies are possible, but probably the most influential is that developed by sociologist Gøsta Esping-Andersen (1990). According to Esping-Andersen, welfare states differed from each other in the extent to which they 'decommodified' social relations; in other words, the extent to which individuals were forced to rely on the market to meet their material needs (through selling their labour and buying goods and services), or were entitled to receive benefits and transfers as citizens. In turn, this meant that the welfare states were important in the ordering of social relations, with different types of welfare systems producing more, or less, equal societies.

Comparative analysis of data from 18 welfare states led Esping-Andersen to develop his famous 'three worlds' of welfare capitalism. In the liberal model, associated with the Anglo-Saxon countries, there was minimum provision of means-tested benefits, and social security systems thus tended to reproduce social stratification. In the corporatist or conservative model, associated with Central European welfare states, rights to welfare were linked to the status of individuals within the labour market through compulsory insurance schemes, and thus tended to reproduce

existing social hierarchies. Finally, in the social-democratic welfare model, associated with the Nordic countries, social relations were highly decommodified; moreover, because benefits were universal, this reliance on the state rather than the market for welfare services also extended to the middle classes, so these states tended to undermine social hierarchies and produce more equal societies (Esping-Andersen 1990).

It must be noted that all attempts to classify welfare states deal in ideal types, and no welfare state can be expected to conform perfectly to the typology. Thus, even if the Nordic welfare states are considered ideal types in their provision of public sector, universal, tax-financed welfare, none of these characteristics is met entirely. The family continued to have a strong role in all of the Nordic welfare states, for example in the care of very young children or elderly parents. Nor were all benefits and services provided universally (Edling 2006). Klas Åmark's comparative history of the welfare state in Norway and Sweden found that welfare benefits tended to be directed towards male wage-earners in permanent full-time employment; other groups such as women and self-employed small farmers were much less well provided for (Åmark 2005). Esping-Andersen has been criticised for overlooking important aspects of the welfare state in his typology, not least the impact of welfare policies on gender relations (Emmenegger et al. 2015). The classification can also be criticised for emphasising social insurance and cash benefits as the main ways in which the welfare state functions, ignoring the goods and services that are provided in kind. The UK's National Health Service (NHS) is after all an example of the universal welfare state, delivering free healthcare to all citizens according to need.

Moreover, the development of the Nordic welfare states was uneven. Denmark and Sweden must be regarded as Nordic pioneers in the adoption of welfare reforms, especially neutral Sweden because of the exceptionally strong position of its economy after the Second World War. Norway, Finland and especially Iceland were less prosperous and remained largely agrarian societies until well into the post-war period, so that the major expansion of the welfare state did not take place until the 1970s. For this reason, welfare state historians have coined the phrase 'one model – five exceptions' to describe the Nordic welfare states (Christiansen and Markkola 2006). Nonetheless, there is a broad consensus that the Nordic welfare states do cluster as a group with certain shared characteristics (Hilson 2008). The idea of a 'Nordic model' of welfare may be understood in two ways. On the one hand, it functions as a heuristic device to shape comparative analyses of the welfare state and its development in the Nordic region. On the other, it has often served as a

vision and a source of identity, shaping the exchange of policy ideas and the development of welfare legislation across the region.

## Historical Roots of the Nordic Welfare States

What then is distinctive about the Nordic welfare states as they have developed in the twentieth century, in contrast to welfare regimes in other parts of Europe and beyond? The constraints of space mean that it is not possible to offer a comprehensive survey of the development of social policy in five countries, so instead the chapter explores two inter-related themes: first, the role of social democracy and other ideological influences; second, the importance of the state.

Is the Nordic model a social democratic model? The Swedish Social Democratic Party (SAP) claimed that it was, when in 2011 their application for copyright of the term was approved by the Swedish Patents Agency (Marklund 2013, 280). The designation carries two slightly different meanings. On the one hand, it reflects the notion that social democratic parties were the principal architects of the welfare state, through their influence on legislation and policy while in government. On the other hand, in Esping-Andersen's (1990) typology the designation social democratic refers more broadly to the impact of welfare policies on the Nordic societies, above all the historically relatively high levels of social equality. There are various ways to calculate inequality and relative poverty, for example based on the share of income or wealth concentrated in the highest or lowest income groups, but on most measurements the Nordic countries continue to be characterised as relatively equal societies (World Inequality Database 2018). In 2016 inequality in the five Nordic countries remained lower than that in the UK, the US and the OECD average, measured by the Gini index (OECD 2018). With the exception of Iceland, however, inequality had also increased during the decade since 2007, especially in Sweden (OECD 2016). According to Jørgen Goul Andersen, rising inequality in the Danish case could be attributed to changing policies and especially reforms that had made the tax system less progressive and redistributive (Goul Andersen 2018).

Historian Francis Sejersted (2011) referred to a 'social democratic order' in Norway and Sweden in the decades from the 1930s to the 1960s. The Nordic social democratic parties abandoned the Marxist-inspired commitment to class struggle relatively early and embraced instead a vision of modernity that included, among other things, the belief that individual freedom rested on material security; tolerance of

capitalist enterprise as a means to provide that security, especially in the export sector; trust in technocratic solutions to economic and other problems; and the coupling of social democracy with national integration (Sejersted 2011).

In Sweden, the social democratic vision of the welfare state was encapsulated in the concept of the *folkhem* or people's home, as a metaphor for the new society. The term was first used by SAP leader Per Albin Hansson (Prime Minister 1932–46) in a speech to the *riksdag* (the Swedish parliament) in 1928, though it was actually borrowed from right-wing political discourses in the early twentieth century (Dahlqvist 2002). The *folkhem* expressed the vision of a welfare state that took care of its citizens from the cradle to the grave, and where individuals could expect to be treated equally regardless of social status, and kindly without the stigma that had been attached to earlier recipients of welfare benefits. The *folkhem* was to be built not just metaphorically, however, but also literally in bricks and mortar, through the state's investment in housing and social institutions that were designed to reflect expert opinion with regard to hygiene and rationality (Saarikangas 1997). The culmination of this thinking came with the Swedish government's famous 'Miljonprogram' that saw the construction of 1 million flats between 1965 and 1975 in new suburban developments (Östberg and Andersson 2013, 36–40).

Many of the leading politicians associated with welfare reforms in the Nordic countries were indeed Social Democrats: Per Albin Hansson, Gunnar and Alva Myrdal in Sweden; K.K Steincke and Thorvald Stauning in Denmark; Einar Gerhardsen and Johan Nygaardsvold in Norway. For some of them, like Sweden's Gustav Möller, their visions of a humane welfare system were shaped by their own formative experiences of poverty and hardship (Tilton 1991). But the Nordic welfare states were not exclusively the products of strong social democratic parties. First, the model does not hold true for Finland and Iceland, where communist parties had a much larger share of the working-class vote, and where different political models thus prevailed (Jonsson 2001; Kettunen 2001). In Iceland the dominant party of government was the centre-right Independence Party, while in Finland governments formed of broad political coalitions were more common. Second, even in Denmark, Norway and Sweden, social democratic parties were often obliged to form agreements with or govern in coalition with bourgeois parties. Indeed, it was only after the negotiation of red-green – so-called because they were negotiated between social democratic (red) and farmers' (green) parties – political compromises in the 1930s that they were able to gain parliamentary majorities. The

passing of welfare legislation always rested on a process of compromise, for example in 1958 when the Swedish supplementary pension reform was agreed in the *riksdag* (Hilson 2008, 43–4).

## Lutheranism and the Nordic Welfare State

A ‘historical turn’ in welfare state scholarship has drawn attention to other ideological influences on the development of the Nordic welfare states, and especially to the ideas that shaped the trajectories of the Nordic welfare states before the influence of social democracy. For example, Peter Baldwin (1989) has emphasised the role of agrarian liberal parties in securing welfare reforms during the 1890s and 1900s in Denmark and Sweden, and in doing so establishing the principle of (partial) universalism, which was to endure in later legislation.

Scholars have also debated the influence of religious cultures on the development of welfare states, noting of course that the Nordic countries are distinguished for being largely mono-confessional and dominated by Lutheran Protestantism (Markkola and Naumann 2014).<sup>1</sup> The Reformation created new understandings of poverty and established the principle that poor relief was a matter for collective responsibility. The evolution of poor relief systems after the Reformation was of course a long and complex process, but historians of Denmark in particular have paid increased attention to the influence of a specifically Lutheran morality through the early modern poor laws into the first universal welfare reforms of the late nineteenth century (Koefoed 2017; Petersen 2016, 2018).

An important legacy of the Reformation was the close relationship established between the state and the reformed Protestant church (Knudsen 2000). Responsibility for the poor laws rested with the state, but relief was administered through the local parish structures, with pastors inevitably playing an important role in this process (Markkola 2011; Koefoed 2017). It cannot be assumed that there was an unbroken continuity between the Reformation in the sixteenth century and the emergence of the modern welfare states in the twentieth. But it is often suggested that the general perception of the state as a largely benign institution, and a broad tolerance of its interventions in citizens’ lives, is a peculiar characteristic of the Nordic societies that owes something to the Lutheran influence (Sørensen and Stråth 1997). Moreover, the Lutheran church has also been cited as an important influence on the curbing of corruption in the Nordic states (Frisk Jensen 2018), the legacy of which has been relatively high levels of trust in the effectiveness of public



institutions. Some social scientists have also argued more broadly for the importance of social capital and trust at the micro level in explaining support for the universal welfare state in Scandinavian societies (Svendsen and Svendsen 2016), though this is of course extremely difficult to measure accurately in a comparative context. During the twentieth century, representatives of the state Lutheran Churches were often uneasy about or even openly critical of the welfare state, which they feared would undermine traditional moralities and family ties (Markkola 2014).

## Critiques of the Welfare State

From the 1960s, new criticisms of the welfare state started to emerge. On the political left, a new generation of activists radicalised by the upheavals of 1968 criticised welfare policy for falling short in its aims to improve equality and undermine class differences, while those on the right argued that the welfare state stifled individual choice and entrepreneurship, ‘crowding out’ resources from the private sector (Einhorn and Logue 2003, 305–24). The immediate consequences of this were seen in the emergence of new political parties campaigning against high taxes and bureaucracy in the early 1970s (Arter 2006, 89), which foreshadowed the rising influence of neoliberalism in the 1990s and after.

Inspired partly by Michel Foucault’s theorisation of the operation of power (Gould 2001), from the 1970s feminist scholars turned their critical attention to the welfare state, examining its role in the creation and consolidation of social norms (Hirdman 1989; Åmark 2004). The welfare state had undoubtedly helped improve the lives of women as well as men, but it needed to go further in reforming gender relations, in particular through interventions in family life such as support for parental leave and collective childcare. Such questions had been discussed earlier – for example by Swedish Social Democrat Alva Myrdal during the 1930s – but it was only from the 1970s that there was a substantial increase in support for the so-called ‘dual breadwinner’ model, that is families where both parents undertake paid work outside the home following the birth of children. There were also differences between the Nordic welfare states, with gender differences remaining stronger far later in Norway for example (Sainsbury 2001). It has often been noted that the Nordic labour markets remained highly gender segregated, so that in many cases women moved from unpaid care work in the home to paid care work outside it, in welfare state institutions such as nurseries and care homes for the elderly (Lewis and Åström 1992).

During the 1990s another historical aspect of the welfare state attracted public attention, namely the practice of compulsory eugenic sterilisation. Eugenics originated in nineteenth-century evolutionary science and was widely debated across Europe and North America during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Eugenics, or ‘race hygiene’, referred to the study of the influence of hereditary factors on the population and interventions to prevent the transmission of what were regarded as undesirable hereditary disorders between generations, with the aim of improving the quality of the population as a whole (Koch 2010, 34–9). There were two waves of eugenic thought: ‘main-line eugenics’ from the late nineteenth century was based on the idea of racial difference; ‘reform eugenics’ during the 1930s was informed by new thinking about genetics (Roll-Hansen 2005).

In the Nordic countries, discussions of the ‘social question’ in the early twentieth century were connected to fears about population decline due to falling birth rates. What was unusual about the Nordic countries in an international context was that these ideas resulted in legislation allowing the compulsory sterilisation of individuals for whom reproduction was deemed undesirable, such as those with hereditary mental or physical disorders (Broberg and Roll-Hansen 2005). These groups were also prevented from marrying. Estimates of the numbers affected by these policies vary, but sterilisations were carried out on tens of thousands of individuals across the region between the 1930s and the 1960s (Roll-Hansen 2005, 263). Although Nordic eugenics legislation was not specifically based on the pseudo-scientific racial theories associated with Nazi Germany, certain minority groups such as travellers were nonetheless targeted, because they were perceived to deviate from desirable norms of behaviour for ‘productive’ members of society (Spektorowski and Mizrahi 2004; Broberg and Tydén 2005, 124–30). It should also be noted that women were significantly over-represented in the numbers sterilised (Runcis 1998, 277). Eugenic sterilisation was abandoned in all the Nordic countries during the 1970s, but the issue became headline news in Sweden in the summer of 1997, leading to public enquiries and the adoption of compensation schemes for the victims of eugenic sterilisation (Broberg and Tydén 1998).

## The Future of the Nordic Welfare States

The early 1990s was a difficult period for the welfare state; one might even say a crisis. Several developments combined simultaneously. The

fall of the Soviet Union placed neoliberalism in the ascendancy: across the world politicians referred to the need to roll back the state, tackle welfare dependency and introduce market reforms into public institutions. In Sweden and Finland, the effects of this paradigmatic shift were exacerbated by a very severe recession during the early 1990s, and in 1991 a new bourgeois government took office in Sweden on a platform of welfare retrenchment (Timonen 2003). This shift did not come out of the blue of course; as noted above, it marked the culmination of a political critique of the public sector that had been developing since the 1970s. But longer-term challenges were also mounting, not least the demographic problems – faced by societies across Europe – of an ageing population and rising dependency ratios (see Sejersted 2011, 388–430).

What was remarkable, however, was not the demise of the Nordic welfare model that some had predicted, but its apparent resilience. At the turn of the new millennium, social scientists largely concurred that the twin challenges of globalisation and European integration had not significantly undermined the distinctiveness of the Nordic welfare states in a European context (Kautto et al. 2001; Kuhnle 2000). Popular support for the welfare state remained high, and political parties on both right and left presented themselves as the defenders of the unique Nordic welfare systems. Historian Pauli Kettunen (2011) has noted the paradox of the Nordic model in current debates: on the one hand, it requires defending against the threats of globalisation; on the other, it also offers the key to successful competition in a globalised world, underpinned by global league tables indicating the success of the Nordic countries in various criteria. An exception was perhaps Iceland, where politicians embraced an extreme version of neoliberal speculative capitalism during the early 2000s, but returned to elements of a more recognisable Nordic welfare model after the crash in 2008 (Ólafsson 2011).

There seems little doubt that the welfare state is now established as an essential element of the regional and national brand in the Nordic countries (Marklund 2016). After the turn of the millennium, and especially following the global financial crisis which began in 2008, international attention once more focused on the Nordic countries, with *The Economist* famously proclaiming the region to be ‘the next super-model’ in 2013 (*The Economist* 2013). Nonetheless, the discourse of the welfare state has changed fundamentally. Foreign politicians now look to the Nordic countries not only as an example of social-democratic paradise (or dystopia), but also for examples of how to successfully introduce market reforms and competition into the provision of services such as healthcare and education (Hoctor 2017). In societies which are by any

measure prosperous, welfare is no longer merely a matter of material security but also of well-being, where the different Nordic countries compete with each other for the accolade of 'world's happiest nation', but at the same time publicly debate concerns about rising levels of anxiety and stress.

Two challenges seemed to be especially prominent in 2019. The first concerns transnational mobility and citizenship. Who is the welfare state for? Mass immigration might logically seem to provide a potential solution to the challenge of an ageing indigenous population, but it is rarely regarded as such. Instead, in common with the rest of Europe, the Nordic countries have seen a steady rise in support for populist parties campaigning on a platform of 'welfare chauvinism' and nativism (Jungar and Jupskås 2014). These parties argue that access to the welfare state should be restricted to those holding full citizenship, which is moreover increasingly likely to be conceived in terms of cultural exclusivity.

A second challenge is the prospect of environmental crisis and responses to it. During the post-war period the welfare state was based on growing material prosperity and rising consumption (Andersson 2003), which was in turn based on the exploitation of natural resources, especially cheap energy. The first major challenge to the expansion of the welfare state came with the oil crisis of the early 1970s. Norway was exceptional in this respect, where the discovery of rich oil resources in the North Sea contributed to the country's exceptionally high levels of prosperity and welfare (Halvorsen and Stjernø 2008, 147–50). But it is also widely agreed that this is not sustainable in the long term. A major challenge for all the Nordic countries will be the need to adapt economies and societies based largely on fossil fuels, while also trying to maintain the high standards of living associated with the Nordic welfare model.

Will there continue to be a Nordic welfare model? The term is used to refer to common patterns in the development of social policies in the Nordic countries during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries – and even before – and the outcomes of these policies measured by social indicators such as equality. The Nordic countries are certainly not identical, whether in social policy or in any other field, but there do seem to be enough similarities between them to warrant analysis of them as a distinctive group in a European or global context. However, two observations may be made in conclusion. First, there was never a coherent blueprint for the development of the Nordic welfare states; as in other countries, social policy was formed piecemeal through a constant process of negotiation, conflict and compromise. Second, the Nordic welfare states are not, nor have they ever been, static constructions. The

meanings of welfare and the policies needed to achieve it will doubtless continue to be a topic of heated debate for many years to come in the Nordic countries as in other societies.

## Note

1. There are historical religious minorities in Norden, including small Jewish and Catholic communities, followers of the Orthodox Church in Finland and indigenous Sami religions, for example. From the eighteenth century the monopoly of the state Lutheran churches was challenged by pietism, with different consequences across the region. From the late twentieth century other religions such as Islam have also become more prominent. However, it would be hard to deny that at least until then the Nordic societies were religiously homogeneous to a much greater degree than most of the rest of Europe.

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