A Warning From Denmark

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Since George W. Bush has put Social Security reform on his political agenda, it may be that immigration is now the third rail of politics. Before it becomes a subject that cannot be rationally debated, it is useful to take a good look at Denmark and the revealing report by Henrik Bering recently published in the Heritage Foundation's Policy Review.
The Danes shocked the world last September 28 when, rejecting the urging of all their political and media leaders, they voted decisively against participation in the new European currency called the euro. It now appears, according to Bering, that another reason for the euro's defeat was fears about immigration, and thereby lies a tale worth repeating.

Denmark has been in the forefront of European efforts to encourage easy immigration and integration of immigrants with the native-born population. Denmark spends one percent of its GNP on foreign aid, the highest per capita in the world.

Denmark's laws spell out generous rights for immigrants. A foreigner admitted to Denmark automatically qualifies for social benefits including free health care, schooling, job training, and an apartment within three months of his acceptance.

The Danish liberals romanticized the immigrants as innocent Third World victims of Western exploitation, people who were more in touch with nature and an understanding of life. The left propagandized the notion that people from different parts of the globe could be transplanted and assimilated into a multicultural Danish society.

In addition to fuzzy idealism, there was a practical side to this easy immigration policy. The Danish birth rate is too low to provide sufficient workers to finance the social benefits of the welfare state. The need for taxes to support the graying population demanded an influx of younger workers.

"Guest workers" started coming in the 1960s, especially from Turkey, Pakistan and the Middle East. And they kept coming; today the foreigners number about 7 percent of Denmark's population.

Conventional Danish wisdom through the 1980s was that these immigrants would be assimilated. Surprise, surprise, multiculturalism bred anger and resentment rather than integration.

Those who warned about culture clashes were ignored or called nasty names like racist or xenophobic. Today, the failure of the immigration policies is so obvious that critical reports have been published by mainstream foundations and agencies. In the middle of the euro campaign last year, the Social Democratic interior minister Karen Jespersen, a former 1960s radical, suddenly said that she "did not wish to live in" a multicultural nation "where the cultures were considered equal." She suggested isolating refugees with criminal records on a "deserted island."

Those words caused an international uproar, with spokesmen in other countries accusing her of "racially motivated ideas" and darkly threatening international opprobrium. However, few could dispute the problems caused by the refugees.

Denmark's liberal refugee policy, which grants entry to anyone who requests asylum at the border, has become an easy target for members of organized crime from the former Soviet Union, especially

Azerbaijan, Armenia and Ukraine. These gangsters have no intention of becoming Danish; they prey on the local population and send huge parcels of stolen goods back to their home countries.

But it was Jespersen's statement that she doesn't want to live in a multicultural state where cultures are deemed equal that struck at a favorite fetish of modern liberals. She was reacting to demands from militant Muslims that they introduce key elements of Islamic law into Danish law, including the death penalty and even mutilation.

And that's not all. A lifelong women's rights activist, Jespersen refuses to recognize as "equal" the Muslim immigrants' practices of denying women access to the labor market, denying them the right to divorce, and subjecting them to arranged marriages.

The pro-immigration Danish politicians mistakenly assumed that, after a generation, the children of the newcomers would marry Danish girls and be integrated into the society. That just didn't happen.

It is estimated that 95 percent of Turks, even in the third generation, still import Turkish wives and even feel an obligation to import their relatives through arranged marriages. The result is a new underclass of people of different appearance and language.

When a ghetto of unassimilated foreigners reaches a certain point, the Danes move elsewhere to escape the problems in the local schools. Americans would understand this phenomenon as "white flight."

Bering describes the financial costs of immigration and the failure of the immigrants to integrate as "staggeringly expensive." Four percent of the population is now costing 34 percent of the Danish social budget, and elderly Danes who paid a lifetime of the highest taxes in the world are being squeezed out of the medical and other benefits they expected.

There is something rotten in Denmark. America should make sure that we don't make the same mistakes, either at home or in "nation-building" in other lands.