

Book Review: The Nordic Models in Political Science: Challenged, but Still Viable? edited by Oddbjørn Knutsen

In The Nordic Models in Political Science: Challenged, but Still Viable?, editor Oddbjørn Knutsen and contributors provide a useful update on the current state of the 'Nordic models'. This book is a timely reminder that alternative models of governance exist and will nourish debates about the UK's future following the Brexit vote to leave the European Union. 'Where do we go from here?' is a question on many people's minds, and exploring the 'Nordic models' is not a bad place to start, recommends Mike Pym.

The Nordic Models in Political Science: Challenged, but Still Viable? Oddbjørn Knutsen (ed.). Fagbokforlaget. 2017.

Find this book: 

The Nordic countries have often been perceived as having a utopian appeal, combining large, supportive states with high participation rates, levels of equality and educational standards as well as a commitment to peaceful progress. Yet, simultaneously viewed as expensive to visit and too liberal for some, they seem to be an anomaly that will inevitably succumb to the international forces with which other nations have grudgingly come to terms. However, such a narrow perspective on the Nordic countries ignores their internal variation and importance as an alternative to parochial views about the way the nation state and government should operate.

This edited collection has been written as a general text for degree-level students and others with an interest in the field. Oddbjørn Knutsen intends the book as a successor to Knut Heidar's 2004 book *Nordic Politics: Comparative Perspectives*, but it also usefully updates Mary Hilson's historical text *The Nordic Model: Scandinavia since 1945*, which might be more familiar to UK students. Exploring the history, political and administrative arrangements of other countries enables reflection on one's own society, so the book makes useful reading for anyone interested in challenging their own assumptions, and it greatly benefits from comparative data that supports many of the arguments.

Knutsen, Professor of Political Science at the University of Oslo, edits contributions from a number of distinguished academics into a comprehensive, readable and fascinating exploration of the distinctive traits of the five Nordic countries. These comprise Scandinavia (Sweden, Denmark and Norway), Finland and Iceland, whose histories, whilst diverse, are interrelated enough to be considered a discrete bloc. The volume's objective is to examine the variation within the 'Nordic model' and to consider the degree to which Nordic countries have been influenced by the forces that have generated a degree of convergence in other Western states (13).

The difficulty of a book like this is how to identify its essence from amongst the wide-ranging thoughts and debates about how historical developments have contributed to the nations that we observe today. The *culture* of Nordic countries and the *relationship* between the individual and the state seem to be two common and uniting themes that touch upon all areas of discussion in the book and provide a handy lens for its examination.

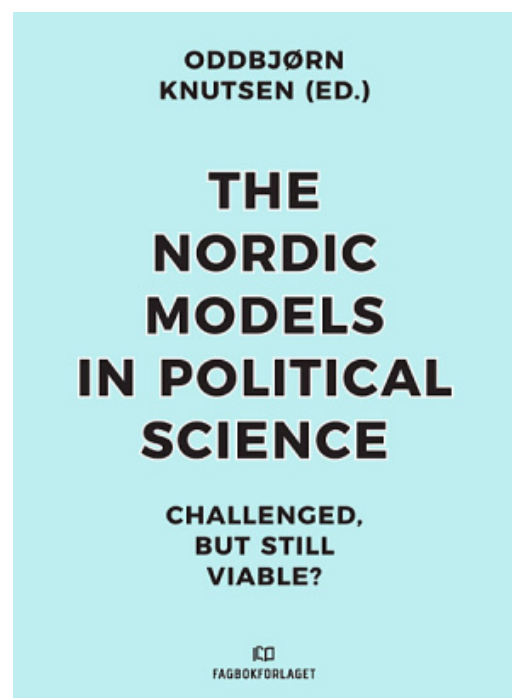




Image Credit: Flags of Finland, Norway, Sweden, Denmark and Iceland (ILP Photo Archive CCO)

The Nordic nations emerged from centuries of militarism in 1814, reconciled to their position as small and relatively weak states; a smooth transition to democracy followed, completed by the 1920s. These are 'consensual democracies', writes Knut Heidar and Bjørn Erik Rasch (105), where multi-party states combine with elections based on proportional representation, generally producing coalition or minority governments that might be considered weak (114). However, Nordic cultures are collaborative and egalitarian, exemplified by high levels of gender equality, corporatism and pluralism, strong local democratic traditions and co-operation in government. Arguably, representation is better in Nordic states than in many other European countries: citizens are able to more creatively influence government and are happier for it.

The welfare state is considered a 'prime, distinguishing characteristic' of Nordic countries (219), according to Axel West Pedersen and Stein Kuhnle, where spending has historically been significantly higher than the OECD average as a proportion of GDP. The system is sustained through a common sense of social and moral responsibility, and the redistributive consequences contribute to relatively narrow wealth distribution and high levels of public satisfaction.

Welfare had its 'Golden Age' in the 1980s, enabling the Nordic countries to better withstand the impact of the oil price crisis that was so damaging elsewhere (230). However, high unemployment, negative growth and substantial government deficits in the 1990s have led to a more parsimonious approach, where falling net replacement rates mean that pensions in Sweden, for example, are now considered 'meagre' (232).

Despite recent reforms of local and regional governments, they continue to play a significant administrative role in the provision of health services in Nordic states. Harald Baldersheim, Lawrence E. Rose and Siv Sandberg identify them as 'decentralized welfare states' with a high degree of cooperation between national and local government (193); putting responsibility for healthcare in the hands of local democratic institutions reinforces the connection to citizens. In comparative terms, this arrangement minimises the service integration problems (215) that continue to tax countries like England in terms of health and social care.

The administration of the large state in Nordic countries is also an interesting and related area worthy of comparison with our own system. Implementation of New Public Management (NPM)—devolved decision-making combined with the use of business methods and performance monitoring—was carried out reluctantly in the Nordic countries from the 1980s. Karl Hagen Bjurstrøm and Tom Christensen argue that they were seen as 'laggards' (105) in this process, though in their role as 'reluctant reformers' of administration (105), Nordic states have fortuitously avoided much of the fragmentation associated with NPM that the UK, for example, is now struggling to overcome. Administrative reform has, nonetheless, taken place in Nordic countries, although the uncomfortable fit of NPM with many features of Nordic society (159) has led to them being overtaken by post-NPM approaches.

More broadly, the Nordic states are facing additional challenges similar to those in many other countries, and economic data confirms a shift towards the OECD average in terms of welfare benefits (233). Pedersen and Kuhnle identify three specific areas of where the welfare state has been challenged since the 'Golden Age'. First, the demographics of ageing populations have put pressure on public spending that may have a particular impact on Nordic states that have taken on such wide-reaching responsibilities (237). Secondly, economic globalisation has enabled wealth to be easily moved, thereby reducing the state's ability to collect taxes; and, finally, immigration has challenged the ethnic homogeneity that has been seen by some to bind Nordic societies.

It is easy to understand the appeal of the 'Nordic models' and the egalitarian and peaceful states that they have produced. Nordic culture seems to positively encourage political participation and responsibility, and the elements of the models reinforce each other in favourable ways. However, there is no doubt that the Nordic states have and continue to be challenged and not just in the area of welfare. There are challenges elsewhere that show a weakening of 'corporatism', increased polarisation and support for the far right as well as falling support for the multi-party democratic system, for example (256). Reassuringly though, Knutsen, in concluding the collection, argues that it still makes sense to talk about distinct and viable 'Nordic models'. Nordic states remain strongly democratic and equitable societies, and re-examining them here provides much food for thought.

Mike Pym is a Research Associate and PhD student at King's College London. He is evaluating collaborative administrative models in the NHS in England and the broader changes in administrative methods in the public sector. [Read more by Mike Pym.](#)

Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.