

## [Pass the smelling salts](#) [1]

Written by [Tim Worstall](#) [2] | Saturday 16 August 2008



Oh dear, I think I'm having an attack of the vapours. I find myself actually agreeing with [Madeleine Bunting](#) [3]. This really isn't something that should happen to any self-respecting policy wonk. She's talking about why the Scandanavian system works (as it does to an extent) for Scandanavians but doesn't for others.

Brown's thought-provoking book on Sweden, *Fishing in Utopia*, explores how this powerful social fabric has been eroding over the past 25 years. He argues that a set of social relations born from Calvinist protestantism and the intense interdependence of small rural communities is unlikely to outlast the decline of both. Consumerism is a direct challenge to the ingrained self-restraint of countries whose grinding peasant poverty is only at a couple of generations' remove.

Given that we and other industrialised nations haven't been in grinding peasant poverty for many more than a couple of generations, it's not all that surprising that we don't still feel that intense interdependence. As noted there as well, it's highly likely that the Scandanavians won't feel it for much longer either.

I've long been of the opinion that this sort of high tax, all encompassing social democracy wouldn't work in the UK anyway: normally on the grounds of scale. What might work in an homogenous nation of 5 million (as Denmark) won't scale up to a heteregeneous one of 60 million like the UK. The feeling of all of us in this together just simply isn't strong enough to extend to that large a group of people, certainly not to the point that the tax levels required would gain public acceptance.

One Swede in Brown's book talks about the need for 100% "social control" in which "everyone works together": you could call it consensual authoritarianism, and it is profoundly foreign to most Britons. Despite the persistent illusions of the liberal left, it's part of why the Scandinavian welfare state has been one of the region's least successful exports.

That authoritarianism isn't just foreign to most Britons, it seems to be common to those who are more than a couple of generations away from grinding peasant poverty. We might thus say that far from social democracy being the goal, is simply a stage to be passed through on the route to a wealthy capitalist and liberal society.

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