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# S'pore and Nordic nations share a nuanced similarity

I UNDERSTAND that Professor Tommy Koh's article last Saturday ('What Singapore can learn from Europe') returns the compliment by Mr Ole Sohn, the Danish Minister for Business and Growth, who wants Denmark to be the 'Singapore of Europe'.

Prof Koh stated that the Nordic nations have achieved inclusive growth, reversed fertility decline, embraced environmentalism and respect for heritage and the arts, while staying economically competitive.

While it may be true that Singapore and the Nordic nations have succeeded by embracing pragmatism, the Nordic variation is different.

While economic growth and development remain vital for the Nordic nations, the economy serves society and the individual.

First, the creation of a business-friendly environment does not mean sacrificing workers' protection. What is important is a person's quality of life. Nordic employers can dismiss workers but unemployment benefits offer individuals psychological stability.

Unemployed able-bodied people get support and training to find jobs, while keeping their self-esteem.

Second, businesses respect the view that the family is important to Nordic society and the individual. For instance, family life is celebrated and revered in policies such as extended maternity leave, child sick leave and flexible working hours. Childcare institutions are accessible to all, and education is free.

Essentially, the worker must fulfil work obligations while the employer respects and creates an environment conducive to the demands of a worker's family life. There is tension in harmonising work and family life but all parties try to demonstrate understanding and acceptance.

Third, government and business must actively engage civil society. Open public discussions have resulted in a lively civil society, through which a Nordic consensus is cultivated. Different political parties engage with different non-governmental groups and, as a result, various governments take on board different social causes. The Nordic nations took decades to embrace environmentalism and now that they have, they lead the world in environmental technology, policies and businesses.

Fourth, Nordic governments and bureaucracies keep an arm's length approach to the arts. The state provides financial and moral support but does not and cannot dictate the contents.

Naturally, friction and debate happen, but they are accepted as par for the course. Peers in the arts and culture community decide how they want the resources used. Cultural life has been enriched although it is economically taxing on the State.

The Nordic countries are not as economically efficient as Singapore, but they have produced innovative companies, stable governments and possibly happier people.

To follow Mr Sohn's quip, is making Singapore the 'Denmark of Asia' a bad idea?

**Dr Ooi Can Seng**

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