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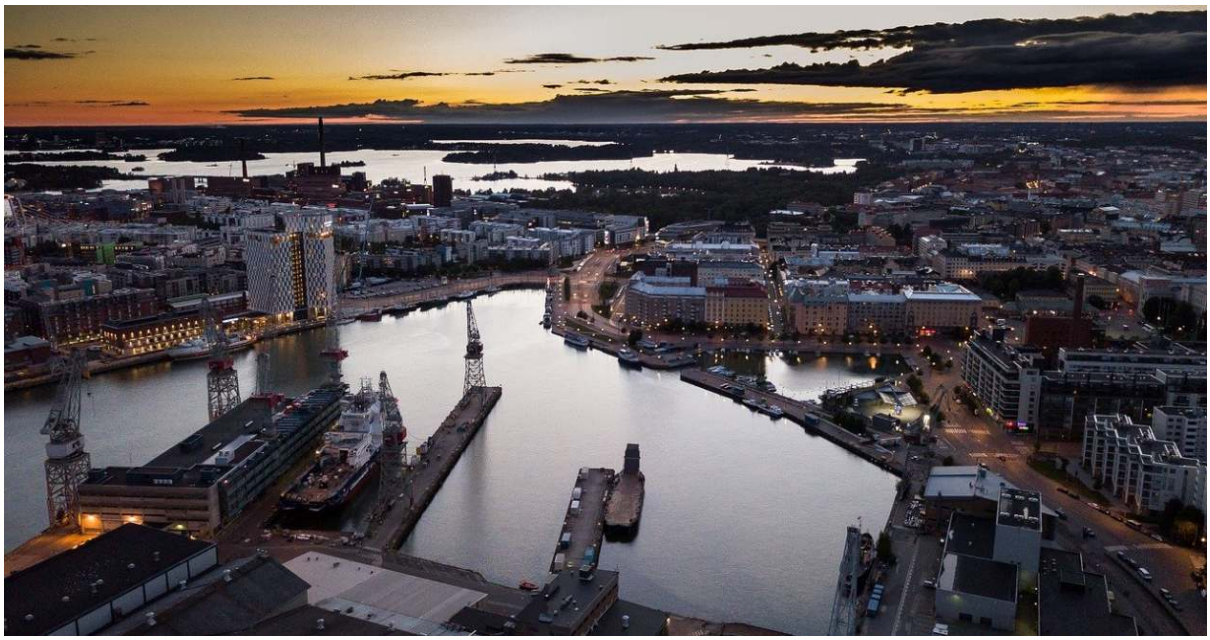
FINNTOPIA: A LONG READ

1 February 2021

Finland

Finland is rarely mentioned as an example by leftists and Greens who want to build a better future. Yet this little-noticed country is one of the most equal, peaceful and happiest on the planet. **Danny Dorling** and **Annika Koljonen** explain how Finland came to demonstrate the benefits of investing in people – and suggest what its model might have to offer the rest of the world.



For the third year in a row, Finland topped the UN's World Happiness Report in 2020. Credit: Kostiolavi/Pixabay

Finland has become the 'by way of contrast' country, as the *British Medical Journal* described it in 2018. Finland is the one place that shows that something much better is possible than the status quo. That is a weighty responsibility. Of course, Finland is not Utopia, but today it offers one of the closest approximations.

In 2018, when Finland first achieved its top placing in the UN's World Happiness Report, a UK newspaper reported the news with the caveat: '… even though its GDP is below that of the US and Germany'. When Finland overtook Norway to take first place in the World Happiness Report, it did so with a GDP per capita that was more than a third lower than that of Norway; and it then went on to hold that top-ranked position in both 2019 and 2020.

The World Happiness Report ranks countries according to GDP, life expectancy, generosity, social support, freedom, and corruption levels in each country to evaluate the quality of their current lives on a ladder scale ranging from 0 for the worst possible life to 10 for the best possible life.

Finland is the country that most clearly shows how it is possible for world-beating happiness to be achievable without becoming ever richer, and while having living standards in terms of material wealth that are below those in the most affluent parts of the world, including its more affluent Scandinavian neighbours.

Recent research conducted in Finland has established that 'well-being is to a significant extent conditioned by the position one occupies in the social structure and by the welfare regime one lives in'. However, that research also found that Finland is unusual in one other way, namely when it comes to the thoughts and feelings of recent migrants to the country.

Finland is the country that most clearly shows how it is possible for world-beating happiness to be achievable without becoming ever richer

In affluent countries, immigrants usually tend to be more optimistic than the natives of their new country. When the UN measured the happiness of immigrants for the first time in their 2018 report, Finland scored the highest of any country being compared. However, in general in Nordic countries, including Finland, where people's well-being is generally so

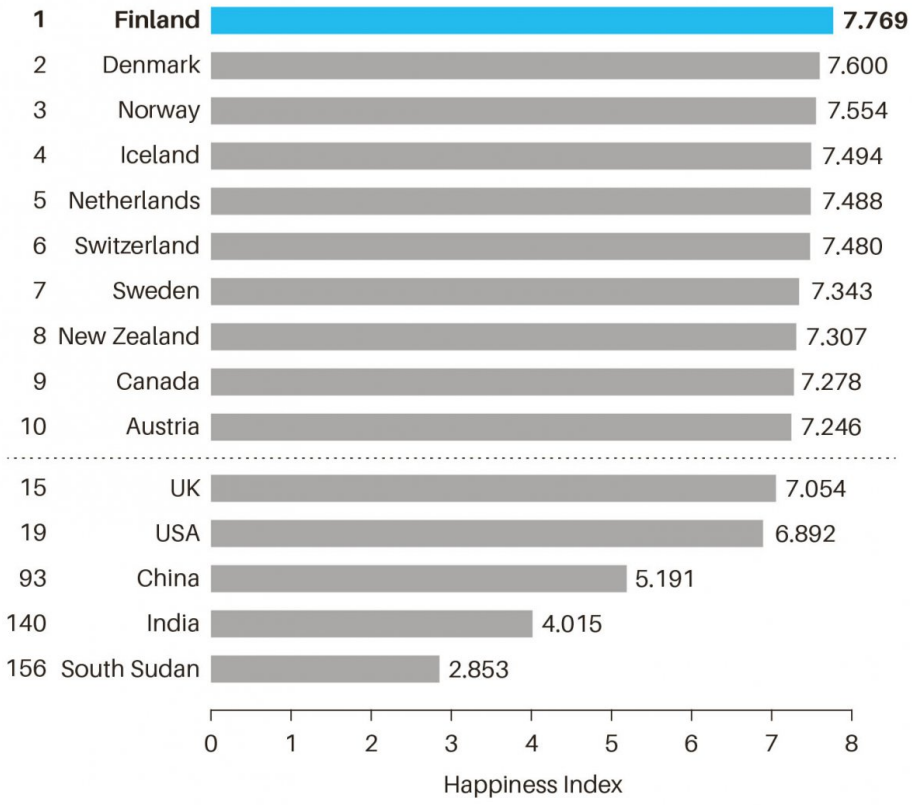
high, being of an immigrant background is an adverse factor, when all else is taken into account. It is possible that it is very hard for outsiders to fit into a society that is already so equal and cohesive.

If you turn up in London or New York as an immigrant, you are just one of many similar others in cities full of immigrants. What is more, you have just arrived in a society that is deeply divided. The rich do not trust the poor, and the poor have good reason not to trust the rich. Almost everyone is an outsider in one way or another. Many, if not most, people you meet will be migrants like you, or their parents were. The same cannot be said of Finland or of other countries that top the list of most happy or most politically stable places.

The Fragile State Index (previously the 'Failed State Index') has been published annually since 2005. It ranks 178 countries across 12 indicators that attempt to summarize the key risks and vulnerabilities faced by individual nations. Currently, Finland ranks highest overall in this index, as the least fragile state in the world. It also ranks highest on many components of the index, including on low group grievance, on high (as well as socially even) economic development, on good public services, and on low demographic pressures – all as compared with the other countries in the top ten shown in the table.

At first it appears quite remarkable that as well as performing very strongly on so many other international rankings, Finland ranks highest of all 178 countries for political stability. However, international rankings are very positively correlated with each other. It is easier for your people to be happy if your state is not fragile, your press is free and responsible, your schools are cohesive, the health of your infants is good and the health of the population as a whole is improving rapidly from what used to be quite a poor record.

The happiest countries in the world, and selected others, 2016-18[2]



The ten most politically stable countries in the world in 2019[5]

Country	Rank	Total	Security Apparatus	Factionalized Elites	Group Grievance	Economic Decline	Uneven Economic Development	Human Flight and Brain Drain	State Legitimacy	Public Services	Human Rights and Rule of Law	Demographic Pressures	Refugees and internally displaced	External Intervention
Finland	1	16.9	2.5	1.4	1.2	2.9	0.7	2.0	0.9	0.7	0.7	1.0	1.9	1.0
Norway	2	18.0	2.1	1.1	3.3	1.9	1.0	1.3	0.6	0.8	0.9	1.2	2.8	1.0
Switzerland	3	18.7	1.1	1.0	3.3	1.9	1.8	1.7	0.7	1.0	1.4	1.4	2.7	0.7
Denmark	4	19.5	1.3	1.4	4.3	1.6	1.2	1.9	0.9	0.9	1.7	1.6	2.0	0.7
Australia	5	19.7	2.7	1.7	3.3	1.6	1.6	1.0	1.0	1.5	1.7	1.2	1.7	0.7
Iceland	6	19.8	0.7	1.8	1.0	3.1	0.9	2.5	1.0	1.0	1.0	1.3	1.7	3.8
Canada	7	20.0	2.8	2.5	2.8	1.5	2.1	1.7	0.7	1.0	1.4	1.3	1.6	0.7
New Zealand	8	20.1	1.4	1.4	3.2	3.2	1.9	2.3	0.6	1.0	0.8	1.7	1.7	0.9
Sweden	9	20.3	2.7	1.8	1.7	1.5	1.5	1.1	0.8	0.9	0.9	1.6	4.9	0.9
Luxembourg	10	20.4	1.3	3.4	2.7	1.2	1.2	1.7	0.7	1.7	1.0	1.6	3.1	0.8

Finland today is one of the few environments on earth that replicates most closely the situation in which we are most content: when we are caring for each other and not competing; where we are each valued very similarly, and where no one is greatly elevated or diminished. In another affluent country that is in many ways Finland's opposite, in today's UK, 1 in every 200 people are homeless. In Finland the proportion is at least four times lower and almost no people are to be found actually sleeping on the streets.

Countries that care less count less carefully. Crude estimates by the UK government show that the number of people who were street homeless rose by 169 per cent between 2009 and 2018 in England. In Finland over the same time period, much more precise estimates revealed that long-term homelessness fell by 35 per cent, and rough sleeping was all but eradicated in Helsinki, where only one 50-bed night shelter now remains. In recent years, every week on the streets of England, three people die because they have nowhere safe to sleep. The BBC recently reported that Finland was 'the only EU state not suffering from a housing crisis which is the result of Finland's Housing First initiative which started in 2008… in Finland housing is seen as a right, not as a reward, as it often is in other EU countries. The Finnish system is financed by public funds and Finnish slot machines', and the Finnish government is considering using new (including online) gambling taxes and licences as well. Finland is abandoning transitional and temporary housing for the homeless. Instead, they are given a normal apartment, immediately.

However, as news spreads of Finland's success across so many areas of public life, there is a risk of success fatigue setting in, of Finns resting on their laurels, and of people who would like lower taxes proclaiming that enough has already been achieved. On the other hand, success also encourages success, and Finland has a reputation to maintain.

As a small nation, Finland inevitably pays a lot of attention to its high ranking on many international indices. The general population is aware of the country's prominent position in such measures, and the Foreign Ministry shares news of its success frequently via social media.

Finland's high rankings appear to help draw attention to the value of Finnish institutions. The current government tends to speak of restoring honour to the Finnish education system (by investing once again, rather than cutting). In a more theoretical sense, happiness or achievement is

always relative; you value good times more when you've had bad times. In one of his best-known works, Eino Leino, a pioneer of Finnish poetry in the late 19th and early 20th century, wrote 'he who has happiness, should hide it'. Jukka Ukkola, whose columns in the weekly newspaper *Suomen Kuvalehti* are typically satirical, quoted this line when Finland was first proclaimed the world's happiest country, and joked that because Finns can no longer hide their happiness, they should learn to market it. As with the PISA educational rankings, he suggested, perhaps researchers will soon start arriving to ask how Finland has become so happy.

The leaders of Finland's five coalition parties in power in December 2019. This image was widely circulated in a tweet that 'went viral' upon Sanna Marin becoming Prime Minister on 10 December 2019. People around the world immediately commented on all five being women and four being in their early thirties. Four remain in these positions but Katri Kulmuni resigned as Deputy Prime Minister in June 2020 and as Centre Party leader in September (replaced in the latter role by Annika Saarikko who is also female and in her thirties). Original collage: Tuomas Nisakangas

The good news for the rest of the world is that Finland will not always be at the top of the rankings, because its achievements are not an unobtainable extreme. In Finland, as elsewhere, there are always things that could be better. And Finland has only a fairly modest amount of natural resources, no unusual historical advantages, no innate national characteristic, no special trick or magic word to account for its current position.

To treat each other with respect is to be human; not to do so is inhumane. Regrettably, all of us are capable of both. By choosing the right path more often when there was an option, Finland has shown that any nation could do as well. And by doing so well it achieves so much else as a by-product of greater equality.

HOW FINLAND ESTABLISHED ITS MODEL – AND THEN CHALLENGED IT

Progress, it is often said, is the battle to remember in a time of forgetting, including remembering some lessons learned over a century ago. Finland's equality was not a gift given by the profits from natural resources, or the spoils of an empire. Finland does not have Sweden's larger population and legacy of imperial wealth, nor does it have the petroleum riches of Norway. It cannot use geothermal activity to smelt aluminium as in Iceland, or use its proximity to the rest of Europe to its advantage, as Denmark does. Nor did Finland have equality imposed upon it, as was the case in Japan, and to a lesser extent in Germany, after 1945.

Many of the policies that are fundamental to Finland's success have come out of compromise. One of the first major interventions by the state into social and health services was accomplished many decades ago in 1937 with the Maternity Grants Act by a government made up of the Social Democratic Party and Agrarian League (now the Centre Party) – the country's first left-right coalition since the civil war (and dubbed a 'red-mud coalition'). Even before this, land reforms passed into law in 1918

which enabled the rural proletariat to purchase small holdings of land immediately after the most bloody of civil wars, required the Social Democratic Party to approve private ownership which it had previously opposed, and the bourgeois parties to accept that parts of larger estates would have to be sold off.

By no means did Finns put acute civil-war tensions behind them quickly, but, as author Kjell Westö explains, Finns were pragmatic and worked together despite their history of both internal conflict and oppression from outside. Policies that emerge from compromise between parties of different ideological stripes can also become policies that are broader, more innovative and stronger than those forged by any single political party. Problematic elements of how a society is organized, such as maintaining segregation in education, can then be discarded later when empirical support emerges for action, as comprehensive education reform following the 1968 Basic Education Act illustrated.

People in Finland were no doubt influenced greatly by what was occurring elsewhere in the world, not least the radicalism of the 1960s in the US and to a lesser extent in the UK, France and Germany at that time. Finland's most significant student protests in that era, which are not widely known outside of the country, occurred in 1968 when the Old Student House in Helsinki was occupied. While it may be overstating the case to suggest that Finland had a 'summer of love', nevertheless Finns travelled and brought home useful stories. From the 1960s onwards, a vision of what the greater welfare state could achieve became a widely shared dream. That dream became a reality through establishing common ground and common agendas between political left and right. This alliance helped all of Finnish politics to (in fits and starts) drift leftwards.

It was also during the 1960s that Finnish activists created the anti-authoritarian November Movement, which advocated for stigmatized peoples, among them the disabled, LGBTQI+ (referred to in Finland as 'rainbow people'), prisoners, alcoholics, the mentally ill and the homeless. The movement's goal was to reduce the pressure for uniformity in society.

When viewed from a British or American standpoint, a Finnish conservative today is likely to look very much like a socialist. Finland avoided the alternative that often arises when Social Democrats are dominant for a time and introduce a more wishy-washy welfare state, one that could have been more easily eroded. Instead, the left in Finland in the

1960s and 1970s managed to establish in the national mindset the idea of social investments and from there, the idea of investing in people entered the normal practice of the National Coalition Party, the country's moderate right. In this sense, Finland's practice of investing in universally good schooling, health insurance, and the only genuinely comprehensive safety-net housing system in Europe, were not conceived of as social transfers from rich to poor, but as sound macroeconomic policy. The Finns are, above all, pragmatic.

When viewed from a British or American standpoint, a Finnish conservative today is likely to look very much like a socialist

The Finnish welfare state developed through consensus politics in a parliamentary democracy; it has never been an idea owned by a single party. However, in the past few decades political parties on the right (by Finnish standards), such as the National Coalition Party, have advocated for greater outsourcing and privatization. They have called for greater choice and decision-making capabilities being given to citizens with regard to public services; this would represent an ever-so-small step towards the US model for healthcare and other services that is in marked contrast to the aims and norms of welfare-state provision.

Finland may be the pre-eminent model of the Nordic welfare state. But there are, of course, Finns who find fault with that model. They might well point out that, until very recently, Finland had been moving away from this model, and they might argue that this shift was for good reasons. The government in power in Finland until early 2019 had made changes reminiscent of the British, or in some cases the US, model. These changes included the attempts to further outsource healthcare services, and levying fees for university tuition for non-EU students, unlike say in Germany, where university education remains essentially free for all. However, Finland is still to a very large extent the exemplar Nordic welfare state, even if the foundations of those ideals have been under recent attack.

In the past couple of decades, like acid rain eroding the façade of a once-beautiful building, neoliberal arguments and reasoning have etched scars deep into the surface of the body politic of Finland. This would not have happened had all been well in paradise, or if those outside of Finland had not wanted to change the direction in which it was going. In recent years

rightwing think tanks in the UK and US have been targeting Finland, as have far-right parties and politicians who hate and fear the Nordic model. Many of those think tanks are almost certainly largely funded by US businesses and billionaires but they claim to present independent research and their funders hide behind a dark veil of anonymity.

In the not-so distant past, and still occasionally today, some far-right and extreme-right groups have lauded Scandinavia as the home of the 'white race'. The notion of the true Aryan home of the white master-race is an extreme fantasy that never quite goes away. Because eugenic practices, including the sterilization of those deemed unworthy to have children, were permitted in Sweden – right through to the 1970s – Scandinavians have partly lived up to their bit-part in this fantasy. Thankfully, however, Scandinavians and the Finns then looked out to the rest of the world. They saw the criticism of eugenics and reacted. Just as importantly, they saw how else society could be arranged, especially when children are not allocated to schools based on eugenic assumptions about inherent ability.

Due in part to recent policy proposals running counter to established Finnish practice, such as the previous government's plans for privatization, the more leftwing parties now in power have become steadily more vocal in their opposition to conservative economic policies. Their positions are far more critical than those heard from, for example, today's UK Labour Party, and are emphatically far to the left of the US Democratic Party. Today Finland is arguably the antithesis of what the world's political right admires, and the government elected in 2019 is moving Finland again in the direction of greater equality.

A vintage poster aimed to attract tourists to Finland.

INEQUALITY AND TAX

Improving competitiveness in global markets is currently high on the Finnish political agenda, just as it was in the post-war reconstruction era. Finland is not just aiming for international competitiveness in economic terms, but achieving it with due concern for its social values and institutions.

With significantly higher taxes, but little wage stagnation and much lower income inequality than, say, the UK, Finnish political parties rarely emphasize social transfers from the rich to the poor as their fundamental aim. Instead, they focus on how health, housing, education, financial security are of benefit to the whole community, not just the present recipients. This is easier to achieve in a parliamentary democracy where compromise and consensus are essential and there is widespread use of public services, than it is in countries where two-party systems prevail. Ideas such as transfers from the rich to the poor being beneficial to all don't necessarily sell as well abroad to a set of people who have yet to encounter the results of such choices.

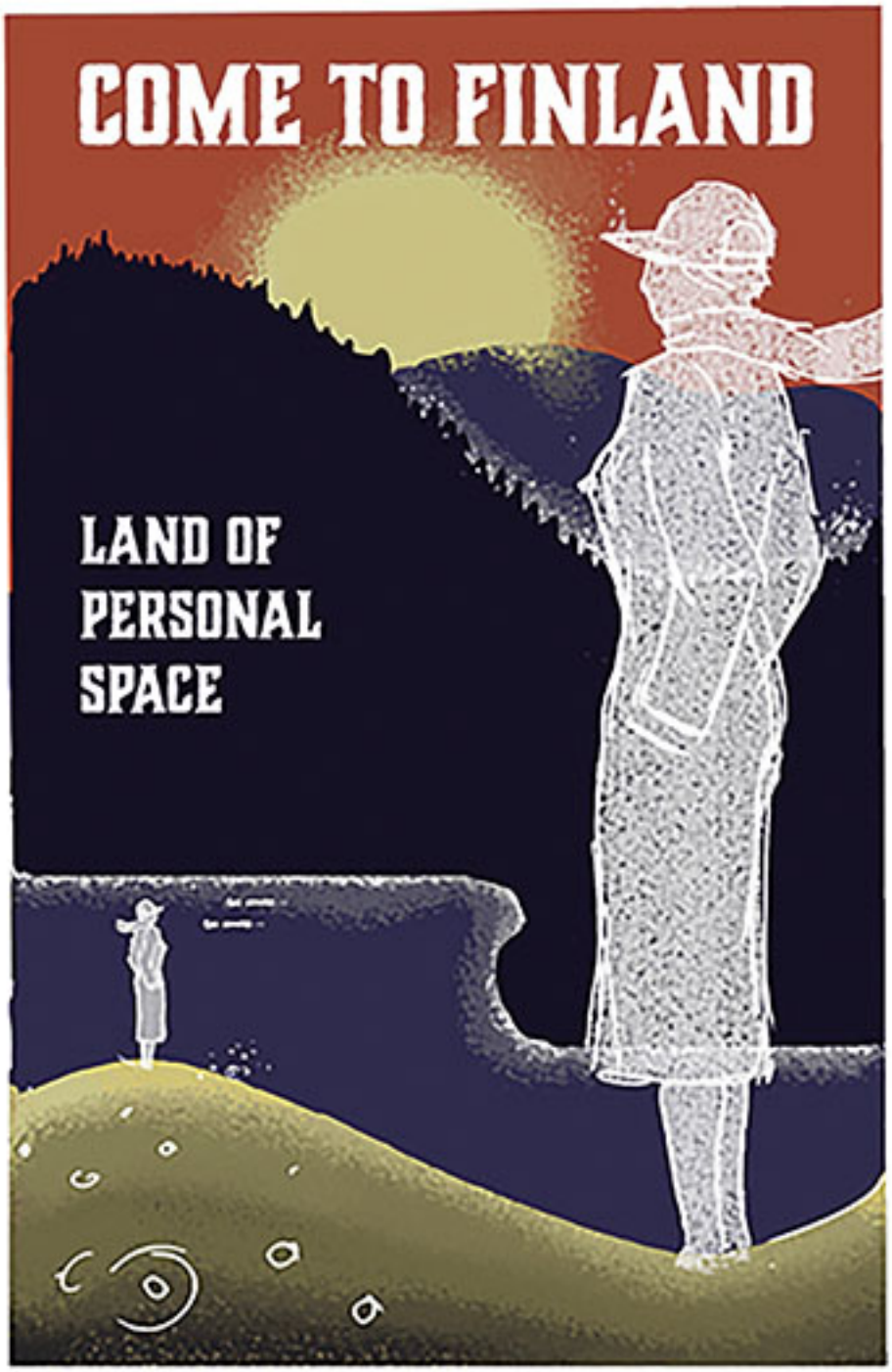
Wealth inequality has been increasing in Finland and is higher than income inequality, which, despite a small increase since 2017, has remained relatively low and stable after a rise at the end of the 1990s. Wealth inequality is probably greater than official measurements indicate given the wealth that is hidden in tax havens, and it has become more difficult to measure accurately since the abolition of the wealth tax. But if inequality is considered from the perspective of post-tax national income, then the share of the richest one per cent decreased from the year 2002 (when it was 7.2%) to 2016 (6.1%).

Finland's high levels of happiness and contentment can be understood partly in relation to the accepted social norms and expectations of what is possible in Finnish society. These norms are good due to excellent public services and low levels of inequality, particularly in comparison to the conditions prevailing today in all other countries, including most other affluent societies. We know that Finns are happy and contented with their lives, although they are often disinclined to show it. Public displays of emotion of any kind are rare. This may be part historical, reflecting the former dominance of Russia and Sweden, and has now become cultural. It

is also possible that both Finns' reserve and their contentment makes funding excellent public services easier, as higher taxes are more accepted.

Today employees in Finland still contribute some of the highest proportions of their personal income in tax. In 2016, when the take in income of Finland's richest 1 per cent was less than 6 per cent of the country's total (compared with 15 per cent in the UK and 22 per cent in the US), the tax collected from personal incomes in Finland made up 13 per cent of GDP. In Chile, one of the rich world's most unequal countries, it amounts to just 1.8 per cent of GDP by OECD estimates. As the mass protests (and police repression) of late 2019 demonstrated to the rest of the world, the toll taken by Chile's economic travails have for many years been falling most heavily on its badly paid, indebted and politically voiceless majority. When income is more evenly spread, overall taxation is far more effective, public services can be far better, and civil unrest is very rare.

A huge proportion of Finns, 79 per cent, say they are 'happy to pay their taxes'. An astonishing 96 per cent, when asked, agree that 'it's important to collect tax to maintain the welfare state'. The tax bills of everyone in Finland are public documents, although individuals earning above €100,000 ($119,000) a year can, as of 2019, request to opt out of their tax information being released on the list of high-income earners provided to the media (4,400 such requests were successful in 2020). Individual tax records remain public and can be found, but this list facilitates the media's commentary on income and wealth distribution. This publicity has made it harder to hide corruption and tax evasion. In an equitable country with well-run public services, tax avoidance is rightly seen as no different from shop-lifting.



A vintage poster carrying a satirical message.

TRUST IN JOURNALISM – AND CRITICAL THINKING

Part of how Finland avoids fatigue is the robustness of its press. Ed Miliband, a former leader of the Labour Party in the UK, has been a passionate and early campaigner on climate change and helped steer his political party to becoming both greener and more democratic, with every party member having the opportunity to vote for the next party leader. As a result, Britain now has a far more Finnish-style party in its Labour Party than it would have had if it were not for Ed; but Ed was often subjected to personal attacks in place of criticisms of his policies. His successor, Jeremy Corbyn, was attacked even more relentlessly, and in particular during the 2019 election, where he was misrepresented and demonized by both privately-owned media and the state-owned BBC.

It is true that the Labour Party has recently proposed some policies that would be too leftwing for Finland. For instance, in November 2019 the Labour Party proposed nationalizing the largest broadband company in the UK and providing free broadband for all. However, it is more often the case that Labour's policies, including most of those when Corbyn was leader, are significantly to the right of Finnish public policy; in its 2019 election manifesto, the UK's Labour Party proposed raising spending on public services, but only to German levels, rather than those of Finland. You would know little of this from reading the British press.

Recently featured on Ed Miliband's podcast 'Reasons to be Cheerful', Vesa Häkkinen, the director of current affairs communications at Finland's Ministry for Foreign Affairs, spoke of the anti-disinformation campaign that was launched in Finland in 2014. The campaign encourages critical thinking and awareness to increase people's ability to spot fake news, from training election officials to reforming the education curriculum. When Miliband asked at what age Finnish children were educated about identifying disinformation, Häkkinen mentioned seeing a children's television show featuring a teddy-bear that was critical of the news during its adventures. To prevent cynicism rising, a good press and an aware citizenry are both vital.

According to Reporters Without Borders, Finland rose back up the global freedom of the press ranking from fourth place in 2018 to second place in 2019. Finns typically see press freedom and responsibility as a more

serious matter than citizens of other states do. Finland is in the minority of countries where freedom of the press is characterized as good.

In 2018, Presidents Vladimir Putin and Donald Trump, arriving for a summit in Helsinki, were greeted with billboards and posters created by Finland's highest-circulation daily newspaper, *Helsingin Sanomat*, welcoming them to the 'land of free press'.

Even in Finland, though, things could be better. A concern raised by the Centre for Media Pluralism and Media Freedom's annual *Media Pluralism Monitor* is the concentration of media ownership in Finland, and the lack of government regulation of that ownership. The centre's 2017 report found that the four largest companies in Finland's television-broadcasting sector together claimed a 92-per-cent audience share and 72 per cent of revenues; in radio the figures were 94 per cent and 87 per cent respectively, and in the newspaper market it was 55 per cent and 71 per cent, respectively. Another concern raised by the report is the lack of proportional access to airtime by Finland's minorities. Media ownership became even more concentrated in February 2020 when media conglomerate Sanoma acquired another major media company, Alma Media. Although concerns were raised over the decreased media pluralism, the deal was not considered a significant risk to competition in the media market by the Finnish Competition and Consumer Authority.

UNIVERSAL BASIC INCOME

When we think of Finland as a role model for other countries, one initiative that comes up often is the idea of introducing a universal basic income (UBI). Universal basic income could represent a major shift in the current welfare state model of the West. Pilot experiments have recently been run in the city of Seattle and the Canadian province of Ontario, and in 2016 the Finnish government launched a basic-income experiment involving 2,000 participants. UBI is not the only proposal for reforming social security in Finland. Most of the country's political parties have their own models, and the experiment itself was targeted rather than universal. Dutch historian and journalist Rutger Bregman stated that universal basic income 'is all about freedom' at the 2019 World Economic Forum annual meeting in Davos.

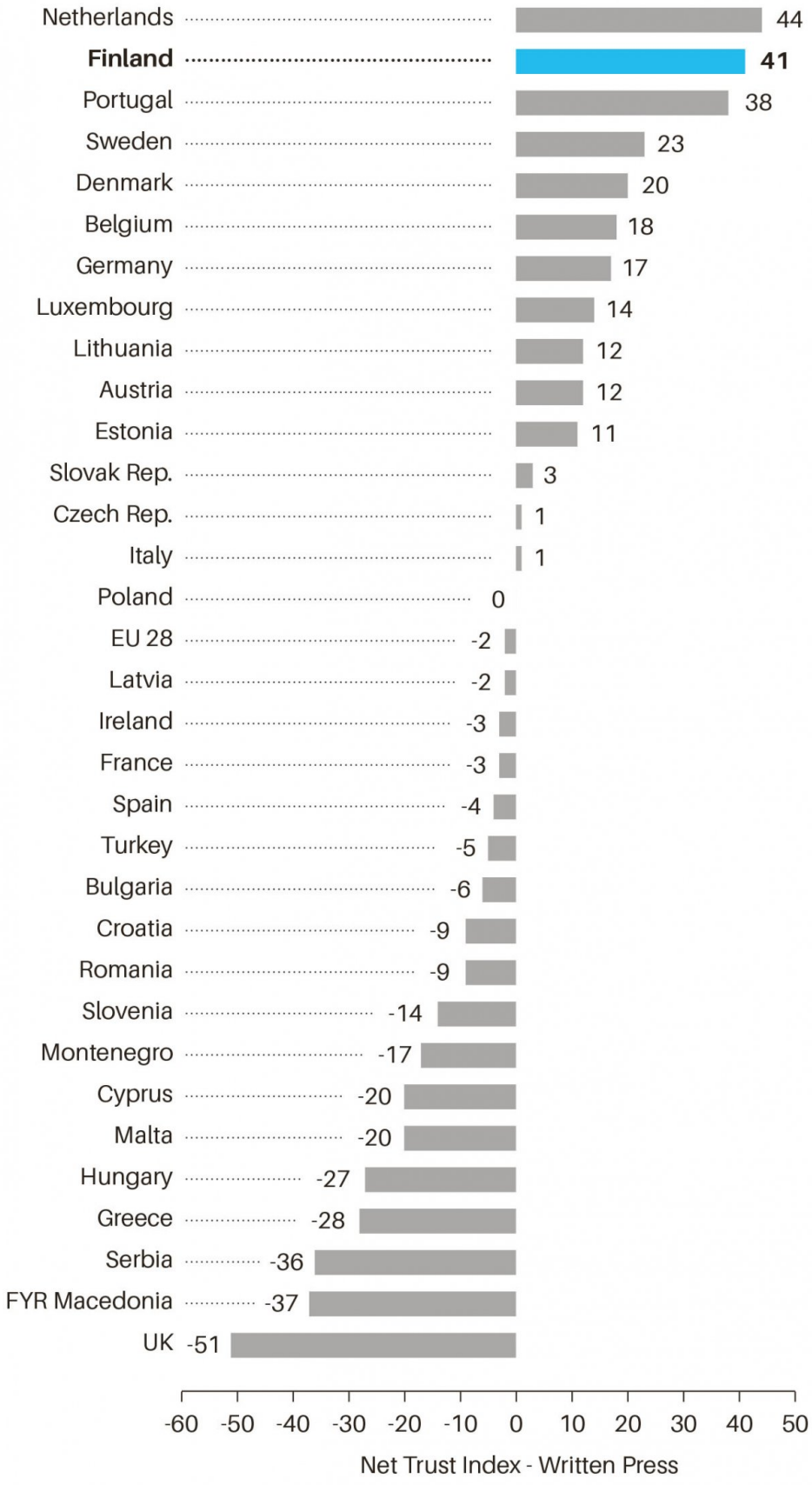
The first Finnish Basic Income trial, which ran from 2017 to 2018, was initiated in response to the changing nature of work and the fact that a greater proportion of the population are now employed in temporary and part-time jobs. The participants, who were unemployed when they began the trial, received a basic income of €560 ($665) every month for two years regardless of any other income and regardless of whether they were actively seeking work. The trial aimed to assess whether the existing social-security system could be simplified, and whether the alternative basic-income system encouraged employability, since currently benefits diminish on starting paid employment or on receipt of other sources of income. The theory was that because basic-income payments alone are not necessarily sufficient to cover all living costs in the long term (such as holidays), it therefore would not discourage recipients from finding work. One participant, journalist and writer Tuomas Muraja, responded to critics of the experiments saying:

Concerns have been voiced about the high cost of the basic income model. But free school meals, free basic education and universal basic healthcare are expensive too… The system requires more investment to boost the minimum income level, to improve the level of financial incentives and to simplify it. Critics fear that basic income will make people lazy. However, limited evidence from several basic-income trials from around the world prove that people use basic income to improve their quality of life and not as a license to do nothing.

The results published in 2019 showed that the intervention did not increase the number of people who found employment, but neither did it reduce it. Some attributed this to the design of the experiment; but even with these results, Rutger Bregman argued that other outcomes of the study warranted attention – namely, that participants reported higher levels of well-being, less stress, and greater overall happiness.

The experiment was criticized on the basis that in addition to including unemployed youth, the pool of participants was limited to primarily the long-term unemployed who would benefit more from services to help with health issues or outdated skills rather than from financial incentives. In addition, taxation was not taken into account, and halfway through the experiment the ‘activation model’ was introduced, which skewed comparisons with the control group – that is, everyone else who was unemployed.

Trust in journalism, 2016, European countries[8]



One thing worth bearing in mind about the early results of the trial is that increasing employment need not be a major aim of basic income. If people in Europe are to consume less, and pollute less, then they need to also produce less and learn to live on lower incomes than they currently do. A basic income makes it possible to live on a very low income and spend your time doing what you really want to do, including useful unpaid work. If you need a little more money, you can work, but it need not be high-paid work. If Finland is to remain one of the happiest countries in the world, it won't be because everyone works for as many hours as they can, for as much money as they can get.

ONE DAY…

One day, a country will provide a universal basic income (UBI) to everyone. Finland may not be the first to do so, but it will experiment further and remains very open to similar new ideas. Many people say that UBI is unaffordable. But how much more unaffordable is it than the practice in the UK and especially the US of keeping large numbers of people in overcrowded prisons, with plans to build more prisons and calls for more and longer sentences? A universal basic income would not be compatible with wasting money on antisocial activities such as locking so many people up. It would, however, be compatible with massive reductions in carbon emissions, as those who chose to consume less would be able to. They would not have to drive to work if they chose not to work, and a basic income means exactly what it says – basic. A universal basic income is only unaffordable if you think it is necessary for some to go hungry, cold and homeless to keep many of the rest of us at the grindstone of paid employment, much of which is of little ultimate benefit to society.

One day, a country will have no need for prisons; and Finland already has very few prisoners. People find the idea of no prisons strange, because when it is suggested they think of a future society that is just like their current society, but without jails. However, as a journalist based in the Bronx in the United States, Alice Speri, explains: 'in a society that is tackling things like white supremacy, economic deprivation, toxic masculinity, and that is providing connections between people, and where communities are responsible for each other, I actually don't think it would be weird at all. You wouldn't even need the things that we now think of as

elemental parts of our society, like the local jail.' One day, a country will have no homeless people. Finland is very nearly that country.

One day, no one will die prematurely. This utopian vision is at least two centuries old. In Western countries it is best remembered through the words of mill owner Robert Owen, and his address to the inhabitants of New Lanark in Scotland on New Year's Day 1816: 'What ideas individuals may attach to the term 'Millennium' I know not; but I know that society may be formed so as to exist without crime, without poverty, with health greatly improved, with little, if any misery, and with intelligence and happiness increased a hundredfold; and no obstacle whatsoever intervenes at this moment except ignorance to prevent such a state of society from becoming universal.'

Finland is not Utopia and its people are well aware that there is much that could still be better. However, they also know that they live under a flexible system in a pragmatic country that will permit better ways to be found and further improvements to be made. Knowing that things are going to get better, especially for the less well-off, is often more important than how the situation is today. We will always worry, but we also need to be able to hope.

Finland's recent history can give us all hope. On 20 March 2020 it was announced – for the third year in succession – that Finland was once again the happiest country in the world. The report in which this was declared included a chapter dedicated to the Nordic countries which concluded: 'There seems to be no secret sauce specific to Nordic happiness that is unavailable to others. There is rather a more general recipe for creating highly satisfied citizens: ensure that state institutions are of high quality, non-corrupt, able to deliver what they promise, and generous in taking care of citizens in various adversities'.

Of course, Finland excels at much more than just happiness, and we should learn more about how and why the Finnish recipe works in practice – because it urgently needs to be made more widely available in the world.

Danny Dorling is Professor of Human Geography at Oxford University; Annika Koljonen is a recent Politics And International Relations graduate From the University Of Cambridge who Lives in Helsinki. This is an edited extract from their book Finntopia: What We Can Learn From The World's Happiest Country (Agenda Publishing, 2020).

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