

Quality Reform in Denmark

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The Danish Government has pointed out a commission of ministers on the theme “*quality of the public sector*“. The commission is going to develop and publish a strategy for securing the quality of the public sector in the future. The motives are: a diminishing number of available labor force – many civil servants – around 200.000 over the next 10 years – are retiring within a few years; the young generation is smaller than before, and the public sector has to compete with the private sector in order to recruit “new hands”; the demands of welfare services are declining analogous to the fact that the Danish society can afford still more. The idea of the Government is a flexible public service in accordance with modern lifestyle in families and workplaces. The Government does not support any steps to higher taxes – nevertheless, public welfare services should grow 0,5 % each year until 2010.

It is interesting to observe that the tools foreseen by the Government do not have much in common with recruitment, but seem to be buzz words like innovation, user involvement and open administration (a kind of ‘glasnost’). That is why the opposition in Parliament interpretes the whole reform as a further step to privatization.

Observers and researchers have already published more analyses showing the basis of the reform. First: it is obvious that the neoliberal Government acts on longer terms, meaning that the public sector diminishes while the private consumption increases. Ordinary people would then get used to pay for the services of their own pocket instead of paying via taxation. Autumn 2006 big strikes in more cities in Denmark showed that e.g. parents of kindergarten children directly were involved in demonstrations etc. aiming at better kinder gartens. It seems difficult for the Government to “play that card” only. Second: expectations show that 200.000 civil servants are retiring in the period 2006-2016. The argument therefore sounds: as we do not have enough hands, we are forced to change the public sector in order to keep up quality with less labour force. The argumentation is in brief: better quality for lesser ressources, meaning that new forms of administration have to be developed.

The whole complex of ideas is not new at all. Earlier reforms were labelled “modernisation” or “deregulation”. In the 1980’s the buzz word was decentralization, marked by initiatives on more self governing, self determination and even more market. This was the Danish version of New Public Management. The Reform never really succeeded as planned. But many kinds of reforms were carried out during the 1990’s – professionalization and bureaucratization, efficiency and improvement of services, market orientation and quality development.

The debate of the Danish Parliament shows that the opposition (4 political parties: The Social Democrats, the Social Liberals, People’s Socialist Party, and the United Left) has pointed in common statements at the necessity of recruiting more labor force for the public sector by improving the working conditions and salaries, by introducing more democratic ways of decision making and/or by demanding quality rights for every citizen.

Is it possible to recruit new hands in a situation with nearly full employment? At least 800.000 men and women are outside the labor market – early retirement, impaired etc. It seems realistic to recruit among those. It might be part time jobs or jobs on special conditions. Therefore, the opposition as well as the Danish trade unions are campaigning aiming at a more flexible labor market. Social workers do not necessarily have to work 110% – less might do! Many women have part time jobs for the moment being and they might accept an offer of getting full time employment, especially if the labor market becomes less stressing.

The Quality Reform – as developed by the Government – is to be prepared as legislation about June 2007.

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