

PATHS ARE MADE BY WALKING

'WE WANT TO COPY DENMARK!' MARTIN LIDEGAARD, DANISH MINISTER OF CLIMATE, ENERGY AND BUILDINGS, AND A KEY FIGURE IN DENMARK'S EU-PRESIDENCY SINCE 1 JANUARY 2012, HEARS THIS STATEMENT FREQUENTLY WHEN HE VISITS OTHER COUNTRIES. HE BELIEVES THAT DENMARK IS, AND SHOULD CONTINUE TO DEVELOP AS, A LABORATORY FOR TESTING SUSTAINABLE SOLUTIONS.

BY SØREN STEEN OLSEN AND STEEN SVENDSEN, PUBLIC FUTURES / HOUSE OF FUTURES

We met Martin Lidegaard as an engaged participant at the first In100Y-seminars, where he – prior to being appointed Minister – was a member of the Core Group of experts in the project 'In100Years – starting now' (see p. xx). He also visited the third seminar as a newly appointed minister to give a keynote speech about sustainable development in the long term, which he concluded by quoting the Spanish poet Antonio Machado: 'Traveller, there are no paths. Paths are made by walking. Walk!'

We met Martin at his office just around the corner from our office, and had a chat about visions and specific climate and energy initiatives.

When evaluating the major changes that we face as a society as a result of climate and environmental issues, do you think that we need to adapt to the challenges or do you think that we face a fundamental transformation of our society?

That is a very, very good question. I think it is a different society we're talking about in the sense that our modes of production and consumption patterns will change. Consumption of knowledge and services will grow, whilst material consumption will decrease. We are moving towards a quality society, and products will be of a better quality than we may have been accustomed to over the past 20-30 years.

Will it be unrecognizable as a society? I am not sure. I do not think that all of our current values will change. The changes we are talking about will happen within a relatively short period - two to three decades. This is a very long time in a technological context, but with regard to changes in values and consciousness, it will be short. I think changes in our technological, production and consumption purposes could achieve a lot over the next decade, but our mindset and our fundamental relationship with nature and each other will change profoundly, of that I am in no doubt.

How do you see general developments over the years to come?

In Denmark, we will be taking big strides within my field – that is, within climate and energy, which is outstanding in an international context, because we have undertaken many comprehensive changes over a very short period of time, all of which are pretty exceptional and farsighted. Allow me to mention two things.

One is energy and resource efficiency, where we will be aiming for up to a 14% reduction in total energy consumption, whilst maintaining economic development. This is a pretty demanding target. The other target is for over 50% of our electricity supply to come from wind by 2020, and this means almost a doubling of the current levels. This will provide an entirely new electricity system and an entirely new pattern of consumption.

I do not believe that we, in Denmark, would be capable of conducting

this kind of politics and still get the very strong support that we do if it were not for the fact that there is an awareness in the population that this is the right and necessary way to go about things. In Denmark, we have worked with this particular agenda for over 40 years. It is something that people have heard about since elementary school, and it is something that occupies much of the political universe. When I talk to colleagues in other countries, I get the impression of a much weaker popular backing, and most politicians would not be able to implement these kind of policies in their own countries.

On the other hand, it is quite clear, from looking at the political debate, that there is nobody who seriously questions the whole model of economic development. There is nobody who questions the relationship between man and nature, nor whether we should give up our prosperity. And why not? There are many explanations, but one reason is that we as human beings have, up till now, been capable of developing incredibly well in relation to new living conditions. We are a very adaptable species, but there could be a genuine conflict between what we choose to do in the present and our future in the longer term.

That is why I am very concerned with formulating and developing political visions, which give hope and provide attractive answers to the challenges that we actually face. This is not an alternative to telling the population that we are in a serious situation. As a politician, you have to be able to do

both – both formulate the problem as well as provide solutions.

Do you have a picture or a vision of the society of the future in your daily work?

I don't have a crystal clear image of where we will be in 10 or 20 years. Maybe it is just as it is in your own life, where what you plan is not always what happens, when it comes to the crunch. But it is possible to push development in the right direction. I think that is also how it will be with regard to the society of the future.

I would also like to specifically single out certain fields which we will definitely be developing, and where I have a sense of the direction things are moving. The first is energy, which has been and is one of the really big issues. In short, you could say: energy and food. If we solve these two problems in an intelligent way, then we will have achieved a lot. In Denmark we are actually well on our way and have recently agreed on the most ambitious energy legislation in the world.

The other field is the whole bio-field, of which I believe we will have a completely different understanding of within the next 10-15 years. Of what it is, in the broadest sense. How do we make optimal use of biomass. Must we make plastic out of it? How will it integrate into food production? Our total biomass concept will also change character, so we will be able to exploit all materials more intelligently than we do today. A lot can be solved technologically, but some of this also requires behavioral changes.

And I am also convinced that there will be profound changes in the field of taxation. We are moving towards a higher taxation of resources in the broadest sense and a lower taxation of human labor. We will need incentives for more labor and less resource use, so this will be a natural development. Take for example Ireland, which until recently had very low taxation. In their new tax regime

a very large share of the extra revenue will come from green taxes.

I have no doubt that we, as a global society, will be pushed in this direction, and that there will be many options for solutions.

How do you see Denmark's international role and possibilities with regard to long term sustainability?

I travel quite a lot at the moment and there is always a colleague who will make a comment such as "We want to copy Denmark". It is thought-provoking how many countries feel the need to push for new solutions. I find that there is an enormous amount of interest, and I believe that the only way that Denmark can play a role internationally is by being a good example and showing that what we do is not in conflict with a healthy economy. To demonstrate new solutions in the big laboratory. To show that it can be done. There is a great deal of interest in this.

As you know from your participation in the project In100Years, we are working with a model that contains four perspectives of sustainable development; inner (culture, consciousness, values) and outer (physical conditions, systems) as well as top-down and bottom-up. How do you see the interplay between the four approaches?

I am convinced, after having worked with bottom-up as well as top-down, that there is a need for both approaches. It is clear from my attending international climate conferences that top-down initiative makes important contributions in some areas, but is also totally inadequate in others. It is actually impossible to do top-down without bottom-up. Conversely, some political action is needed to enable bottom-up solutions Both are necessary.

Inner and outer are also crucial. What makes us happy? What actually makes us happy in daily life? Is it when our salary rises in real terms

by 20% over the next ten years, or is it that we can live lives in which we have time for our loved ones, and where we can also look our children in the eyes? These kinds of considerations also need to be taken when we assess the bigger picture.

All four perspectives are important and necessary. This is also linked to the fact that you cannot make political regulations in these areas without appealing to the inner too. It just cannot be done.

Does the happiness agenda pop up in your meetings with your foreign colleagues?

No, I wouldn't say so. My own philosophy as a politician is that it is a difficult agenda. I am more inclined to "show it, don't tell it". Without having thought it through completely, my instinct tells me that no matter how difficult the GDP target is – and I really do think that it is problematic to put economic prosperity into such simple statistical formulae, it will be just as difficult to put happiness into statistical formulae.

What creates happiness for people in the long term, is something I believe comes as much from within as from outside. This means that as politicians we must create the best framework for as many people as possible to create the good life. That is how I think it is.

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Read Martin Lidegaard's speech from the third In100Y-seminar in November 2011 at www.in100y.dk/cph-seminars/3-no-fixes/from-the-seminar/