

SOMETHING ROTTEN IN THE STATE OF DENMARK

A NIGHTMARE SCENARIO

You are on a hospital ward somewhere in your native country, Denmark. You are with your mother, who has cancer and urgently needs help, but all the doctors and nurses rush by. You beg and plead, but no one gives you a second glance.

Finally you manage to grab hold of a doctor who is willing to clear up the mystery. The staff, refusing to work for the paltry wages they earn in the public health system, will not lift a finger unless somebody pays up front. In other words, you will have to cough up some cash if you want your mother to have any chance of surviving.

You have never heard of this happening in Denmark before. Universal health services have been largely free for all citizens for many years, yet here you are, expected to pay a doctor and two nurses a sum larger than your monthly salary so your mother can receive her vital chemotherapy ...

Fast-forward a few hours. You are at a meeting with your son's teacher at his school, and the teacher refuses to hand over his school report. You will have to pay a newly

introduced 'release fee' to the head of the school, the teacher explains. And by the way, your son cannot stay enrolled at the school if his report is not picked up and signed for by his parents. You know the fee is illegal, but dare you jeopardise your son's future?

You are in a vaguely Kafkaesque dilemma. Perhaps you ought to report the teacher and the head of the school to the police?

Suddenly your spouse is there, whispering that the police cannot be trusted. The head of the school is the local police commissioner's brother, and everyone knows they support each other when dealing with difficult parents and citizens.

What is more, the police always demand a 'special fee' before they even consider taking action, whether the allegation is assault, rape or kidnapping.

And, your spouse reminds you, even if the case makes it to court, no judge can be trusted to hand down a ruling based on the law of the land. After all, judges are only human, and like the school head and the police commissioner they want to feather their own nests, just a bit. If the right payment is on the table, they can help make incriminating evidence disappear or force witnesses to withdraw unfavourable statements – or make them disappear too.

You now remember reading an outspoken article at the breakfast table that morning. In the daily newspaper *Information* a journalist criticised the public prosecution

service for ignoring flagrant breaches of the law, even in the face of irrefutable proof.

The journalist, citing damning evidence in case after case, detailed how the head of the tax authority systematically cut shady deals with top executives from the likes of Maersk, Danfoss and Lego – flagships of the Danish business community – and with former high-ranking politicians from the Social Democrats and the Liberal Party. The journalist also claimed to have proof that an investigation into the defence minister’s shareholding in an arms company – from which, representing the Danish Armed Forces, he had ordered four new fighter jets at a cost of almost three billion Danish kroner – had been shelved for no apparent reason.

Your family, friends and colleagues find the article shocking. They have never read anything like it. For as long as anyone can remember, the newspapers and televised media have never been anything but lapdogs to the powers that be. The few brave journalists and public officials who have ever dared to disclose even a crumb of information about the huge personal fortunes of the elite, their seaside mansions north of Copenhagen, or their holiday homes in St-Tropez, have come to a bad end.

At least that is what people suspect, since such critics are never heard of again. All your friends and acquaintances now reckon the same fate will befall the journalist working for *Information*. Writing that article was practically a suicide mission, they say.

Days go by, and each morning you flick through

Information hoping to find news about the affair, or at least some other piece written by the courageous journalist. You find nothing. No news about the case; no by-line with the journalist's name. You eventually pay the special fee for your son's school report. And the Minister of Defence? He is still sitting comfortably behind his nice, big desk ...

HERE, THERE AND EVERYWHERE

THE HAPPY COUNTRY

... And suddenly you wake, bathed in sweat. Phew! It was all just a bad dream. Medical treatment is still free, and education and the judicial system are still not for sale to the highest bidder in the welfare state of Denmark, ranked for years as one of the world's least corrupt countries.

However, from a global perspective this remarkable absence of corruption, a noteworthy feature throughout the Nordic region, is an exception. Corruption is commonplace in most countries. What is merely a nightmare scenario for Danes, although frightening enough, is the stark reality in an alarming number of nations around the world.

Whatever its form and scope, corruption is profoundly destructive to any society. If the rule of law does not apply equally to all citizens, and if bribes can pave the way for illegal acts, the result is arbitrary decisions and a lawless society. In a country whose politicians and officials commit malversation, embezzlement and fraud, the general population will lose any desire to follow the rules themselves. The result is a dangerously dysfunctional state. Over recent years social scientists have documented the

detrimental effects of corruption, which are, unfortunately, far worse than anyone believed. Corruption dramatically reduces a nation's resources and has dire consequences for value creation and growth, not to mention its adverse affects on general living conditions and health. In many countries these pernicious forces lie at the root of lagging development, daily hardship, water shortages, hunger and poverty.

Much suggests that the level of corruption in a country and its wealth are closely linked. It is hardly a coincidence that Transparency International consistently pegs Denmark high or first on the list of the *least* corrupt countries in the world, while economists rank it is one of the wealthiest. Other research has found Danes to be the world's happiest people. This is probably linked to our trust in one another, as Denmark also has the world's highest level of 'social trust', meaning trust in strangers. In fact, Danes even trust their public administration, including the tax authorities, in their small country, whose 5.8 million citizens also live with one of the world's highest levels of taxation.

AILING STATES

Rogue states, failed states, dictatorships and developing countries are not alone in labouring under corruption. It is everywhere – even in Denmark and similar high-functioning nations.

Consider France, where the former president, Nicolas Sarkozy, has been accused of receiving unlawful political support for his conservative party, the UMP. During the