

Being royalist the Danish way

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Like Carlsberg, Danish bacon and Lego, the Danes will boast about most things that put them on the world map. And the monarchy is one of them. A thoroughly Danish expression is *hyggelig*, which means cozy, nice and jolly all wrapped into one. And that is how many Danes choose to characterise their monarchy. Refusing to get into the politics of it all, they like to think the Queen, the Princes, and the traditions that follow are not something to be taken too seriously.

Queen Margrethe II is admired by most in her own right. She has, after all, designed ballet costumes for the Royal Danish Ballet, and lent her art to posters and calendars for various charitable causes. She's translated books, and even illustrated a 1977 version of *The Lord of the Rings*. She smokes like a chimney, and the people take bizarre pride in the fact that she only smokes Danish ('Prince') cigarettes. Indeed, it would be unseemly for a Danish queen to smoke anything else.

Danes hate for anyone to think they are better than them, blue-blooded or not. Regents of the past have found an irreverent approach to regal privileges to be the way into people's hearts. My grandmother often tells the story of how her mother, as a little girl, was handed a piece of chocolate by the King Christian X on one of his early morning outings. He ruled during both World Wars, and was famous for riding his horse alone around the streets of Copenhagen - even at the time of the German occupation.

Likewise, the public responds with a friendly and irreverent approach to the Royal Family. Urban myths flourish. Everyone will tell you how the recently deceased Queen Mother, Ingrid, was a shoplifter and that her bodyguards would pay for everything she pocketed. A persistent rumour decrees that the Queen's French husband, Prince Henri, is gay. When the young Prince Regent, Frederik, complained he could not go to a bar without anyone notifying the press, a national tabloid printed posters for bars and cafés to display, headed: "Freddy is free". For weeks an atmosphere of unity prevailed over allowing the prince his privacy.

Velvet seriousness

At New Year, the Queen delivers a televised speech to the Danish public. She is not allowed party political views but has made a firm tradition of pondering cultural and ethical issues. Last year's speech was especially meaningful. Along with much of Europe, Denmark has seen growing electoral popularity for the far right. A rather fearful debate about immigrant issues has dominated politics in recent years. Who else but Her Majesty would tell Danes to be nice to one another?

"History has shown far too many examples of how insecurity and fear has nourished prejudice and caused differences between people," she said, remarking that it can be just as difficult for foreigners to adapt to Danish society, as for Danes to admit that it has changed. "Standing together is not something which can be achieved from one side only. It requires something of us

all, because it is not always easy to recognise your neighbour behind a different appearance and unknown customs.”

How unusual and wonderful to have a monarchy that relates directly to the public. Danish royals go to public schools, drive their own cars, and lead independent productive lives, as well as representing Denmark in situations where politicians have little real purpose. And while no one really expects the present Queen’s descendants to be as popular, the monarchy is not something the Danes would likely bid farewell to. Like fairy tales, ice cream and beer, it plays an important role in Danish culture. But then, we like to think, most *hyggelig* things do.

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