

What Can Denmark Tell Us About the Same Sex Marriage Debate?

By Warren Throckmorton, Ph.D.

Over a decade ago, Denmark became the first country to implement marriage-like unions for gays. Can the Danish experience teach us anything about our current debate over same sex marriage? If Denmark is any guide, we are in for a long and contentious political battle that ultimately may please no one.

In 1992, Danish sociologist Henning Bech distilled the arguments for and against same-sex registered partnerships in Denmark. Writing in Ken Plummer's book, *Modern Homosexualities*, his words apply with near prophetic accuracy to the situation in today's United States:

"The main argument for the opponents was the dissolution of marriage and the family argument, often bolstered by the religious and technical ones. The main arguments of proponents were those on equality and equal value."

To understand Bech's analysis, we need a brief review. In May 1989, the Danish parliament passed a law establishing registered partnerships. Still the law of Denmark, these partnerships are not quite the equivalent of marriage. Gay registered partners only recently acquired the ability to adopt a partner's child, and are still unable to adopt biologically unrelated children or have children by artificial insemination. Nonetheless, the law was the first of its kind, and other Northern European countries soon followed with similar laws.

In reading Bech's account of the Danish experience, it is quite clear that many of the same pro and con arguments were heard then that we are hearing in the news today.

According to Bech, "the debate consisted in the assertion of two fundamentally opposed sets of principles and values: 'traditionalist' ones on God, nature and the family, versus 'modern ones' on liberty, equality and justice."

Bech observed that conservatives and religionists were lined up on the opposition side and politicians from the "left and centre parties, the national organization of gays and lesbians" and some in the media were lined up on the side favoring registered partnerships.

Even the so-called "conservative" argument advanced recently by columnist Andrew Sullivan was heard in the Danish debate. The Danish version—not unlike the American model — argued that registered partnerships would "strengthen long-term monogamous relationships among homosexuals." However, like the current debate,

Bech noted that such arguments were advanced "only by a few male homosexuals in newspaper articles."

Furthermore, Bech discounted the validity of such arguments by noting the low partnership utilization rates, about 10%, by gay couples in Denmark. The primary argument for registered partnerships in late 1980s Denmark was, as now, based in personal liberty, equality and justice.

What are Bech's observations of these arguments and the Danish situation? Although Bech could hardly be considered a conservative, he seemed to agree with the observation of many — that legal recognition of gay coupling is antithetical to traditional values concerning marriage. To wit, he wrote: "The introduction of 'registered partnerships' in Denmark, then, shows a society where traditionalist principles and values have increasingly lost their power..."

Let that sink in a minute. Speaking as a sociologist, Bech did not lament the demise of traditional values, but rather observed the occurrence as a fact. In fact, in the remainder of his article, he seemed to say the decline of traditionalist values did not really go far enough in Denmark. As evidence, he noted that gay coupling was not really equal with heterosexual marriage, since state church weddings and adoption were excluded as benefits of registered partnerships.

From Bech's perspective, Denmark fostered an alliance of traditional and modern values. The registered partnership law, to be sure, represented a decline in traditionalist values but the fact that adoption and church weddings were saved for straights testified to a society in transformation, in some uneasy middle ground.

I submit that the United States is in a similar place as Denmark pre-1989. Acceptance of gay marriage would represent the near complete decline of traditionalist values, and civil unions would be an effort to wed incompatible worldviews. If Massachusetts and current polls are guides, we may end up with something like Denmark's registered partnerships, a kind of "values stew."

The current scene in Denmark may be prophetic for the U.S. Over the last decade, gay rights groups and the Danish parliament have been in regular battle over adoption and artificial insemination. In our case, if we go the way of civil unions, I suspect the compromise will only give both sides of the cultural divide a chance to breathe before the next battle ensues. ■