

## Preface – Onnen maa (The land of happiness)

In a little over half a century, Finland has become one of the most equitable countries in the world. It is the country with the best life chances for children, and the happiest people. What makes Finland so successful? To what extent is bold social policy key to that success? Or is it because of the growth of a shared belief in the well-being of everyone – and, if so, what role has its recent history played in the rise of that belief? Finland is just as subject to the vicissitudes of globalization and environmental threats as other affluent countries, but today it often confronts these problems better than almost all others and appears to be incredibly robust. We believe that it is time to take a close look at what other countries can learn from Finland.

What drawbacks might there be from so much equality? What are the downsides, if any, to Finntopia? Why haven't more countries achieved what Finland has achieved, and how many have done nearly as well as (or even better than) Finland on one or more aspects of equality – and why? If there are no great disadvantages to the Finnish system, then why don't more people move there or more countries emulate it? Why are there still far-right political parties in a country where life looks – in comparison to the reality for so many people in Britain or the United States – like paradise?

This book begins by acknowledging what almost everyone first mentions: the Finnish winters. And indeed, for many months of the year in Finland, it is very cold. We show that it is not this fact, nor the small size and high homogeneity of Finland's population, that are the underlying reasons for the social

equality that exists in Finland today. In the pages that follow, using a huge range of statistics and sources, we explain why it is not Finland's climate, its demographics or its ethnicity that matter. None of those factors made everything that transpired inevitable. In fact, in many cases these factors have been a hindrance to Finland's economic, social and political development.

Along the way, we hope to debunk several myths about Finland, a country whose history may well surprise our readers. For one thing, its transition to an egalitarian society is relatively recent. Until the very end of the 1960s, its education system was deeply unequal. Greater equality in its schools was only very gradually won after fierce political debates, with a significant number of powerful elected politicians arguing that selectivity and competition were essential to an effective school system and a prosperous society. Finland's overhaul of its formerly elitist educational structure demonstrates that nationwide reforms to some of society's most important institutions are possible. With creative thinking, movement-building and a lot of stubborn perseverance, changes such as these can happen.

From education to housing, political will and perseverance have been crucial in almost all of Finland's milestones in equity, although it is worth noting that even in a country that in parts appears to be utopian, no accomplishments can be taken for granted. The Finnish healthcare system has fallen behind Finland's other achievements and nationwide reform has been ongoing since 2006 (Strömberg 2019). As the chapters to come will show, Finnish society is remarkable for its determination to keep innovating and adapting for the future, even if some attempts produce disappointing outcomes, such as the initial results of a universal basic income experiment carried out in very recent years. Of course, Finland is not utopia – but its people have worked to build a better world with far more rigour and determination than any other nation on the planet.

Most recently, first in 2018, then again in 2019 and now again in 2020, Finland has been proclaimed the happiest nation in the world (Helliwell *et al.* 2019; Martela *et al.* 2020). Interestingly, however, whenever rankings such as these are published, or any of the more than 100 league tables listed in the appendix of this book in which Finland ranks first, second or third out of roughly 200 competitors, many Finns try to explain why Finland doesn't deserve these top spots, and instead highlight the rankings in which it does

not perform especially well. The problems of alcoholism, gambling, depression, and security for women are frequently cited as rebuttals to the argument that there is nothing left for the country to improve. It is clear that Finns still want their nation to become even better, and – more importantly – they believe that it is possible. Finns are also – quietly and remarkably reservedly – very proud any time Finland is mentioned abroad (unless they have just won the Ice Hockey World Championships, when they are neither quiet nor reserved in expressing their pride).

The older generation of Finns, those born during the Second World War, have lived through the immense changes that Finland has experienced as it went from being one of the least developed European countries to eventually becoming one of the most stable and most admired. This change was only possible because the Finnish state invested in its people. When you benefit from being part of the state from birth through childhood, with parents who can take parental leave and afford childcare, and in youth and adulthood you receive free education and universal healthcare, and have the security of knowing you will never have to sleep rough, and in old age you receive a decent state pension upon retirement, you appreciate the true value of the tax taken off your salary.

Finland should be proud of its achievements, but the final third of this book explains that it must not let complacency win. Finns must not let the praise their country now receives go to their heads. Like the rest of the world, Finland must confront the climate emergency, manage the needs of an ageing population, and address the rising inequality within parts of its society. It must also grapple with the challenge of integrating immigrants into its society and the apparently concomitant (but surely not inevitable) rise of right-wing populism.

As an example of how much a single nation can get right, Finland's work toward ending inequality makes it too important to fail, and hopefully it is now too far ahead to flounder. Although there are many other states in the world that are nearly as equal, it is Finland that has travelled the furthest and fastest, despite limited natural resources beyond forests and some minerals, and with no chance event that might have thrust equality upon it. Finland is a beacon for those who think that another world is possible. It allows us to put aside fantasies of what could be built, and look instead at what has

actually been created. Go to Finland and see for yourself, or better still, save the carbon pollution and the airfare, and read the pages that follow.

We did not write this book for people in Finland, although we have talked to a great many Finns and read the works of many more. This is a book for people elsewhere in the world. It is for people who may not believe that what has happened in Finland could also happen in their country. It is especially for British and American readers, whose nations are in the grip of the dire harm that high inequality brings, and the hopelessness that is perhaps the most dangerous economic-inequality outcome of all.

We say little about the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic in this book because, as we write, it is still unfolding. Readers can judge for themselves the extent to which they think Finland was better prepared than almost all of the rest of Europe for when the pandemic struck, and how that contrasts with the preparedness and behaviour of politicians and officials in those affluent countries least like Finland. The Finns are not naturally sheltered from pandemics by their geographical isolation. The influenza pandemic of 1918 ravaged the country, and was one of a series of such past tragedies, as Figure 8.1 in this book illustrates.

Just a century ago, Finns had it worse than almost all other people in Europe. Their success is not a story of having access to resources and using those well, or even of a triumph out of adversity. Finland's achievements were the result of a long, patient slog, and the people of Finland are testament to what can be achieved if and where and when there is the will. Finland offers us an example of what bold policies can produce: policies that put the equality of individuals at their heart, with the aim of building a fairer, happier, more prosperous society. The story of Finland shows that anything is possible.