

Finntopia: Lessons From The World's Happiest Country

Ross: Welcome to Renegade Inc. The league tables that caused plenty of consternation amongst the Western political classes show the Nordic countries constantly top in education, media freedom, lack of corruption, happiness and quality of life. So how did they get there? How do they stay there and why can't we emulate their success?

Ross: Professor Danny Dorling, welcome to Renegade Inc. Always great to have you on the programme. You have written Finntopia and it is, in a sense, an almanac for how to do things properly if you're running a country. Is that a fair depiction of it?

Danny Dorling: That's part of it. How can you get to a position where so much is so much better than it is in places like the UK?

Ross: Finntopia: What We Can Learn from the World's Happiest Country. It's co-written by you and Annika Koljonen. Give us the three bits that really put the lights on when you were writing this with Annika. What was the thing that you thought, you know what, wow!, this has changed me as an author that these are three realisations that I didn't know before I started writing?

Danny Dorling: Just how utterly terrible things were in Finland in 1918, just how divided a society it was - worse than the UK. Just how ridiculously well people are doing now, you know. Even the things we thought they were doing badly on, like suicide rates, have actually improved dramatically. So that was a shock. And then the other thing I learnt was the struggle in the 40s, 50s, 60s, 70s, 80s and 90s. The political decades of struggle when things could have gone in a slightly different direction. It could of just been an average European country. And the amount of effort that went in the right way and also the right wing doing badly, that meant that it got this success now.

Ross: What is the one rebuttal that you hear all the time, quite specifically from one group of people, which is the British right wing? Because when the Nordics are always at the top of every league that you want to be top of, whether it be happiness, media, freedom, equality, education, what's the one thing that you hear all time that irks these people and they think, Oh, I can't all be that good up there?

Danny Dorling: The nasty one I get is racial homogeneity.

Ross: What is that?

Danny Dorling: Oh, these are all white people who are related to each other.

Ross: Dear oh dear.

Danny Dorling: The implication being, Enoch Powell like, if only England was all white.

Ross: That's a degree from eugenics.

Danny Dorling: I get to hear that. That's the thing that really irks. And of course, even Finland is no longer like that because it's had very high rates of immigration and once more because its rate of fertility is so low that if it doesn't get more immigration, it's going to have a problem.

Ross: Aren't we further on from that? Haven't we progressed?

Danny Dorling: Most of us. But there's this small group of eugenicists and you do wonder whether they're a tip of an iceberg of a bigger kind of feeling in Britain that occurs in unequal countries where you're looking for people to blame. What tends to happen in general is that the right wing want to not talk about Nordic countries. I was told recently that there are two countries you can't mention in the Department of Education in London. One is Finland. Just don't mention it. The other interesting one is Scotland.

Ross: Why? Why Scotland?

Danny Dorling: Because Scotland does better for education, and most dramatically....

Ross: Surely, they have triumphed that?

Danny Dorling: Scotland last year only excluded less than five children from secondary schools. We exclude thousands permanently in England. Scotland excludes less than five.

Ross: It's a triumph. You'd trumpet that. You'd say they're getting something right. Let's go out and find out what it is.

Danny Dorling: You don't keep up a position of high inequality and inefficiency and do so as badly as England does by looking at other places and learning from them.

Ross: This is a terrible start. Where are we going with it? Because if we're not willing to learn, we're in trouble, right?

Danny Dorling: Yes. But that should give you reasons for optimism, you know, because if the blinkers are so down, then if you can only open up to see and to realise this actually does work. The Scottish example of education, the fact you do not need to permanently exclude children from schools. And of course, we in England do it at a higher rate than anywhere else in Europe. And simple things of it doesn't keep up discipline.

Ross: It's Victorian mentality.

Danny Dorling: Yes, although you're beginning to see - and this is our reasons for optimism - fairly mainstream politicians talk about excluding from schools being the equivalent of in the 80s we caned children, right? And of course, there are people who wee in favour of keeping children, and they came from one part of the political spectrum. This is why the story never changes, but some things are. I mean, we need to learn from other countries to do things better, which, you know, the Nordic and Scandinavian countries in particular, but you

know, even Scotland, which in so many ways is getting slightly better than England through policies, political policies.

Ross: As a Geographer, you've spent a lot of your time looking at Scandinavia. Why has that area taken your fancy? Why have you spent so much time writing about, thinking about and looking at the Nordics?

Danny Dorling: I've looked at other areas as well. I mean, the other big four European countries - Spain, Italy, France and Germany - are all more equal than the UK. But the Nordics are interesting in that they've managed to keep a position for a length of time, despite the internal worries in the Nordic countries of saying things are going better, worse, whatever, they've actually managed now to hold on for an entire generation to pretty good equality. When it slipped slightly, when inequality rose slightly, say in Finland, it capped again. You know, Finland is at the best level the UK ever got to, which was the same level as Sweden in the 1970s. You can compare Nordic countries. There's just about enough for them, only just, to be able to say, well, why does Finland, say, do better than Norway on this? And it shows you it isn't necessarily about having more money, so you can actually begin to look between them. Where, say, if you take a large country like Germany, it is harder to measure. So I'm interested in comparisons between places and in what is really happening, because constantly people tell you something is impossible, and you go, well, it's happening over there. It's actually happening, you know. It's not theoretical.

Ross: Do you think that one of the most fascinating aspects of this is that the longevity of the statistics? Because we often hear in the UK, if Scotland gets its independence, then it'll go off and it'll be another Denmark, it'll be another Norway. But the point you make is that actually it can do that, but you need generation after generation after generation to keep those norms in place so they become habitual. And then you just keep repeating. As we know, success is about repetition. It's not as simple, is it, to say to other countries like the UK or anywhere else, or Scotland, well, just become independent and then it'll happen overnight?

Danny Dorling: No. I mean, the country I looked at in particular was Finland. So we wrote a book with a sort of slightly jokey title, Finntopia. What we discovered in that - because we were trying to write a book about what's wrong in Finland - the things you think are wrong like too much alcohol, whatever, most of them are getting better. And then much else, of course, isn't wrong. The question is how did Finland manage to get there and the answer is, it took a long time. So the problem for Scotland is, you know, I would go for independence if I was Scottish, but I would assume that only the grandchildren are actually going to benefit. It's going to be a huge struggle. The Scots don't realise just how English they are.

Ross: I tell you our inboxes are going to be absolutely full of comments. Can you imagine? Qualify it.

Danny Dorling: Well, think of the number of private schools in Edinburgh. Think of the inequality in Edinburgh. Yes, that's an English level of inequality. Or Glasgow and the poverty, you know, very, very high by Western European standards. You make Scotland independent and the country it most looks like in Europe suddenly is England.

Ross: And we're back to privilege and postcodes.

Danny Dorling: And the common enemy is no longer London. The enemy suddenly becomes the rich in Scotland versus the lazy poor in Scotland. The SNP can't have a nationalist party anymore when you've got independence. So the SNP goes, split into multiple parties. Hopefully, if the Scots went for independence, they would introduce a voting system which was fair so at least they could have their multiple parties. But then they would have to unravel centuries of privilege and division. What would you do about who's allowed to go to university? What would you do about the lawyers who are paid so much money and live in Newtown? What would you do about the slums on the south side of Glasgow? How do you unravel these things? How do you get to a position, say, to go from Scotland to Finland, where all the schools in Scotland are seen as good?

Ross: They're wicked problems, right?

Danny Dorling: Nobody, well, short of an absolute disaster, short of, you know, Japan losing the Second World War and having two nuclear bombs put on it and the Americans invading, that's been the only circumstances in the last couple of centuries where suddenly equality has come very quickly. Revolutions haven't done it.

Ross: No, exactly, because ultimately those who start revolutions aren't in power when they end, often, and someone else is who just entrenches the monopoly that was there before?

Danny Dorling: Yeah. And we've had enough revolutions to be able to go through, and you don't want catastrophe.

Ross: So how do you do it?

Danny Dorling: By pushing and by two generations of activism. Not just one, two generations.

Ross: Right. Let's wind back and just pick you up at the end of the Second World - Finland - because that's what the book's about. Let's just take the education system. End of the Second World War in Finland, a bunch of adults looked around and there were literally feral kids in the street. Now the Finnish education system now is by a country mile, the best in the world. I don't know what is the second. I think it's Switzerland, but anyway, the point is Finland right up there. When they saw those feral kids running around and said, we've got to do something here because - and this comes back to your multi-generational point - the realisation is if we're going to have a successful country, we're going to have to invest now for a couple of generations time. OK, there were a couple of ups and downs in the 70s and 80s where they got it a bit wrong, but broadly they got it right. Is that as somebody who is concerned with society, where to focus your effort?

Danny Dorling: Where the Finns beat other Nordic countries is by focusing their effort more on the poorest quarter than anything else, partly because they didn't want to leave because nobody was coming. I mean, straight after the war and during the war, one of the first things they did for school children was to introduce free school meals for everybody.

Ross: We're still having that debate in the UK.

Danny Dorling: We're still having that debate. And, even though there are some ups and downs later, people campaigned not to lose that. So they're not called free school meals, of course. They're just called school lunch because if anybody gets it, it's just like having a chair. You know, having to pay for your school meal is as stupid as having to pay for the chair you sit on at school. You have to eat. You know, this doesn't make sense. In Helsinki, they also did meals during the holidays which they've kept since the war. So again, no need for Marcus Rashford and so on. So not losing what you've gained and then arguing to improve all the time. It's ironic, the British want to be number one in the world but over power and money and wealth. The countries that have actually become number one, two and three in the world have done it by wanting to be good and decent to other people in their country.

Ross: Whereas we still have an empire mentality where we rule over those who are lesser.

Danny Dorling: It would make them soft. Our mentality is, if you were nice to people, they'll just stop working. If they're not hungry, they won't try hard enough.

Ross: That's utter rubbish. And we know that Lord of the Flies wasn't a handbook. We actually know that collaboration works way better because it's not pushed by fear.

Danny Dorling: But the British Empire did work by fear. I'm not defending the British Empire.

Ross: You can't. We haven't got it anymore.

Danny Dorling: But those in power in Britain think it was a wonderful thing. And it was the thing made based on fear and subjugating people beneath you. And if that is your model of achievement, the very opposite for the Nordic countries and particularly Finland, which was only ever a colony to several different countries. So the idea of dominating other people in other places as success isn't there. It is very difficult for this island on the west of Europe to begin to get its way out of thinking like that. The first thing that the British have to do is actually realise what they are and where they came from.

Ross: Danny Dorling, welcome back, Renegade Inc. It's really great to have you. Finntopia. You co-wrote it with Annika Koljonen. Is that the right pronunciation? Pitch it to us and tell us why we should read it.

Danny Dorling: Because it's a happy book and you don't get many happy books. Finland about three or four years ago, it's called first, second or third in over 110 international social rankings. You know, best in the world for education, lowest homelessness rates, I could go on and on and on. At the same time about four years ago, it was also ranked as the happiest country in the world. Then it did it again. Then again, then again. Four years in a row, number one. And the interesting question is, why don't people look at the place that does so well? So what Annika and I did is we tried to do two things. One is we tried to work out what doesn't work in Finland - what's so bad in the closest thing we have to utopia.

Ross: What are those things quickly?

Danny Dorling: Those things are, you know, a bit of loneliness.

Ross: Alcoholism?

Danny Dorling: Bit of alcoholism. It's getting better.

Ross: A few guns?

Danny Dorling: Loads of guns.

Ross: Loads of guns? Are they for hunting or....

Danny Dorling: They are for hunting. And they don't kill each other with them.

Ross: They don't?

Danny Dorling: No.

Ross: Helpful.

Danny Dorling: You know things will have to go wrong in Finland to want the guns there.

Ross: So they are the few things that are going wrong. But what are the things going right that you charted in this?

Danny Dorling: Lowest infant mortality rate in the history of the species, maybe the top one. You know, it's oh best work-life balance for everybody from every social group. No matter what your education is, you can choose. It just goes on and on. So then the other thing we did is we tried to work out how on earth do they get this, and we found that it was partly because of a lot of hard work over many decades and may maybe a little bit a chance as well at the right time.

Ross: Danny, we talked in the break about something that you do in your spare time, and I hope you don't mind me bringing it up. You go and give talks, lectures, to schools about inequality in the UK, and your stark message within those talks is that we failed - over to you. When the pupils ask you for a solution you say we failed. So at least you now know the problem. Get on with fixing it. That's broadly it, isn't it?

Danny Dorling: That is my answer, yep.

Ross: There's a few things their. The first thing is that a professor from Oxford shouldn't be standing in front of children in a well-functioning country and explaining inequality should he?

Danny Dorling: We shouldn't need to. It took a lot of work to get inequality onto the agenda.

Ross: Of course. And you've done huge amounts.

Danny Dorling: I've done some but other people did a lot. It just wasn't talked about. In the 80s we weren't allowed to talk about poverty if you got government research money, let alone inequality. And there are people now kind of calling it disparities. So, a lot of work getting on the agenda. Once it's on, then you're asked to talk about it. When you show just how wide the gaps are between people, it is shocking. You think how on earth can people survive like that or how on earth could other people be so profligate with so much. But everybody thinks that they don't have enough. That's the other thing. But in terms of solutions, people have tried, you know. Adults have tried. Progressive people on the left of politics, have tried - created the largest social movements and party membership across the whole of Europe and tried. You know, if it was easy, it would have been done. I also try to tell children to be beware of people telling them that they are fixing the problem. The next stage will be, don't worry about inequality, we've got it down. It requires quite a lot of numeracy to spot if you're being lied to by somebody telling you that they've got a gap down because there are many ways in which a gap can be measured. And people who like inequality like to confuse the issue of what it actually is.

Ross: Overnight, you can't just transpose what the guys in Scandinavia are doing and dump it on the UK. And similarly, we must be getting a few things right that the Scandinavians would take. What are we getting right that the Scandies might want?

Danny Dorling: Well, an advantage of having a huge world empire is that we have had more people from all parts, different parts, of the world here for longer. So if you look at racism, say in London or racism in a remote part of a Scandinavian or Nordic country, you know, you'll probably find more racism in the remote part. But it's not like we didn't go out and conquer the world because we wanted to become a bit more multicultural.

Ross: We liked nicking stuff.

Danny Dorling: Yeah, but then it shows a nice side of human nature that it is quite hard to keep up prejudice when you actually mix and live near people.

Ross: And it's also made us a much richer country insofar as cultural.

Danny Dorling: Yeah, that's the main one.

Ross: So we're good at going around the world and stealing stuff, so we're going to go up and steal some ideas from Scandinavia. What are we going to steal? What are we going to take and either introduce gently or just transpose onto here to try and get these socioeconomic indicators going in the right direction?

Danny Dorling: Yes. I mean, you'd much more likely introduce it gently, but you never know. You know, like there could be an absolute economic catastrophe in which case what is often is done is actually cheaper. They spend less on their education in Finland than we do, you know? So it's more efficient and have the best education system in the world. I would be looking at housing, particularly homelessness. And although we say we're introducing

housing first policies from the Nordic countries actually do it properly and people come who run the housing systems in Finland here and go, why can't you see how we actually do it and copy it rather than just copy the name of the scheme? I would look at Social Security and, you know, nothing goes wrong when you actually give people better Social Security, they don't become lazy.

Ross: It's the myth isn't it to give people a universal basic income and they'll go and spend it in gambling shops and on alcohol. Absolute rubbish. They'll try and better their lot.

Danny Dorling: Yeah, yeah. And they actually become happier and...

Ross: And they can enter into the norms of society. Who knew?

Danny Dorling: Yeah. And in a similar way to the way in which people from Scandinavian and Nordic countries came during the 1960s here to see how you do things that are more progressive because we were doing a very good job at reducing poverty and inequality. You know, we had one of the biggest falls in inequality. We took one of the most divided societies in which a majority of women, the largest jobless work in service in the 20s and took it right through to the swinging sixties. And nobody had a servant anymore. So learning from other places does make sense. And it's partly why Scandinavia and the Nordic countries are so good, because they came and they learnt from the best of equality in places like Britain in the past. You know, those decades that we know in the seventies that are now written off by the right wing who say it was terrible. Well, but you know, that's when people were coming and looking to see how to do things.

Ross: Finish on this. And it's one of the quotes of the beginning of one of the chapters of your excellent book. And it actually comes from the Finnish prime minister, who is the youngest elected prime minister in the world. She's now serving at 34 years old and on the 8th of December 2019, she said I've lived in a welfare state and I'm grateful for how society gave me support in the tough times of my life. What I would venture that you wouldn't become a serving prime minister at 34 if you hadn't have that welfare state to be able to cushion you whilst you do the thinking, reading and learning to be able to do the job.

Danny Dorling: Yeah.

Ross: Why do we go so badly to war on the welfare state in this country when it's created such a positive outcome in Finland?

Danny Dorling: We just don't look there, you know, that's the start. We look, and have looked, to the United States of America as our model.

Ross: Golly gosh!

Danny Dorling: Which, of course, has even worse Social Security and food stamps.

Ross: And arguably, presidents?

Danny Dorling: Yes. Because the USA took over from us as becoming the world leader and the world power. So we looked to them because they must know how to do it. And it would have been so easy in hindsight just to, you know, look the other way. Look up there.

Ross: Go east.

Danny Dorling: Yeah. And Labour politicians, Gordon Brown, would go every summer to Cape Cod to learn how things work in America.

Ross: Tony Blair famously said, you know, don't go back on the Americans, because if you wrong them, it's a long, long, way back.

Danny Dorling: Yeah. So, you know, we have so much of our thinking to undo. You know, it's not just decolonising our curriculum, it's actually learning about which continent we actually are in. You know, and I'm a geographer and that it's kind of we are in Europe, you know, look at it, learn from it, see the different parts of it. Don't go round to look at Singapore or Australia or the US as your model. You've actually got far better models. Not perfect but just.....

Ross: A damn sight better than this.

Danny Dorling: And the highest quality of living that the world has ever known for human beings. You know, it's not that bad, either.

Ross: We've painted a realistic picture. I was going to say bleak. It is bleak, of course, but the picture is realistic. But we've ended by saying, actually, first you have got to diagnose this and then you've got to address the symptoms and then eventually you get to a better place. Are you optimistic?

Danny Dorling: Yes.

Ross: You've got to be a bit more convincing than that.

Danny Dorling: I am. I do find it deeply upsetting the situation that Britain has got itself in at the moment. I've always ever lived here. I was born here and that is upsetting. I'm optimistic because you step back from it and you can now say we are now very sure that there are not superior and inferior human beings. We are now very sure that you can run things collectively and look after everybody. And it's better for everybody. We have had enough decades of this working in various places, whereas if you were in the sixties and seventies, it would be an ideological argument. It would be, you know, this person has written a book about how wonderful things could be. And if only we did this, which you know, might be true, often doesn't work. Whereas seeing it in practise and it also results in low expenditure, high happiness, less CO2 pollution, you know, it is kind of where you want to go. It'll be terrible if it wasn't the case. Now, there will be people listening to this spitting blood saying it's all going to go wrong and don't you know about the three Fins and you know, you've got to keep battling and fighting for it. But the old ideas of different people - gold, silver, bonds - children, you know, they really, really are dying amongst most people

who think and live and experience things. And I'm optimistic that the UK will not be able to cut itself off from ever from that understanding and keep the majority of the population down and living on so little on the grounds that they are supposedly so inferior while lying to them and telling them, Oh, don't worry, tomorrow will be better.

Ross: Jam tomorrow. What you've done. Danny Dorling, is you've created a handbook. Finntopia is a handbook for how we could possibly get out of this mess. Congratulations to both you and Annika Koljanen on writing it. Thank you very much and thanks for your time.

Danny Dorling: Thank you.

Danny Dorling: In a very unequal country like the UK has become, back in the 70s, we were almost as equal to Sweden. In a very unequal country, you have people who actually want it to be unequal. You don't become unequal by accident. You have people who want it to be unequal. You have people who believe there are big differences between human beings that some deserve a lot of money, but most don't. And if you believe that, if you believe that most people are inferior, you have to lie to them. You can't say, I believe most of you are inferior. I've had a very expensive education the baby expensive education. I'm very clever. You need me to rule you and, by the way, because you're inferior, you don't need as much money as me. Because I'm superior, I need country houses and things. You don't say about the people when they have a vote. You lie all the time - year after year after year - to you get to a point where you don't know it's lying anymore because that's how you talk to little people. And that's what happens in a country that becomes more and more a more unequal.