

## **Does Finland appeal to foreign experts?**

– Daryl Taylor\* –

There is a chapter in "Finnish for Foreigners – Book 1" in which some Finnish women are gossiping about their neighbour's daughter Kaisa, who has got engaged to a foreign gentleman. The discussion is a happy one until someone points out that the marriage will take Kaisa away to a foreign country. The obvious sub-text of the story, then, is that it would be smart for this new mixed marriage couple to live somewhere outside of Finland.

Statistics clearly show that this has been the norm for most of the history of Finland as an independent nation. This country has basically been a point of departure for emigrants, particularly those with marketable skills. So in response to that eternally tiring question that the Finns ask: "why did you come to Finland?", the harassed immigrant can always answer "why are YOU still here?"

Mass emigration erodes the self-confidence of a nation, and we sometimes try to pretend that it is somehow an unreal, or at least temporary phenomenon. We speak of the "lost generations" as if they were merely temporarily absent. I think this kind of self-deception also influenced Finland's returnee policy, given the long-standing assumption that people who can't speak the Finnish language and can't even find Finland on a map of Northern Europe may be classified as returnees and given immigration privileges purely because of their biological origin, in other words the ethnic background of their distant ancestors. And I think it's still worth mentioning this self-deception because Russian specialists who have found work in Finland, who are genuinely interested in Finnish culture, and who have even made considerable progress in learning the Finnish language, have run into difficulties getting work permits precisely because local officials claim that "Finland is already full of unemployed Russian engineers".

A lack of national self-confidence also underlies the common belief that foreigners don't come to Finland in order to create anything new or valuable, but to feed on the hard-won achievements of the country's people. Even though it has the lowest population density in Europe, Finland is simply not viewed as a land of opportunity in which an ambitious person might want to live.

Finland has historically remained a country that skilled people leave in search of work. In other words, historically speaking even the Finns have not regarded Finland as a place with any real appeal as a career centre, even for home-grown talent. And this historical baggage makes it quite hard for us to suddenly begin marketing the country in the hope of attracting foreign specialists. Any salesman will tell you how important it is to believe in the product that you are selling, not just when it comes to attracting the impulse-buyer, but especially when you need to secure long-term customer loyalty.

### **Finland from the immigrant's point of view**

A few years ago I was retained to run an occasional course for foreign engineers at Nokia, where we examine the legal status of a migrant worker in Finland from the practical perspective of the individual. More than a hundred of Nokia's foreign engineers permanently stationed in Finland have been involved in this course so far, and it has therefore given me a new opportunity to find

out just what brings these achievers to Finland, and more especially what keeps them here. I have also gained some insight into why they leave the country.

Just as an aside, I'd like to point out something that I think is quite obvious but often forgotten. At least in the case of those of working age, the value of an immigrant to our national economic and cultural life increases over time. The longer the immigrant has lived in Finland, the more valuable he or she becomes. The worst possible situation therefore arises when recently qualified migrant workers come to Finland to make all of their pre-competence blunders, and then head off to other countries to score the most important achievements of their careers. Precisely this was an entirely open way of thinking among many foreign English language teachers in the 1980s before this industry got its own trade union and thereby forced up the standard. There was at least one major international language training business that openly regarded Finland as a place of practical training for freshly qualified teachers. It would be in Finland that these teachers gained their earliest practical experience at the expense of their unfortunate and unknowing Finnish students, while the teacher was waiting for job opportunities to open up in a serious language education market such as that of Italy or Portugal.

I think it can also be taken as read that Indian or Chinese achievers, given the choice, are not going to head for Finland if they have done their homework and their main aim in life is to increase their share of the world's wealth. In fact rather many quickly notice that their net pay and material standard of living fails to match their expectations. On the other hand, these people are by definition not stupid. They know what they pay their taxes for. And my own impression, based on many, many conversations, is that most of them would be quite willing to sign up for the Nordic model of welfare and collective affluence if only it was offered to them.

The actual situation so far has often made the migrant worker pay for that welfare and affluence without benefiting from it. I have continually heard complaints, for example, that even though the pay slip shows that the foreigner has paid an unemployment insurance contribution, actual payment of unemployment benefit during a layoff was denied with reference to something called the "purpose of residing in Finland". Equally shameful is the fact that unemployment benefit funds, both within and outside the trade union movement, are willing to recruit such people as members and take their membership subscription, even though there is no way that they can ever be entitled to claim benefits from the fund. The directors of a private insurance firm selling empty insurance cover like this would certainly wind up behind bars. Nor does the welfare system function consistently, given that a pregnant immigrant may be eligible for free prenatal courses at the local clinic, but then ineligible for a maternity package. We really have to ask how many future Finnish citizens have lost out on certain basic benefits of this kind, given that these are the very things that Finland likes to brag about at international conferences. When it comes to welfare services, then, there is still a lot of truth in the old saying: if you want to know the human rights situation in a country, then you should look at how it treats the foreigners who live there. End of aside.

I would like to stress, however, that given the chance foreign achievers could quite voluntarily sign up to the Nordic model of welfare and affluence, as it really does offer surprisingly good value for money. And now the big advertisement begins: Finland is a country where foreign achievers can let their children walk to a high standard publicly-maintained school without an

escort or bodyguard. It's a country in which the next train leaves sooner than one month next Sunday, even when there is no hope of ticket revenues ever covering the cost of operating the service. It's a country in which the roads have been cleared even before most people even know that it snowed heavily last night. And as a Londoner I can tell you that Finland only ever gets noticeable traffic jams on public holidays, and then only because people are heading for Great Open Spaces, the likes of which only the very wealthy or otherwise very fortunate can ever hope to enjoy in other countries.

Grinding poverty is virtually unknown in this country and the educational standard of the population is very high, both of which give Finland an important measure of political stability. The Finnish trade union movement is a partner in economic and working life, and is not regarded as "the enemy within" to use one of Margaret Thatcher's more notorious expressions. As a political activist I really do appreciate the fact that any sensible reforms that I may propose have a chance of coming to pass in my own lifetime. From a British point of view it is little short of astonishing how much this flexible society is capable of changing to accommodate intelligent and diligently pursued ideas. Finland has a rich cultural life that is worth getting involved in, for example by joining a sports club or starting your own. Even the changeable character of the weather forces us to adopt a healthy flexibility of lifestyle and to organise our lives around the seasons. In a nutshell, Finland is a place where one can enjoy an unusually good quality of life that is far from easy to find in many other countries. Many things that are taken for granted in Finland are actually very hard to secure in other countries at any price.

Obviously I could continue this sales pitch for Finland pretty well indefinitely, but we must also be honest and talk about the downside. The problems faced by immigrants include those of raising bilingual children both at home and at school, all of the various forms in which racial discrimination can arise, acquiring language skills and general psychosocial adjustment. Concerning the various problems of public administration that I mentioned just now, I often find myself advising immigrants to regard these as challenges, as this is the healthiest approach. The immigrant should get involved in the process of eliminating these historical problems from our system. The new Aliens Act is an important step in this direction, and you'll find evidence of lobbying by politically active immigrants in many places in this new law.

For many years now I have furnished migrant workers in Finland with certain Golden Rules to live by. One of the more interesting of these is the advice that an oral refusal from the official sitting behind the glass window is not the end of the matter, but merely the beginning of the challenge. Another piece of advice concerns the emotional adjustment of a foreigner to new surroundings: don't put your life on hold! Your present situation is only temporary if you have a clear idea of where you are going to and when you are leaving. If you don't know when your present circumstances will end, then they are not temporary. This means that if you don't know when you are leaving Finland, then you should behave as an immigrant whose grandchildren will be born in Finland and will live here as ordinary Finnish or Swedish-speaking citizens of Finland. The continual feeling that one's life is on hold is highly damaging, as it prevents a person from adjusting psychologically to what the future holds.

This advice conversely applies to the rest of us. The traditional view has been that there are no immigrants in Finland, and that any foreigner that you may encounter is a tourist or other invited

guest who is only staying temporarily. This is a basic assumption and attitude that must change if Finland is to become a genuinely attractive destination for immigrants. It has to be a rule of thumb that the foreigner in Finland is a permanent immigrant unless there is concrete evidence to the contrary (a camera round the neck and a map in the hand is a good give-away). The fact of that permanence must be respected both by allowing foreigners to enjoy the social benefits that they need and also by requiring them to contribute to the society according to their ability. This is a matter of both administrative and psychological adjustment for society as a whole.

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