

Jailing Former Immigration Minister: Denmark's Inger Støjberg

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*It's not the sort of thing you encounter regularly. A member of a government cabinet, responsible for arguably one of the country's most important portfolios, found both wanting and culpable for their actions after leaving their post. But this is what former Danish immigration minister **Inger Støjberg** found when she was convicted for illegally separating asylum seeking couples arriving in the country.*

A Danish court of impeachment, [in finding](#) the former minister guilty for intentionally neglecting her duties under the Ministerial Responsibility Act, sentenced her to 60 days in prison. Of the 26 members of the court, only one found for the ex-minister.

It was only the third time since 1910 that a politician has been referred to the impeachment court. The last was in 1993, when former Conservative justice minister **Erik Ninn-Hansen** [faced proceedings](#) for illegally halting the family reunification of Tamil refugees in 1987 and 1988.

Interest in the proceedings centred on an order the ex-minister issued in 2016, which directed that if a member of a married couple were underage, they should be separated and housed in separate centres. This was irrespective of whether they had children. At the time, Støjberg [argued](#) that the measure was necessary to protect “child brides”. “They have to be separated,” the then minister [told](#) the Danish Broadcasting Corporation,

“because I will not accept that in my system there could be examples of coercion.”

Some 23 couples [were mandatorily separated](#) by the Danish Immigration Service without an individual examination of their circumstances. One couple, a 17-year-old pregnant woman and her 26-year-old husband, filed a complaint with the Danish Parliament’s ombudsman, [who found](#) the separation to be illegal.

The impeachment court also found the policy to be unlawful and a breach of European human rights law as the arrangement did not include exceptions and individual assessments by the immigration service.

Ministers tend to find such intrusions of the law into their discretion disconcerting. Were executive power to be curtailed by such legal actions, firm, tearless decisions would be hard to make. When the trial commenced, Støjberg [was confident](#) that the Court members would see good sense. “I know exactly what I said and did. That is why we are seeking an acquittal.” So confident was she of the outcome that the conviction [came as something](#) of a shock. “It’s the only scenario I had not prepared for because I thought it was completely unrealistic.”

Støjberg was [quick on the draw](#) regarding the principles which she followed in making her decision. “I think it wasn’t just me that lost today, it was Danish values that lost today.” (Every political figure found fouling the law is bound to hide behind a set of values.) If, she said, she “had had to live with the fact that I had not protected these girls – that would actually have been worse than this.”

The values game is always precarious and immigration ministers claiming to protect the vulnerable are rarely trustworthy sorts. Scratch the surface, and you are bound to find a sadistic reactionary. For Støjberg, it meant adopting a line against the swarthy hordes seeking sanctuary in Europa’s bosom populist, anti-immigration figures found attractive. Between 2015 and 2019, she served in a centre-right government bolstered by the support of the anti-immigration Danish People’s Party and presided over 110 amendments restricting the rights of foreigners. Memorably crass, she celebrated the passage of the fiftieth restriction on immigration with a cake.

Amongst those measures was the [“Jewellery law”](#), a stipulation that asylum seekers surrender their jewellery and cash above 10,000 kroner to help fund their stay in Denmark. The Ministry of Immigration guidelines made modest concessions: wedding rings or engagement rings were to be left untouched, though individual officers could determine what sentimental value was attached to others.

Like her counterparts in other countries, Støjberg sought to place unwanted and undesirable arrivals on a remote island – Lindholm – a plan that raised eyebrows in the United Nations. While the facility was intended to detain foreign nationals convicted of crimes and set for deportation, UN Human Rights chief Michelle Bachelet [warned](#) about “the negative impact of such policies in isolation, and (they) should not replicate these policies. Because depriving them of their liberty, isolating them, and stigmatising them will only increase their vulnerability.”

Støjberg, self-proclaimed protector of child brides, was [merely contemptuous](#) of such concerns. “I’m quite impressed that you can sit in New York and comment on a deportation centre when not a single shovel has yet touched the ground, and when we have clearly said

that we will stay within the conventions we are signed up to.”

The modern immigration minister has become a plain clothes member of the country’s police force. Suspicion is preferable over charity. Judgment comes before understanding. Separating families, tormenting parents and children, are not infrequent things. But in all fairness to Støjberg, her measures did not lack parliamentary approval and degrees of public support. Not only was she encouraging cruelty, she also being encouraged to be cruel.

Indeed, Denmark’s harsh refugee policy is being further developed under the guidance of the centre-left Social Democrats, [who have adopted](#) some of the world’s harshest refugee policies. Recently, [an agreement](#) barring foreigners with suspended sentences from ever becoming Danish citizens was struck by the government with right-wing parties.

In June, Parliament gave the government [a mandate](#) to establish an internment camp system outside European borders to process asylum-seeker claims. “If you apply for asylum in Denmark, you know that you will be sent back to a country outside Europe, and therefore we hope that people stop seeking asylum in Denmark,” [warned](#) government spokesman Rasmus Stoklund.

The [smug view expressed](#) by such papers as *Politiken*, that no minister is above the law, ignores the point that Støjberg became a post girl for reaction, a model emulated rather than dismissed. Had she tinkered more with her “child brides” order, conditioning it with less severity, she may never have faced the impeachment court.

Immigration ministers in other countries should take note but the lessons of this case are unlikely to be learned in Australia.

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