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I grew up learning that the Scandinavian countries had it all figured out. Universal health care, education for little to nothing, or even getting paid to go to school. It seemed like a dream-like place to be. After spending twenty-five days in Scandinavia, I can say that, although Sweden does indeed have most of it “figured out”, there is always more progress to be made. Throughout my time in Sweden, numerous things caught my attention, from the smallest road sign to large-scale legislation, that surprised and impressed me. My amazement of Sweden began when I stepped off the airplane at midnight to find a light blue sky above my head. Of course, this is not controlled by the Swedish people, nor is it an indication of any sort of social advancements, but the awe I felt was a very appropriate first impression.

One of Sweden’s accomplishments that struck me was that of the Indigenous population’s projected life span compared to non-Indigenous people. In Canada, the Indigenous population, on average, has a lifespan that is 7 years shorter than non-Indigenous people. In Australia, the difference rises to 17 years. Meanwhile, in Sweden, there is no gap. This may be because, in Sweden, Swedes are largely all considered the same. Instead of addressing health care based on race or ethnicity or any sort of classification, every Swede is considered just that and only that: a Swede. This seemingly simple, straight-forward concept allows all people to receive the same coverage and benefit from the same social programs. Of course, this directly contrasts with the separate provincial/federal control of Indigenous and non-Indigenous individuals in Canada. Despite Sweden’s apparent advancement in this domain, Miguel, a researcher at the University of Umea, remains deeply frustrated by the amount of progress he

feels needs to happen. Even though every Swede has health care and free education, there remains a disparity in health between those of lower socioeconomic status and lower education. While Miguel sees this problem as a big one, we as Canadians were shocked that this problem was one of the most worrisome in Sweden. Not only was this surprising from a Canadian's standpoint, but it was even more impressive from an American's. In Vermont, countless people worry about merely affording health care, with hopes of one day finding a job that provides health insurance. People in Sweden don't need to worry about affording proper care. This idea helped me realize the potential growth and change that should and must occur at home.

As I spent more time in Sweden, I started to see little glimpses of the system that were not as perfect as they originally seemed. Despite the benefits of Indigenous and non-Indigenous individuals being treated the same, Swedes report having less knowledge of Indigenous culture compared to other countries. Although this is certainly a problem, recognizing the two groups of people as different can lead to marginalization and exaggeration of differences as we see today in Canada and Australia.

Some people believe that the rules in Sweden are too strict, with limited space for self-expression or freedom. (Although I do have to mention that one individual who complained about this to us was frustrated that only five people were allowed in her car at once.) I also spoke with a woman who told me she didn't like living in a town with a university because it was a drain on town funding. With free education and social programs, there must be an unspoken agreement to willingly participate in sharing the wealth, especially when income taxes can reach around 55%. One of the most important things I understood while in Sweden was that no matter what is accomplished or how much progress is made, there will always be room for improvements with contrasting opinions. Although this is true around the globe, I feel that these

opinions and feelings are shared more appropriately in Sweden compared to Canada or the United States.

The respectful, considerate nature of the Swedes is embedded deeply in their society. A simple example of this is the cleanliness of not only the streets, but also the buildings, the yards, and even the cars. At first, I thought the cleanliness was related to rural northern Sweden. I was surprised to find Stockholm, a city of 950,000 people, to be just as tidy. There is also an expectation to follow the rules, to respect guidelines, and to contribute for the betterment of society. One of the highlight of my time in Stockholm was my visit to the Parliament, largely because it explained so much about how and why Sweden is so advanced, especially in social programs. A few things in particular caught my attention. In the gathering place of all the government representatives, individuals of opposing parties sit directly side by side. When voting, each representative's answers are placed on a board in the front of the room for everyone to see. Each meeting is also completely open to the public and is broadcasted on television and, when it adjourns, the representatives often share a meal. In terms of citizen participation, Sweden has a 87% voting rate. All Swedes are automatically registered to vote when they are of age through their personal identity number, or the Swedish equivalent of the social insurance number. Maybe it's because I live in the United States where the voting rate for the last election was 61.4%, but the dedication to social engagement and accountability was astonishing to me. I cannot imagine all of the politicians from home casually sharing a meal together or remaining civil enough to sit side by side. Learning the policies and political system while in Sweden from Swedes themselves allowed me to truly see and begin to understand how the country functions.

In addition to the knowledge I gained by talking with the local people and taking tours, I also learned an incredible amount from the Free Range conference I attended. My biggest

“lightbulb moments” occurred when I realized that the things I consider normal are only normal because I grew up in a small, rural community in Vermont. One day, the Free Rangers were discussing recruitment and retention of physicians in rural areas. It was not until that conversation that I realized the primary reason my family moved to the United States was actually because of a recruitment/retention initiative. As I continued reflecting, I realized the “locums” my parents work with are not common in all hospitals, or that being an hour away from a hospital with a surgeon is not “normal”. I also realized that, although locum positions do help recruit physicians, they are not very successful in retaining them. The comparisons between home and Sweden continued as the conference progressed, and even after when I had the chance to travel to Denmark and Iceland. By having conversations about rural and remote communities with individuals who were also from rural and remote places, I realized that the problems we face are largely the same, even though we live on opposite sides of the globe.

Free Range changed the way I look at rural and remote communities. Instead of seeing our areas of the world as the “middle of nowhere”, I began to realize that, in fact, the only reason we consider our areas of the world to be any lesser is because that is society’s perception that we are perpetuating. I grew up expecting, and almost always receiving, a phrase of condolence when I say we don’t have a movie theater or we only have three restaurants in my town. After experiencing Storuman and having such meaningful conversations with others, I have come to realize that, although we may not have access to everything as they do in cities, people from rural areas have an incredibly different outlook than those who grow up in metropolitan areas. I was lucky to grow up in a place where campfires and s’mores meant summer or where going to the mountain to ski was a common weekend activity. I find comfort that others feel the same way

I do and am now motivated more than ever to continue fostering my love for rural areas and working to improve access to services and care.

While speaking with Free Range members, I had the opportunity to engage in active conversations with genuine, like-minded individuals. I appreciate the opportunities I've been given that have allowed me to have a broader sense of the world. I know I have to learn a whole lot more in order to contribute in any way, but I look forward to continuing to expand my knowledge and perception of different issues, especially those related to rural and remote communities.