

History of Denmark

Country
Denmark

Capital
Copenhagen

Location
Northern Europe, bordering the Baltic Sea and the North Sea, on a peninsula north of Germany (Jutland); also includes two major islands (Sjaelland and Fyn)

Size
43,094 sq km

Terrain
low and flat to gently rolling
plains

Climate
temperate; humid and overcast; mild, windy
winters and cool summers

Languages
Danish, Faroese, Greenlandic (an Inuit
dialect), German (small minority)

Nationality
noun: Dane(s)
adjective:
Danish

Religion
Evangelical Lutheran 95%, other Protestant
and Roman Catholic 3%, Muslim 2%

Currency
Danish krone (DKK)

Exports
machinery and instruments, meat and meat
products, dairy products, fish, chemicals, furniture, ships, windmills

History of Denmark

Ancient Denmark

People lived in what is today Denmark more than 100,000 years ago, but they were likely forced to leave for a time because of the ice cap that covered the land for some of the intervening time during the ice age. It is thought that people have lived continually in Denmark since around 12,000 BC. Agriculture made inroads around 3,000 BC. The Nordic Bronze Age period in Denmark was marked by a culture which buried its dead, with their worldly goods, beneath burial mounds. Many dolmens and rock tombs (especially "passage graves") date from this period. Among the many bronze finds from this period are beautiful religious artifacts and musical instruments, and the earliest evidence of social classes and stratification.

During the Pre-Roman Iron Age (500 BC - 1 AD), the climate in Denmark and southern Scandinavia became cooler and wetter, limiting agriculture and setting the stage for native groups to migrate southward into Germania. At around this time, people began to extract iron from the ore in peat bogs. Evidence of strong Celtic cultural influence dates from this period in Denmark and much of northwest Europe, and is reflected in some of the older place names.

The Roman provinces, whose frontiers stopped short of Denmark, nevertheless maintained trade routes and relations with Danish peoples, attested by finds of Roman coins. About AD 200 the first runic inscription appeared. Depletion of cultivated land in the last century BC seems to have contributed to increasing migrations in northern Europe and increasing conflict of Teutonic tribes with Roman settlements in Gaul. Roman artifacts are especially common in finds from the first century AD. It seems clear that some part of the Danish warrior aristocracy served in the Roman army.

Occasionally people were killed and thrown in bogs during this time. They are known as bog bodies. Today these people are uncovered very well preserved and are valuable resources of information about the people who lived in Denmark during this period.

The Germanic Iron Age

The material culture of northern Europe during the mass migrations of the 5th-7th centuries is referred to as the Germanic Iron Age. Among the most well-known remains from the period are the "peat bog corpses," among those the well-preserved bodies of two men deliberately strangled.

Middle ages

Earliest literary sources

Widsith and Beowulf and by later Scandinavian writers, notably Saxo Grammaticus (c. 1200) provide some of the earliest descriptions of Danish culture. Much is mythical and legendary. Like Homer an earlier culture is described imperfectly from a later perspective. However, they may contain some historical facts.

Vikings

People who became known as Vikings inhabited much of Denmark for several hundred years from the 8th to the 11th century AD. They had a more complicated social structure than most previous societies to inhabit the areas and became famous for raiding and trading throughout the rest of Europe.

During the Viking period, Denmark was a great power based on the Jutland Peninsula, the Island of Zealand, and the southern part of what is now Sweden. In the early 11th century, King Canute united Denmark and England for almost 30 years.

Christianity and the establishment of Denmark

Various petty kingdoms existed throughout the area now known as Denmark for many years. It is thought that around 980, Harold Bluetooth established a unified kingdom of Denmark. Around the same time, he was visited by a German missionary who, according to legend, survived an ordeal by fire, which convinced Harold to convert to Christianity. The new religion, which replaced the old Norse mythology, had many advantages for the king. Christianity brought with it some support from the Holy Roman Empire. It also allowed the king to dismiss many of his opponents who were adherents to the old mythology. The church would bring a stable administration to his lands that he could hopefully use to exercise some control over them.

After the death of Canute the Great in 1035, England broke away from Danish control and Denmark fell into disarray for some time. Vikings from Norway raided Denmark sporadically. Canute's nephew Sweyn Estridson (1020-1074) re-established strong royal authority and built a good relationship with the Archbishop of Bremen, who was at that time the Archbishop of all of Scandinavia.

In the early 12th century Denmark became the seat of an independent church province of Scandinavia. Not long after that, Sweden and Norway formed their own archbishoprics free of Danish control. The mid 12th century was a difficult time for the kingdom of Denmark. Civil wars rocked the land and created much strife. Eventually, Valdemar the Great (1131-82), gained control of the kingdom, stabilizing it and reorganizing the administration. He and Bishop Absalon rebuilt the country. During Valdemar's reign, a castle was built in the village of Havn, leading eventually to the foundation of Copenhagen, the modern capital of Denmark. They built Denmark into a major power in the Baltic Sea, which competed with the Hanseatic League, the Counts of Holstein, and the Teutonic Knights for trade, territory, and influence throughout the Baltic. Valdemar and his successors launched various 'crusades' to claim territories, notably modern

Estonia. Legend has it that the Danish flag, the Dannebrog fell from the sky during a battle in Estonia in 1219.

The Middle ages saw a period of close cooperation between the crown and the church. Thousands of churches were built throughout the country during that time. The economy expanded during the 12th century, based mostly on the lucrative herring trade, but the 13th century was a period of difficulty and the temporary collapse of royal authority.

Difficulties for the kings

The kings of Denmark had difficulty maintaining their control of the kingdom in the face of opposition from the nobility and the church. There was an extended period of strained relations between the crown and the Popes of Rome known as the "archiepiscopal conflicts". By the late 13th century, royal power had waned, and the nobility forced the king to grant a charter, considered Denmark's first constitution. A weakened Denmark was a great benefit to both the Hanseatic League and the Counts of Holstein. The Holstein Counts gained control of large portions of Denmark because the king would grant them fiefs in exchange for money to finance their operations. Consequently, by the 1320s the king was largely bound by the wishes of these counts, who by then owned most of Denmark.

The kingdom continued to fall apart; the territory of Scania passed for a while to the King of Sweden. In 1340 the throne fell to Valdemar Atterdag, or "New Day." He was a skilled politician and was able to reunite the old kingdom of Denmark by turning the counts against each other. The Black Death, which came to Denmark during these years, also aided his campaign. His continued efforts to expand the kingdom after 1360 brought him into open conflict with the Hanseatic League. He conquered Gotlandia, much to the displeasure of the League, since Visby, an important trading town, was located there. Their alliance with Sweden to attack Denmark was initially a fiasco since Danish forces captured a large Hanseatic fleet, and ransomed them back for an enormous sum. Luckily for the League the Jutland Nobles revolted against the heavy taxes levied to fight the expansionist war in the Baltic; the two forces worked against the king, forcing him into exile in 1370. For several years, the Hanseatic League controlled the fortresses on "the sound" between Scania and Zealand.

Margaret and the Kalmar Union

Margaret I was the daughter of Valdemar Atterdag. She was married to Håkon VI of Norway in an attempt to join the two kingdoms, along with Sweden, since Håkon was related to the Swedish royal family. Originally her son, Olaf III was intended to rule the three kingdoms, but due to his early death she took on the role. During her life, the three kingdoms of Denmark, Norway, and Sweden (including the Faroe Islands, as well as Iceland, Greenland, and present-day Finland) were unified under her capable rule, in what was called the Kalmar Union, made official in 1397.

Her successor, Eric of Pomerania, lacked his predecessor's skill and was directly responsible for the breakup of the Kalmar Union. However, there was still some enthusiasm for the idea, so when Christopher of Bavaria, a distant relative came to the throne, he managed to be elected in all three kingdoms, briefly reuniting Scandinavia. The Swedish nobility grew increasingly unhappy with Danish rule and the union soon became merely a legal concept with little practical application. In the early 16th century, Christian II came to power. He is quoted as saying, "If the hat on my head knew what I was thinking, I would pull it off and throw it away." This is apparently in reference to his devious and machiavellian political dealings. He had conquered Sweden in an attempt to reinforce the union, and had about 100 leaders of the Swedish anti-unionist forces, as well as many ordinary citizens, women, and children killed in what came to be known as the Stockholm Bloodbath. The bloodbath continued during the following months in other parts of the country, with about 500 more killed, and it destroyed any lingering hope of Scandinavian union.

In the aftermath of Sweden's definite secession from the Kalmar Union in 1521, civil war and Protestant Reformation followed in Denmark and Norway. When things had settled down, the Privy Council of Denmark was weakened, and that of Norway was abolished. The two kingdoms were joined in personal union, known as Denmark-Norway. Norway kept its separate laws and some institutions, such as a royal chancellor, and separate coinage and army. Being a hereditary kingdom, Norway's status as separate from Denmark was important to the royal dynasty in its struggle to win elections as kings of Denmark. The two kingdoms remained tied until 1814.

Early Modern

Reformation

The Reformation, which originated in Germany from the ideas of Martin Luther, had a strong impact on Denmark; today the national Church of Denmark is Lutheran. The Reformation was introduced in Denmark in 1536. As elsewhere in Europe, the spread of protestantism was made possible by the powerful combination of popular enthusiasm for the

reform of the church and the enthusiasm of the government for the opportunity for increased independence from Rome. No small incentive for independence from Rome involved seizure of Church lands by the King. In Denmark this increased royal revenues by 300%.

There was widespread dissatisfaction with the established Roman church and in the early 1530s the people were incited to attack monasteries and churches. When Frederick I died in 1533, a council of Bishops took control of the country and refused to allow the election of Christian III whom they feared would welcome Lutheranism. Armed opposition from nobles and the mayor of Lübeck forced them to accept Christian as king, and sure enough, church lands were soon confiscated (to pay for the armies that had enforced his election) and priests were forced to convert their allegiance to Lutheranism. Denmark quickly became part of the heartland of Lutheranism. The seventeenth century became a period of strict Lutheran orthodoxy in Denmark; teachings suspected of representing either Calvinism or the teachings of Huldrych Zwingli were harshly punished.

Early Modern politics

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Enlarge

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Denmark grew wealthy during the sixteenth century, largely because of the increased traffic through the Øresund which they were able to tax because Denmark controlled both sides of the Sound. The grain trade from Poland to the Netherlands and the rest of Europe grew enormously at this time, and the Danish Kings were not hesitant to cash in on it.

The Danish economy benefited from the Eighty Years' War in the Netherlands because a large number of skilled refugees from that area, the most economically advanced in Europe, came to Denmark. This helped to modernize many aspects of society and established trade links with the Netherlands.

Denmark was a relatively powerful kingdom at this time. European politics of the sixteenth century revolved largely around the struggle between Catholic and Protestant forces, so it was almost inevitable that Denmark, a strong, unified Lutheran kingdom, would get drawn into the larger war when it came. The Thirty Years' War went badly for the protestant states in the early 1620s, and Denmark was called on to "save the protestant cause". Embarrassingly for Christian IV, the Danish military intervention in Germany was a fiasco; worse still, Sweden later intervened with greater success.

Christian IV is nevertheless widely remembered as one of the great kings of Denmark. He had a very long reign, from 1588 to 1648, and is known as the architect on the Danish throne because of the large number of building projects he undertook. Many of the great buildings of Denmark were constructed during his reign.

After his death, Denmark waged a disastrous war against Sweden. An abnormally cold winter allowed Swedish troops to cross the sound on the ice and attack Copenhagen directly. The peace in 1658 ceded three of Denmark's richest provinces, Scania, Halland, and Blekinge, to Sweden under the terms of the Treaty of Roskilde.

Absolutism

As a result of the disaster in the war against Sweden, King Frederick III was able to convince the nobles to give up some of their powers and their exemption from taxes, leading to the era of absolutism in Denmark.

The Danish diet was suspended, disappearing for a couple of centuries. During this time power was increasingly centralized in Copenhagen. The government was reorganized in a much more hierarchical manner, built around the king as a focal point of administration. Crown officials dominated the administration, as well as a new group of bureaucrats, much to the dismay of the traditional aristocracy which saw their influence curtailed even further.

The administration and laws were modernized during this period. In 1683 all the old provincial laws were standardized and collected in the Danske lov 1683.

Other initiatives included the standardization of all weights and measures throughout the kingdom, and an agricultural survey and registry. This survey allowed the government to begin taxing land owners directly, allowing it to move beyond dependence on revenue from crown lands.

The population of Denmark rose steadily through this period, from 600,000 in 1660, after the loss of territory to Sweden,

to 700,000 in 1720. By 1807 it rose to 978,000.

Attempts to diversify the economy away from agriculture failed. During this period very little industry existed, except for a very small amount in Copenhagen (pop. 30,000). In the late 17th century a small amount of industry did develop catering to the army. The primary export market was the Netherlands. The nobility of the country counted only about 2000, but owned about half the land in the country.

Rural administration was, however, still carried out primarily by the large landholders and a few law enforcement officials. In 1733 adscription was introduced, tying rural labourers to the place that they were born. They could not leave the estate they were born on without the permission of the landowner. Theoretically this was to organize the militia but it also provided cheap labour. Adscription was abolished in 1788 at the initiative of the new more liberal bourgeois class centred in Copenhagen.

In the late 18th century extensive agricultural reforms were executed. The old open-field system was abolished, and many smaller farms were amalgamated into larger ones.

Throughout the 18th century, the Danish economy did very well, largely on the back of expanded agricultural output due to expanded demand across Europe. Danish trading ships also traded around Europe and the north Atlantic, venturing to new Danish colonies in the Caribbean and north Atlantic.

New propriety, and Enlightenment ideas became popular among the middle classes of Denmark. A result was an increased interest in personal liberty. Censorship, which had existed through the 17th and 18th centuries was relaxed for the last 15 years of the 18th century. At the same time, a sense of Danish nationalism began to develop. Hostility increased against Germans and Norwegians present at the royal court. A pride in the Danish language and culture increased, and eventually a law was passed banning "foreigners" from holding posts in the government. Antagonism between Germans and Danes increased from the mid eighteenth century on.

Colonialism

Denmark maintained a number of colonies outside Scandinavia starting in the 17th century lasting until the 20th century. Denmark had colonies in Greenland and Iceland in the north Atlantic held through the union with Norway. Christian IV first initiated the policy of expanding Denmark's overseas trade, as part of the mercantilist wave that was sweeping Europe. Denmark's first colony was established at Tranquebar, or Trankebar, on India's southcoast in 1620. In the Caribbean Denmark started a colony on St Thomas in 1671, St John in 1718, and purchased Saint Croix from France in 1733. Denmark also maintained its colony, Tranquebar, in India, as well as several other smaller colonies there, for about two hundred years. The Danish East India Company operated out of Tranquebar. During its heyday, the Danish and Swedish East India Company imported more tea than the British East India Company - and smuggled 90% of it into Britain, where it could be sold at a huge profit. Both East India Companies folded over the course of the Napoleonic Wars. Other colonies, forts, and bases were maintained in west Africa, primarily for the purpose of slave trading.

19th century

Napoleonic Wars

Denmark's robust economy was shattered by the expenses and losses of the Napoleonic wars. Denmark had allied with France and had faced several attacks from the British. The British fleet attacked Copenhagen in 1801 (Battle of Copenhagen (1801)) which led to Denmark allying with the French. In 1807 the British fleet bombarded Copenhagen again, which caused considerable civilian hardship. They captured the Danish fleet and brought it back to Britain, leading to the Gunboat War.

Norway was transferred from the Danish to the Swedish crown by the Treaty of Kiel in 1814, as a reward to Sweden which had chosen the victorious side. But the Norwegians revolted, declared their independence, and elected crown prince Christian Frederick (the future Christian VII) as king. After a brief war with Sweden, he was forced to abdicate in order to preserve Norwegian autonomy, in a personal union with Sweden.

During this period Denmark was literally bankrupt. Merchants fled, and the general population suffered a period of general deprivation. Interestingly, this period is also known as "the Golden Age" of Danish intellectual history. Literature, painting, sculpture, and philosophy all underwent an unusually vibrant period. Hans Christian Andersen, Kierkegaard, Thorvaldsen, and Grundtvig were all active during this period.

Nationalism and liberalism

The Danish liberal and national movements gained momentum in the 1830s, and after the European revolutions of 1848 Denmark became a constitutional monarchy on June 5, 1849. The growing bourgeoisie demanded a share in government, and in an attempt to avert the bloody revolutions that were occurring elsewhere in Europe, Frederick VII gave in to the demands of the citizens. A new constitution was drawn up dividing powers and granting franchise to all adult males. The king was made head of the executive branch, which was complemented by a legislative branch consisting of two parliamentary chambers; the Folketing, consisting of members elected by the general population, and the Landsting, whose members were elected by landowners. An independent judiciary was also set up. In 1845, the Danish colony of Tranquebar in India was sold to Britain.

The Danish king's realm did still consist of four parts: the islands and Jutland, which together constituted the kingdom, and then the duchies Schleswig and Holstein, which were in personal union with the kingdom. Since the early 18th century, and even more so from the early 19th century, the Danes had got used to viewing the duchies and the kingdom as increasingly unified in one state. This was, however, not the view of the German majority in the duchies, who had also been enthused by the liberal and national movements leading to a movement known as Schleswig-Holsteinism. They aimed for independence from Denmark. The First War of Schleswig was ignited by the constitutional change of 1849 and ended with status quo only thanks to the intervention of Britain and other Great Powers. There was much debate in Denmark as to how to deal with the question of Schleswig-Holstein. National-Liberals demanded that Schleswig be permanently tied to Denmark, but Holstein could do as it pleased. However, international events overtook domestic Danish politics, and Denmark was confronted with war against Prussia and Austria in 1864, in what came to be known as the Second War of Schleswig. The territories had become pawns in Otto von Bismarck's larger political ambitions. Denmark was forced to cede all of Schleswig-Holstein to Prussia and adopt a policy of neutrality.

The war was deeply traumatic for Denmark as a nation, forcing it to reconsider its place in the world. The loss of Schleswig-Holstein was the last in a long series of territorial defeats for the once large kingdom of Denmark. Many of the richest areas of the kingdom, in Sweden and Germany had been lost, so the nation focused on developing the poorer areas of the country. Extensive agricultural improvements were undertaken in Jutland, and a new form of nationalism, which emphasized the "small" people, the decency of rural Denmark, and the shunning of wider aspirations, was fostered.

The two concepts internationalism and nationalism have been very much part of the history of the Danish labour movement.

The labour movement gathered momentum when the social issue came to be associated with internationalism. Socialist theory and the organisational contact to 1st Internationale, which was a union of labour movements in various countries, paved the way. The driving force was Louis Pio. In 1871 following the bloody defeat of the Paris Commune he started publishing Socialist Papers. Here he campaigned strongly for an independent organisation of the workers under their own management, and organised a Danish branch of the Internationale. This proved to be the foundation stone for the Social Democratic Party under the name of Den Internationale Arbejderforening for Danmark (The International Labour Association for Denmark). It was a combination of union and political party, and adroitly brought together national and international elements.

Pio stated that the workers' fight had to be international, if they were to succeed at all - without internationalism, no progress. He went on to point out that the middle-classes cooperated across the frontiers and used nationalistic rhetoric as a weapon against the workers and their liberation.

The Danish section started organising strikes and demonstrations for higher wages and social reforms. Moderate demands, but enough to provoke the employers and the forces of law and order. Things came to a head in the Battle of Fælled on the 5th May 1872, where the three leaders Louis Pio, Poul Geleff and Harald Brix were arrested, charged and sentenced for high treason.

The three left Denmark for America to create the ill-starred and short-lived Socialist colony near Hays City, in Ellis county Kansas. It was begun and ended in 1877. The leaders were Louis Albert Francois Pio, Paul Geleff, and W. A. Hansen. The Socialists who had been forced, or at least found it advisable, to leave Denmark. There were eighteen colonists, some married and some single. They at once set to work to build a log cabin with separate apartments for the married and the unmarried. Tools and stock were purchased. The men worked "like hell." The women quarreled. And the naked prairie--save for an abundance of buffalo bones, rattlesnakes, prairie dogs, owls and an occasional soldier--seemed so unresponsive to the demands for a better social order, that the colonists could stand it no longer than six weeks. The property was then sold and the proceeds divided among the colonists, netting each some thirty dollars.

Back in Denmark, the emerging political situation made possible by the new constitution was quite alarming for many of the existing elites since it inevitably empowered the peasantry. Simple men with little education replaced professors and professionals in positions of power. The peasants, in coalition with liberal and radical elements from the cities, eventually won a majority of seats in the Folketing. Even though there had been constitutional changes to empower the Landsting, the Left Venstre Party demanded to form the government, but the king, still the head of the executive branch, refused. A

constitutional crisis ensued, which was ended in 1901 by the introduction of parliamentary government. It was decided that no government could rule against the wishes of a parliamentary majority.

Monetary Union

The Scandinavian Monetary Union was a monetary union formed by Sweden and Denmark on May 5, 1873 by fixing their currencies against gold at par to each other. Norway, which was in union with Sweden entered the union two years later, in 1875 by pegging its currency to gold at the same level as Denmark and Sweden (.403 grams [1]). The monetary union was one of the few tangible results of the Scandinavist political movement of the 19th century.

The union provided fixed exchange rates and stability in monetary terms, but the member countries continued to issue their own separate currencies. Even if it was not initially foreseen, the perceived security led to a situation where the formally separate currencies were accepted on a basis of "as good as" the legal tender virtually throughout the entire area.

The outbreak of World War I, in 1914 brought an end to the monetary union. Sweden abandoned the tie to gold on August 2, 1914 and without a fixed exchange rate the free circulation came to an end.

Twentieth century

Early 20th century

In the early decades of the 20th century the new Radical Party and the older Venstre Party shared government. During this time women were granted the vote (1915), and some of Denmark's colonial holdings, three islands (St. John, St. Croix, and St. Thomas) in the West Indies were sold to the United States. During this period Denmark inaugurated important social and labour market reforms, laying the basis for the present welfare state.

Denmark remained neutral during World War I, although the conflict affected the country to a considerable extent. There was widespread profiteering, but commerce was also greatly disrupted by the conflict and the ensuing financial instability in Europe. Following the defeat of Germany in the war, the Treaty of Versailles mandated the Schleswig Plebiscites, in which it was decided to return Northern Schleswig (now South Jutland) to Denmark. The king and parts of the opposition were dissatisfied that Prime Minister Carl Theodor Zahle did not use Germany's defeat to take back more of the German-ethnic land lost in the Second War of Schleswig, and believing he had the support of the people he used his reserve power to dismiss Zahle's cabinet, sparking the Easter Crisis of 1920. As a result of the Easter Crisis, the Danish Constitution was amended, lessening the power of the monarch.

In the 1924 election the Social Democrats, under the charismatic Thorvald Stauning, became Denmark's largest party, a position they maintained until 2001. Stauning worked with some of the bourgeois parties, making the Social Democrats a more mainstream party. He was able to broker an important deal in the 1930s, which brought an end to the Great Depression in Denmark, and also laid the foundation for a welfare state.

Despite its declaration of neutrality at the beginning of World War II, and the conclusion of a non-aggression agreement with Nazi Germany, Denmark was invaded by Nazi Germany (Operation Weserübung) on April 9, 1940 and occupied until May 5, 1945. The occupation of Denmark was unique in that the terms of occupation were initially very lenient (although the Communist party was banned when Germany invaded the Soviet Union). The new coalition government tried to protect the population from Nazi rule through compromise. The Folketing was allowed to remain in session, the police remained under Danish control, and the Nazi German authorities were one step removed from the population. However, the Nazi German demands eventually became intolerable for the Danish government, so in 1943 it resigned and Nazi Germany assumed full control of Denmark. After that point, an armed resistance movement grew up against the occupying forces. Toward the end of the war, Denmark grew increasingly difficult for Nazi Germany to control, but the country was not liberated until Allied forces arrived in the country at the end of the war.

Also notable was the relocation of most Danish Jews to Sweden in 1943 when Nazi forces threatened deportation, see Rescue of the Danish Jews.

Post-war

1953 saw further political reform in Denmark, abolishing the Landsting (the elected upper house), colonial status for Greenland and allowing the female right of succession to the throne with the signing of a new constitution.

After the war, with the perceived threat posed by the USSR and the lessons of World War II still fresh in Danish minds, the country abandoned its policy of neutrality. Denmark became a charter member of the United Nations and was one of the original members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, though Denmark had originally tried to form an alliance only with Norway and Sweden. A Nordic Council was later set up to coordinate Nordic policy. Later, in 1973, Danes voted yes to joining the European Community, the predecessor of the European Union. Since then, Denmark has been a hesitant member of the European community, opting out of many proposals, including the Euro which was rejected in a referendum in 2000.