**Global Models and Post-Brexit Discourses: "Singapore on Thames" or "Nordic Scotland"?**[1]

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***Introduction***

This paper analyses the rise of policy discourses in post-Brexit UK. Specifically, we compare two discourses – "Singapore on Thames" and "Nordic Scotland" – as reflexivity of invented national models constructed by global policy scripts and indicators. We explore how the UK's withdrawal from the European Union (EU) led the country to search for its new global identity and place in the global economy. Addressing the uncertain future, political actors referred to Singapore as a potential model for post-Brexit UK, idealising the Southeast Asian City State's competitive institutional arrangements and innovation activities, as well as ability to attract foreign investments. Brexit also gave momentum for aspirations of Scottish independence; here, we find Nordic countries and welfare state acting as a starkly contrasting model for an independent Scotland. Examining discourses – their emergence and evolution – is thus important because they reveal how models are presented, become politically salient, or rejected during critical junctures.

We build on earlier research on political economy highlighting imaginaries' importance for capitalism, particularly in assessments of uncertain future. Imaginaries are also increasingly referred to in analysis of global governance and policy. Competition is an especially pervasive social imaginary, currently constructed and echoed by the global indicators. Over the past two decades, there has been a surge of global rankings and indicators, resulting in quantification and numerical comparisons of various domains of governance with potential effects on national policies. We see the global rankings increasingly functioning as navigating tools for the uncertain future, tapping on the imaginaries of competitiveness. This also links to national models – and seeming rivalries between them – as East Asian tigers such as Singapore and Hong Kong and the Nordic countries often top various ranking lists of country performance.

In analysing the policy discourses, we build on discursive institutionalism and framing of policy problems. Through qualitative content analysis and conceptual analysis of the data, we

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analyse the cognitive and normative aspects of the Singapore on Thames and Nordic Scotland debates. Here, following Schmidt (2002), we understand cognitive elements to express some form of social scientific knowledge, and is most commonly found in coordinative discourses among an "epistemic community". Normative elements, on the other hand, evoke certain values and memories that are seen as collective, shared by members of a nation state and found in communicative discourses. Our paper critically analyses how these "models" have been constructed, what kind of imaginaries they build on, and what kind of policy prescriptions they imply.

Our paper is organised as follows. We first present our theoretical framework on imaginaries, policy models, and discourses, followed by research design, methods, and data. Our data mainly consists of media reports, as well as selected official statements. We use material in Nordic languages (Finnish, Danish, Icelandic and Swedish) and English. The material of Singapore on Thames consist of the debate around Brexit. The materials of Nordic Scotland are debates in 2010s and early 2020s, including independence referendum and Brexit related debates. We then analyse the two discourses and compare them concerning their normative and cognitive elements. We find that simplistic global comparisons and modelling, increasingly with the help of policy indicators, allowed two different idealised models to emerge in the debate for the future of post-Brexit UK. However, both models were thin on cognitive substance and mostly emphasised normative aspirations, likely contributing to the failure of these discourses to retain political salience throughout the post-Brexit search for models.

## *Imaginaries, Models and Discourses*

### *Imaginaries and Policy Diffusion*

Comparative analysis of welfare state and political economy highlight the distinctive historical trajectories among countries (Thelen, 2014; Hall and Soskice, 2001; Esping-Andersen, 1990), characterized by historical continuity and path dependence (Mahoney, 2000; Pierson, 2000; Thelen, 1999). Institutional practices of substantial history tend to change in critical junctures or crises, where the context of governing alters rapidly and the ideas of governing change (Peters, Pierre and King, 2005; Krasner, 1984). The context for such institutional change is in many ways that of ideational uncertainty, where the underlying ideas and norms of the state are being questioned and reconsidered (Blyth, 2002; Schmidt, 2002, p.226; Marcussen, 2000).

The change hence entails political conflict and ideational change, facilitated by new ideas, norms, discourses, and narratives of the state (Somers and Block, 2005; Rothstein,B. and Steinmo,S., eds., 2002; March and Olsen, 1989; cf. Douglas, 1987). The emergence of new policy discourses often indicates policy innovation or a "revolution in world view" (Schmidt, 2002, p.222; Bacchi, 1999). In many ways the debate on Singapore on Thames indicates such policy innovation at the context of Brexit as the critical juncture in British government and the ideational uncertainty surrounding it. Here, Singapore becomes a seeming global policy model for the post-Brexit Britain, where orderliness and global competitiveness are desirable traits. In similar fashion, we see the discourse on Nordic Scotland to have re-emerged in a process, where Scottish independence is being considered as an opportunity that would be feasible in the aftermath of Brexit.

Scholars of political economy have highlighted imaginaries' importance for capitalism (Jessop, 2004, 2010), particularly in assessments of uncertain future (Beckert, 2016). Imaginaries are also highlighted in analysis of globalisation and global governance (James and Steger, 2014; Kamola, 2014; Steger and James, 2013; Archer, 2012) and global policy issues such as the climate change (Hajer and Versteeg, 2019; Levy and Spicer, 2013; Wright *et al.*, 2013). Imaginaries build on shared cultural ethos and cognitive structures (Strauss, 2006; Taylor, 2002, 2004; Castoriadis, 1987), and also link to nationalism (Anderson, 1991).[2]

Competition as social imaginary (Alasuutari and Qadir, 2016) is currently constructed and echoed by the global indicators (Erkkilä and Piironen, 2018; Sum, 2009). Over the past two decades, there has been a surge of global rankings and indicators, resulting in quantification and numerical comparisons of various domains of governance with potential effects on national policies (Kelley and Simmons, 2015; Merry,S.E., Davis,K.E. and Kingsbury,B., eds., 2015; Espeland and Sauder, 2007).

Scholars of policy diffusion have shown how diffusion might not necessarily lead to policy convergence (Radaelli, 2005) and often the adoption of policies might be characterised by limited rationality, but also "bricolage" and muddling through (Stone, 2017; Dwyer and Ellison, 2009). The perspective of policy translation, highlights the diffusion as a multi-actor process of interpretation (Stone, 2017, p.67; Sahlin and Wedlin, 2008), where actors are making sense of the perceived "models". Adding complication to the matter is the fallacy of modelling, where we come to assume that models exist though there might not be enough

[22] There are also critical debates on the use of imaginaries (Vanheeswijck, 2015; Grant, 2014).

coherence to speak of such; Nordic countries are often seen to be uniformly characterised by small open economies, extensive welfare state benefits, and trust-based consensual decision-making. This Nordic model arguably rests on virtuous circles of economic competitiveness, social solidarity, and well-functioning public institutions (Kettunen, 1997). Singapore, on the other hand, highlights competitiveness and market dynamism.

*Rankings and Models: Emerging Peers and Rivals*

While the Nordic and Singaporean models seem to be rather opposed to one another they come together in the realm of global rankings. Rankings now allow making comparisons – and drawing associations – between countries and models that may not have been deemed "comparable" in traditional political scientific sense some decades ago. Moreover, the Nordic countries and East Asian tigers such as Singapore and Hong Kong have become unexpected peers or rivals in the realm of global comparative assessment, regularly topping various ranking lists, making them appear as top dogs of globalisation and desirable models for emulation. Indeed, to make claims of models and their superiority with the seeming scientific credibility that the rankings lend would have been a major academic endeavour only a decade or two ago.

Comparing and identifying countries and cities as forerunners and laggards in innovation and digitisation, the global rankings have also acquired governing functions (T. Porter 2012; Kelley and Simmons 2015; Broome and Quirk 2015; Löwenheim 2008). Scholars often refer to global indicators as Foucauldian technologies of discipline (Broome and Quirk 2015; Löwenheim 2008), but also more subtly as tools of social pressure and reactivity (Merry, Davis, and Kingsbury 2015; Kelley and Simmons 2015; Espeland and Sauder 2007). Previous assessments have highlighted numbers as policy instruments, though their effects are not always consistent, and even lead to unintended consequences (Espeland and Sauder 2007; Pidd 2005; Robinson 2003; Smith 1995; Thiel and Leeuw 2002).

[Table 1 about here]

Global indicators have become tools for constructing models that may be seemingly used for steering national debates. How? Table 1 shows the scores of UK, Singapore and the Nordic

countries in selected global indices such as OECD Pisa, Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index (CPI), World Economic Forum's Global Competitiveness Index (GCI), as well as Global Innovation Index (GII) and Global Talent Competitiveness Index (GTCI). These indices thus present the UK, Singapore, the Nordic countries as peers, and rivals, in global competition in economy and innovation. This demonstrates the simplicity of making comparisons between countries with the help of indicators. Rankings as the linguae franca of global public policy allow identifying models, but there is also a fallacy of perceiving them as transportable to different domains.

A closer look shows fragmentation in the perceived models, for example in the scores of Iceland that ranks lower than the rest of the Nordic countries. It is also a good question what is at the core of these models and how they are constructed with the help of global metrics. While the global comparisons often tend to highlight the economic aspects of countries' performance, we have added the ranking scores from Freedom House's Freedom in the World (FW), Economist Intelligence Units Democracy Index (DI), Academic Freedom Index (AFI), Labour Rights Index (LRI) and Environmental Performance Index (EPI). Here, the UK clearly appears in the peer group of the Nordic countries, while Singapore scores consistently lower and thus not a peer.

Though the Nordic countries are characterised by high level of democracy, social security, labour rights and environmental protection, seen from the economic perspective, both the Nordic countries and Singapore seem to highlight some aspects of a small and open economies that fare well globally, including in low levels of corruption. Here, we see a dialectic between democratic and economic understanding of "openness" and "open society"; often, the Nordic countries are seen as particularly open societies incorporating economic competitiveness with high levels of social welfare and trust (Götz,N. and Marklund,C., eds., 2014; Marklund, 2013; Erkkilä, 2012), while Singapore's economic openness is often highlighted, including by global ranking producers such as the World Economic Forum who ranks Singapore as the world leader in "openness" (World Economic Forum, 2018, pp.6, 18–20). These appealing conceptualisation are reflected in the idealised use of the Nordic and Singaporean "models" in the post-Brexit policy debates.

We see the global rankings to increasingly function as navigating tools for the uncertain future, tapping on the imaginaries of competitiveness. This also links to transnational policy models and "scripts" (Meyer *et al.*, 1997). Transnational policy scripts define specific but generalisable

measures to address a policy issue (Kentikelenis and Seabrooke, 2017). Unlike descriptive policy positions, policy scripts prescribe action. As knowledge structures, scripts also describe predetermined sequences of events (cf. Schank and Abelson, 1977). The generalisability and predetermination of policy measures, as well as their prescriptive nature, has intensified through the use of global indicators that now allow global benchmarking and further allow to bridge ideas and data across policy domains. Global indicators bring coherence to transnational governance by providing a global policy script for countries to succeed in global economic competition.

*Rankings and Policy Discourses*

Such policy scripts hence imply narratives and storylines that help to communicate them. Building on Vivien Schmidt's ideas on discursive institutionalism (Schmidt, 2010), we observe communicative and coordinative aspects of the policy discourses on Singapore on Thames and Scandinavian Scotland. While the communicative elements of the policy discourse allow legitimising the policy proposal and its communication to the general public, the coordinative policy discourse allows the policy actors to share ideas over the technical details and causal mechanisms of the proposal (Schmidt, 2002, p.214).

According to Schmidt, policy discourse can be divided into communicative and coordinative variants, both of which have different audiences and emphasis (Schmidt, 2002, pp.230–231). The purpose of the *coordinative discourse* is to explain and spread the new policy ideas to members of *a policy community*, helping them to construct a policy programme and agree on it. The purpose of the *communicative discourse* is to explain and legitimise the policy programme to *the general public*. The form of the communicative discourse is simplistic and it translates the policy programme into a suitable form for public debate. Moreover, it is rhetorically appealing, legitimising the new policy programme to the general public.

These sub-discourses tend to emerge at different points of the policy change, involving different actors. In the coordinative stage, such actors mostly consist of government participants (civil servants and politicians), but representatives of interest groups and private companies might also be involved (Schmidt 2002, 232-234). The composition of this "epistemic community" is largely dependent on the existing national political culture. In the communicative stage, the political actors communicate the policy programme to the general

public, giving it "a sense of orientation" in terms of country's present state and the future, and a "sense of legitimacy" with regards to the government's policy (Schmidt 2002, 235).

The two discourses also have a different ideational core (Schmidt, 2006, pp.251–252). The coordinative discourse tends to base itself on social scientific knowledge, making a *cognitive* argument. The communicative discourse tends to direct itself towards a *normative* argument that fits into the narratives, values, and collective memories that have either been newly endorsed or have prevailed for a long time in a national context (cf. March and Olsen, 1989, p.25). The public narratives accommodating and mediating the institutional ideas should therefore be assessed in a given political and timely context (Somers and Block, 2005). This also points to a new use of the history and construction of collective memory (Anderson, 1991; Hobsbawm, 1987; Neustadt,R.E. and May,E.R., eds., 1986). In fact, this reflexivity over national institutional history is a mechanism of policy diffusion, accommodating the proposed policy changes.

*Models as Delimited Visions of Future and Instruments of Politicisation*

In our analysis of models, we identify two modalities in their use that differ in their degree of precision, detail, and contextuality. The first modality links models to anticipatory global governance, an attempt to govern the uncertain future. Here, models serve in delimiting policy alternatives for future, often also linking to policy scripts. The second modality is more rhetorical and sees models as repositories of various aspirations, easily drawn to pre-existing political debates in a national context. While the two modalities do not exclude one another, they are often difficult to consolidate. They meet in their ability to close and open policy alternatives through (de)politicisation. Indeed, numbers have the ability to both depoliticise and politicise issues (Erkkilä and Piironen, 2014).

The first modality for model use, anticipatory global governance may operate to widen or narrow future horizons, providing either "creative" or "robust" visions of the future (Berenskoetter, 2011). Creative visions portray the future as consisting of a horizon of possibilities; robust visions explore their probable success (Berenskoetter, 2011; Berten and Kranke, 2022, p.160). The future visions constructed with the help of global indicators are robust: the metrics are used to objectify a blueprint for innovation driven economic competitiveness (Erkkilä, Chou and Kauppi, 2023). Using past performance of ranked entities as proof for their ability to adapt to future challenges assume strong continuity and even

linearity of activities, despite the rhetoric of global challenges and rapid changes unfolding around the world. In so doing, the rankings narrow future horizons and the range of possible policy solutions for tackling global challenges.

However, global models are often drawn to national policy debates as reference points that may be used somewhat loosely and opportunistically as instruments of politicisation. This could be seen as decoupling of the model and the national implementation (Meyer *et al.*, 1997), but more importantly in the second modality models serve as tools for politicising certain issue (Palonen, 2003), making it playable and opening horizons for policy alternatives. Here, models are treated less coherently, serving as shorthand for certain political aspirations. While this comes closer to a "creative" future vision, it is important to understand that the global models are often closely linked to pre-existing debates, hence used instrumentally, rather than deliberatively. Moreover, the two modalities also resemble the two variants of policy discourse identified by Schmidt. Anticipatory governance highlights cognitive aspects of a model, while its instrumentalisation for politicisation is often more normatively loaded, making the model a repository of various, and often even contradicting, aspirations.

*Research Design, Methods, and Data*

We analyse the rise of policy discourses on Singapore on Thames and Scandinavian Scotland as reflexivity on invented national models constructed with help of global comparative assessments, including global policy indicators. In analysing the policy discourses, we refer to Vivien Schmidt's work on discursive institutionalism as well as Carol Lee Bacchi's work on framing policy problems (Schmidt, 2008, 2010; Bacchi, 1999). Following Vivien Schmidt's division between "coordinative" and "communicative" elements of policy discourse (Schmidt, 2002, p.214), we analyse the cognitive and normative aspects of the Singapore on the Thames and Nordic Scotland debates. We pay specific attention to the two modalities of model use, as means of anticipatory governance and politicisation. More concretely, we engage in qualitative content analysis and conceptual analysis of the data that mainly consist of media reports, mainly newspaper articles and columns as well as op-eds. In addition, few official statements are included. These were collected using search-engines and media databases. The search words included variations on model's name or Brexit combined with both countries in local languages. We use material in all Nordic languages (Finnish, Danish, Icelandic and Swedish) and English. The material of Singapore on Thames consist of the debate around Brexit. The

material of Nordic Scotland includes debates in 2010s and early 2020s (independence referendum and Brexit related debates). We also analyse the strengths and weaknesses of these two discourses in more recent debates, as well as how the discourses relate to the politics of their main proponents.

### *Models for post-Brexit UK*

*"Singapore on Thames"*

During the Brexit debates, Conservative politicians such as the then Foreign Secretary Jeremy Hunt (2018) and the former and current Prime Ministers Theresa May and Boris Johnson promoted the model of "Singapore on Thames" for post-Brexit UK (Bloomberg news, 2018; Hunt, 2018). In the main, the model concerns especially competitiveness policies such as regulation levels and hub-like nature of economy (Ovais, 2021; Woolfson, 2019)—all to lure foreign investments to the UK. From a policy perspective, the "Singapore on Thames" model is generally thought to include some combination of reducing government intervention, lowering taxation levels, deregulating labour protection (e.g., minimum wages, unemployment) and environment requirements, while having "free port" arrangements in the global trade (Owen, 2021; Foster and Pickard, 2020; Woolfson, 2019). The model projects an image of Singapore as one with a highly competitive and globally connected economy. In addition, the proponents of the model have also praised the achievements of Singapore's educational system (Coates 2019), and admired the fabulous eating and living for which the City State is known (Key, 2017). While the policies of the "Singapore on Thames" model are directional, pointing to the way the UK intends to become, how the model's proponents used it was clear. Indeed, from a negotiation strategy perspective, we observe that the Singapore model was used in two interlinking ways. First, as a threat to the EU with a highly regulated single market, and, second, as a desirable outcome for the UK in the event of a "no-deal" outcome for Brexit (cf. Martin, 2020).

Proponents of the model have used a historical narrative of Singapore's successful growth story to champion its allure (Wintour, 2019; Bloomberg news, 2018; Hunt, 2018), a City State that has emerged from the bottom to the top of many global rankings. This narrative borrows from the one that Singapore's founders have projected to an international and domestic audience; indeed, the late Mr Lee Kuan Yew's classic account of Singapore is titled *From Third World to First, The Singapore Story: 1965-2000* (Lee, 2000). At the heart of the "Singapore Story" is

the image of a new country geographically sandwiched between two larger and hostile neighbours, and its transformation into a thriving economy through strategic, calibrated, and "smart" policy planning. This early "bravely-going-it-alone" attitude resonated with Brexiters. The historical ties between the UK and Singapore have also been used when promoting the model to suggest its supposed compatibility (Hunt, 2018). Indeed, Margaret Thatcher's friendship with Lee Kuan Yew and her admiration for "Singapore's meritocratic education system" have been referenced as an earlier example of how the UK looked towards its former colony for policy inspiration (Athony, 2017).

We see different names used to refer to the "Singapore on Thames" model, including the "Western Singapore" model (Blakely, 2017), UK as the "Singapore of the West" (Athony, 2017), "Singapore in the Atlantic" (Evans-Pritchard, 2017), and the "North Atlantic Singapore" model (Staton, 2016). What these names have in common are "Singapore" and the UK's geographical location. The model thus has a clear relational dimension. It explicitly suggests a refocussing away from European centres towards other growth centres in Asia and North America (Jack 2021; Da Silva 2021). This refocussing identifies both new partners and competitors, as well as a geographical pivot away from "Europe". It is worth noting that the first trade agreement that the UK signed after Brexit was with Singapore (BBC News, 2020). In this context it is intriguing that the one idea in "Singapore on Thames" model was to view Singapore and the UK as connected hubs for Asia and Europe respectively (Ovais, 2021). More interestingly, post-Brexit policies have explicitly targeted Singapore's status in global shipping where the UK and Singapore have been identified as key rivals (Foster and Pickard, 2020).

The model has faced widespread scepticism in the UK, the EU, and around the world, including Singaporean commentators. To start with, commentators have questioned the possibilities for British businesses and economy to succeed in this refocusing exercise. For example, City of London commentators have worried that conflicts with current partners may arise and noted the importance of European markets for the UK businesses and financial sector (English, 2021; Vincent, 2020). Other sceptics pointed to the incompatibility between Singapore and the UK from system, demographic, and policy perspectives (John 2019; Hosking and Griffiths 2020; Agini 2020; English 2021; Vincent 2020). For instance, many critics highlighted that the economic model on which "Singapore on Thames" is built relies on a fundamental misconception about Singapore's economy. These sceptics argued that the lower regulations and taxation are implemented in the shadow of a highly planned economy in Singapore, an economic model which the UK is unlikely, or unable, to follow (Anthony 2017; John 2019;

Wintour 2019). For instance, while Singapore has experienced tremendous economic growth since its independence in 1965, 80% of its permanent residents live in modest public housing and the majority of which will never earn enough to purchase a car in the City State (Vasagar, 2018). Moreover, employers and employees are required to contribute about 37% of earned wages to the Central Provident Fund (Martin 2020). The Singaporean economy also relies heavily on its non-resident population, historically making up about 30% of its overall population (Prime Minister's Office, Singapore, 2021) in comparison to 14% in the UK (Migration Observatory, 2021). Given the prominence of immigration as an issue in Brexit, it is difficult to see how the UK could embrace Singapore's foreign labour policy that has significantly contributed to the City State's economic and infrastructural growth. Thus, these critics claimed that the political and social models are inseparable from the economic one.

Those who oppose the model based on its (perceived) content have actively deployed the model in their rhetoric since Brexit, pointing to the model's overall undesirability. In this context, commentators, for instance, from Brussels (Waterfield and Wright, 2021; Hosking and Griffiths, 2020; Paris, 2019), Berlin (Paris, 2019), and the City of London (English, 2021; Agini, 2020; Vincent, 2020) have used it to describe an unwanted scenario. Put simply, "Singapore on Thames" as a negative model. The model is given such negative connotations and meanings as "race to the bottom" and "deregulation of labour". Singapore-based or affiliated commentators provide more nuanced reflections in the form of questions, asking whether British dairy farmers would accept giving price advantage to producer countries such as Australia and New Zealand (Khanna, 2019), or the British people would accept rising income inequality and relative stage stagnation as Singapore has also been experiencing (Lim, 2019)? Martin (2020) best sums up the overall critique when he said, "The advocates of 'Singapore on the Thames' either ignore or are ignorant".

The model's proponents have tried to defend against these criticisms in several ways. For example, proponents have attempted to demarcate a separate Singaporean economic model from political and social models, as well as underlining the intent to cherry-pick the policy lessons (Coates, 2019). Similarly, they have also tried to separate issues of deregulation or means from standards and quality or outcomes (BBC News, 2019; Coates, 2019). Observing how critics have hijacked the model and used it as a negative model, proponents have almost entirely ceased to use the explicit notion of "Singapore-on-the-Thames" publicly since Brexit. Reporting, however, suggests that at least some policies are still aligned with the premises of the model (Owen, 2021; Press Association, 2021). For instance, the UK officials have visited

their Singaporean counterparts when designing new financial services regulations (Press Association, 2021).

Despite all the criticism and apparent limitations of the Singapore on Thames model, the Liz Truss government that followed Boris Johnson in September 2022 made the deregulated low-tax model of Singapore on Thames a corner stone of its governing strategy (Shrimsley, 2022). However, when the UK chancellor Kwasi Kwarteng proposed £45bn tax cuts the market reaction was equally stern with the currency stumbling to record low and borrowing costs reaching a record increase (Parker *et al.*, 2022). The market panic and the quantitative easing that the Bank of England was compelled to do was seen by some commentators as poor implementation of the Singapore on Thames model (Yates, 2022), while others asked if this was undoing some 40 years of free market philosophy (Keegan, 2022). While the fractions within the conservative party also contributed to Liz Truss's downfall (Landler, 2022), the backtracking from the proposed tax cuts eventually led to her resignation after only 49 days in the office. The Singaporean model, while normatively appealing to Brexiters, proved to have very thin foundations with its basic assumptions and causal beliefs challenged and dismissed in matter of weeks, at least for a moment.

*"Nordic Scotland"*

While conservatives were debating Singapore as a future model for UK, the proponents of Scottish independence, most notably the Scottish National Party (SNP) explored a Nordic model for Scotland. The literature on the Scottish discussion has identified two related but analytically demarcated Nordic models: social model (policy content) and decision-making model (policy-making style) (Cairney and Widfeldt, 2015; Keating and Harvey, 2014; Newby, 2009). The latter denotes a corporatist and consensual decision-making arrangements that are deemed to support in providing the services and living conditions of the social model. During the 2010s debate the focus has been on the social welfare model and international institutional arrangements (RÚV, 2014b; Stefánsson, 2014) although political model gets some mentions.

In addition to the geographical closeness (Palomäki, 2020; Saarikoski, 2020; Little, 2014; Skjervold, 2014; Theils, 2011) the promoters of the Nordic model have underscored the historical affinities between Nordic countries and Scotland (Saarikoski, 2020; Harrison, 2019; Bryden, 2014; Buxton, 2014; Magnus, Honningsøy and Babu, 2014) all the way from the Viking era (Kelly, 2011; Politiken, 2011). These affinities are seen also in the general mentality

and identity of the people such as prominence of solidarity (Guðnason, 2020; Saarikoski, 2020; Gyberg, 2014; Kelly, 2011; Theils, 2011). The model is also marketed by deploying a historical narrative of Nordic countries' successful growth into competitive welfare states (Larsson, 2014).

Regarding the political model the debate has highlighted the similarities of the Scottish system with Nordic systems compared to Westminster model (Kelly, 2011). In this context it is worth noting who are the proponents of the Nordic model in Scottish politics. The key driver in political arena is the Scottish National Party (SNP) but also the ideational entrepreneurship of a Nordic Horizons think tank whose mission is to promote the idea of Nordic Scotland (Saarikoski, 2020; Buxton, 2014; Gyberg, 2014) in (Nordic) media debate is noteworthy. SNP has floated the idea of Nordic model in their strategy papers during independent referendum debate in 2014 (Macdonnel, 2011) as well as through statements from their policy spokesperson such as defence spokesperson (Hujanen, 2016; Hegevall, 2014). Ideologically commentators note how the Nordic model is presented as a shift from (English) neoliberal policies to more social democratic or left-leaning policies of Nordic countries (Bryden, 2014; Gyberg, 2014; RÚV, 2014a). Therefore, the model is closely tied with SNP's ideological position.

There are, however, many sceptics who question Scotland's capabilities in adapting the social model (Buxton, 2014; Skjervold, 2014). These sceptics come from socio-historical or practical views regarding, for example, urban policies and willingness to pay taxes (Buxton, 2014) or recycling systems and alcohol monopolies (Skjervold, 2014). The sceptics have noted the differences in historical context as the Nordics developed their welfare systems compared to open global and EU markets nowadays. In similar vein the sceptics point out that the economies are currently also quite dissimilar as Nordic countries are highly skilled and high-tech economies (Kelly, 2011). The more critical sceptics point out that the Nordic model and social democratic policies that are promoted in Scotland might not be reality even in Nordic countries anymore (Elvander, 2014; Skjervold, 2014). There has been also commentators who directly attack the model exercise itself by calling it "Scandimania" (Wooldridge, 2014) or "Nordic fetish" (Torrance, 2014) .

During the independence and Brexit referendums the model's relational dimension was an important talking point. The model is used to redefine the peers and to refocus the attention from the England to Nordic counterparts (Harrison, 2019; RÚV, 2014a; Politiken, 2011). The

definition of peers in this context is quite explicit as the Scottish proponents of the Nordic Scotland have called for Scottish membership in the Nordic Council and its different sister organizations (Lyyra, 2020; Little, 2014; Magnus, Honningsøy and Babu, 2014; Theils, 2011). Although general areas of interest identified in Nordic-Scottish co-operation are digital, environmental, energy and social policies (Stefánsson, 2014; Politiken, 2011) the suggestions go even so far as foreign policy alignment (Stefánsson, 2014) and partaking in Nordic defence co-operation (Elvander, 2014; Little, 2014). Foreign policy and especially defence policy is intriguing example of ambiguity in Nordic model[3].

The formal organisational structures within Nordic co-operation may explain why the model is still called Nordic although some have viewed that the Scottish debates have actually focused more keenly on, for instance, Norwegian growth model with national oil fund (Elvander, 2014; Magnus, Honningsøy and Babu, 2014; RÚV, 2014a; Skjervold, 2014; TT, 2014; Politiken, 2011). Reasoning behind focussing on Norway is similarity of key revenue sources, oil and fish, that the countries share (Elvander, 2014; RÚV, 2014a; Skjervold, 2014; Theils, 2011). This is noteworthy as Norway is not an EU member-state although it co-operates closely with the union. The debates of Scottish referendum also heavily involve the question of EU membership (Palomäki, 2020) where Nordic countries, again, have quite differing arrangements[4].

Whatever is deemed to be the core subject for mimicking it might be however be combined with particular social innovations, for instance, from Finland (Palomäki, 2020; Saarikoski, 2020) or Denmark (Theils, 2011). Therefore, the Nordic model promoted in Scottish debates maybe better understood as a collection of policy ideas from various Nordic countries packaged together. Therefore, the Nordic model remains ambiguous as some Scottish proponents of Nordic[5] model note that it does not mean mimicking an existing set of policies but constructing a new mix (RÚV, 2014b).

[3] Although Nordic countries do have systematic and formal co-operation framework, the importance of Nordic framework differs widely as Denmark and Norway are foremost NATO-members whereas at the time of the debate Finland and Sweden were NATO partners but formally non-allied (Finland joined NATO in 2023 and Sweden is in the process of becoming a member). Therefore, Nordic defence includes two very different arrangements and identities, NATO and neutrality.

[4] The Norway is non-member, Sweden has opted-out the single currency and Denmark has opt-outs in justice and home affairs whereas Finland is partaking in all policy areas.

[5] In this regard, it is illuminating to note that on social innovation and policies the comparative Nordic models are used also within the Nordic countries themselves. For example, in Finnish employment policy debate references to Swedish, Danish, or Nordic models are common.

Although the tone in anecdotal interviews and columns for Scottish membership in Nordic club are generally positive (Drejer, 2020; Hujanen, 2016; Little, 2014) the official comments have been quite cautious (Bevanger, 2020; Sveriges Radio, 2017; Politiken, 2011). For instance, in official statements the Nordic officials underscore the importance of "British Isles" as partner(s) (Nordic Council, 2020). The reservedness is explained by the commentators with noting the close ties and trade relations that the Nordic countries share with Britain (Bevanger, 2020; Little, 2014; Magnus, Honningsøy and Babu, 2014). The sceptics have also pointed out that the similar Nordic ambitions of Baltic countries have not been reciprocated in the Nordic Council (Hegevall, 2014).

The discussion in Nordic media is heavily tilted towards analysing bilateral relations and policy transfers (Saarikoski, 2020; Magnus, Honningsøy and Babu, 2014; Politiken, 2011). However, the debate circles around and between countries. For example, a feature piece by Helsingin Sanomat (Saarikoski, 2020), a Finnish newspaper was widely commented on Scottish media (Heatjer, 2020; Perring, 2020). Or another way around the Nordic media has commented on Scottish or British articles (Hegevall, 2014; Hujanen, 2016) on the issue. The Scottish media also notes that the models circulate both ways and some Scottish policies are also adopted in Nordics (Heatjer, 2020).

While UK government mostly remained silent on the Nordic model to avoid giving legitimacy to the independence movement, the Scottish National Party and its leader Nicola Sturgeon were closely associated with the debate. However, the Nordic Scotland model quickly moved to the background after Scotland's first minister and SNP party leader Sturgeon failed to secure a new referendum on Scottish independence. While facing difficulties due to policy performance and choices, as well as controversy due to financial issues concerning her husband, it was nevertheless the diminishing lack of support for her plan on Scottish independence that was most damaging for her tenure, leading her resignation (Mnyanda, 2023; Mnyanda and Cameron-Chileshe, 2022). Referring back to the plan, or model, for Scottish independence, media observers argued that Sturgeon "had ran out of ideas" (Shrimsley, 2023), drawing parallels to the exit of Liz Truss with lack of concrete plans on how to execute the Scottish independence, or even secure a (positive) vote on it (Deerin, 2023).

*Limits of Models and Scripts*

As the above discussion the two pathways for post-Brexit UK shows, there are surprising parallels on the proposed models and related discourses, Singapore on Thames and Nordic Scotland. Also, the fate of their proponents in the post-Brexit debates bears similarities. Comparing the two discourses and their public mediation, we wish to draw attention to their cognitive and normative aspects. Based on the comparison, we question if there are even concrete models speak of, i.e., if the Nordic countries provide enough coherence for a single model and to what extent the idealised elements of Singaporean governance system form its core. Our further critique is then pointed to the simplistic ideas of policy transfer critique, i.e., to what extent and under what conditions can these models be implemented in the adopting countries.

[Table 2 about here]

Table 2 presents the two discourse based on their cognitive and normative aspects (after Schmidt, 2002, p.214). While both discourses emerge in ideational uncertainty pertaining to the Brexit, the simplistic promise of models as solutions copied easily from elsewhere overlooks the mismatch between concrete policy issues and the proposed solutions. While the communicative variant of the discourse may have been appealing to the public initially, the explicit references to Singapore on Thames were downplayed over time as the notion became successfully "hijacked" by opponents criticising the model. Most apparently, the proponents of Singapore on Thames had very weak cognitive foundations for their model, failing to coordinate key policy ideas with expert audience, most notably the market actors. Facing the task of negotiating trade deals internationally and providing domestic regulation to compensate for that of the EU, the UK conservatives opted for the simplified message of deregulation and major tax cuts, which instantly lost credibility when implemented.

The Nordic Scotland discourse was more favourable received outside UK, though it also failed to fully convince expert audiences. But in this case, it was especially the weakness of the communicative variant of the discourse that led to dismissal of the "model". In fact, it seems that the discourse anticipating future independent Scotland was never a solution to the actual problem that the SNP was facing: how to find a constitutional and political pathway to the

second referendum on independence? As the roadmap to referendum remained unclear and other issues mounted, there finally was not even significant enough support for Scottish independence in the polls to actively pursue this.

But instead of reducing the lack of success in the post-Brexit debates to communicative strategies, we rather wish to highlight the references to models and their simplistic use in policy discourses. While a closer reading of the proposed models and realities on ground point to the apparent decoupling of the model and its intended implementation. While this could be simply deemed as failure of political rhetoric the fate of Liz Truss government points to a more general trend in global policy, where models are on the one hand being used in anticipating future, but on the other hand used as a shorthand for projected intentions of their proponents, while the actual policies are less relevant.

In our theoretical part, we discussed two modalities of models as means anticipation and politicisation. The first modality – models as anticipatory governance – is problematic as it creates robust future visions that project past experiences to an assumed future, limiting the horizon of policy alternatives and leaving no room for creative visions (Berten and Kranke, 2022; Berenskoetter, 2011). The second modality of simply referring to a "model" as a callsign for certain aspirations is equally problematic, as a quick look may reveal overall incompatibility between the model and existing systems — quite distinct in the case of the post-Brexit UK. Here the strategy of model use is selective, "cherry-picking" and "cobbling together" desirable elements. For example, the ambiguity and the general caricature of Singapore indicate that the model is used in public discussion to paint a positive scenario for Brexit instead of being a detailed policy plan for post-Brexit UK. The use of history and historical tropes further hides the fissures in the rough models, accommodating the mismatch of idealised model and institutional reality.

But problems ensue when the two modalities are confused, as is apparent in both discourses. While the Brexiteers may have thought they had a coherent model or robust future vision in Singapore on Thames, they rather only succeeded in politicizing an issue with little concrete substance. And while the proponents of Nordic Scotland may have had more robust vision for their anticipated future, they failed to politicise the issue of Scottish independence to the extent that would have granted them the opportunity for a renewed referendum.

***Conclusions***

Our analysis of two post-Brexit policy discourses – Singapore on Thames and Nordic Scotland – has showed how models are used in global public policy. We argue that these cases tell us more about the use of models than a mere lesson in seemingly failed political rhetoric. Based on our analysis, we find both policy discourses to have cognitive and normative elements that appear differently in the coordinative and communicative variants of the policy discourses. We further link this to the two modalities of model use, anticipation and politicisation. While global models are increasingly used to anticipate future and address foreseeable challenges, the references to models can also be used to politicise issues and bringing them to the political agenda. Anticipation has the tendency to depoliticise and delimit policy alternatives. Politicisation serves to open horizons for alternatives.

While Singapore on Thames discourse could politicise the deregulated, low tax model as a policy alternative for post-Brexit UK, it was too weak as a coordinative discourse with its cognitive underpinnings remaining too loose and scattered to convince the expert audience, markets most notably. And even though Nordic Scotland model was equally a repository or shorthand for various aspirations of its proponents, it was the weakness of the communicative aspects of this discourse that failed to provide the political momentum for second referendum on Scottish independence.

Rankings and comparative assessments allow identifying new global rivals and peers among assessed entities, be they countries, cities, or academic institutions. Our analysis points to the fallacy of using models in public policy and political rhetoric, which often have poor institutional fit and are instrumentalised for pre-existing debates rather than considering true alternatives. We suggest that policy models serve as means of anticipation and politicisation involving varying degree of cognitive and normative elements that are often difficult to balance.

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**Table 1 Scores of UK, Singapore and the Nordic countries in selected global indices**

| | Pisa[1] 2018<br>Pisa 2015<br>(Rea / Mat / Sci) | CPI[2] 2020<br>CPI 2016 | GCI[3] 2019<br>GCI 2016-17 | GII[4] 2020<br>GII 2016 | GTCI[5] 2020<br>GTCI 2015-16 | FW[6] 2020<br>FW 2016 | DI[7] 2020<br>DI 2016 | AFI[8] 2020 | LRI[9] 2020 | EPI[10] 2020<br>EPI 2016 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| UK | 504 / 502 / 505<br>498 / 492 / 509 | 11th<br>10th | 9th<br>7th | 4th<br>3rd | 12th<br>7th | 93<br>95 | 16th<br>16th | 0.915 | 81.0 | 4th<br>12th |
| Singapore | 549 / 569 / 551<br>535 / 564 / 556 | 3rd<br>7th | 1st<br>2nd | 8th<br>6th | 3rd<br>2nd | 48<br>51 | 74th<br>70th | 0.466 | 51.5 | 39th<br>14th |
| Finland | 520 / 507 / 522<br>526 / 511 / 531 | 3rd<br>3rd | 11th<br>10th | 7th<br>5th | 7th<br>10th | 100<br>100 | 6th<br>9th | 0.947 | 93.5 | 7th<br>1st |
| Sweden | 506 / 502 / 499<br>500 / 494 / 493 | 3rd<br>4th | 8th<br>6th | 2nd<br>2nd | 4th<br>6th | 100<br>100 | 3rd<br>3rd | 0.964 | 92.0 | 8th<br>3rd |
| Norway | 499 / 501 / 490<br>513 / 502 / 498 | 7th<br>6th | 17th<br>11th | 20th<br>22nd | 9th<br>8th | 100<br>100 | 1st<br>1st | 0.934 | 85.5 | 9th<br>17th |
| Denmark | 501 / 509 / 493<br>482 / 488 / 473 | 1st<br>1st | 10th<br>12th | 6th<br>8th | 5th<br>5th | 97<br>98 | 7th<br>5th | 0.909 | 86.5 | 1st<br>4th |
| *Iceland* | *474 / 495 / 475*<br>*482 / 488 / 473* | *17th*<br>*14th* | *26th*<br>*27th* | *21st*<br>*7th* | *14th*<br>*17th* | *94*<br>*100* | *2nd*<br>*2nd* | *0.925* | *N/A* | *17th*<br>*2nd* |

[1] Programme for International Student Assessment (OECD, 2018, 2019)
[2] Corruption perception index (Transparency International, 2017, 2021)
[3] Global Competitiveness index (Schwab ym., 2020; World Economic Forum, 2016)
[4] Global Innovation Index (Cornell University ym., 2020; *GII 2016 Report*, ei pvm.)
[5] Global Talent Competitiveness Index (INSEAD, 2016; INSEAD ym., 2020)
[6] Freedom in the World (Freedom House, 2017, 2021)
[7] EIU Democracy Index (The Economist Intelligence Unit, 2017, 2021)
[8] Academic freedom index (KINZELBACH ym., 2021)
[9] Labour Rights Index (Wageindicator, 2021)
[10] Environmental Performance Index (Hsu ym., 2016; Wendling ym., 2020)

**Table 2 Cognitive and normative aspects of the policy discourses analysed**

| | Cognitive | Normative |
|---|---|---|
| Singapore on Thames | Coordinative discourse:<br>-low government intervention and taxation<br>-deregulated labour protection and environmental requirements<br>-free port arrangements in global trade<br>-idea of global hub<br><br>Critique:<br>-painful refocusing of businesses<br>-misconception of Singaporean model (highly planned economy)<br>-Singapore's migration policy and reliance on non-resident population<br>-political and social model not to be separated from the economic one<br>-"race to the bottom" and rising income inequality | Discourse:<br>-historical narrative of Singapore's global growth story<br>-"doing it bravely alone"<br>-close ties and common (colonial) history<br>-geographic parallels and rivalries in global trade and shipping<br><br>Critique:<br>-proponents are ignorant |
| Nordic Scotland | Discourse:<br>-corporatist and consensual decision-making<br>-social welfare<br>-digital, environmental, energy and social policies<br>-foreign and defence policy<br>-Energy and oil industry<br><br>Critique:<br>-differences of welfare systems and context for creating them<br>-differences in industrial structure<br>-Nordic social model fragmenting | Discourse:<br>-historical affinities ('Viking era')<br>-similarities in mentality, identity, and solidarity of people<br>-borrowing of policy inventions<br><br>Critique:<br>-"Scandimania", Nordic fetish |