The Stagnation of Women’s representation in Denmark: prospects for improvements

Dr. Robin T. Pettitt

Kingston University – London

r.pettitt@kingston.ac.uk

Abstract

Denmark has long been seen as a front runner in achieving ever greater descriptive representation for women in the national parliament. This has been achieved incrementally without the use of quotas (the ‘fast track’ to gender equality). However, in recent elections Denmark has experienced a stagnation in the proportion of women in parliament. The proportion has still been going up, but at a glacial rate compared with previous decades, pushing the point of full parity (that is 50/50) far into the future should the current rate continue.

This paper will explore this stagnation; the possibility of the incremental path picking up speed again; and failing that, what the prospects are for a change to the fast tract of gender quotas. The paper will also discuss what the lessons of Denmark’s situation are for the incremental track to gender equality in politics.
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Introduction

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This paper will explore this stagnation; the possibility of the incremental path picking up speed again; and failing that, what the prospects are for a change to the fast tract of gender quotas. The paper will also discuss what the lessons of Denmark’s situation are for the incremental track to gender equality in politics.

The paper will first outline Denmark’s (now stalled) progress towards parity; it will then examine some of the drivers of this stagnation before exploring the prospects for a return to a higher rate of increase. It will then examine two of the best performing parties, the Socialist People’s Party and the Social Liberals to see if there are any lessons to be learnt from their success’ It will finally discuss what the prospects are for Denmark resuming a more rapid march towards gender parity in parliament, and what the lessons are from the Danish case.

Progress towards parity

It has been argued that Denmark has entered a period of stagnation in terms of the rise of women in the Danish parliament (Dahlerup 2013: 146). Since the late 1960s the proportion of women in the Danish parliament saw a steady and at times rapid increase (see Figure 1). In 1968 the Danish parliament contained 10.9 percent women. In 1971 one it was 17.1 percent. In 1973 there was a drop, but the proportion of women was back at 17.1 percent in 1977. It then saw a period of considerable growth, breaching one quarter in 1984 and entering the 30s in 1988. The elections of 1990 and 1994 saw only modest growth, but in 1998 there was another notable increase, reaching 37.3 percent.

[FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE]

However, since 1998 Denmark has experienced a period of stagnation in the journey towards parity. Whilst it was still possible for the Danish media to hail ‘Record numbers of women in parliament’ (TV2) after the 2011 election the 39.1 percent achieved in that election was a mere 1.8 percentage points increase over a 13 year period and four elections. This is the lowest increase in a similar time frame since the 1960s. Between 1945 and 1998 the average increase in each election was 1.45. Between 1998 and 2011 it was 0.45. In other words Denmark’s incremental path towards parity has become a lot slower in the last four elections. Based on the average increase from 1945 to 1998,
Denmark was about 9 elections away from parity in 1998. Based on the average increase from 1998 to 2011, Denmark was 25 elections away from parity in 2011.

This stagnation is also reflected in Denmark’s standing internationally. Figure 2 shows Denmark’s standing internationally. From having been amongst the most gender equal nations in the 1990s and early 2000s, it has declined to 15th in the world by January 2014. So, Denmark may have continued to see an increase in the proportion of women in parliament (albeit very modest increases in the last four elections) but others have clearly overtaken Denmark.

[FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE]

So, from being a pioneer in women’s representation and an example of the merits of the incremental path to parity, Denmark has fallen behind, and serve to illustrate that steady progress towards parity without some kind of active intervention cannot be taken for granted.

It is worth noting that progress towards parity in Denmark is very varied between the eight parties currently represented in the Danish parliament. Figure 3 shows the current (2011 election) state of the Danish parties. As we can see, all but two of the eight parties fall below the overall score, some by a fair way. However, none fall below the 30 percent mark. The parties that stand out are the Socialist People’s Party and the Social Liberals, both of which have a majority of women in their parliamentary group. Clearly these two parties have a significant role to play in pulling the overall proportion of women up to where it currently is.

[FIGURE 3 ABOUT HERE]

Causes of stagnation

There appears to be two broad reasons for this stagnation. Supply line issues; and what has been referred to as ‘saturation before parity’.

Starting with the supply line side, of the 182\(^1\) members of parliament listed on the Danish parliament website, 73 mention some kind of local government experience. In other words about 40 percent of Danish members of parliament started their political life in local government. However, as we can see from Figure 5 women’s representation in local government is even lower than at the national level.

[FIGURE 5 ABOUT HERE]

\(^1\) There are 179 MP in the Danish parliament. However, when an MP goes on leave for any reason (e.g. parental leave or due to illness) a suppliant will step in.
In addition, it is important to notice that the stagnation in women’s representation at the national levels appears to have been preceded by a stagnation of women’s representation at the local level. What we can see in Figure 6 is that the increase in women’s representation at the local level stagnated between 1993 and 2005. This then was followed by the already noted stagnation at the national level starting from 1998 onwards. This would suggest that part of the explanation for the stagnation in progress towards parity at the national level is that a key supply line to national politics saw a similar stagnation, which eventually filtered through to the national level.

[FIGURE 6 ABOUT HERE]

The stagnation in women’s representation at the local level has been linked to what Kjær (1999) refers to as ‘saturation before parity’. According to Kjær:

...in the mind of the voters and party nominators, the dimension of gender recedes into the background when some progress has been made. This is not to say that a certain level of women in the legislatures generates hostility towards female councillors and candidates but, rather, that it might lead to a lack of any affirmative action regarding the characteristics of gender. (1999: 151-2)

Kjær argues that having an equal proportion of candidates and legislators from both genders is not ranked very highly and that a gender balanced ticket is not seen as being 50/50 (1999: 159-60). He further finds that concern with gender equality tends to wane when 31 percent of candidates are women. Dahlerup (2013) also finds that party organisations and voters are reasonably satisfied with the current level of women in legislative assemblies. The generally feeling seems to be that ‘equality has by and large been achieved – stop making such a fuss!’ (Dahlerup 2013: 165).

Kjær’s (1999) work on ‘saturation before parity’ was based on local politics, but Dahlerup (2013) argues that it could equally be applied to national politics. It would therefore seem that the ‘saturation before parity’ affects national politics twice. First indirectly by undermining an important supply line; and secondly directly by reducing any motivation to deal with stagnation at the national level.

Prospects for progress

The question now is what prospects there might be for this problem being dealt with and Denmark moving back up the rankings for gender parity in national legislative assemblies. There are two broad avenues that could be taken. One is working towards restarting the incremental approach. The other is a more active intervention in the form of getting Denmark onto the fast-track (i.e. quota) route to parity. It is also worth examining the numerical presence of women in Danish parties to understand what kind of descriptive representation they have in the membership organisations. Restarting the incremental path or shifting to the fast-track is arguably more likely if women have a significant presence in Danish parties. The following will first look briefly at the numbers and then consider prospects for both the incremental path and the fast-track route.

Two surveys have been carried out of Danish party members in Denmark – one in 2000 (DDA-14069) and in 2012 (CVAP 2012). In 2000 women made up 35 percent of members in the nine parties surveyed. In 2012 that was down to 32 percent (albeit across slightly different parties as some had
died away and others had emerged). The numbers across the eight parties examined in this paper can be seen in Figure 7 (The Liberal Alliance did not exist in 2000).

[FIGURE 7 ABOUT HERE]

It is fairly clear that women have a much greater presence in some parties than others, with the left generally doing better than the right. However, one thing is how many women there are, another is what impact they have in the party. This researcher attended seven party conferences in 2012, with an eight attended by a research assistant. During these visits the gender of speakers from the conference podium was noted. The numbers can be seen in Figure 8.

[FIGURE 8 ABOUT HERE]

What we can see is that women are underrepresented in almost all the parties amongst the membership, and their voice is also missing in the highest authority (the conference) of the parties.

Whether these numbers are reflected in the parties’ attitude to gender equality remains to be seen.

There is little to suggest that the incremental path that Denmark has so far followed will return to the rate of increase seen in the 1970s and 1980s. The important supply line represented by local government did see an increase in the proportion of women councillors in 2009, but this was followed by a drop in 2013 (albeit still leaving the proportion of women councillors higher than in 2005). In addition it is very important to keep in mind that the increase in women’s representation experienced from the late 1970s to the early 1990s was not automatic or spontaneous. As Dahlerup (2013) shows the increase in women’s representation in the Danish parliament was driven by a strong and active women’s movement which, whilst particularly strong on the left, still brought together important figures from different parties. The issue of women’s representation was brought to the fore by this diverse women’s movement – the result being that the overwhelming male dominance of politics was gradually broken, most notably from the 1973 election onwards. In addition to the practical result of seeing more women in parliament, the activities of the women’s movement also resulted in ‘the general understanding that the country was on a route of continuous progress towards gender equality’ (Dahlerup 2013: 149).

However, from the late 1980s and early 1990s the feminist movement in Denmark weakened and fractured, as other concerns came to the fore. Dahlerup argues that debates over the EU in connection with Denmark’s several referenda in the 1990s served to split the women’s movement between pro- and anti-EU groups (Dahlerup 2013: 165). This was followed by the rise to dominance of a debate over immigration and the protection of ‘Danish values’ against foreign (read Muslim) influence. The concern with gender equality did not go away as such. However, the impetus to do something was lost as the discourse became about protecting Danish values, including gender equality. In that context gender equality became something which had already been achieved and therefore not an area that needed anything doing to it, except protect it from being undermined by immigration (Dahlerup 2006: 8).

In short, was seems to have happened is that there was a considerable feminist momentum created in the 1970s which impacted on the number of women getting into parliament. This momentum now appears to have run out. The steady increase in women’s representation created by that momentum has also levelled off, hence the stagnation experienced since the late 1990s.
It is therefore not likely that the incremental path to gender equality in the Danish parliament will restart automatically. Clearly, what is needed is a renewed focus on the issue, to either recreate the momentum seen in the 1970s, or put Denmark onto the fast-track to gender equality (i.e. quotas).

It is difficult to judge the prospects for a renewed popular women’s movement to emerge, so the following will focus on the extent to which the eight parties in the Danish parliament are concerned with the issue of gender equality at the political level and what they might want to do about it. As part of this paper the author contacted the Member of Parliament for each party who has the equality brief (ligestillingsordfører – equity policy lead). The author put to each policy lead the fact that Denmark has fallen behind globally in terms of the proportion of women in parliament. Each policy lead was then asked if their party had a position on this issue; did they see it as a problem; and did they have any suggestions for what could be done about it? For each party the author also looked for ‘ligestilling’ (equality) on the parties’ websites. In addition, each Danish party (with the exception of the Liberal Alliance) has a ‘party programme’. This is not an electoral programme for a specific election, but rather a presentation of a party’s general ideological views. The following will examine the view on equality in each of these three sources for all eight parties represented in the Danish parliament.

The Red Green Alliance mentions equality several times in their party programme. Equality is, perhaps unsurprisingly for a leftwing party, an important topic for them. They mention that men and women are much more equal in Denmark than many other places, but that there is also a long way to go. They view the ‘women’s struggle’ (kvindekampen) as part and parcel of the struggle against capitalism. Indeed, most of their comments on equality and gender are in the context of the effects of capitalism (which are overwhelmingly negative). There is no specific mention of equality in the political world. The situation is much the same on the party’s website. There is general opposition to any kind of discrimination, and linking the women’s struggle with the wider class struggle the party subscribes to. Unequal representation in political assemblies is not mentioned.

In her reply to the author’s questions about women in the Danish parliament, the equality policy lead, Johanne Schmidt-Nielsen, replies that descriptive representation is important (not using that term, but the meaning is there). She also raises the issue of other social groups not being adequately represented, such as manual workers. The party does have gender quotas for the party’s executive, but not for parliament. However, she also writes that no candidate list would be approved by the annual conference if the gender balance is not ‘sensible’ (fornuftig). That is no guarantee for gender balance in the parliamentary group can be seen from the fact that the Red Green Alliance has one of the lowest proportions of women (33 percent).

In short, there is no indication in anything from the Red Green Alliance that they see a problem worthy of active intervention.

As with the Red Green Alliance, equality features several times in the Socialist People’s Party’s programme. The programme makes reference to the party’s roots in popular moments, amongst others the women’s movement. The programme declares that the party will fight against oppression and inequality based on ‘economic factors, education, religion, culture, gender, ethnicity, sexuality and disability’ (SF 2012: 1). Hence, discrimination based on gender is listed alongside a significant number of other concerns. Indeed, ‘equality in its broadest sense’ is part of the society they want to see built. They list inadequate equality as one of several issues they want to address on the
international stage. In short, equality, including gender equality, is one of several issues that the Socialist People’s Party ‘name checks’ in their programme. Political equality in Denmark is not mentioned.

Their website has a page on gender equality. It addresses a number of issues such as equal pay; paternity leave; domestic violence; women’s presence on company boards; and smuggling of women for sex work. There is no mention of gender equality in political institutions.

The researcher received a reply from the special advisor to the party’s policy lead on equality. She pointed out that 8 of the party’s 12 MPs are women as is the party leader, before acknowledging that nationally only 40 percent of MPs are women. She also points out that this is not an issue which receives much attention in political debate in Denmark, and that consequently the party does not have concrete solutions to the problem. In terms of the causes of the problem she suggests that party cultures and the political debate climate may benefit men. In addition, she points to the general lack of women in leadership positions. She mentions the party’s general work on gender equality (e.g. equal pay; shared paternity leave; and removing expectations derived from gender stereotypes). She concludes by arguing that equal representation in parliament will come with future generations as equality is achieved in the rest of society (i.e. an incremental approach).

The Social Democratic programme mentions gender equality three times. In a paragraph about respecting minorities the programme declares that the Social Democrats will fight ‘attitudes which limit women’s opportunities compared to men’s based their gender and cultural upbringing’ (SD 2011: 7). This fits well with Dahlerup’s claim that the gender debate has become about defending women’s rights from non-Danish cultures (which usually means Islam). The programme also declares that the party will not tolerate discrimination based on gender, age, ethnicity, religious beliefs, sexuality or political beliefs (SD 2004: 9). Like the Socialist People’s Party programme, this seems again like name checking. Finally, the Social Democratic programme says that: ‘...because of a gender-political struggle has become a country dominated by equality between and equal treatment of men and women’ (SD 2004: 12). This then fits very well with the discussion above. The discourse is one where gender equality has been achieved in Denmark, but is potentially threatened by minority groups and their non-Danish culture.

On the Social Democratic party’s website, equality has a separate page. The webpage focuses on gender equality; sexual orientation equality; and ethnic equality. In the section on gender equality the party admits that Denmark has a long way to go in achieving equality between men and women when it comes to pay and influence. The rest of the section touches on equal pay; paternity leave; the possibility of quotas for women on company boards; and the educational attainment of boys. There is no mention of equality in the political field.

When asked directly about gender equality in politics the policy lead on equality said he found it ‘positive’ that things were going in the right direction (thus not addressing the speed, or lack thereof). He also found it to be a ‘quantum leap’ for gender equality when Denmark got its first female Prime Minister in 2011. He did say that more could be done to get more women into politics, but that it was not a significant problem in the Danish parliament. Of more concern was the lack of women in local politics. Hence, generally a positive view on gender equality in Denmark, with a small acknowledgement that more (unspecified) could be done.
The Social Liberals, perhaps somewhat surprisingly, does not mention equality (ligestilling) at all in their programme. It does mention the need for everybody to have an equal right and ability to have influence on society. However, gender in any form is never mentioned.

The party’s website does have a page on equality. It declares that the party views equality as the absence of discrimination on the basis of ‘gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, religion or disability’ – another example of a name checking list. The party’s says it wants to deal with the gender pay gap, with the prevalence of lifestyle illnesses amongst men, and paternity leave. It also mentions Denmark being a pioneer in gender equality and the party’s focus on that element in its foreign aid policies. Political equality is not mentioned.

When asked by this author about political equality the Social Liberal’s policy lead on the issue argues that there is no actual problem. Denmark’s declining status internationally is put down to improvements elsewhere, rather than a problem in Denmark. The policy lead argues that women make up ‘a very large part’ of the seats in parliament. She concludes: ‘I do not believe there is a national problem with women’s participation. Therefore I do not believe that anything needs doing’.

The Liberal Alliance does not, unusually amongst Danish parties, have a party programme. It does, obviously, details policies on its website. However, there does not appear to be a single document setting out its fundamental vision. Their website does have a small (six and a half lines) section on equality. It starts out with the usual name checking, i.e. opposing discrimination on the basis of ‘gender, age, race, social status, disability, religion and political and sexual orientation’. Most of the rest is dedicated to the party’s opposition to quotas and parental leave earmarked for one or other gender.

The Liberal Alliance’s policy lead on equality told this author that men and women have equal opportunity to be selected and elected to the Danish parliament (which formally speaking is correct). She points out that in recent years there have been several female party leaders and ministers and that the current prime minister is a woman. On that basis she concludes that she does not see a problem with the current situation.

The Liberal Party’s programme mentions equality a number of times. Like several others it ‘name checks’ gender alongside other characteristics: ‘the right to freedom must apply to all equally regardless of gender – or political, religious, ethnic and sexual background’ (Venstre 2006: 4). The programme does declare that ‘work must continue to achieve greater equality between men and women’ (Venstre 2006: 17), a rare declaration for a Danish party that there is more to be done in Denmark. Exactly where more needs to be done is left unsaid, and political equality is not mentioned.

Equality as a political concept is not mentioned on the party website. When asked the party’s policy lead on equality acknowledges the lower number of women compared to men in national and local politics. However, she also writes that the party believes that there are equal rights and possibilities for men and women. In addition, she believes that, apart from e.g. publicity campaigns by parties, nothing should be done specifically for women: ‘It must be down to a person’s own drive, and if you want it [a political career] there are plenty of opportunities’. Further, she states that the party does not have a target for how many and women there should be in parliament.
Equality as a political concept is never mentioned in the Conservative Party’s programme. The only time the word is even used is in the context of treating physical and mental illnesses equally. On the website gender equality is ‘name checked’ alongside freedom, democracy, freedom of speech, habeas corpus, and tolerance, as values that are fundamental to Danish society. As usual, political equality is not mentioned.

In her reply to this researcher’s questions about gender equality, the party’s policy lead on the issue takes a standard meritocratic stance. Voters will vote for the people they think are best for the job, and local branches should not include gender in their selection criteria. If they do, the ‘party would find it very problematic’. She also argues that if any constituency selected only women for their candidate list they would be aware that this would be a disadvantage for the party; ‘because that is fortunately the way it is now – therefore I am struggling to see that we have any kind of problem as a country. We have, and have long had, many competent women in politics’.

The Danish People’s Party has no mention of equality of any kind in the party programme. Their website does have a page on equality. This deals with parental leave; domestic violence; and the employment market. In the section on the employment market they declare that Denmark is very close to gender equality and highlight their opposition to positive discrimination and a general opposition to legislation on gender equality. Political equality is not mentioned.

When asked about the topic the Danish People’s Party’s policy lead starts by saying that the party did not regard Denmark’s placement internationally as a problem. She further argue that looking at gender when voting was undemocratic. Finally, she (unprompted) rejected any use of gender quotas.

What is clear is that the issue of gender equality in the political sphere is thoroughly missing from the radar of Danish political parties. Equality is seen as important by several parties, and discrimination based on gender is frequently ‘name checked’ alongside other characteristics as something to be avoided. However, when prompted directly about political equality the overwhelming attitude is that this is a non-issue. Several equality policy leads outright reject the notion that there is a problem at all in this area. This would strongly suggest that there is little prospect for Denmark opting to shift from the stalling incremental path to a fast-track path. Indeed, the fast-track is not only unpopular with many equality policy leads, but with many party members too. The membership survey from 2000 asked members to agree/disagree with the following statement (translated from Danish): ‘Gender quotas are a good way to promote equality in the party’. The question was not asked in 2012. The results can be seen in Figure 9. A plurality of party members in 2000 opposed gender quotas, although there is considerable variation between the parties. The three parties on the left are pretty evenly split. The parties from the Social Liberals to the Liberal Party very strongly oppose gender quotes, with the Danish People’s Party fairly split on the matter. In short, party members displayed, at best, lukewarm support for quotes, at worst, strong opposition.

[FIGURE 9 ABOUT HERE]

The front runners – the Socialist People Party and the Social Liberals
The final issue that this paper will consider is if there is anything to explain why the Socialist People’s Party and the Social Liberals do so much better than the other parties.

As we saw above, both parties have reached parity (albeit sometimes a bit inconsistently). The Socialist People’s Party did briefly use quotas, but not for a long time. The Social Liberals have never used quotas, and indeed judging by the 2000 membership survey, Social Liberal members are overwhelmingly opposed to the use of quotas. The Social Liberals only have about 35 percent women members, whereas the Socialist People’s Party has almost 50 percent. The Social Liberals were led by a woman from 1988 to 1993, Marianne Jelved, who returned in 2001. In 2007 Margrethe Vestager took over before moving to a European Commission post in 2014. The Socialist People Party was first led by a woman in 2012, Annette Vilhelmsen, although she lasted for less than two years. In 2014 she was replaced by Pia Olsen Dyhr. The two parties then differ in terms of the presence of women in the rest of the party. The gender composition of the party membership and the party leadership therefore cannot explain why they both do well in terms of the presence of women in the parliamentary group.

According to the special adviser to the equality lead in the Socialist People’s Party, the organisation has seen it as a priority for a long time to get more women into the party. In addition, she mentions the party’s success at integrating people from the 1960s and 1970s women’s movement.

The policy lead in the Social Liberals speculated that a number of factors might be in play. The party is very highly educated, and she suggested that more educated women might find it easier to rise up in a party organisation. Another factor she mentions is that the party ideologically values equality and that this has had an impact. Finally, she also writes that women tend to be slightly ‘softer and redder’, and that the Social Liberals appeal to centre-right women who want policies that are ‘softer and redder’ than more right wing parties.

It is difficult to judge the impact on ideology on a party’s ability to attract female members and turn them into candidates. However, it is easier to examine the educational levels in the different parties. As can be seen from Figure 10 the Social Liberals do indeed have a very well educated membership with more than 60 percent have at least three years of university education. However, the Liberal Alliance is not far behind and yet does much less well than the Social Liberals when it comes to attaining parity in the parliamentary group. The Liberal Alliance is on 33 percent with only the Red Green Alliance joining them on that number and the Danish People’s Party in a worse position. In addition, the Socialist People’s Party has 56 percent women in the parliamentary group, yet a significantly less well educated membership than the Social Liberals.

[FIGURE 10 ABOUT HERE]

When we look at the level of education of MPs the picture is also mixed (see Figure 11). What we can see is that female MPs tend to be better educated than male MPs. The exception is in the Social Liberals and the Danish People’s Party. At the same time the female MPs on the whole are less well educated in the Socialist People’s Party than the female MPs in the Red Green Alliance, the Social Democrats, the Social Liberals and the Conservatives, yet it is the Socialist People’s Party which currently has the highest proportion of female MPs.

[FIGURE 11 ABOUT HERE]
In short, there is no straightforward explanation for why the Socialist People’s Party and the Social Liberals do better than the other parties in terms of getting women into parliament.

Discussion

What should be clear by now is that political equality, i.e. reaching parity between men and women in the national legislature, is not on the Danish political radar. The parties often ‘name check’ equality as a good thing in their policy documents, but parliamentary gender parity does not appear anywhere. When asked directly about it most of the parliamentary policy leads replied that the issue was non-existent. Denmark does not have a gender problem at the parliamentary level was the overwhelming message.

There then seems little prospect of the incremental path restarting or for Denmark to change to the fast track. There does not seem to be any significant debate about women’s representation in the media, and clearly the political parties are perfectly happy with the current state of affairs. The policy leads often point to the presence of a female Prime Minister, numerous female ministers and party leaders. Such powerful women could undoubtedly operate as ‘critical actors’ to put the issue back on the agenda, facilitating either a renewal of the incremental path or a shift to the fast track. However, it appears that in the case of Denmark the presence of powerful women in the political system is used to illustrate that everything is in fact fine.

The general lesson of Denmark seems to be that the incremental path is not a path to gender parity, but rather to saturation – so far and no further. The saturation point will be different for different countries, parties and individuals. However, as Kjaer found (see above) concern with gender equality wanes after the proportion of women hit about 30 percent. In short, unless the saturation point amongst the main critical actors happens to be 50 percent, the incremental path is unlikely to lead to parity. Once saturation has been reached, nothing further will be done to deal with the barriers women experience in getting into political office. For Denmark nationally the saturation point seems to be just under 40 percent, and it seems unlikely that this will see major progress without some form of active intervention.
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