Chapter 24
Copenhagen 2008



Monday, May 26, 2008, Copenhagen, Denmark

I am here for a week, and probably with a fair amount of time to myself. I am participating in something called Copenhagen Consensus 2008. This is a repeat of something they did here in 2004, where they brought together a small group of experts to examine and prioritize options for solving the world's problems. The experts drew upon studies of each problem that had been prepared by analysts, mostly economists. This time around, those analysts will also be commented upon by authors of shorter "perspective papers," which is what I am contributing. Essentially, I am a discussant of a paper on the problems of subsidies and migration in international trade, and I will present my paper to a group of eight experts about half of whom are Nobel prize winners. There is also a simultaneous set of sessions at the Copenhagen Business School for "youth," where we will also present.

The most distinctive thing about my visit, so far, is my hotel room. We are in the Admiral Hotel, which is a large, old, six-story gray brick building next to the harbor, which has been beautifully renovated into a high-class hotel. My room is on the top floor, under the slanting roof, and what is distinctive is that the room is two stories tall. That is, there is a rather steep staircase in the center of the room that goes up to a loft where the bed is. On the bottom level there is a sitting room and desk, but no bed (unless perhaps the couch is hiding one). Heavy unfinished wooden beams crisscross the room and seem to be original. Two windows, one downstairs and one upstairs protrude from the roof in dormers, and a small skylight also provides light. It's all very charming.



Admiral Hotel, from trip



Admiral Hotel, from Web 2025

A slight downside, both for this room and for my visit to Copenhagen, is that I'm having trouble with my left foot. For over a month now it's been hurting me – something called plantar fasciitis – and several trips to a foot doctor have so far not helped. This would be a great city to walk around, and I hope I will, but this may slow me down. And it also slows me down as I descend from the loft after sleeping, since that is when my foot hurts the most, and this steep staircase is a challenge.

My flight was normal and uneventful. I was seated next to a middle-aged woman whose hand settled on mine several times while she slept. She seemed not to know it.

The hotel is just three blocks from the site of the conference, which is the Moltkes Palace.[1] I went there yesterday afternoon for the opening ceremony and press conference. This featured several of the Nobel Prize winners, plus my friend Jagdish Bhagwati who would very much like to win a Nobel Prize. As he and others spoke, I realized that the exercise of prioritizing solutions to the world's problems is even more problematic than I had thought, especially so for trade. I may need to adjust some of what I say in my presentation.



Moltkes Palace , from Web 2025

The ceremony was in a large room, probably a ballroom, which was richly decorated with plaster sculptures adorning the curved ceiling. I'm afraid I paid more attention to them than I did to the speakers. Most of the sculptures were either workmen doing bricklaying, carpentry, etc., or smaller winged cherubs helping them out. My notion of a cherub is a pudgy baby that flits about uselessly like a hummingbird. But these were larger and much more muscular, carrying loads of building materials for the workmen. That, together with their nudity and their wings, made them incongruous. I don't know

[1] Photo by Neoclassicism Enthusiast - Own work, CC BY-SA 4.0, https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=122997691

what the Moltkes Palace used to be (actually I do, having now looked it up online), but it clearly has had something to do with labor (it turns out, having been a palace for nobility, it was purchased by the Craftsmen's Guild in 1930, which is when this ceiling was put in). I also noticed what appeared to be a swastika in one place, but it apparently predated the use of that symbol by Hitler.

Our schedule said that we would be entitled to dinner in the hotel, but it didn't say when, and it implied that we would simply be reimbursed. I went down for dinner a bit before 7:00 and was told first that there were no tables available, and that there would not be until after 9:00. But then the staff decided that, since I was just one person, they could squeeze me in. Then another fellow appeared at my elbow, asking if I too was with the Copenhagen Consensus and could he join me. I said yes, and we were seated at a small table. Shortly after we'd ordered, a friend of his arrived and joined us, pulling another small table over next to ours. Nobody objected.

These guys were both health economists, one from Harvard and the other, I think, from UCSF. We had a good conversation about topics of both trade and health, and I learned a few things. Did you know, for example, that if an epidemic of an air-borne communicable disease, such as flu, were to break out, one of the best things to do would be to equip everyone with cheap face masks? This is well known, and units of the US government at several levels all agree that such masks should be stockpiled for that purpose. But each unit of government thinks that another unit should be responsible for this, and as a result the US does not have nearly enough face masks anywhere to do this. It makes sense therefore, as I recall being told by Pat, for us to have such masks on hand ourselves. But the main purpose of the masks is to reduce the transmission of disease more generally, so what we really want is for others to wear them, and having them ourselves won't help with that.

Another thing I learned was that the spread of disease follows a process that is mathematically just like the "multiplier process" in economics, with the exception that the multiplier can be explosive. It all depends on how many people get the disease from one person who has caught it. If this is less than one, then the process converges to a finite number, which could be small. But if it is larger than one, then the number with the disease just grows without bound. That's why it is so important to reduce the rate of transmission, as with face masks and quarantines. Regarding the latter, it was pointed out that if you tell a group of Americans not to go out, because they are sick, the one thing you can be sure they will do is go out.

A confusing thing about this event is the extent to which we are allowed to listen to each other present our work. Our main purpose is just to present to the panel of experts, and to answer their questions. Indeed, we were told that when this process was completed, we would have to leave the room so that the experts could talk among themselves. That suggested that we might not be welcome to listen to presentations of others. My dinner companions and I talked about this last night, and we all agreed that it would be unfortunate if we couldn't attend all the sessions. This morning all three of us set out for the Moltkes Palace to see what they would let us do. It was clear from the setup of the

room, however, that there was no place for us, and we headed back to the hotel. Along the way we met a staff person from the Consensus, and she said we'd be welcome to hear the same presentations when they were made to the Youth Forum at the Copenhagen Business School. That's further away and will require a taxi ride, but I may do it.

When I checked in to the hotel, they gave me a packet of information, which is not unusual, plus a small folding umbrella. That was a nice touch, though I hoped I wouldn't need it. I do need it today, however. It's raining steadily. Any hope I had of being a tourist today is dashed.

Wednesday, May 28

I've now done the first of my two presentations, and I can relax a bit. Although I guess I've been relaxing until now anyway. On Monday I did not go out until the dinner for authors. After writing in this journal, I fell asleep for about three hours. Then I just stayed in the room doing some work on the laptop.

The "authors" were told to meet in the hotel lobby, and we would be escorted "around the corner" to a restaurant for dinner. Fortunately, by then the rain had let up to just a mist, so we didn't use our umbrellas. Around the corner turned out to be about three blocks,



Canal, from trip

over to the canal that seems to be a main tourist thoroughfare, lined with restaurants with seating both indoors and out. Our group, which numbered perhaps 20, ate indoors and upstairs in a room to ourselves. The menu was set, except for the surprising number of vegetarians who had to negotiate for something they could eat. An Indian woman across from me, after asking for vegetarian, was brought chicken. They assured her that it was "vegetarian chicken." I suppose that's right; I've never seen a chicken eat meat.

There are four people I know at this event, all trade economists. Jagdish Bhagwati is a member of the Expert panel, and he was not at this dinner. I learned later that the experts had dined at the Prime Minister's residence. The author of the trade paper, on which I was commenting, is Kym Anderson, who is from Australia but has spent a lot of his career in Washington at the World Bank. He was there for the authors' dinner, although he sat at a different table, and we didn't manage much more than a hello. The other discussant is Tony Venables, a Brit who has just moved from the London School of Economics to Oxford, after spending several years in the British government. He arrived later that evening and didn't attend the dinner.

So, at dinner I was with people I didn't know. Two of them had already done both of their presentations that day, so the rest of us were questioning them about what it was like. The presentations to the experts were apparently quite formal, and the questioning was intense but not much fun. The other presentation, to the Youth Forum, was very lively and enjoyable. I'll be doing that one later today.

I'm sure I learned a few things from my dinner companions that evening, just as I had the night before, since they were all knowledgeable about different subjects. But unfortunately, I seem to have forgotten all of it now. Instead, I remember that we talked about things that none of us were experts on, such as politics. It was pleasant, but not memorable.

Yesterday I went down for breakfast at about 8:30. I met Jagdish just coming out. He said he had looked for me and hoped we could sit down together sometime during the week, but he needed to get on to the meetings right then. Indeed, he did. I learned later that his meetings were to start at 8:00, and he got there late.

I found a table to eat alone, as I prefer, but in a few minutes, Tony Venables showed up and sat down with me. I learned about his move to Oxford, his time in government, and other things. We talked a good deal about this exercise we are engaged in here, which we agree is peculiar, at best.

After breakfast (which, by the way, was very conventional – many choices in a buffet, including eggs, bacon, sausage, and lots of pastries and fruit), I stayed in my room going over my presentation and doing other work. A little after noon, Tony and I met to walk over to the conference site. It was good I'd been there before, since there was nothing inside Moltkes Palace to tell us where to go, or even to acknowledge that it was the right place. Upstairs we found several round tables set for lunch and we joined one that had two empty seats. Tony was on my left, and on my right was one of the Experts, a

Frenchman named François Bourguignon, whom I'd met but whom Tony knew well. In fact, for the first part of the lunch they talked to each other, with me in the middle. Later, though, various other conversations took place around the table, and I talked with others, never Tony or François.

Our presentations had been turned in beforehand as PowerPoint slides, and these were already loaded and ready to be shown in the room next door where the work would take place. Across the room was a laptop that displayed in huge numbers the time we had left, and they had been very firm that we would have to limit ourselves to the time they had specified, in my case ten minutes. I thought that having that clock counting down in front of me would be distracting, but in fact it was very helpful.

Kym presented his paper, followed by me and then Tony. The experts then asked questions, almost entirely of Kym. In some other contexts, I often have a lot to say and have no trouble getting the floor. Here, however, my few attempts to intervene were talked over by someone else, and in the end, I don't think I said a thing to the group aside from my presentation. Nor did anybody seem particularly interested in what I'd had to say, except Jagdish who said something positive to me after the event was over. The experts themselves, half of them Nobel prize winners, said a wide range of things, many of which seemed irrelevant or uninformed, but some of which were insightful.

The whole event was unusual, as I think I've already said, in having no audience, just the panel of experts. Actually, that isn't quite the case. At the back of the room there were three older women sitting quietly. I learned that these were the wives of some of the older experts, who were there basically as their keepers.

The event was also unusual in that, after the questioning was done, we were asked to leave the room but to wait for the experts to deliberate in case they had further questions for us. We sat in the room where we'd had lunch, chatting and drinking coffee. After forty minutes or so, we were summoned back in to answer a couple of questions. Then we stepped out again and waited some more. In the end, the experts found our topic so difficult that they were unable to reach agreement even then, and they were to continue their discussion this morning.

When they did break up, Jagdish darted in to say he hoped to join the rest of us trade economists for dinner. We met in the hotel at 7:00, and the four of us plus Nancy Stokey, a well-known economist from University of Chicago and another one of the experts, went to dinner at a nice restaurant on the canal. This was the best food I've had so far in Copenhagen: a seafood bisque and some salmon with a delicious sauce. Our conversation was kept alive by Jagdish, who has no trouble talking. And in this situation, I was much more a part of it.

Thursday, May 29

Wednesday morning, Kym, Tony, and I took a taxi to the Copenhagen Business School (CBS) where they were holding the Youth Forum. This is a group of 80 students from all

over the world who were recruited to attend, all expenses paid, plus some 300 students from Denmark. They hear the same presentations that we gave to the Expert Panel, and then they ask questions. In addition – and we only learned this midway through our own session, the students break up into groups, and two of the groups then also make presentations to the whole group, one in favor and one against the proposals that we have presented. Finally there is more discussion.

All of this went very well. As we'd been told to expect, the students were lively and had far more varied ideas than the experts had. To our surprise, they did not seem to be particularly anti-globalist, which apparently is a change from when this same exercise was done four years ago. We don't know why.

I did a much better job of having things to say to this group, both in the formal q&a and in the informal interactions afterward. I did, however, still have some difficulty getting the floor. As the author of the main paper, Kym spoke first, if he had anything to say, in response to most questions from the group. And he spoke at length. At one point then, when I tried to follow up with a comment, the moderator interrupted and said that he wanted time for more questions, so he didn't let me speak. After that I was a bit more assertive in turning on my microphone and speaking before others got a chance. Not always, but a couple of times. The truth is that the three of us all share so much the same views that once one of us talked, there wasn't always need for another.

At the expert meeting, I got the feeling that nobody had paid much attention to my presentation. The only exception was Jagdish, who said that I should publish what I had presented, which I thought would be going too far. At the youth forum, though, I got another piece of feedback, and it surprised me even more. A student came up afterwards and said that my presentation was something that everybody ought to see, and he said I should do it as a video and put it on YouTube. He was sure it would be watched a lot. I find that hard to believe, but it certainly was good to hear. [Reading this now in 2025, I wish I knew what I talked about then, but I have no record of it.]

When the event was over, lunch was provided both for the students and for us, and I sat with groups of students, first with Tony and later with Kym, and we continued the conversation, not just about trade but also about other topics that they had been dealing with. It was good fun.

The same sort of fun continued that evening, after a spell back at the hotel, when the CBS hosted a dinner for us and the students. This, oddly, was a stand-up buffet dinner. That is, there were lots of round tables, set with white tablecloths and candles, but the tables were all at the right height to stand, not sit. There were no chairs at all, although the sides of the large room were tiered in a way that did provide places you could sit, though not at the tables. We first had to listen to a couple of speeches, but most of the evening was spent chatting with people, mostly students, as we ate at the tables. Except for my feet hurting, this was fun. I had lively discussions of "food security" and "fair trade," among other things, and I also learned a good deal about situations in various other countries that the students had come from.

After a while, many of us older folks sat down around the perimeter and left the standing to those who were younger. I was joined by Nancy Stokey, whom I'd first met at dinner on Monday. She is well known in economics, and she's married to Bob Lucas, a Nobel prize winner at Chicago. She seemed somewhat shy, but perhaps she recognized me as a kindred spirit. We also sat together on the bus back to the hotel, and while our conversation wasn't lively, it was satisfactory.

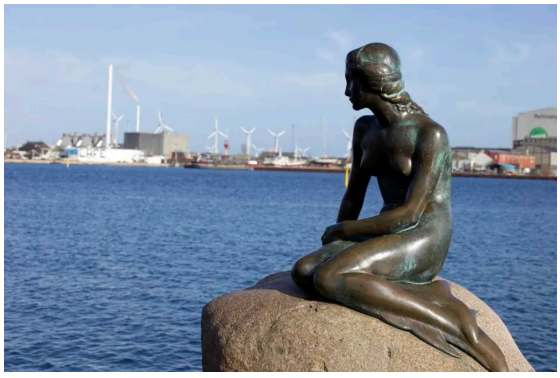
This morning, as usual, I went down for breakfast carrying my *Economist* magazine to read. As I looked for an empty table, one of the other participants whom I'd met but didn't really remember jumped up and invited me to join him at his table. He turned out to be Chris Green from McGill, an expert on global warming with some controversial views, which I then heard a great deal about. His main point is that none of the methods that we think we have now for dealing with global warming are going to work, mainly because they are not "scalable" – that is they cannot be expanded to the level that would be needed to make a real difference for the global climate. His message is that the greatest resources need to be put into research to find new ways to solve the problem. Listening to him on the likely failures of cap-and-trade, carbon tax, wind, solar, etc., got rather depressing. But it was informative.

During all of this, I noticed that he was only drinking coffee. I presumed that he had already eaten his breakfast when I arrived, but it turned out that he was waiting for his wife. After what must have been a good half hour of our conversation, he saw her come in and called her over. By then I'd finished, so I got up, said hello to his wife, and left.

I then went out on the town. Fortunately, today was a perfect day. The sun was shining, and the temperature was in the mid-60s. The map from the hotel showed the route for a walking tour that others had recommended, so I mostly did that. However, when I reached the dock where boat tours originated, I took one of those as well. It lasted an hour, showed me many of the sights of Copenhagen (which tried to mimic Amsterdam in building canals), and rested my feet. From the boat we saw the most famous sight here, the Little Mermaid.



Little Mermaid, from trip



Little Mermaid, Web 2025

The other main thing I saw and did on the walk was to visit the Round Tower. This is attached to a church, and it plays the role of the church steeple, but it also has an astronomical observatory on top of it and a



Ramp in Round Tower, from trip



Round Tower, from trip

library part way up. What is most unusual, though, is that you reach the top by walking up a spiral ramp, not a staircase. This ramp, built of stone, inside the round stone walls of the tower with regularly spaced windows looking out on the city, was unique. If you walked near the center, it was quite steep, and you would reach the top quickly. That's what the young people climbing the tower tended to do, passing me on my right as I walked the much milder slope at the outside. I don't ever much enjoy climbing, but this was pleasant.

At the top, there was a good view of Copenhagen all around. This wasn't all that wonderful, since Copenhagen away from the center is a mixture of beautiful old and ugly new. Indeed, the young people who'd passed me on the way up seemed more interested in lying on the floor up there, and soaking up the sun, than in looking at the city.



View from Round Tower, from trip



View from Round Tower, from trip

My meals this week have all been either provided by the conference or ordered as part of a group. One thing I was looking forward to, today, was having a distinctive Danish open-face sandwich, so that's what I tried to find for lunch. In a square not far from the Round Tower I found an outdoor restaurant that looked like it might have that, so I asked. Did they have the traditional Danish sandwiches, which I thought were called "smorebrot?" The man didn't understand me at first, of course, but when he did, he said no, nobody eats those anymore except maybe for special occasions like weddings. Oh.

I ordered from the menu on the wall, a sandwich with brie. When it arrived, it was on a plate heaped high with lettuce, looking more like a salad than a sandwich. I could see slices of brie cheese in amongst the lettuce leaves, as well as small slices of green pepper, onion, cucumber, and lots of sun-dried tomatoes. Plus part of a slice of bread, covering just part of the pile of greens. Looking more carefully, I saw that the rest of this slice of bread, which was large, was flat on the plate under the rest. And both slices were smeared with what looked like thousand island dressing. So, in way, this was after all an open face sandwich, but one that you had to eat much more like a salad, with knife and fork. It was a good lunch, accompanied by a wonderful cappuccino.

From there I walked through the Kings Garden, a large public park. There were plenty of people there, of all ages, even though this is a Thursday. Many were sunning themselves



King's Garden, from trip

(though I only saw two women who were topless), while others were playing various games. It was a beautiful park.

From there I essentially headed back to the hotel, but along the way I saw a sign for Guinness. I stopped, of course, and had one, the only customer in this somewhat out-of-the-way bar. The bartender offered me an English newspaper, but I had my *Economist* to read. He commented that I must be hot in my jacket (I was wearing my sport coat, as I usually do), which surprised me since I hadn't noticed that it was at all warm. But sitting inside, I soon realized that it was much warmer inside than out. I took off my jacket, and then I moved to a table outside. There, in the sun, it was quite comfortable. And the Guinness was excellent.

During my walk there were several things I was hoping to find to buy. One was the usual souvenirs that I pick up for the kids on my travels. I didn't find any. Another was postcards. For quite a while I didn't find these either, so when, near the Round Tower, I found a store displaying them, I bought all that I needed, despite their high price. To my surprise, at the top of the tower, there was a shop selling postcards, and these were cheaper. Too bad.

The other thing I wanted was more Kleenex. I neglected to bring enough packs of it along, and I was on my last one. I tried one store, which didn't carry them but directed me to a 7-Eleven down the street. There, when I asked, the man looked around at a place on his shelves where he apparently expected to find them but did not. The same thing happened at the next place I tried that looked likely, and at the next. Perhaps they just don't expect people to need tissues after winter is over, so even though they carry them, they run out. Finally, not far from the hotel, I found a store that had them and I bought a couple.

Copenhagen is very flat, and therefore people make great use of bicycles. Every street has bike lanes on both sides, between the sidewalk and the street, with a small curb for each. To me, the bike lane looks enough like a sidewalk that I didn't think twice about standing in it to take a picture. Not good. I heard what I presume was Danish invective from a woman who, fortunately, refrained from hitting me.

The cyclists, like Danes in general I suspect, are very well behaved. They only ride on the right side of the road, and they seem to obey all traffic rules, including waiting patiently at red lights. They even use hand signals when they are about to turn. I suspect that if I were driving a car here, I might not even resent their presence.

Sunday, June 1, Ann Arbor

No, my trip didn't last this long. I got home on Friday, but I'm just now finishing this journal.

Thursday evening, we had our final "celebratory dinner" at Tivoli. This is an amusement park and "pleasure garden" close to the center of Copenhagen that has been there for

more than a century and a half. It has a very few rides of the sort one finds at Cedar Point, and those must be pretty new. The more traditional features are restaurants, gardens, stage shows, etc. The whole place is filled with both natural and artificial color, the former being lots of flowers and flowering trees, the latter being not only painted facades, but also – and especially – colored electric lights. The lights are somehow a bit muted, though, so that what you get is a feeling of coziness.

Had this been like one of our amusement parks in the US, it would have been odd to hold the conference dinner there, since the food wouldn't be especially good. But at Tivoli this was not the case. They took us across the park to a building that housed an aquarium, then up several flights of stairs to a long narrow room and a balcony overlooking the park. We had drinks on the balcony, then dinner in the room. It was elegant.

I managed to sit across from Chris Green, the same fellow I'd eaten breakfast with, which meant that I could count on him to keep the conversation going. Fortunately, it was not mostly about global warming. He was eager to talk about several of my former colleagues at Michigan, including Peter Steiner and Harold Shapiro, both of whom he'd known. He knows Ann Arbor well too, as his brother teaches in the Law School.

After dinner they offered us a "train ride" through the park. This was more of a tram, since it ran on the sidewalks, not on tracks. Not everyone did it, fortunately, since there wouldn't have been room, though there may have been ones who wanted to who missed it. After we'd gone a couple of hundred yards, Bob Mundell intercepted us on foot, having apparently run to catch up to us, and we squeezed him in. Since he's one of the Nobelists, advanced in both years and girth, I rather wish I could have seen him running after us.

After the ride we had about half an hour before the bus was to return us to the hotel. I was still with Chris Green and his wife, so I said that I was going to do some shopping in a store that happened to be right there. I did, and I found most of the things I wanted as souvenirs for the family. Only when I was paying, and when I got caught up in the paperwork for getting the tax refund that is available, did I notice that Chris and his wife were still in the store waiting for me. I apologized, since it seemed that I had somehow prevented them from seeing more of the park. I'd had no idea they were waiting for me.

We made our way to the park entrance, where the only bus in sight was across the road. We debated whether that could be ours – none of us had paid attention to what the bus that brought us had looked like, and it had dropped us at the entrance, not across the road. Eventually, Chris went across to find out. I then noticed a group of Africans who had been with us at dinner, and they too were waiting for one of theirs to check out the bus. Soon both Chris and an African were waving to us to come over, which we did. We waited for five or ten minutes after the announced departure time, since there were far fewer of us on the bus than there had been when we came. Eventually we decided that others were either walking back to the hotel or had decided to stay longer at the park drinking. Drinking seems to be one of the better things one can do at Tivoli.

Friday morning, I checked out and took a taxi to the airport. Checking out, they asked me about the various charges – meals, internet, etc. – and then came up with a total that was far less than I expected, since I was supposed to pay myself for two of the five nights. I said so, they rechecked their data, and they finally came up with a total much more appropriate. It sounded like I could have saved lots of money (this was not a cheap hotel) by staying silent. But I've never been able to do that (thanks, Mom and Dad!), and in any case I'm sure that the conference organizers, when they saw the bill, would have tracked me down and insisted I pay it.

So that's it for my trip to the Copenhagen Consensus. If you are interested, you can learn more about it at the website www.copenhagenconsensus.com. I just went there to see what there is, and I found a link that says "View all the presentations." It lists all the presentations, including mine, and so I thought that maybe I could actually deliver on the student's suggestion that I put it on YouTube. No such luck. [That link no longer has presentations from 2008. For results of the 2008 meeting, see Copenhagen Consensus 2008 -- Results.]

Other photos from trip:



Copenhagen Opera House, from trip



Canal, from trip



Street scene, from trip



Old Pharmacy Building, from trip



View from Round Tower, from trip



Street performer? From trip



From trip



Danish Royal Guard, from trip



From trip



Royal Palace, From trip



Dvid Replica, from trip



From trip



Rosenborg Castle Gardens, from trip



Rosenborg Castle Gardens, from trip