In this third and final chapter on the sustainability of the Nordic model of social democracy, we will look further into another key component, namely, its moral sustainability. While closely interlinked with environmental and economic sustainability, moral sustainability is in itself a crucial component underpinning the viability of the model as a whole and the welfare state especially. This raises important questions: Does the welfare state model found in Scandinavia, with broad and general systems of welfare benefits for the many rather than means-tested solutions for the few, presuppose a high level of social cohesion? Alternatively, has the creation of a welfare state been the chief factor behind the high level of community found in the Scandinavian countries?

The implications of the answers to these questions should not be underestimated. If a comprehensive and generous welfare state must be founded on a historically based, deep-lying trust between social classes and between citizens, it is only viable in societies with a rooted and basic experience of a common purpose and shared destiny. Should this be the case, it not only severely limits the potential for exporting the Nordic model, it also puts serious doubts on whether the model is still viable in the multicultural societies developing in Scandinavia today. If, by contrast, conscious policies enacted by social democrats have been pivotal in fostering the social cohesion found in the Nordic states, it is certainly of interest way beyond the countries in question.

In the present chapter, we will discuss the possibilities for policies that promote social cohesion in the twenty-first century, as the effects of globalization and internationalization make for more diverse societies, creating new social conflicts. Furthermore, we will look at what such policies might entail, taking two concrete policy efforts with social democratic origins as the point of departure: the report of the
government-appointed Norwegian Welfare and Migration Commission and the recommendations of the Norwegian Labour Party’s Integration Committee. The focus on Norway in this chapter is not accidental. Unlike its Swedish and Danish sister parties, which have more or less ignored the issue or had to half-heartedly accept populist proposals originating from their political opponents on the right, the Norwegian Labour Party in government has at least started a process that, though still in its infancy, is expected to end up with new policy proposals for the twenty-first century.

We will then explore the paradoxes that sometimes arise from an ideology which has the liberation and empowerment of the individual through collective action and social cohesion as its stated aims. Most social democrats would agree that, in order to ensure liberty for all, it is sometimes necessary to put constraints on what the British philosopher Isaiah Berlin has defined as the ‘negative liberty’ of the individual.¹ The questions of how and to what extent the individual should be subordinated to authoritative, collective decisions are much harder to answer. We will end the discussion on the sustainability of the Nordic model of social democracy by looking at the sustainability of the social democratic parties themselves, as mass-based parties in an age of individualism.

Homogeneity, cohesion, and the welfare state

A fairly common narrative of the history of the Nordic model implicitly takes the view that its root causes are to be found in the national histories of the individual Scandinavian countries. The historic framework for the development of the Nordic welfare state is then the ethnically and culturally homogenous nation state, with roots dating back to the introduction of absolute monarchies in the seventeenth century and the end of the Napoleonic Wars in the early nineteenth century. The first event heavily influenced the relationship between the state and its subjects, and the latter meant the definite end of the great power ambitions of Sweden and Denmark and the re-establishment of Norway as a sovereign state, albeit with its citizens as subjects to the Swedish king.

With the exception of a German minority in the southern parts of Denmark and the Finn and Sámi people of northern Norway and Sweden, what remained after the Treaty of Kiel in 1814 were three more or less culturally homogenous nation states with clearly defined political borders, strong loyalty to the governing institutions, shared religious practices, common written languages, and a high degree of literacy