

The people's fool

A highly placed official recently said, "We have very few eccentrics in Denmark." The short and happy career of Jacob Haugaard puts this claim to the test.

Jesse Ventura was kind of a joke, but he was trying to be serious, and he actually wasn't all that funny. Jacob Haugaard knew he was a joke, and that was the whole point. A stand-up comic and harmless whacko, he got the idea to run for parliament in 1979.

"I was just the drunken freak in my hometown, and all the fellow students developed the Union of Conscious Working Shy Elements. I was a rock and roll singer, a school dropout." They first tried in 1979, and ran in every election until 1994. "It's important to remember that there was no content."

He campaigned, promising more tailwinds for Danish bike paths. Nicer weather for Denmark. More jellies in bags of candy mix, shorter lines at the supermarket, and more generous Christmas presents. He also promised to include Nutella in the field rations of the Danish army. And he won, showing that while there may not be

a lot of eccentrics in Denmark, every one of them votes.

All viable candidates get a certain amount of government money for their campaigns, which they spend on posters and polls and experts. Jacob spent his on a big party. In an exag-

"The difference between a court jester and me is that I could vote."

*-Jacob Haugaard,
Former member
of Parliament*

gerated version of drinks on the house, he spent his entire allotment on beer. The "house" was the whole town of Aarhus, the second largest city in Denmark.

Once in, a politician receives an annual expense payment of DKK 20 for every vote received. "For three years I spent my annual budget for free beer. The last year I put it into a



Courtesy Jacob Haugaard

One man, one suit: Jacob Haugaard

shopping spree. Then I met a charming 86-year-old lady who had just broken one of her dentures. So I took her to the dentist and got her a new one." This is the best ward healer tradition; Jacob became the jolly godfather of the worker's sector.

After his victory, he went to the presentation of the new government at court in a twisted caricature of a smooth politician's three-piece suit, cut from coffee sacks. The queen, bless her heart, smiled. "She's great.

She has a great sense of the artistic." She told him that what he had done was very historic. "She thought it was a good idea, she liked it. When people ask me what my role in parliament is," he said, "I always reply, that of securing that the number of members remain uneven."

His original idea was to perform the duties of court jester, or king's fool. This is an honorable, time-tested position, but you need a powerful monarch. In Denmark, "The monar-



Courtesy Wonderful Copenhagen

The Strøget, the world's longest pedestrian street

chy represents the ball on the flagpole. They have power as long as they don't use it."

After one term, Jacob came to realize that politicians, although they may have flashes of acerbic wit, are actually pretty serious fellows. Not only that, politics is a pretty serious job. What they do affects the lives of real people, most of whom have serious concerns.

He is a man of conscience, and he couldn't reconcile practical jokes with people's serious problems. "I couldn't sleep at night if I spoiled lives." He saw that he could make them laugh, but he couldn't help keep the currency stable, he didn't know how to protect old people, and he couldn't emerge from three-hour briefing on macroeconomics and use that information to anybody's benefit.

"Politics is like a soccer match. The people are always screaming, and then suddenly I was yanked onto the field. And it's hard work." To his everlasting credit, he decided not to run for re-election.

To paraphrase Shakespeare, "How ill the job of legislating people's lives becomes the fool."

Everybody is proud of him. The other parliamentarians commissioned an official portrait to be made, which is a singular honor in Danish politics. Now 50, he is entertaining for a living -- "singing, recording, making fun." He has written a couple of books, including "The Honored Member, the Jester." He is married with four children. Everybody still likes him, which is pretty good for a politician that didn't keep a single one of his campaign promises. The tailwinds on the bike routes are just as sluggish, the supermarket lines are just as long, and the Danish soldiers are still fighting without Nutella.

The Danes, however, through their long dismal winters (this, I have to add, is yet another campaign promise that he didn't keep) can look back on his career and get a good laugh.

That's worth my vote.