

Denmark's Social Democrats: Selling Out Our Values

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Denmark's general election is set to produce the most left-wing parliament in decades. But the country's Social Democrats have disgraced themselves with anti-immigrant rhetoric.

As Denmark votes in Wednesday's general election, the country faces what looks like a historic swing to the left. The right-wing coalition government headed by the Liberals' (V) Lars Løkke Rasmussen is unpopular with voters, and its main parliamentary allies in the nationalist Danish People's Party (DF) are set to slump to defeat. The election could result in the most left-wing parliament since the 1970s.

The May 26 election for the European Parliament already gave some idea of what we can expect in the June 5 contest. In last weekend's vote, the DF slumped from 26 to 10 percent; polls for Wednesday's election predict that this right-populist force will lose almost half its seats in the Danish parliament. Overall the [European elections yielded](#) 43 percent for parties backing Denmark's present right-wing government, and 54 percent to the opposition. Within this, there was a breakthrough first seat for the Red-Green Alliance (now standing independently, having historically run as part of a left-wing anti-EU alliance) while the Socialist People's Party (SF) also gained one seat thanks to its 13 percent of the vote.

Even if we can't simply map these results onto the Danish general election, there are promising signs for the Left (broadly defined): SF and the Red-Green Alliance are polling a total of almost 20 percent, while the biggest winners are likely to be Mette Frederiksen's Social Democrats. All this suggests a voter backlash against the retreat of the welfare state we have seen in recent years, especially since the 2008 crisis. However, under the surface of this promise, there are also real reasons to worry.

Worrying Tendencies

This is evident even when we look at the steep decline of the Danish People's Party. Indeed, the right-populist party's weakening should not be seen in isolation, and most certainly does not mean the end of anti-migrant policies. Rather, significant elements of its stance on immigration and refugees have been adopted by its competitors: not only by the more established right-wing parties, but also by the Social Democrats themselves. At the same time, its setbacks also owe to a radicalization of some of its voters, with two far-right parties on course to beat the 2 percent threshold to enter parliament.

The most extreme of these, Stram Kurs, explicitly calls for the expulsion of all Muslim and foreign-born citizens. Its idiosyncratic leader Rasmus Paludan has [especially gained notoriety](#) for his public burning of the Quran. The party has collected a bizarre slate of candidates, ranging from a disgraced psychology professor (upholder of an unabashed biological racism), to a performance artist otherwise best known for bizarre artistic "happenings" involving nudity and public urination.

The second new party, Nye Borgerlige, was created by former leading conservatives. It is trying to appeal to more affluent voters by combining an extremist anti-immigration stance with hardline neoliberal economic policies, destroying the bases of the welfare state. It, too, is hovering around the threshold to enter parliament. While the major parties have refused cooperation with either Stram Kurs or Nye Borgerlige, seeming to undermine their influence, their appearance remains a highly worrying phenomenon.

More complicated is the progress represented by the return-to-strength of the Social Democrats. Amid the generally bleak picture for Europe's center-left parties in recent years, this party's polling rise like the successes of its Spanish and Finnish counterparts represents a clear counter-tendency. Yet while in Spain Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez has gained momentum by turning his PSOE more to the left, at the same time as reaching out to the radical-left Podemos over his budget plans, the Danish Social Democrats have taken a radically different course.

There is some superficial similarity: becoming leader in 2015, Mette Frederiksen promised to turn away from Third Way neoliberalism and toward a more classic form of social democracy. Yet in practice her strategy has been to combine a moderate shift on economic issues with a sharp swerve to the right on immigration, believing this to be the way to appeal to disaffected working-class voters. This may reap electoral benefits. Yet this also means the continuation of Denmark's already harsh anti-migrant measures — infamous for such shocking policies as [confiscating jewelry and other valuables](#) from asylum seekers.

Uncertainty After the Election

Even looking beyond the Social Democrats' dubious turn on the migration question, it is still hard to predict what impact the rising support for the further-left parties will really have after election day. While the radical Red-Green Alliance advances demands that push the whole political agenda to the Left — with its call for [democratic ownership of companies](#) and the [breaking up of the big banks](#) — the new parliament will also include centrist forces like Radikale, which combines neoliberal economics with a softer line on immigration policies.

Especially central for the new government's course will be the relationship between the Social Democrats and the Red-Green Alliance. Formed in 1989 by a coalition of radical-left parties, it entered parliament in 1994 primarily spurred by its opposition to the European Union. In 1992, the Danish voters rejected the Maastricht treaty in a referendum, and when voters were asked to vote a second time, this time it yielded a yes vote. The subsequent disillusionment, to which the Red-Green Alliance gave a political voice, allowed it to clear the minimum threshold. Yet only in the last decade did it rise above the status of a marginal force, as it offered a clear rejection of the neoliberal policies imposed by the last Social Democratic government under [Helle Thorning-Schmidt](#) in the 2011-15 parliament.

Thorning-Schmidt's tenure was characterized by neoliberal reforms, corporate tax cuts, and — the crowning glory — the sale of part of part of the national energy company to Goldman Sachs. [This sale](#) netted Goldman a \$2 billion profit over three years, but produced widespread disillusionment among left-wing voters. Bjarne Corydon, the Social Democratic finance minister who pushed through the sale in the face of large popular protests, eventually left office only to take up a lucrative position at consulting firm McKinsey. Today he is chief editor at *Børsen* — the Danish equivalent of the *Wall Street Journal*.

Given these experiences, we can expect the post-electoral negotiations between the center-left and more radical left to be tense. The result will most probably be a single-party minority administration, in which the Social Democrats govern alone, but with a policy prospectus highly influenced by the

concessions they are forced to make to other left-wing forces in exchange for their passive consent. Both the Red-Green Alliance and Alternativet — a new green party associated with Yanis Varoufakis's [European Spring movement](#) — have threatened to topple the new government if it does not cede to enough of their policy goals.

Influencing the Social Democrats' policy on immigration will be especially difficult, in this regard. Indeed, the center-left party will have a solid parliamentary majority on this issue, given that it has promised to continue the previous right-wing government's policy. Most likely, the tensest negotiations will instead be those centering around climate policies, austerity, and welfare.

While Denmark remains a relatively egalitarian country, more than two decades of neoliberal reforms have eroded the "Nordic model," with Denmark seeing one of the [most dramatic rises in inequality](#) among OECD countries in recent years. This development has accelerated since the crisis, with a series of draconian cuts to benefits, education, and welfare services. Prominent Danish social scientist Jørgen Goul Andersen speaks of the welfare state "[reaching a point of no return](#)" if this development is not reversed in coming years.

This development provides the backdrop to the arm-wrestling contest we can expect between the Social Democrats and the more radical-left parties after the election. While the Social Democrats are running on a program of increasing welfare spending and turning away from some of the liberal orthodoxies that characterized their last period in government, it remains to be seen whether they will stick to this line once they are back in office. But if an empowered left acts to stop a repeat of the last experience of "Third Way" rule, the new government may find its rule is short-lived.

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