

The Danish Elections: Social Democracy with an “Inhumane Face”

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The great centrist European tradition of social democracy has been receiving a rattle for the last few decades. The European Parliament elections were a reminder how much their appeal has diminished. In Denmark, by way of contrast, they have established something of a bridgehead, defeating the centre-right coalition led by the Venstre party’s Lars Løkke Rasmussen in Wednesday’s election. The Left parties won some 52.1% of the vote with 41% netted by right wing opponents. Extreme parties such as Stram Kurs were kept out.

But the analysis from outside the country is typically skewed, seeing such a victory as a return to worn social democratic clothing with a grand spring clean. The votes, seen in raw terms, do show a return to form for the left. This ignores the actual change of political attire. Danish voters did not return to any temple of the left and renew progressive vows. The left, more to the point, has edged, in some cases leaped, to the right.

The response of the Danish Social Democrats in 2015 was not to convince voters about an existing vision for a future vote, but to ape that of the victors. That year had seen the arrival of 21,000 migrants, causing disruption in the electoral mood.

“I know that many Danes are worried about the future,” claimed the newly elected leader of the party, Mette Frederiksen. “Worried about jobs, about open borders. About whether we can find a balance in immigration policy.”

In an [interview with TV2](#), she opined that Denmark was not good at integrating refugee arrivals; nor was it “heroic or humane to bring so many people here that the problems become huge in our own country.”

Frederiksen’s policy has been to play the devil, the humanitarian and the dissembler. Social welfare has been returned to the centre of political discussions, but the issue of refugees and asylum seekers has also prominently, and negatively featured. To [TV2 on Monday](#), she spoke of her interest in implementing “an economic plan that benefits the fight against inequality and invests in welfare.” The civic compact of the welfare state is to be renewed, but the outsiders, those desperate to be admitted to it, are to be kept at arm’s length.

In the last four years, strict immigration laws passed by the Rasmussen government have received approval from the Social Democrats. Frederiksen was doing everything to shrink the gulf with her opponents, not accentuate the difference. To that end, her party, in 824 legislative votes since 2015, has voted with the government [in over 90% of instances](#).

Nasty measures sharpened for populist appeal have gotten the nod of approval: the [banishment](#) of rejected asylum seekers unable to return home and foreigners convicted of

crimes to the island of Lindholm, known for hosting cattle and swine said to possess viral diseases worthy of studying; the [grant of intrusive police powers](#) enabling the confiscation of goods held by refugees deemed non-essential and worth more than 10,000 kroner; and [fining](#) those wearing garments covering faces in public places.

In February, the Danish parliament passed the [L 140 bill](#) shifting the focus on immigration away from integration to that of repatriation, including those who do not have permanent status and UN quota refugees. The Social Democrats went along with this [“paradigm shift”](#), despite disagreeing with the reduction of the social welfare benefit known as the *integrationsydelsen*. The crude note behind the bill [was struck](#) by their spokesperson for immigration Mattias Tesfaye: “People will be given the more honest message that their stay in Denmark is temporary.”

Spokesperson for the Red-Green alliance Pelle Dragsted [summed up the view](#) in some disgust.

“The essence of this is about making life harder and more unpleasant for people who have come here to escape Assad’s barrel bombs and the sex slavery and terror of Islamic State.”

The Social Democrats have also campaigned on shifting the focus from Denmark the processing state to countries, and regions, of origin, dubbing it a [“Marshall plan for Africa”](#). Go to the source of ruination, and improve it with structural and financial incentives. We shall help more, [goes the party’s policy](#), though “we cannot help all in Europe and Denmark.”

Despite a collapse in the 2019 election (their number of 37 mandates shorn by 21), the Danish People’s Party (Dansk Folkeparti) supplies a text book example of how parties of the far right can terrify and convince their opponents into shifting ground. When its candidates first started finding a voice in Denmark’s parliament in 1998, the focus was always on tightening immigration, with a conspicuous anti-Muslim, anti-immigrant bias. The welfare state would take pride and place, but outsiders would be frowned upon.

The DPP, in other words, sounded much like convinced Social Democrats incarnations, at least on social and economic policy. They proved religious defenders against any increases in the legal retirement age, advocates for lower taxes for low wage earners and promoters of better labour conditions. In 2001, 2011 and again in 2015, they made good their reputation of being kingmakers but would often do with forces infected by economic rationalism.

While disaffected Social Democratic voters would find a temporary home in the DPP, this was done at some cost. Knowing this, Frederiksen was always careful to keep the DPP close, mindful of any future power arrangements.

“In Denmark,” [she claimed in 2017](#), “you are entitled to almost all benefits from day one. It’s a difficult system when large numbers of people come into the country.”

Frederiksen was also handed a pre-electoral gift by her opponent. A day before the poll,

Prime Minister Rasmussen was [keen to shake off](#) some of the more influential rightist groups that might have a say in a future government. The New Right and Stram Kurs, for instance, were not going to be “realistic” partners in any conservative bloc. “If there’s a blue majority tomorrow, I feel convinced that it would include parties that I will not accommodate.”

Rasmussen saw the situation mirrored on the part of his Social Democrat opponents. Should the progressives do well in the elections, Frederiksen would have to share with parties of the far left persuasion. “The alternative is there will be no blue majority. And then we have a situation in which a Social Democratic prime ministerial candidate must accommodate the far left. Neither option is in Denmark’s interests.” The desired route? A partnership with the Social Democrats to push the extreme wings of both sides out. The idea lacked wings, and never took off.

The pooh-poohing of fellow conservative members so close to the vote did Rasmussen few favours. Frederiksen found herself able to muster the numbers of a red bloc, though its shape is still forming. The extreme voices of the Stram Kurs movement were kept out. Denmark has confirmed its status as a political mutation parochial of the welfare state but sharply sceptical about refugees. What this says about social democracy is also significant: to be relevant, [argues](#) Frederiksen, the movement must be able to “appeal to those who are most strongly affected by the challenges of the future and the changes in our society”. If this demands dry tear ducts and a hardening of the heart towards outsiders, then so be it. To the victor go the dubious and tarnished spoils.

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