

Political Science 231

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DENMARK:

AN ANALYSIS OF DOMESTIC AND FOREIGN POLICIES

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1. Introduction

When thinking about Denmark in terms of domestic and foreign policy for the first time, only very few people will expect interesting and unique facts and ideas. Denmark simply seems too small to be taken seriously. After looking at some books and articles suddenly more and more appears that arouses interest and encourages further research. Why is Denmark still able to afford the expensive system of the welfare state and how does it work? Why are the Danes still skeptical about the European Union? Which international policies does Denmark support? What dominates their domestic political agenda? In this short paper, I will try to give answers to the above questions.

2. From absolutism to democracy: a brief historical outline

As strange as it may sound today, Denmark once was an influential world power. In the ninth and tenth centuries, the Danish Kingdom included the East of England and in the late fourteenth century, all of Scandinavia was under Danish rule. Rivalries among the Scandinavian states ultimately reduced Denmark's power. The outcome of World War I shaped Denmark's current European borders.

Democratic political institutions in Denmark emerged relatively late. Royal absolutism lasted until the middle of the nineteenth century, when Frederik VII, pressed by the Danish liberal movement, had to issue a liberal constitution. A constitutional monarchy was established. The constitution was adopted on June 5, 1849. Despite several amendments it is still the basis of the current Danish structure of government (Warmenhoven, 65). Only a few decades later, Denmark introduced social and labor market reforms, which was the basis for the existent welfare state. In 1915, a constitutional reform granted universal suffrage and established the current electoral system.

3. The electoral system and the political parties

Elections in Denmark are held at least any four years, but since the Prime Minister can dissolve the parliament (Folketing) at any time, elections are held frequently (22 since the end of World War II). The 179 members of the Folketing are elected by a system of proportional representation. The Danes wanted to avoid fragmentation of the vote into innumerable splinter-parties and therefore created a threshold of 2 percent. Only parties that secure at least 2 percent of the total vote receive representation in the parliament (Warmenhoven, 65). This relatively low threshold gives smaller parties a chance to enter parliament, which was the case in the so-called "earthquake election" of 1973 when 10 different parties were elected to the Folketing (Warmenhoven, 66). One could assume that such a high number makes efficient decision-making impossible but this was not the case in Denmark. After the newly elected protest parties became less influential, Danish politics in 1982 entered a particularly stable period. The "four-leafed-clover government" for over a decade consisted of a coalition, which comprised the same four conservative parties

Lower-house parliamentarism already became the accepted norm in 1901 (Borre/Andersen, 17), but only in 1953 another constitutional reform abolished the upper house, which had represented the privileged class and the aristocracy. Danish parliamentary politics are divided in a two-bloc pattern. The parties on the left are led by the Social Democrats, while the right groups around the Conservative and Liberal Party (Borre/Andersen, 19). From 1982-1993, Denmark was governed by a coalition of the Conservatives, the Liberals, the Christian People's Party and the Center Democrats. In early 1993 Poul Nyrus Rasmussen, the leader of the Social Democratic Party, was elected prime-minister after a new center-left coalition including the Social Democrats and the Radical Liberals had been elected. The general elections of 21 September 1994 weakened the coalition but confirmed it in office (Fitzmaurice, 418).

4. The Danish welfare state

Denmark enjoys the reputation of being "one of the world's best-run and most generous

welfare states“ (Warmenhoven, 67). In 1994, 43% of tax-revenue was returned to households in the form of the following benefits:

- all working persons are granted a five-week paid vacation
- Danish workers are accorded up to 80% of their wages in the case of sickness, disability or maternity or paternity leave and receive an equally high unemployment compensation up to 2 and a half years
- day care facilities for children are provided by the state
- public education is free
- all Danes are covered by a national health-care plan that provides free hospitalization and medical care (Warmenhoven, 67)

The required money to pay for these programs keeps the tax burden high. About half of the total income is collected by the state and most of it is used for the expensive social services. This has triggered an ongoing discussion about the high taxes and the welfare state in general. First disapproval could be registered during the elections of 1973, when almost a quarter of the voters opted for parties, which wanted to reduce taxes. Nevertheless, since ultimately every resident of Denmark profits from it, the system still enjoys strong support.

Ole Borre and Jorgen Goul Andersen, in their study about Danish political attitudes and voting behavior, found out that "welfare attitudes tend to be overwhelmingly positive (...). The legitimacy of the Danish welfare state appears to be safely ensured unless the government loses control over the economy, over public expenditure, or both. Fear of future costs, fear of inefficiency and fear of social abuse are among the potential threats to legitimacy whereas taxes seem to play an insignificant role" (245). Most hypotheses dealing with a decline of legitimacy of the welfare state in Denmark receive little or no support through their study. But each year, the rules for social benefits are tightening, especially for the unemployed. The debate even splits the Social Democrats, a classic worker's party. One wing wants to put tasks out to tender to allow competition, which would lower the costs, while the other wing wants to reintroduce

the tax on capital and guarantee employees a share in companies' profits (Danish Politics-Welfare Debate, 1).

5. International Security

During the First World War, Denmark remained neutral and between World War I and World War II only joined the cooperation of Oslo States. This organization was not a military alliance but wanted to further economic cooperation during the Great Depression. Shortly before the outbreak of World War II, Denmark decided to abolish its army, which led to quick occupation by Nazi Germany (Background Notes, 4). Denmark had to succumb to Hitler without any resistance. After the German surrender five years later, the Danes had learned their lesson and were eager to join a collective security system to prevent future war and occupation. When the United States came up with the idea of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), Denmark and Norway quickly abandoned the idea of bloc neutrality and joined the NATO (Warmenhoven, 67).

Four years earlier, in 1945, Denmark became one of the founding members of the United Nations (UN). Although its relatively small economy limits Denmark's importance in the UN, it contributes large amounts of development aid and is a strong supporter of international peacekeeping. Danish forces engaged in the former Yugoslavia in the UN Protection Force (UNPROFOR), IFOR and SFOR (Background Notes, 6).

Despite several serious confrontations with the US between 1982-1988, membership in the NATO is still popular in Denmark. When joining the NATO, the Danish government had made it a condition that no nuclear weapons would be installed on Danish territory. A parliamentary majority decided against lifting these restrictions, which caused serious difficulties since the Alliance had decided to store nuclear weapons in its European member states (Warmenhoven, 67). The dispute was settled and today Denmark is a very active NATO member, trying to integrate Central and Eastern European states into the West and coordinating

assistance to the Baltic States (Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania). Besides being a member of the European Union (which will be discussed in the next section), Denmark joined the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, the World Trade Organization, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, the Council of Europe, the Nordic Council, the Baltic Council and the Barents Council (Background Notes, 6).

6. Denmark and the European Union

The only word that can properly describe Denmark's relationship with the European Union (EU) is ambivalence. Are the Danes "reluctant" Europeans (Background Notes, 6) or loyal members? Until the early 1960s, Denmark's economy had concentrated its efforts on the Nordic Cooperation. Then it joined the European Free Trade Association and when Great Britain (the EFTA's leading member) considered EU membership in 1972, the Danes also attempted to jump on the European train. On January 22 1972, Denmark signed the accession requirements. A 141 to 34 vote in the Folketing, made Denmark an official member. However, poor information about the advantages and disadvantages of EU membership often caused unrest and discontent among the Danes who even threatened to withdraw. Their skeptical attitude reached a climax when the government decided to hold a referendum on the so-called Maastricht Treaty. 50.7% of the Danes voted No and left the European Union stunned (Warmenhoven, 68). Many plans had to be put on hold.

The shocking result of the referendum appears in a completely different light if one has a look at the study of Franklin, Eijk and Marsh. They present evidence that referenda can be subject to what they call "lockstep" phenomenon. It basically means that referendum outcomes are influenced by the popularity of the government: "In the case of the Maastricht referenda in France and Denmark, the apparent unpopularity of the European project in fact appears to have been nothing of the kind, but instead to have reflected the unpopularity of ruling parties in both

countries" (101).

After a more popular government had been elected and after other countries had ratified the treaty, the Danish had their chance in a second referendum. Denmark was granted several exceptions from the original Maastricht Treaty, which convinced 56.8% of the Danish population to vote in favor of ratification on 18 May 1993. The granted reservations concern measures on citizenship, defense collaboration, cooperation on civil law matters and the last phase of the European Monetary Union (EMU). Denmark will not take part in the EMU's last and most important phase, which by 1999 will replace the currencies of the member states by a single European currency (EURO).

Certainly, Denmark is not dominated by "Euro-phobia" (Christensen, 525). It often comes up with constructive proposals and is one of the EU members who reliably implement all regulations. Denmark supports the admission of central and eastern European countries, wants a joint effort to combat unemployment and demands that the EU system be operated openly to get "grassroots backing" from all European people (Danish Politics-EU policy, 2). Denmark particularly underlines the importance of further tightening of environmental rules. Environmental protection also has strongly been established on the Danish political agenda and will be the topic of the following paragraph.

7. Denmark and the environment

Jamison, Eyerman, Cramer and Laessoe in their comparative study of environmental movements in Sweden, Denmark and the Netherlands, argue that a new environmental consciousness in Denmark emerged during four related periods.

From 1960-1968, the "denial of the environment" saw an enormous economic growth, passivity concerning ecological problems and "the absence of public debate" (73). The older generation enjoyed the growth of wealth and social services, while the soaring industrial production did serious damage to the environment. The era of "political ecology" (1969-1973)

was characterized by the growth of a "new left generation" (76) who revolted against the established society. Their protests included strong environmental criticism. University students created an organization called NOAH, which became the flagship of the new environmental movement. Its leaders published a magazine and used a very communicative approach to reach the public. NOAH successfully used the wave of the youth revolt of 1968 to gain influence. During the "grassroots era" (1974-1980), an "epochal shift in the development of environmentalism" (90) took place, largely because of the OPEC oil-price raise. As a consequence, Denmark considered a massive increase in nuclear power plants, which caused enormous protests. The anti-nuclear movement was born and it strengthened all environmental groups and their supporters. Environmental concern was institutionalized as the Danish State established a Ministry for Environmental Protection in 1971. In the 1980s, the "Professionalization" took place. Professional and more traditional organizations influenced the movement. At the same time, the destruction and exploitation of nature reached a higher level. The problem became part of the established political culture.

Environmental awareness in Denmark today is extremely high: "On the political level, the established parties and interest organizations try to outmatch each other as pro-environmental representatives. Whereas the general attitude in the 1970's was to consider environmental problems relatively less important than the employment situation and Denmark's international economic competitiveness, there is fairly general agreement today that environmental problems deserve the highest priority" (111).

As a member of the European Union, Denmark also has to take into account any rules and laws passed by this organization. Current EU policies deal with the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions and the labeling of genetically modified crops and food (DG XI Commissioner's Newsletter, 2). Since Denmark's environmental awareness easily matches that of the rest of Europe EU regulations should not be hard to comply with.

8. Conclusion

Being embedded in the European Union, the NATO and several other influential western organizations, Denmark's foreign policy is one of stability and cooperation.

"Problems" with the European Union should not be misinterpreted as a sign of isolation. After giving up its neutrality in the wake of German occupation, Denmark today is a very open and active protagonist of the world community. With an outstanding foreign-aid program it can almost be regarded as a role model in international politics.

Domestically, the welfare state stands out as perhaps the greatest Danish achievement. Although the problem of unemployment worries the Danes, a large majority still supports those in need by voting in favor of the welfare system. The relatively low 2% threshold guarding Denmark's proportional representation hasn't given the Danes serious trouble, yet. A great advantage for the Danish political system is the strong, active influence of the citizens. An extremely high turnout at elections combined with the will to protest publicly if necessary gives Danish decisions on important policies an enormous credibility.

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