

# Social Democrats routed in Danish parliamentary election

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28 November 2001

The Social Democrats suffered a drastic defeat in the Danish general election, which had been brought forward to November 20. They polled just over 29 percent of the vote, in contrast to 35.9 percent at the last poll in 1998, reducing their representation from 63 to 52 in the 179-seat *Folketing* (parliament).

Outgoing Prime Minister Poul Nyrup Rasmussen, in office since 1993, relinquishes power to the largest of the opposition parties, the rightwing Liberals (Venstre). Led by Anders Fogh Rasmussen (no relation), Venstre increased its vote by 7.2 percent, to capture 31.3 percent of the ballot, giving it a total of 56 seats. Fogh Rasmussen is hoping to form a coalition with the Conservative Party, which made a slight gain, reaching 9.1 percent and so retaining its 16 seats. His government will also need the support of the rightwing extremist Danish Peoples Party, headed by Pia Kjaersgaard, which gained 4.6 points to reach 12 percent of the vote. Kjaersgaard's party won 22 seats, nine more than its previous total, becoming the third strongest party in the 179-seat *Folketing* (parliament). As a result, a significant move to the right is to be expected in Danish politics.

For the first time since 1920, the Social Democrats will no longer be the largest party in the *Folketing*, and the bourgeois parties of the centre right have secured their biggest majority since 1926.

The Social Democrats' former coalition partners, the Radical Liberals (Radikale Venstre), increased their seats by two to nine, and the ex-Stalinists of the Socialist Peoples Party—previously supporters of the government—lost one of their thirteen seats.

The three-week election campaign was marked by bitter debates about immigration and refugee policy, with all the parties, including the Social Democrats, competing to advocate the harshest measures against

asylum seekers.

The Danish Peoples Party set the tone, continually goading the other parties and accusing the government of not doing enough to keep foreigners out of the country. The September 11 terrorist attacks and the government's reaction to them further inflamed anti-foreigner sentiments, especially towards Muslims. Both government and opposition demanded harsher controls for immigrants and limitations on the right of family members to join immigrants residing in Denmark.

In a televised discussion after his election win, Fogh Rasmussen announced that under his government, a special ministry for immigration would be established. The immigrants' organisation INDSam saw a parallel between this and the politics of apartheid and anti-Semitism. INDSam spokesman Mohammed Gelle expressed the fear that such a ministry could lead to even more restrictive laws against immigrants. "I fear we might end up with a 'Jewish problem', similar to the one in Germany in the 1930s—one law for the Danes and another for new-comers," Gelle said.

In a survey carried out by the newspaper *Jyllands Posten*, a number of foreign correspondents from the international press expressed their dismay at the Danish election campaign. Clare MacCarthy, a correspondent for the *Financial Times*, compared the tone of the election discussion with anti-Pakistani and anti-Indian rhetoric in Great Britain during the 1960s, which culminated in rightwing Tory politician Enoch Powell's notorious "rivers of blood" speech.

"It is very unappetising how literally every Danish politician is prepared to make scapegoats of immigrants simply for the sake of getting into government," said MacCarthy. "It is primitive, vulgar and pure xenophobia the way politicians are dishing out one lie after another, trying to bolster their arguments with

dubious statistics.”

Charles Farro, a reporter for America’s *Newsweek*, called the anti-immigrant tone of the debate “shocking”. “When I listen to this debate,” he wrote, “I sometimes get the impression that there was never any crime in Denmark until immigrants arrived here.”

Osama Al-Habahbech, a correspondent for the Jordanian news agency, said the politicians had “bombed integration twenty years back into the past”. He wrote that “Comparisons have been drawn with Jörg Haider [extreme rightwing leader of the Austrian Freedom Party], but the tone being set in Denmark is much worse than in Austria. Common decency seems to have taken a holiday in recent weeks. If the word ‘Jew’ were to be replaced by ‘Muslim’, the present campaign could be compared to the Nazi propaganda during the Second World War.”

This criticism is directed primarily against the two far right parties, Mogens Glistrup’s Progress Party (which failed to retain any of its seats) and the Danish Peoples Party, but the other parties are in no way excluded. Leif Stenberg, the Swedish immigration expert from Lund University, recently said that he was “disappointed and shocked at the xenophobic tone of the Danish election campaign. I’d be able to understand it if these attacks came from ultra-right organisations, but even a respectable party like the Social Democratic Party has jumped on board.”

Even the former foreign minister, Niels Helveg Petersen of Radikale Venstre, accused politicians of damaging Denmark’s image abroad by adopting such an extremely xenophobic tone throughout the election campaign. Attacking all the major parties, he claimed they had conducted “a loud and hysterical debate”. It was the most offensive campaign he had experienced in his thirty years as a parliamentary deputy, and one which was devoid of any serious political content, he said. “They should be ashamed of themselves,” said Petersen.

In spite of the country’s healthy economic situation—having the lowest rate of unemployment in 25 years, a high growth rate and low inflation—the Social Democrats reacted to pressure from the international financial markets by enforcing a rigid austerity policy at the expense of the majority of the population, thus increasingly alienating their traditional electorate. They made it possible for the rightwing parties to challenge

them on social policy, luring away many voters with the promise of more finance for welfare services, health and old age care.

They have also played into the hands of the extreme right, stirring up xenophobic feelings by attacking immigrants and democratic rights, policies which benefited the far right in the end.



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