

Danish elections overshadowed by the "fight against terrorism"

Helmut Arens**17 November 2001**

On November 20, Denmark is holding a general election. The Social Democratic Prime Minister Poul Nyrup Rasmussen called the election at short notice on October 31, although he could have remained in office until March next year. Rasmussen has been prime minister since 1993 and presently leads a minority government of Social Democrats and Radical Liberals (Radikale Venstre).

Opinion polls this year have consistently placed the government parties behind the opposition, made up of rightwing Liberals (Venstre), the Conservatives and Christian Peoples Party. However, they would have needed the support of the rightwing extremist and racist Danish Peoples Party of Pia Kjaersgaard to secure a parliamentary majority.

Now the government hopes to be able to win the elections in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks. In the name of the fight against terrorism, Rasmussen is massively expanding the state's repressive apparatus, tightening up immigration legislation and demolishing democratic rights.

The press praised Rasmussen for the "statesmanlike" way he has dealt with the consequences of the terrorist attacks and his personal reputation has increased considerably in the upper echelons of society. He was one of the first government heads to pledge the US unconditional solidarity. In the meantime, he has promised to despatch a warship to the Persian Gulf and to send military personnel to the USA.

"It has become necessary to think differently since September 11. We need effective laws against terrorists." These are the words with which the Social Democratic Justice Minister Frank Jensen justified the government's anti-terrorism measures introduced at the end of October. The new laws include draconian punishments for those supporting terrorism, which is defined so widely that almost any oppositional action could be included.

Any expression of support for terrorist actions or organisations, either orally or in writing, can be punished by up to six years detention. Financially supporting terrorism can be punished by up to 10 years in prison. Serious damage resulting from terrorist acts is to be punished with a life

sentence, like murder. The law defines terrorism as the endeavour to seriously harm the political and economic structures of a country and to spread fear in the population.

The anti-terrorist measures also permit the extradition of Danish citizens if they can be prosecuted for terrorist acts committed abroad that are punishable in Denmark by more than four years imprisonment.

The government also wants to tighten up the immigration laws. The immigration authorities will be able to withdraw an asylum seeker's residency permit if they are condemned for terrorist activities abroad.

The police are being granted vastly extended powers of investigation against terrorist suspects, such as the right to conduct secret searches of dwellings and to monitor email and mobile phone discussions.

Renowned legal expert and lawyer Steen Bach expressed his alarm at the government's anti-terrorist measures. "It is a sad day for democracy, when we let ourselves be intimidated by terrorists in such a manner that we abandon our own fundamental legal principles. We are undermining our own liberties, if we sacrifice our legal rights because of a small group."

The reaction of the Danish state to the "terrorist threat" stands in clear contrast to its traditionally liberal attitude to the freedom of opinion. For example, neo-Nazis are permitted to distribute their propaganda completely unhindered and even to operate their own radio station.

As in other countries, Denmark's anti-terrorism campaign has racist overtones, directed particularly against dark-skinned refugees with Arab or Islamic backgrounds.

One consequence of this is that the number of attacks, threats and intimidation of immigrants in Denmark since September 11 is as high as for the whole of the year 2000. The police report the vandalism of immigrant-owned businesses, death threats and arson attacks on asylum seekers' accommodation.

The xenophobic tinge of the anti-terrorism campaign has given further impetus to the racists and has put immigration policy at the centre of the election campaign. All the parties

are competing in their demands for stricter immigration rules.

The largest opposition party, Venstre, has proposed to sharply curtail the right of immigrants to bring their families with them. Venstre would like to limit the numbers of family members of immigrants already residing in Denmark coming from Turkey, Somalia and Pakistan, and to completely stop all new immigration from these countries. Even immigrants with Danish passports would be affected by these limitations.

Legal expert professor Claus Haagen Jensen of Aalborg University told the newspaper *Politiken* that such a regulation would mean a break with UN conventions. "Even if it were not put in the form of a law, such discrimination, arbitrarily picking out countries, would be illegal," he said.

The openly racist Danish Peoples Party is demanding a complete halt to immigrants being able to bring their families to Denmark, while the Christian Democrats endorse a "moderate" change in the law. According to Radikale Venstre, part of the government coalition, immigrants should be able to read a Danish newspaper and understand it in order to obtain Danish nationality.

Social Democratic Interior Minister Karen Jespersen's criticism of the Liberal's proposals to limit family immigration, which she called "amateur" and "racist", is pure hypocrisy in view of the government's own record. Just over a year ago, Jespersen caused uproar when she proposed to ship "criminal foreigners" (including shoplifters, for example) to an isolated island.

Rasmussen is also helping to poison the political atmosphere. He has promised that the Danes would not be inundated by foreigners and should not have "to feel like foreigners in their own country". Denmark would not become a multi-ethnic country under any circumstances.

The "respectable" parties' efforts to create such a climate have put wind in the sails of the far right Progress Party of Mogens Glistrup. Glistrup had made a name for himself in the 1970s with the populist demand to abolish all taxes.

At the recent Progress Party congress, to the thunderous applause of his supporters, Glistrup again demanded an end to income tax, the dismissal of a half million state employees and the deportation of all Muslims from Denmark. He said it was the duty of the party to fight for a "Muslim-free country". His rival candidate for the post of party chief demanded that Muslim children born in Denmark and with Danish passports should be sent back to the "lands of their ancestors".

Speaker after speaker demanded a solution to "the Muslim problem". One delegate asked, to tumultuous applause, "What is the difference between a rat and a Muslim? The rat does not claim welfare benefits." Party activist Margit Buhl

said she was "proud to be a racist". It is not certain whether the Progress Party will receive enough votes to enter parliament, but it has collected the 20,000 signatures necessary to participate in the election.

The opposition parties support the government's anti-terrorism measures, particularly its cheap propaganda against foreigners and the attacks on democratic rights. Many observers assume that the opposition will win the election and form a new coalition government headed by Liberal leader Anders Fogh Rasmussen.

This seems all the more surprising, given the favourable economic situation recently announced by his social democratic namesake, with low inflation, low unemployment and strong public finances. These are, however, the result of harsh austerity measures, which the social democrats have inflicted upon the general population. Like their counterparts in Germany, Britain and France, the Danish social democrats provide a shining example of austerity policies, implementing the demands of the global financial markets against working people.

Two months ago, Economics Minister Marianne Jelved threatened her resignation, if taxes were increased on North Sea oil in order to finance higher social expenditure. Finance Minister Pia Gjellerup threatened to impose strict economies similar to the 1980s if the ministries did not keep their budgets in check.

Ever larger sections of Social Democratic voters are no longer prepared to accept this, for example putting up with long queues in the hospitals, given Denmark's relatively good economic position. The government's austerity policies go so far that even the rightwing opposition parties attack them from the left and call for more money to improve health and social standards.



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