

# Danish parliament co-opts anti-immigrant program of extreme right

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On May 30 the Danish parliament, the Folketing, voted for a drastic tightening of laws affecting refugees and foreigners in general. The new regulations were supported by both governing parties, the liberal Venstre and the conservative People's Party, as well as the right-wing Danish People's Party, led by Pia Kjaersgaard. With this measure, Denmark has put an end to its customary methods of dealing with refugees, a practice long considered liberal.

The new laws derive mainly from the ideas of the extremely xenophobic Danish People's Party, which is not part of the government but exerts considerable influence on policy making. The liberal-conservative minority government under Anders Fogh Rasmussen (Venstre) relies on votes from the People's Party to ensure passage of its budget policies.

The Danish People's Party won 12 percent of the vote in the parliamentary elections last November. During the election campaign all parties, including the social democrats, tried to outdo each other in demands for stricter refugee and immigration laws, thus playing into the hands of the openly xenophobic People's Party.

The core of the new laws consists of the abolition of the right to asylum on humanitarian grounds (a right which existed in this form only in Denmark and led to a recognition rate of up to 60 percent of applicants) and the reduction of acceptable grounds for asylum to the bare minimum required under the Geneva Convention for Refugees. The law makes cuts of 30 to 40 percent in the social benefits for refugees in their first seven years, the granting of permanent residence permits after seven years at the earliest, a drastic limitation on the right of married couples to live together and be reunited with their families, and the introduction of substantial obstacles in the naturalisation process. Among other things, applicants have to pass a language test to prove that they can speak Danish as well as a native pupil in the ninth year of

school.

Numerous human rights organisations, both from Denmark and abroad, and even the Swedish government have protested against the laws. The Danish government and its minister responsible for "integration", Bertel Haarder, have arrogantly rejected this criticism, describing it as interference in Danish domestic affairs. Haarder makes no secret of the fact that he is concerned with drastically reducing the number of refugees.

A team of experts, engaged by the *Jyllands Posten* daily newspaper and consisting of labour market specialists, heads of various social facilities and sociologists, came to the conclusion that refugees will be condemned by the new laws to becoming "the future's poor". Under conditions where the labour market is tightly insulated against the participation of foreigners, the curtailment of social provision will invariably force many to live under the poverty line.

Ole Pass, head of the national social services, commented: "The conclusion to be drawn is quite clear. Immigrants and refugees will become a new underclass in the society ... or the labour market will have to experience a real revolution, if all newly arriving refugees are to be offered a chance to work." According to the experts, a further danger will be the emergence of an illegal labour market.

Bashy Quaraishy, president of the European Network against Racism (ENAR), called the policy "a classical recipe for catastrophe." The social demolition would cause deep rifts in society and lead to increasing polarisation, he said, adding, "In four years at the latest, Denmark will have its own Bradford, its own immigrant riots."

The United Nations refugee organisation UNHCR has sent the Danish government a 10-page review of its plans, in which almost every aspect of the new laws are criticised. In this it states: "Certain aspects of the laws do

not seem to be in accord with international refugee and human rights regulations.”

UNHCR expressed particular concern about the anti-refugee mood being created: “Our worry has to do with aspects of the recommendations that, taken together, put refugees and immigrants in a negative light.... The UNHCR has already expressed its concern about the tone of the asylum debate in Denmark. It is important ... to avoid making generalisations and stirring up prejudices against immigrants.”

Although all other European governments are dealing with foreigners in an increasingly brutal way, some have protested against the measures being adopted in Denmark. In April, Swedish Labour and Integration Minister Mona Sahlin, together with her Belgian and French counterparts, wrote a letter to the Danish government, expressing concern that Denmark’s hard-line policy in relation to foreigners could have consequences for the entire European Union (EU) when it takes over the presidency on July 1. The Copenhagen government has already announced that it wants to focus on immigration and asylum issues during its EU chairmanship.

In another protest letter to Copenhagen, Sahlin warned: “At a time when xenophobic parties are advancing in Europe, it is terrible that the Danish government is currently legitimising their politics.” Göran Persson, head of the Swedish government, described the Danish laws as “inhuman”.

Copenhagen reacted furiously. Minister Haarder accused Sahlin of making thoughtless comments and spreading untruths about the political situation in Denmark. The campaign against Danish immigration policy was seen as a conspiracy by the social democrats. Denmark’s brusque reaction caused the Swedish liberals to suspend relations with their liberal sister party in Denmark.

Pia Kjaersgaard, chairperson of the People’s Party, was almost hysterical in her reaction to the Swedish criticism. She suggested that Mona Sahlin should busy herself with her own concerns: “If the Swedes in Stockholm, Göteborg and Malmö want to create a Scandinavian Beirut with clan wars, lynchings and mass murders, then they can do so. We can close the Öresund Bridge whenever we want.”

Kjaersgaard is notorious for her inflammatory tirades. In a television broadcast at the beginning of the month, she stated: “Asylum seekers are often untrained illiterates. I don’t need them.” Furthermore, she claimed that “the accumulation of Muslims leads to mass rapes.” After September 11, she called into question Islam’s continuing

right to exist and commented: “There’s only one civilisation, and that’s ours.”

The Swedish daily newspaper *Dagens Nyheter* commented that the terms “right-wing populist” and “hostile to foreigners” were too mild to describe the Danish People’s Party. Rather, the paper claimed, “It is racist.”

However, notwithstanding the continual racist gaffes of Pia Kjaersgaard and other leading members of her party, the government cooperates closely with the Danish People’s Party.

At the start of the year, agreement over the budget was rapidly reached with the People’s Party. The price to be paid was the implementation of the party’s xenophobic programme. It was granted virtual power of veto in relation to future issues involving immigration policy. If there is no drastic reduction in the number of refugees, it will have the right to revise the laws in autumn, i.e., to make them even more draconian.

But Bertel Haarder, the minister for refugees, immigration and integration, should not have much difficulty carrying out the programme of the People’s Party. To a large extent, it corresponds to his own convictions.

Finance Minister Thor Pedersen also enjoys close relations with the right-wing populists. He has often negotiated directly with the People’s Party, without consulting his conservative coalition partners. The last time he did so concerned the distribution of 150 million kroner between the social service ministry and the health ministry. Spokesmen for the conservatives protested against this and were reported in the *Berlingske Tidende* newspaper as saying: “Pedersen has prostrated himself before the programme of the Danish People’s Party.”



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