

Social Democrats routed in Danish election

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A right-wing government has been voted back into office for the first time in Denmark's history. The coalition of the Venstre Party and the Conservatives, supported by the xenophobic Danish People's Party (DF), emerged as the clear victor in the February 8 general election.

This victory had less to do with the coalition's popularity—the 29 percent vote for the Venstre Party of Prime Minister Fogh Rasmussen marked a decline of two percentage points—than with the Social Democrats' capitulation to the right-wing parties. Despite broad opposition to the government's policies—from its support for the Iraq war, to its reactionary social policies, to its promotion of xenophobia—the Social Democrats have essentially adopted the government's standpoint. This led to their worst election result since 1973, with their vote falling from 29.1 percent in the last election to only 25.9 percent on February 8.

The left-liberal Radikale Venstre Party, which was the only mainstream party to clearly speak out against the xenophobic course of the government, was able to considerably increase its vote, nearly doubling its share from 5.2 percent to 9.2 percent.

The government of Rasmussen has stood firmly behind Washington in the Iraq war and supports the US occupation with its own contingent of 500 troops. This policy is widely opposed within the general population. Before the American invasion, some 50,000 Danes (out of a population of only 5.4 million) demonstrated against the war. The latest surveys show that approximately 65 percent of the population supports the withdrawal of Danish troops, and some 50 percent consider the dispatch of soldiers to have been a mistake.

The Social Democrats supported participation in the war more or less openly. When the first Danish soldier died in combat in August 2003, they joined with the government in calling for the dispatch of more Danish

troops.

The Social Democrats are likewise adapting themselves to the right wing in the area of immigration policy. They contributed to the success of the extremist Danish People's Party in the last election, held four years ago. Instead of opposing the DF's xenophobic agitation, the then-leader of the Social Democrats, Prime Minister Paul Nyrup Rasmussen, tried to exploit the same anti-foreigner sentiments, telling voters that under his government, Danes would not have to feel like "foreigners in their own country."

In this way the Social Democratic leader effectively legitimised the DF, which won 12 percent of the vote, making the government coalition dependent upon its support in parliament.

Danish asylum policies, once considered open and liberal, were transformed, under pressure from the DF, into the harshest in Europe. The reunion of refugee families was generally disallowed, and the foreign spouses of Danish citizens were often prevented from entering Denmark. Many Danes fled to neighbouring Sweden in order to live with their foreign spouses.

The waiting period for naturalisation was increased from three to at least seven years, and welfare payments for refugees were considerably lowered. As a result, they receive unequal treatment in comparison to Danish citizens, something that is now being examined by the European Court of Justice, which is to determine whether this policy violates European law.

This restrictive immigration policy led to a two-thirds decline in the number of asylum-seekers between 2001 and 2004, while successful applications for asylum plunged from 50 percent to 9 percent.

However, the DF was still not satisfied. In the recent election, it called for even harsher measures against immigrants and refugees. It demanded that naturalised Danes have their right to vote in local elections lifted and their Danish citizenship withdrawn if they came

into conflict with the law. All those stripped of their citizenship would be deported, together with their families. The DF further demanded that state institutions be banned from using foreign languages, in writing or verbally, and that the unlimited residency right of recognised refugees be lifted.

Whereas the Social Democrats had initially criticized the worst excesses of the government's immigration and asylum policy, they now favour it. Mogens Lykketoft, who was challenging Venstre Prime Minister Rasmussen, pledged support for the aims of the government, saying immigration to Denmark should be stemmed. The same themes were stressed by Social Democratic parliamentary deputy Anne Marie Meldgaard. She declared that, while Danish immigration legislation had to comply with international conventions, some regulations had to be changed to prevent a further influx of foreigners.

This once again provided grist for the mill of the DF, which improved its election result from 12 percent to 13.2 percent, and can now exert even more influence on government policy.

On social policy, the election statements of the two larger parties are almost identical. Resting on Denmark's relatively favourable economic situation, the Venstre Party presented itself as the advocate of social justice, while the Social Democrats stressed the need for social "reforms." Both advocated low-cost kindergartens and more money for research and education, both spoke out against tax increases and demanded improvements in the health system, as well as a reduction in hospital waiting time.

However, even before the election, Prime Minister Rasmussen elicited the support of the Social Democrats for a gradual dismantling of the welfare state. He described this perspective with the words: "If we are unable to eat the elephant [the welfare state] in one sitting, then we must consume it bit by bit."



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