

The liberal opposition still running favourite in the Danish general elections but the vote could be tight

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Analysis

Abstract:

On 27th May Danish Prime Minister Helle Thorning-Schmidt (Social Democratic Party SD) announced that the next general election would take place on 18th June net. 179 members of the Folketing (the monocameral Danish parliament) are elected every four years but since 1960 only 5 parliaments out of 19 have completed a full term in office. The outgoing parliament is in fact one that has undertaken the longest mandate in Denmark's history, except for the one that governed during the Second World War from 1939 to 1943. In this Scandinavian kingdom the head of government can organise elections as he wishes. More often than not he does not wait for the end of the legislature but organises an election when he thinks it best for himself and his political party.

This year the official campaign will last 23 days. However the parties have all been campaigning since the start of 2015.

The elections will decide the future of the outgoing Prime Minister, Ms Thorning-Schmidt. If she loses she will probably be replaced by former Prime Minister (2009-2011) Lars Lokke Rasmussen (Liberal Party, V).

The Blue Block, i.e. the three Danish parties on the right (Liberal Party (V), the People's Party (DF) and the Conservative Party (KF)), has constantly held the lead over the Red Block (Social Democratic Party (SD) and the Unity-Red/Green Alliance List (E)) in the polls undertaken since the last election on 15th September 2011. Today the opposition is still ahead in the pre-electoral polls but the left has been recovering over the last few months in the wake of initiatives in support of growth taken by the government and the Prime Minister's firm position regarding immigration.

"Denmark is back on track, we have emerged from the crisis. It is time to ask the Danes if they want to continue in this direction," said Ms Thorning-Schmidt on 27th May. On the same day she also announced several measures (to a cost of 39 billion crowns – 5.2 billion euro – over four years) regarding healthcare and the elderly, education and public research into

green technologies. Helle Thorning-Schmidt defends continued investment in the Welfare State whilst the Liberal Party wants to reduce the public sector and make it more effective.

According to the Prime Minister the Danes will have to answer two questions on 18th June: "Firstly how are we going to ensure that Denmark will continue to progress and remain prosperous without endangering our well-being and our community? And who will the best Prime Minister for the country be?"

The creation of jobs, the future of the Welfare State notably the healthcare sector and tax policy and immigration will be the main themes in this electoral campaign. The election result on 18th June promises to be tight. In this context and beyond the programme defended by each party the personality of each of the leaders of the two main parties – Helle Thorning-Schmidt and Lars Lokke Rasmussen – will influence the vote.

About 30 MPs are not standing in this election, most of them being from the Liberal Party.

**IN SPITE OF ITS RESULTS THE SOCIAL
DEMOCRATIC PARTY IS STRUGGLING TO
CONVINCE THE ELECTORATE**

In 2011, Helle Thorning-Schmidt became the first woman to lead the Danish government. Apart from her own party her coalition includes the Social Liberal Party and the People's Socialist Party and it also enjoys the support of the Unity-Red/Green Alliance List and that of the three MPs from Greenland and the Faroe Islands. Whilst in office the Social Democrats have worked to revive growth and employment and have undertaken a rigorous management of public finance continuing the policy implemented by the liberals from whom they took over. This policy has brought about some good results: after two years of recession in 2012 and 2013 the country recovered growth (1% in 2014 (0.8% in the euro area) and 1.8% forecast this year). Unemployment is low: 4.9% in March and 6.4% for the entire year 2014, i.e. the fourth lowest rate in the EU (9.8% on average) behind Austria, Luxembourg and Malta. Moreover the number of young unemployed people (11%) is the lowest figures in Europe where the average is 21.4%. Public finances are healthy (the national debt is low: 45.2% against 86.80% on average amongst the 28 EU members). Finally household sentiment totals 1.62 i.e. above the European average (1.39), the third highest figures after Ireland and the UK.

Denmark has just been ranked as Europe's leading country and fourth in the world for the opportunities it offers to entrepreneurs by the World Bank. Tax policy and the ease of access to bank loans explain this good score.

When she announced the date of the next election Helle Thorning-Schmidt recalled the government's work over the last four years mentioning for example the reduction of waiting time for care at hospital and the tightening up of policy regarding immigrants and refugees.

In spite of these results one has the impression that the Danish economy is stagnating rather than really being on the rise. Moreover some of the electorate on the left

say they are dissatisfied with the Prime Minister's work whose budgetary rigour and liberalism they criticise. Helle Thorning-Schmidt has indeed reduced corporate tax by three points during her term in office (from 25% to 22%). She also reduced grants given to students which can now no longer exceed 5 years (against a previous 6), with the aim of reducing this budget by 2 billion crown by 2020 (Danish students receive 5,839 crowns – 782 €).

Many unions have also expressed their discontent and accuse the head of government of having betrayed their electorate and of having failed to improve employee's living standards. The Danish Unions' Confederation (Landesorganisationen, LO) has criticised the government regarding three points: low unemployment benefit (reduced by the left-wing coalition), the relinquishment of tax reductions on union contributions (which was a campaign promise) and the approval of reforms that mainly affect the poorest. *"I became Prime Minister in 2011 and I know that not all of our actions have been popular but I take full responsibility for this,"* maintains Helle Thorning-Schmidt.

From a political point of view six ministers from the People's Socialist Party left the government on 30th January 2014 in expression of their disagreement with the sale of 19% of Dong Energy for 8 billion crowns (1.07 billion €) to the American investment bank Goldman Sachs. Dong Energy is the Danish State company for oil, gas and electricity – wind and thermal) whose turnover lay at 67.2 billion crowns in 2012, around 9 billion €. According to the polls most Danes were against this sale that the government justified by the need for liquidities after negative investments in natural gas.

Weakened by this Ms Schmidt then formed a new government bringing together the Social Democrats and the Social Liberals.

"Today the Social Democratic Party seems to be winning voters over the People's Party but there are still fewer of them than the number who previously quit the party to join other left wing parties," maintains Soren

Risbjerg Thomsen, a professor in Political Science at the University of Aarhus, who notes in the recovery of popularity on the part of Helle Thorning-Schmidt's party the success of the measures she recently took in support of employment, growth and improvements in the healthcare system.

The head of government is in a similar position today as her predecessor Lars Lokke Rasmussen in 2011: although her party is rising in the polls her coalition partner is declining which in the end will reduce the chances of her government of remaining in power.

THE BLUE BLOCK – A FAVOURITE IN QUEST OF ENERGY

The Liberal Party hopes to regain office

The Liberal Party's programme includes five main points: reducing taxes for the poorest, reduction of unemployment, a stricter immigration policy, the fight to counter crime and an increase in health spending. The latter point is paradoxical since the Liberals are against any increase in State spending. The main opposition party intends however not to leave the defence of the Welfare State to the People's Party alone and wants to show that it is not totally lacking in concern for social matters.

Until 2011 the presence of the People's Party in government had been ruled out even if the latter, unlike in neighbouring Sweden, is treated like any other political party. Today the question of a coalition between the Liberal Party and the People's Party to head the State is now on the table and is even a central point of the electoral campaign. In addition to this the two parties are competing for the leadership of the right.

The alliance between the two parties might encounter two difficulties: the Welfare State that the populists want to protect at all costs, and even develop to "maintain a Welfare State worthy of the name" according to its leader Kristian Thulesen Dahl, whilst the Liberals favour a stagnation in state spending – and Europe since Lars Lokke Rasmussen's party is

pro-European and the populists would like Denmark to leave the Union. The leader of the People's Party has already said that if the UK chooses to leave the EU Denmark should also organise a popular consultation on this theme. "We should follow the British example. We should ask for the renegotiation of our membership of the EU in order to recover sovereignty over our borders, immigration policy and over financial policy," indicated MEP Morten Messerschmidt (DF, ECR), who is returning to national politics and will also be standing in the election on 18th June. "It would be a mistake to allow ourselves to be attracted by David Cameron's strategy. We must rather seek an alliance with Angela Merkel who wants European integration. But it should be an alliance that is compatible with the specific nature of the Member States," declared Lars Lokke Rasmussen for his part.

The last four years have been difficult for the former Prime Minister, since he has had to respond to a great deal of criticism from within his party. He was accused of having spent 770,000 crowns (103,000 €) in luxury hotels and on trips in first class on planes at the expense of the Global Green Growth Institute, an organisation that is based in South Korea of which he was the Chairman and which is paid 90 million crowns (12 million €) by Danish taxpayers. He is also said to have spent 24,600 € from his party's accounts to settle various personal expenses including the purchase of clothes. These various affairs have displeased the Danes, who according to the polls, have turned towards the People's Party.

Will the People's Party enter parliament?

The People's Party is a populist eurosceptic party that is fighting for an increase in state spending, more restrictive laws on immigration and the re-introduction of border controls. "The People's Party stands like the original Socialist Democratic Party, generous from a social point of view and concerned about the situation of the poorest," maintains political scientist Marlene Wind. Writer Jens Christian Grondahl also indicates that "for many voters, the People's Party has become an alternative social democratic movement."

The party supports putting a halt to all non-Western immigration into Denmark and want Danes to have priority over immigrants. *"I think that the Welfare State can only exist in a more or less closed society,"* maintains the leader of the populist parliamentary group at the Folketing, Soren Espersen.

The party is also asking for the halt to all immigrant integration programmes which depend on taxpayers' money. Finally it hopes to ban all family reunion before immigrants living in Denmark have received the papers allowing them to live in the country, i.e. very often five years after their arrival.

The party has never held as high a position in the polls as they do now. Kristian Thulesen Dahl's party no longer wants to be pushed into the role of coalition partner and is now positioning itself as a real outsider to the Liberal Party and the Social Democratic Party. Its leader likes to repeat that he is playing to win. In November, and for the first time in its history, the People's Party took first place in the polls.

It might join the government formed by the Liberal Party (it supported the governments of Anders Fogh Rasmussen (2001-2009) and Lars Lokke Rasmussen (2009-2011) without being a member however). Kristian Thulesen Dahl recently indicated that he could see himself governing with either the Liberals or the Social Democrats – a statement that was approved by Dennis Kristensen, the (controversial) leader of the Civil Servants' Confederation (Forbundet af Offentligt Ansatte, FOA), the country's third biggest union.

On 1st May Kristian Thulesen Dahl again said that *"Danish workers have much to gain if the People's Party and the Social Democratic Party draw closer to one another."* *"I cannot see us in a government with the Social Democrats today, but if forming a government becomes as difficult as it was in the 1980's I can see us governing with any political party,"* stressed Soren Espersen.

IMMIGRATION AT THE HEART OF THE ELECTORAL CAMPAIGN

"The country's good results mean that economic issues are now secondary. Immigration will form the core of the election, which will be to the benefit of the People's

Party and the Liberal Party. The Danes believe that the right is better at managing security and immigration," maintains Rune Stubager, professor of Political Science at the University of Aarhus.

On 3rd January last the Prime Minister put forward a new integration plan *Alle skal bidrage* (Everyone has to contribute), the 22nd since 1999, which provides for a better management of immigrants living in Denmark. The measures put forward aim to offer jobs to 30,000 immigrants. Today only one quarter of the refugees who entered Denmark between 2000 and 2003 are said to be in employment, a low figure ten years after their arrival. The youngest immigrants will have to follow courses in Danish as well as training so that they find it easier to find a job.

Even Queen Margrethe II spoke at the beginning of the year on immigration – an extremely rare event in Denmark.

The terrorist attacks of 14th February last also raised questions about security and immigration. On that day Omar Abdel Hamid el-Husseini, a Dane of Palestinian origin murdered film-maker Finn Norgaard during a debate on the freedom of expression organised after the attacks in Paris (7th-9th January 2015) at the House of Culture Kruttonden, in the suburb of Osterbro in Copenhagen. Later he killed Dan Uzan, a member of the Jewish community, in front of the grand synagogue of Copenhagen over which the young man was maintaining watch. Five policemen were also injured. The terrorist was shot and killed by the police the following morning.

Denmark received 64, 874 immigrants last year, i.e. a rise of 15% in comparison with 2013. Most (40,059) came from the west; 24, 815 came from elsewhere in the world. In 2014, Denmark also took in 14,800 asylum seekers. Turks form the highest immigrant group in the country; they represent 9.8% of all immigrants. Poles are the second biggest community (5.8%); Germans, the third (5.1%) and Iraqis the fourth (4.9%). In Denmark an immigrant is someone born in the country to non-Danish parents. If the latter are naturalised the person is no longer considered to be an immigrant.

"After the attacks we need to cooperate to guarantee that we keep one step ahead of the criminals, the human traffickers and organised crime," declared Helle Thorning-Schmidt. In October 2014 the Prime Minister called for a referendum on Denmark's participation in 22 of the 50 legal measures to which the country does not have access given its opt out of the Justice and Internal Affairs chapter of the Maastricht Treaty (Copenhagen is also exempted from the Economic and Monetary Union (EMU), the Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) and the European Citizenship chapter). Amongst these 22 legal measures feature the directive on cross-border legal assistance, cybercrime, the measure to counter the sexual abuse and exploitation of children and the one against counterfeiting. The referendum will be organised before April next.

The People's Party is asking for a tightening in the security policy and the fight to counter Muslim radicalisation but it is against lifting the opt-out clause. We might say that even if the Danes do vote positively in the referendum on the country's participation in some legal measures included in the Justice and Internal Affairs chapter Copenhagen will still not be part of the European Immigration and Asylum policy.

The Danish government also support the country's membership of European Banking Union. The Folketing can decide alone to join the Union without convening a referendum if two thirds of the MPs vote in support. The Liberal Party also supports this measure. "The government has decided that Denmark should join the Banking Union of the euro zone without asking the opinion of the population. Banking Union is natural for the countries in the euro zone, but it remains to be seen whether the government is preparing Denmark for the euro. The Danish population has twice rejected the euro by referendum and the government is not respecting that decision," maintains Kristian Thulesen-Dahl for his part.

THE DANISH POLITICAL SYSTEM

The Folketing, the single Chamber of Parliament, comprises 179 members who are elected for 4 years by Danish residents living in Denmark only and by

proportional representation according to the Sainte-Laguë method. People can vote for a list put forward by a party or an independent candidate. The parties represented in parliament are allowed to put lists forward for the election, those who are not represented have to collate a number of signatures corresponding to 1/175th of the votes declared valid during the last general election. Finally independent candidates have to be recommended by at least 150 voters in the constituency in which they want to stand.

The provinces of Greenland and the Faeroe Isles each have two representatives. The other 175 seats are distributed across three regions: Copenhagen, Jutland and the islands. These three regions are then divided into three urban and seven rural constituencies. The number of seats allocated to each of the constituencies is proportional to the number of inhabitants and is reviewed every five years. The calculation undertaken (addition of the population, the number of voters at the last election and the surface area of the constituency in square km multiplied by 20, the result of this is then divided by 175) favours the least populous regions.

Although the principles of the organisation of general elections are included in the Danish Constitution of 1953 the country does not have any rules governing how the electoral campaign is run and does not set any limit in terms of how the election is financed. All parties that have won at least 1000 votes receive State funding (26.50 crowns i.e. 3.55 € per vote won).

The distribution of seats is undertaken in two stages, firstly by party and then by candidate. 135 of the 175 seats in the Folketing are constituency seats the 40 remaining are called compensatory seats. They are distributed according to the number of votes won by the parties nationally. This distribution method helps guarantee fairer national representation of the "small parties." In order to accede to the distribution of compensatory seats a party must have won a minimum of seats in a constituency or a number of votes that is either higher or equal to the number of votes necessary to win a seat in at least two of the three regions in the country, or at least 2% of the votes cast nationally. Eight political parties sit in the present Folketing:

General elections in Denmark
18th June 2015

- The Social Democratic Party (SD), founded in 1871 and led since April 2005 by outgoing Prime Minister Helle Thorning-Schmidt. It is the main government party with 44 seats;
- The People's Socialist Party (SF), opposition party created in 1959 by former Chair of the Danish Communist Party excluded from his party for have criticised the USSR's intervention in Hungary in 1956. It rallies socialists and ecologists and is led by Pia Olsen Dyhr, with 16 MPs;
- The Social Liberal Party (RV), a centre-left party created in 1905 after the scission of the Liberal Party. Led by Morten Ostergaard and member of the outgoing government coalition, 17 MPs;
- Unity List-Red/Green Alliance (E) founded in 1989 and formed on the basis of the alliance of the Communist Party (DKP), the Socialist Workers' Party (SA) and the Socialist Left (VS). The party is led by an executive

committee of 25 people; its spokesperson, also a leader of the party's parliamentary group, is Johanne Schmidt-Nielsen. The party has 12 seats.

These parties comprise what is known as the Red Block, the political parties on the left.

- The Liberal Party (V), a liberal, agrarian party of former Prime Minister (2009-2011) Lars Lokke Rasmussen. Founded in 1870, it has 47 seats;
- The Danish People's Party (DF), a populist far-right party founded in 1995 and led since 2012 by Kristian Thulesen Dahl, with 22 seats;
- The People's Conservative Party (KF), founded in 1915 led by Soren Pape Poulsen, with 8 seats.

These three parties form the Blue Block which rallies the political parties on the right.

- Liberal Alliance founded in 2007 by dissidents from the Social Liberal Party and the People's Conservative Party. It is led by Anders Samuelsen with 9 seats.

Reminder of the election results on 15th September 2011 in Denmark

Turnout : 87,7%

Political Parties	No. of votes won	% of votes won	No. of seats
Liberal Party (V)	947 725	26,70	47
Social Democratic Party (SD)	879 615	24,80	44
Danish People's Party (DF)	436 726	12,30	22
Social Liberal Party (RV)	336 698	9,50	17
Socialist People's Party (SF)	326 192	9,20	16
Unity-Red/Green Alliance (E)	236 860	6,70	12
Liberal Alliance	176 585	5	9
People's Conservative Party (KF)	175 047	4,90	8
Christian Democrats (KD)	28 070	0,80	0
Independents	1 850	0,05	0

Source : Internet Site <http://www.dst.dk/en/Statistik/emner/valg/folketingsvalg.aspx>

In the regional elections on 19th November 2013 the Social Democratic Party retained three of the country's five regions (Hovedstaden, Midtjylland (Jutland Central) and Nordjylland (Nord Jutland)). It also won the country's main towns (Copenhagen, Aarhus, Aalborg – with the Unity-Red/Green Alliance – and Odense) during the local elections that took place on the same day, although after these local elections the majority of the 98 towns in Denmark went to the liberals. The Liberal Party also won the regions Sjaelland (Zealand) and Syddanmark (Southern Denmark).

In the local elections the Social Democrats won 29.5% of the vote (774 seats, - 27) against 26.6% of the vote for the liberals (746 representatives elected, + 67). Unity-Red/Green Alliance made a breakthrough with 6.9% of the vote (119 seats, i.e. + 115), doubling its result in the capital, Copenhagen. Violent opposition to the reform of the labour market and taxes brought results. Its progress was made to the detriment of the People's Socialist Party.

In the European elections organised in May 2014 the People's Party came out ahead with 26.6% of the vote and four seats. The Social Democrats took second place with 19.1% of the vote (3 seats) followed by the Liberals (16.7% of the vote and 2 seats). Slightly more than half of the Danes turned out to vote (56.32%).

In the last poll by Voxmeter, published on 27th May last the Social Democratic Party is credited with 24.7% of the vote. It is followed by the Liberal Party which is due to win 23.80% of the vote and the People's Party which is due to win 18.4%. The Liberal Alliance is credited with 7.8% of the voting intentions; Unity-Red/Green Alliance is credited with 7.7%, the People's Socialist Party 6.2%, the Social Liberal 5.8% and the People's Conservative Party 3.2%. With 54.3% of the vote the Blue Block would be ahead of the Red Block that is due to win 45.6% of the vote.

Five polls were published on the day the election date was announced and all declared the Blue Block as the winner. However half of the Danes (49%) prefer to see Helle Thorning-Schmidt as Prime, 38% approve of Lars Lokke Rasmussen said a poll by Megafin for the TV channel TV2 and the daily newspaper *Politiken*. Most first-time voters, i.e. young people called to vote for the first time this year are also opting for the opposition: 52.2% against 47.8% who are preparing to vote for the left.

Finally a first TV debate rallied the candidates for the post of Prime Minister on 27th May. According to a poll by Megafin for TV2 and *Politiken*, populist leader Kristian Thulesen Dahl was the best candidate in this show (44% audience ratings).

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