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Migration Dossier

Fortress Denmark

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It's really too early to make any kind of qualified assessment of the longer term effects of the new laws on Foreigners and Refugees that came into force in Denmark on July 1, 2002. July is the holiday month in Denmark, most people and the political establishment are off to the beach with their buckets and spades and the newspapers are full of stories about Elvis being sighted (or the Danish equivalent thereof).

For now one can at least see that the first effects of the increasingly shrill xenophobic tone in Denmark has been a dramatic fall in the number of people seeking asylum here. This has already saved quite a lot of money and the establishment are quietly patting themselves on the back. Unfortunately, the whole package of reforms hardly took stage centre in the political debate. The social democrats (and even the left wing SF to an extent) silently agreed that 'something had to be done', even if they 'deplored' the tone adopted by the Liberal/Conservative regime and their cheerleaders on the extreme right. The social democrats are actually probably quite grateful that the right has grasped the nettle they were toying with whilst in government. They would certainly have put together a package that was less unpalatable for the unions (refugees working for their reduced benefits plus) and probably for the employers too - the Danish employers' organization has been icily cool over such solutions from the Liberal populists.

Protests were and are confined largely to the 'usual suspects' (Enhedslisten, AFA and so on) plus those who work with or have some insights into being refugees. The union of social workers annoyed the minister by encouraging its members to protest and a useful initiative called '7 years' (after the minimum time it will take to acquire citizenship and full legal equality) has been launched.

It's probably most useful to make an assessment of the reforms in-line with the overall strategy and thinking of the government. The ruling parties still retain a slim majority of support in recent polls despite a spectacular inability to meet any of their extravagant pre-election promises on welfare and taxation (except for the very rich). They have degraded a few environmental standards and promised longer jail sentences but these few swallows have made for a wet and windy summer. Their first attempts to structurally weaken the Danish trade unions have received a miserable reception from the employers who would rather 'stick with the devil they know' - the Danish negotiating system which guarantees a low level of disruption at the cost of reasonable wages and a high level of institutional union recognition. Really, the only area where the government have delivered is being nastier to foreigners, and even here strains have arisen.

Firstly, the balance within the governing coalition has tilted even more to the Liberals. The Conservatives and especially the Danish Peoples' Party have fallen in the polls. The DPP are perceived to have sold their social profile far too cheaply for influence on immigration - this, while not a non-issue to their supporters, is only a part of their appeal as a party which 'stands up for the little Dane'. The DPP will probably now re-manoeuvre themselves to a more critical, welfare-orientated populism, forcing the government to the centre and away from the bloc-politics of the last 9 months.

The second and more long-term effect is that this xenophobic binge has obscured any debate on the need for attracting foreign workers. Despite unemployment, there are massive bottlenecks in the Danish economy where foreign workers are needed. Unfortunately, these are often in areas that are not very well represented amongst refugees, which Denmark is so bad at absorbing. Foreigners are always welcome, so long as they are roughly the right colour, approximately the right religion and arrive on Denmark's shores with an adequate grasp of the Danish language and culture. More enlightened sectors of the Danish bourgeoisie are beginning to realize a more nuanced debate is necessary but can they shut their government up?