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Denmark

A defeat for austerity policies but no left wing victory

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The outgoing governmental coalition, headed by Social Democracy, suffered a stinging defeat in the elections on June 18. But so did the leading party of the right opposition. The winners were four different parties outside the political mainstream.

The recent parliamentary elections in Denmark can be interpreted in different ways. Certainly, the outcome was not straightforward.

The background to the elections was the 2011 elections that brought a centre-left governmental coalition to power, headed by Social Democracy. It won the elections based on deeply-felt anger in the working class in marginalised groups, and among humanistic progressives against the politics of the rightwing government that had ruled for 10 years. Trade-union activists actively campaigned for a new government implementing equality and building welfare, not breaking it down.

From the moment that the new government announced its program, it began disappointing its electorate – basically and openly admitting that they were sticking to the economic politics of the EU Commission and the previous government

This created a wide-spread resignation. Every opinion poll from day one after the 2011 election date showed a majority in support of the rightwing opposition. Not even the growth of Enhedslisten/The Red-Green Alliance could counter this trend. Only two weeks before the 2015 elections, polls began to indicate a close run.

The two blocs

Confronting each other in this election campaign were the media-dubbed “blue bloc” and “red bloc”.

Blue bloc consists of five right wing parties: the historic Conservative Party, the historic liberal party “Venstre”, the nationalist and xenophobic Danish Peoples Party, the pretty young ultra-liberalist party Liberal Alliance and the Christian Democrats (no seats either before or after elections). Long before the election campaign these parties all declared their support for Liberal Party leader, Lars Løkke Rasmussen, to head negotiations for a new government and to be prime minister.

Red bloc was the parties that supported Social Democracy leader and outgoing prime minister Helle Thorning-Schmidt to head a government: Social Democracy, the social-liberal party “Radikale” (not so social anymore, also part of the outgoing government), Socialist People’s Party (part of the government until a year ago), The Red-Green Alliance and the completely new party The Alternative (to be defined below). In Danish parliamentary tradition there is no explicit political support implied in supporting a party leader for prime minister.

Defeat of outgoing government

With a narrow majority the blue bloc won the elections. Counted together, the three parties that took part in the

governmental coalition, suffered a defeat, losing 12 seats in a parliament of 179. They were punished for neo-liberal austerity politics.

The loss of the coalition was carried by the two junior partners, Socialist People's Party and the social-liberal party. Both were reduced to less than half their previous votes. Social Democracy improved a bit, 3 seats, primarily because Helle Thorning-Schmidt led a far more professional campaign and had more personal credibility than her direct opponent Lars L kke Rasmussen, who has been involved in several scandals over the last four years in relation to his personal finances.

The loser takes it all

In these days and hours Lars L kke Rasmussen is negotiating with the other parties of the bloc, but the task is not easy. One reason for this is that his party is the big loser of the elections. The liberal party went down from 26.7 % of the votes to 17.1 %.

Secondly his allies are pulling in different directions. Pretty close to the liberal party is the Conservatives, but they have been in constant declines for 25 years, and they are now close to extinction with only 3.4 % of the votes.

Between right wing nationalism and social democracy

Big winner of the elections is the Danish Peoples Party. They increased from 12.3 % to 20.1 %. This has come as a tremendous shock not only to the left wing and other progressives but to the whole political establishment.

The DPP built itself on nationalist, anti-migrant and anti-refugee policies. They had a big influence on this issue on the right wing government from 2001 to 2011 without being part of the coalition.

Over the years they have succeeded in defining the political agenda, and have influenced both the other rightwing parties and Social Democracy and the Socialist People's Party in a way that for example that turned the recent election campaign into a competition between Venstre, the Conservatives, Social Democracy and DPP on who is most "tough on refugees".

But xenophobia is not enough to understand the growth of the DPP. Over the years they have profiled themselves more and more as a party that supports welfare and the public sector. This year the DPP campaigned for growth of the public sector, while Venstre campaigned for zero growth. Zero growth actually means deep cuts, because there is an automatic rise in costs for certain parts of public welfare. For example there are more and more elderly people to take care of.

Likewise the DPP promised to improve unemployment benefits that they themselves helped cut in 2010. On this issue they actually took a position to the left of Social Democracy. This is fundamental in understanding the success of DPP. They have taken up positions that Social Democracy has left. Lots of research documents that the DPP won huge numbers of former SD-voters.

Some even characterise the DPP as the new Social Democracy.

Several governmental options

Realising this “social profile” of DPP, it will come as no surprise that the ultra-liberalists of the Liberal Alliance pull the prime minister-in-waiting in the direct opposite direction. The most likely at this moment is that he will end up establishing a minority government of only his own party.

From this starting point he may use different majorities for different political initiatives, and he will have no problem in including Social Democracy in a number of political deals. In this election campaign Helle Thorning-Schmidt made great efforts to place her party as a centre party. She resigned as party leader on election night, but the new chairman, Mette Frederiksen, will make no fundamental break with this perspective.

New advances for the RGA

The Red-Green Alliance increased its votes from 6.7 % to 7.8 %. This is a tremendously good result coming after the 2011 elections where the party tripled its votes. The non-reformist left has never been so strong parliamentarily, except for an exceptional CP-result in the first elections after the end of the Second World War.

In this way the RGA was not pulled down along with the governmental party for being partly identified with the government.

The growth in RGA-votes at these elections happened notably outside Copenhagen and other bigger cities. It is important that we now have a real national presence.

An especially interesting feature of the RGA-result is some indications that we had a big increases in areas with social housing estates, where a lot of migrants and Danes on unemployment benefit live. These areas were a priority for candidates and other campaigning, and in some of them organising activities took place even before election time. Increases from 20 to 26 percent happened in several of these areas.

Lost opportunities

The growth does not only call for celebration. A debate is needed why the RGA did not attract more of the voters that left the governmental parties in disappointment. Back in 2013 opinion polls showed a support for the RGA of more than 13 %. Why were we not able to hold on to the support of these people?

One part of the explanation is that the party has almost completely focused on campaigning for immediate demands that supposedly could be implemented without breaking the framework of capitalism. The “story” of the party has been to defend what Social Democracy defended some decades ago – or rather what people expected of Social Democracy. The stated aim of “pulling the government” to the left – which had no success – has left an impression that the RGA was to a certain extent a part of the government project. Anyway, the brand of the party has not been anti-system and alternative enough.

The hippie Alternative

This need for a more anti-system RGA was indicated by the success of a completely new party, the Alternative. The party got 4.8 % of the votes. It was established a year ago by a former government minister from the social-liberal party, Radikale, who resigned from his party.

Its policies are not formulated in traditional political terms, but more as post-hippie visions of another way of living. It is a weird mixture of green, humanitarian and anti-technocratic politics, combined with – on the one hand - the demand for 30 hour work week and – on the other hand - support for independent, innovative small scale businesses.

The party has a strong appeal to what some call the creative classes, but also reaches out to public employees and not the least young first-time voters. Its non-belligerent way of campaigning and discussing has appealed to a lot of people who are tired of the aggressive in-fighting between politicians, who do not disagree anything essential but only fight for power and positions.

Establishment is losing control of voters

This leads me to maybe the most important feature of these elections. The traditional Danish political parties with a history of more than 25 years declined. Dramatically, except for Social Democracy that grew a tiny bit, but only recovered back to the 2001 level, not to the historical standards of the party. All together the old parties only got 58 % of the votes.

What it is even more important, is the fact that they are exactly the parties that are directly identified with the neo-liberal austerity policies implemented by both preceding governmental coalitions.

On the other side we have the parties that have never taken part in government. As described above they are extremely different from each other, from neoliberal to nationalism to social liberal naivety to anti-capitalism. What they have in common, are their – differently argued - opposition to the policies that have been implemented. They are seen by the electorate as parties with another perspective, even though this could have been more explicit in the case of the RGA.

These four parties were all rewarded with significant increases in votes. The alternative parties, the protest parties received all in all 42 % of the votes. This is a sign that in spite of the low tide of class struggle and the apparent right wing trend in voting behaviour, there is dissatisfaction below surface, and there is a longing for real changes.

Hard times and backlash

When a new government is established, and the new majority begins to implement its policies, working people in Denmark will experience hard times. This will hit especially migrants, refugees and people on benefits, but also broader layers of people will feel the results of cuts in public welfare. In addition we will see a backlash in legal policies and climate and environmental policies.

But such policies will shake the old party structure even more. Supporters of the new parties of the right wing will turn away from them.

Not the least important, the basic dissatisfaction will make it possible to build resistance, and it will call for a leftwing alternative to both the blue bloc and to Social Democracy.

SAP statement on Danish National election 2015

The Election was a defeat for the politics of necessity

The national election was a defeat for the politics of necessity. The politics distant from reality dictated by the big calculator of the Ministry of Finance has lost support. The Red Green Alliance (RGA) has gained strength and has resisted the danger of being drawn down by the unpopularity of the government. This opens possibilities to strengthen the struggle against the right-wing anti-social reform policies. But it implies a reconstruction of the left project. The RGA is the force that can take on that challenge.

The national election was first of all a defeat for the politics of necessity. The parties of Social Democracy (SD), Liberals, Conservatives, Socialist People's Party (SPP) and Social Liberals (SL) who at least in the eyes of the people are seen as the proponents of reform policies, has lost massively in comparison with the 2011 election. From 75 % of the vote (132 seats) the electoral support for these parties has dropped to 58% (102 seats); a loss of 17 percentage points (30 seats). On the flip side of this the parties seen as alternatives to the politics of necessity gained votes, i.e. Danish Peoples Party (DPP), Liberal Alliance (LA), the Alternative (Alt) and RGA.

The Social Democrats did though win votes, but it was at the cost of the government partners. Social Democracy cannibalized SPP and SL, but lost out in the battle for power to DPP. It was the policies of the Social Democrats with cuts on welfare and hands out to corporations that paved the road for DPP.

Though a large share of votes went to DPP, it is important to understand the social contents of this. For many workers, who chose DPP, this is as much an expression of concern for welfare as a wish for worse treatment of refugees and immigrants. The task of the RGA is to keep DPP responsible on their promises of improved welfare, whether it regards the unemployment benefits or growth of the public sector.

The Alternative became the big surprise. With 4,8% of the votes the party got a massive breakthrough carried forward in the bigger cities – specially in Copenhagen. The party insisted on a new way of doing politics: non-conflictive and opening space for visionary thinking. This attracted many of those who want far-reaching changes of society.

Liberal Alliance appeared with its ultra-liberalist plan for changing public sector and the taxation system as the challenge to the politics of necessity in the blue camp. The party almost won the same electoral size as the RGA with 7,5% and 13 seats.

The electoral support for the RGA grew from 6,7% to 7,8% which is positive. The party has not only consolidated the good result from 2011 but also been able to obtain increased support. It is strongly positive that the party has not been drawn down by unpopularity of the SD-SL-SPP-government, but has maintained the critique of and distanced itself from the government. The RGA has grown significantly in the provinces and hence consolidated the progress from its municipal breakthrough in 2013.

Unfortunately, the RGA lost votes in Copenhagen. The party lost votes to the Alternative. The latter was able to attract part of the critique of the politics of necessity and express the desire for more visions. In spite of highflying dreams the Alternative was able to give these currents a voice, where the accusations of “economic irresponsibility” became rather to the benefit of the party. It will be a task for the RGA to make it visible if the Alternative gives up on the visions when the conflicts of interest manifest themselves.

The RGA appeared too much as the other parties – a party that does politics in the same way as the others with serious, concrete and “fully financed” political proposals within the consensus on what can be made into reality. This approach has helped the RGA to address groups within the working class, but during the election campaign, the lack of more far-reaching demand such as a 30 hour work week, implied that the party did not fully appeal to those that wish for something different and more. This also indicates that the RGA was not able to use the election to present own visions and politics.

The RGA needs to take responsibility to rebuild the left

Seen in a general perspective nevertheless the situation of the RGA is not bad at all. There is a need to reorganize the left. Social Democracy proclaimed during the electoral campaign that it is to consider as a party of the centre. That implies that the RGA is the biggest left party.

The party has to take on the role as the uniting force that will take the lead in rebuilding the left. The party must be the driving force to mobilize for protests against the attacks of the coming right-wing government on marginalized and unemployed. This demands that the RGA casts its resources into the building from below. The RGA must use its forces to do base organizing in the trade-unions and among students. There should be a specific effort to organize in the neighbourhoods with a high level of social marginalisation, where the RGA has gained increased support.

Simultaneously with this process the RGA has to develop on the political level. The main focus must be a strategic reorientation, where the party formulates its own political visions that can show a credible way out of the crisis and towards socialism. The RGA can be the party that build on the dissatisfaction and give the coming struggles against the right-wing government austerity policies a perspective that reach beyond capitalism.

This is no easy task, it presupposes that the party develops a systematic approach to the work in the movements and dedicate resources to do the tasks as a collective. This process should be initiated at the coming conference.

Adopted by SAP national leadership 21st of June 2015.