

## **ELECTION BRIEFING No.19 THE DANISH GENERAL ELECTION OF FEBRUARY 2005**

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### **Key points**

- The election strengthened the Liberal-Conservative government coalition of 2001. The coalition continued to govern with parliamentary support from the nationalistic Danish People's Party which also had a successful election.
- The Social Democratic Party had its worst election since 1973. The poor result made the chairman step down immediately. Several other opposition parties that had lost mandates were also thrown into leadership crises.
- The small Social-Liberal Party was nearly doubled, and was the only opposition party to see marked progress.
- The campaign was dominated by domestic welfare state and labour market issues, as well as problems regarding the integration of immigrants.
- EU questions were absent from the campaign.

### **Introduction**

The Prime Minister (PM) would have had to call a general election at the latest in the autumn of 2005, but it had long been expected that the Liberal PM, Anders Fogh Rasmussen, would choose to set a date already in the winter or early spring. There were at least two compelling reasons for this timing. First, a referendum on the EU's Constitutional Treaty was expected to take place towards the end of 2005, and the PM was likely to hold the general election at a comfortable distance prior to the referendum in order to avoid the two campaigns being mixed up. Second, judging from opinion polls, the government coalition parties, and the supporting Danish People's Party, seemed to have little to fear at the time of the call for election. With no major compromising political issues to be seen in the horizon, Fogh Rasmussen in mid January settled the date for 8 February 2005. This ignited three-weeks of intensive election campaign where 10 parties were competing for the support of just over 4 million eligible voters. The Danish election system is based on proportional representation, and there is a relatively low threshold to enter Parliament, namely 2%.

**TABLE 1: RESULTS OF THE 2005 AND 2001 ELECTIONS TO THE *FOLKETINGET*<sup>1</sup>**

Political party <i>Official orientation towards EU</i>	February 2005			Change since November 2001	
	Votes	% of total votes	Mandates	in % of total votes	in mandates
Liberals <i>Full support</i>	974,636	29.0	52	-2.2	-2
Social Democratic Party <i>Full support</i>	867,349	25.8	47	-3.3	-5
Danish People's Party <i>Soft Euroscepticism</i>	444,947	13.3	24	+1.3	+2
Conservative People's Party <i>Full support</i>	344,886	10.3	18 <sup>2</sup>	+1.2	+3
Social-Liberal Party <i>Full support</i>	308,212	9.2	17	+4.0	+8
Socialist People's Party <i>Soft Euroscepticism</i>	201,047	6.0	11	-0.4	-1
Unity List <i>Hard Euroscepticism</i>	114,123	3.4	6	+1.0	+2
Christian Democratic Party <i>Soft Euroscepticism</i>	58,071	1.7	0	-0.6	-4
Centre Democratic Party <i>Full support</i>	33,880	1.0	0	-0.8	0
Minority Party <i>Hard Euroscepticism</i>	8,850	0.3	0	n/a	n/a

Source: Indenrigs- og Sundhedsministeriet, Folketingsvalg 08. februar 2005, Landsresultat, [www.im-valg.dk/resultater/la000f.htm](http://www.im-valg.dk/resultater/la000f.htm)

### **The result**

The election resulted in a slight strengthening of the Liberal-Conservative government coalition, in power since November 2001, as well as the party acting as parliamentary support for the government, the Danish People's Party. These three parties now have a comfortable majority of 94 of the total 179 mandates in the *Folketinget*. The result has to be seen against the background that the government had focused rather intensely on a series of election promises made in the 2001 campaign: it had not only placed a stop on the incrementalism in taxation that previous Danish Social Democratic governments were famous for, but also lowered taxes on personal incomes. Immigration through family reunification had been curbed dramatically. The unemployment rate was among the lowest in Europe, and the Danish economy remained one of the strongest in the EU. The welfare state, labour market, and the integration of immigrants remained the key pillars of this election campaign. In addition, the very disciplined government leader was remarkably good at keeping political problems at bay, and at managing press relations throughout the 2001-05 term. Subsequently during the 2005 election campaign there was little

<sup>1</sup> This table does not include the four overseas representatives in the Danish parliament who belong to own local political parties.

<sup>2</sup> After the 2001 election, the Conservative Party actually won 16 mandates, but one member of the parliamentary group, Frank Dahlgaard, quite the parliamentary group, and remained unaffiliated. Hence, for most of the 2001-05 assembly, the Conservative group counted 15 MPs.

doubt that the government coalition would be able to continue, and its leaders had practically no reason to fear the formation of a Social Democratic-led alternative.

The Liberal party continued to be Denmark's largest party, though it was not quite able to duplicate the record result of 2001 which was the best election for this party for about half a century. Still, the 2 mandates lost in 2005 seemed to be of little concern in comparison with a new historical success produced in 2005: this was the first time ever in the party's long history that a Liberal PM had been re-elected. Fogh Rasmussen remained the candidate in the campaign, receiving by far the largest personal vote, over 61.000, though this was a considerable decline from his 70.000 personal votes in 2001. The explanation for the lost mandates, and the apparent declining personal popularity of the PM, was that the over-exposure of the party and the PM in the media led to a certain fatigue among Liberal voters.

This explanation seems convincing, as it is evident that many of the deserting Liberal voters migrated to the smaller government coalition partner whose programme only diverged from that of the Liberal Party on a few issues (for instance in relation to taxation). The Conservative People's Party saw a marked increase of 3 mandates. The Conservatives were very visible in the 2001-2005 government coalition, where the party was given an disproportionate number of ministries relative to its parliament mandates. This included key posts such as Foreign Minister (Per Stig Møller), Economics Minister and Deputy PM (Bendt Bendtsen), and Minister for Justice (Lene Espersen). Moreover, party chairman Bendt Bendtsen was successful in taming the party that many times during the nineties seemed to be at the point of disintegrating due to internal disputes. The Conservative People's Party may also have received votes from the smaller Christian Democratic Party that did not pass the threshold during this election.

The Danish People's Party continued to deliver the parliamentary support for the government coalition. Led by the charismatic party 'mother', Pia Kjaersgaard, the party gained 2 additional mandates, and has thus continued to increase its mandates ever since it was constituted from the remains of the controversial Progress Party in 1998: in 1998, the Danish People's Party gained 13 mandates, in 2001 it gained 22, and now 24 mandates. Judging from the 38,000 personal votes cast for Kjaersgaard in 2005, she was the second most popular politician in election. This party has followed a programme characteristic of the tendency towards a gradual erosion of the traditional left-right party indicator. On the one hand, it advocated traditional right-wing nationalistic and anti-immigrant arguments. On the other hand, it focused on traditional centre-left issues of preserving core welfare state features. Hence, it spoke firmly against inequality, particularly in favour of poor pensioners, unskilled workers, and the long-term unemployed. Over the previous years, the party profile has changed markedly from a focus on quite radical anti-immigrant issues, to a constructive engagement in securing minimal universal welfare benefits. This strategy has proven to be successful, and the Danish People's Party has in many respects developed to be a significant competitor to the Social Democratic Party. Hence, the attaining of around 12% of the votes in 2001 was, by many, estimated as exceptional, but this now seems to have normalised. Accusations of citation fraud in the party's 2005 campaign advertisements, especially in relation to its anti-immigration and anti-Muslim stance, did not appear to have produced a significant backlash.<sup>3</sup>

With the loss of 5 mandates, the Social Democratic Party had its poorest election since 1973. As a consequence party chairman, Mogens Lykketoft, announced his resignation in a well-prepared televised speech already on election night. Throughout the campaign, leading Social Democratic candidates were constantly on the defence when confronted with Liberal candidates.

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<sup>3</sup> *Politiken*, 4 February 2005, p. 2, and *Politiken*, 7 February 2005, p. 6.

Firstly, on key welfare state and labour market issues, based on the party's working programme "Made in Denmark" – the original title in English – never managed to appear as more than sporadic higher bidding against the Liberals. Secondly, the fact that the Social Democratic parliament group since 2001 had supported the tightening of the immigration and family reunification policy resulted in this party facing difficulty explaining to the voters where exactly the Social Democratic Party differed from the right-wing government. Similarly problem arose on the question of Iraq, where the Social Democratic Party initially voted against the government's decision to send Danish troops to the US-led invasion, but later continuously supported the maintenance of Danish troops in Iraq.

Thirdly, although the party's long list of top candidates were well-experienced and well-known, they did not add up to a clear party profile. Behind the curtains, an internal dispute among the party's two-to-three wings was bubbling.<sup>4</sup> One clear sign of this, for instance, was when former Social Democratic PM, Poul Nyrup Rasmussen, returned from his new career as MEP and Chairman of the Socialist Group in the EP, to lend a helping hand to certain Social Democratic candidates. Nyrup Rasmussen did not make any public appearances with his former close ally and friend, Lykkesoft. Fourthly, Lykkesoft has traditionally never had the support of the labour movement, which led to another profiling problem.

The most successful party in this election was the Social-Liberals, jumping from 9 to 17 mandates, making it this party's most successful election since 1973. The party leader, former Economics Minister Marianne Jelved, has often been characterised as an uncharismatic politician with a somewhat clumsy appearance, but she was also very straightforward, and that style paid off. Led by Jelved, the party was a fierce and highly visible opponent to issues such as the tightening of immigration and family reunification rules. Consequently, on these issues the Social-Liberals also publicly distanced themselves from the Social Democratic Party. Over the previous four years, the party repeatedly advocated a progressive agenda in relation to immigration, education, the EU, and other international commitments.

During the eighties and nineties, the Social-Liberals formed part of several government coalitions to both the right and left of the political centre. Whereas the Social-Liberal party leader traditionally is silent during election campaigns as to its post-election favourite PM (i.e. to the left or right of the centre), Jelved in 2005 clearly signaled that the party would only be able to point to Lykkesoft as future PM. During the 2005 campaign, Jelved categorically dismissed any suggestion, on the part of journalists, of her party joining a Liberal-Conservative coalition even if such a coalition could be used to cut off much of the influence of the Danish People's Party. The Liberal-Conservative pledge to uphold the tight immigration laws was among the most contested by the Social-Liberals.

The Social-Liberals appear to have had a rapidly expanding grip on voters among the well-educated (estimates are that one-in-four Social-Liberal voter in 2005 has a university-level degree), the 'creative class' (applying Richard Florida as the party guru), and it also had high support among immigrant communities. During the campaign, the party experienced a small bump in the road, when one of its campaign videos was accused of citation fraud, and the discrediting of the Liberal politician, minister in several governments and former MEP, Bertel Haarder, but there seemed to have been no backlash among voters.

The election was a disappointment for the moderate left wing, as the Socialist People's Party lost one mandate. The disappointment was not least because the party clearly failed to catch

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<sup>4</sup> See for instance Ralf Pittelkow, 'S-fløjkamp', *Jyllandsposten*, 26 January 2005.

voters that were defecting from the Social Democratic Party. As a consequence, party chairman for the last 14 years, Holger K. Nielsen, resigned. Since the early nineties this party, largely a child of the Cold War, had struggled through severe internal disputes between doctrinary and revisionist members. Nielsen had been leaning towards the revisionist side, notably changing the official party line from a hard Eurosceptic, to a soft Eurosceptic one. This has not pleased many of the party's traditional voters, and during this same period, the party has had to face constant decline in its parliamentary representation: After a peak of 27 mandates after the 1987 election, the party declined constantly: 24 mandates in 1988, 15 in 1990, 13 in 1994 and 1998, 12 in 2001, and 11 in 2005.<sup>5</sup> In 2005, many voters and party members were dissatisfied particularly with the passivity of the parliamentary group towards parliament's tightening of immigration laws.

Subsequently, some Socialist People's Party voters moved left to the small red-green Unity List which advocates a more left-wing doctrinary line. It is hard Eurosceptic, and also closely connected to anti-globalisation protest circles. The Unity List won two mandates in 2005, up from 4 to 6. It gained representation in Parliament in 1994, when it was formed as a coalition between parties on the far-left wing. The success of the Unity List, however, was not able to conceal the fact that the traditional left wing in Danish politics has been in constant decline since 1998. In 1998, the Social Democratic Party, the Socialist People's Party, and the Unity list had a combined 81 mandates, in 2001, they had 68 mandates, and in 2005 this dropped further to 64 mandates.

Three small other parties took part in the campaign and failed to make it past the 2% threshold. Firstly, the small centre-right Christian Democratic Party lost its 4 mandates, when it obtained only 1.7% of the votes. The defeat only became clear on election night itself, and in the wake of this disappointment, party leader Marianne Karlsmoser decided to step down. On many welfare state issues, this party was only marginally different to the Conservatives and the Liberals. On the EU, however, the party took a soft-Eurosceptic line. It was, moreover, the only party in Danish politics to advocate a religious line in its political profile, and it is largely this protestant profile of the party that alienated many voters in a country where (protestant) religious issues traditionally are decoupled from politics.

Two parties competing for representation had no mandates in the 2001-2005 parliamentary assembly. The small pro-European, centre-right Centre-Democratic Party had parliamentary representation since 1973, and took part in several coalition governments in the eighties. It made several strategic errors in the 2001 election, where lost all its 8 mandates, and dropped from having had 4.3% of the total vote in 1998 to 1.8% in 2001. Party leader Mimi Jakobsen announced that she would step down as party leader, which was a personal defeat not least because her father, Erhard Jakobsen, founded the party.

The campaign saw only one newcomer, the Minority Party, advocating a far-left-wing agenda. With this party, issues such as hard Euroscepticism, anti-United States and globalisation, the strengthening of human rights, ecology and sustainability have been important, as well as acting as a multicultural bridge to immigrant groups (hence the party's name). The party's well-spoken and energetic leader, Rune Engelbrecht Larsen, made a brave attempt at advocating for a broad discussion of those issues, most of which appear to have been tabooed by the mainstream parties during the election campaign. In spite of the fact that someone like the veteran Eurosceptic Niels I. Meyer stood in the background, the party's lack of experience, well-known candidates, as well as financial basis to run a professional secretariat and campaign ads proved to be too major obstacles.

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<sup>5</sup> [www.folketinget.dk](http://www.folketinget.dk)

The turnout for this election was 84.54%, which was 2.61% lower than in 2001. This decline does not give immediate reason for concern, as in 2001, the general election was very high because it took place on the same day as local elections. The gender distribution in the *Folketinget* has not changed significantly with the result. There is now one woman less than before, and 36.9% of parliament seats are now occupied by women. Interestingly, the left-wing parties, the Socialist People's Party and the Unity List, have the lowest percentage of women in their groups, respectively 27.2% and 33.3%.

### **The Campaign and the EU**

There are many reasons why one could have expected that the EU would play a prominent role in this election campaign. Firstly, Denmark was due to hold its seventh referendum about EU membership issues in 2005. In the past, the mainstream pro-EU parties have lost two referendums to the Eurosceptics in 1992 and 2000.<sup>6</sup> The outcome of the battle over the Constitutional Treaty was far from won, with 44% of Danes in support, and 36% against according to the Eurobarometer poll performed in autumn 2004.<sup>7</sup> Secondly, in spite of the ambiguity towards the Constitutional Treaty, Danes, at the time of the election had a remarkably positive view of EU membership: 61% seeing it as a positive thing, and only 13% of the population considered it a 'bad thing'. The sentiment in the population has changed significantly in favour of the areas that Denmark has exemptions from EU cooperation from – the monetary union and the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) as well as the European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP) – and this shift might have been expected to be mirrored in the election campaign. Hence, 50% of the population was now in favour of the monetary union, whereas 45% were against. The Eurobarometer registered 60% in support of the CFSP, and only 29% against. 66% of Danes responded in favour of the ESDP, and only 26% were against. Thirdly, no less than 3 prominent pro-EU former MEPs - Bertel Haarder, Lone Dybkjær, and Helle Thorning-Schmidt - made their (re-)entry into the *Folketinget*. Interestingly, of these three, only Thorning-Schmidt made several references to her past experience in the European Parliament, but given that she had never been a member of the *Folketinget* before, her main point was to illustrate that she was an experienced parliamentarian. Nyrup Rasmussen's brief entry in the election campaign also not bring EU issues into the campaign, as his purpose for doing so was purely party political.

The EU had virtually no salience in the 2005 general election campaign, and it was therefore not much different to previous Danish election campaigns. There appears to be a silent agreement between all mainstream parties, which are all highly supportive of the EU, that a lid should be kept on the EU as an election issue. Hence, there seemed to be agreement among mainstream parties that the general election 2005 should be fought on domestic issues over which there was only marginal disagreement between these parties: the welfare state and the labour market. Table 2 shows that the election result only slightly strengthened parties in full support of the EU, and hard Eurosceptics.

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<sup>6</sup> Ann-Christina L. Knudsen [forthcoming, 2005], 'Euroscepticism in Denmark', in Paul Taggart and Aleks Szczerbiak (eds.), *Opposing Europe?*, Oxford University Press.

<sup>7</sup> Standard Eurobarometer 62, Autumn 2004, National Report, Denmark (February 2005).

**TABLE 2: FOLKETINGET AND THE EU<sup>8</sup>**

	Total mandates, 2005	Total mandates, 2001
Parties in full support ( <i>The Liberals, Social Democrats, Conservatives, Social-Liberals</i> )	134	130
Soft Eurosceptic parties ( <i>Danish People's Party, Socialist People's Party</i> )	35	36
Hard Eurosceptic parties ( <i>The Unity List</i> )	6	4

The election result did not produce any marked change in the Eurosceptic camp. Two hard Eurosceptic parties took part in the election: the Unity List and the Minority Party. Together, they received 3.7% of the votes cast. It was primarily the Minority Party that continuously tried to raise the EU and the Constitutional Treaty as a problem. By contrast to this, the Unity List was much more cautious about bringing the EU into the debate. It was as if participation in four general election campaigns now had taught the Unity List that there are no votes to be gained from hard Euroscepticism.

The three soft-Eurosceptic parties – the Danish People's Party, the Socialist People's Party, and the Christian People's Party, representing a total of 21.0% of the voters – also seemed uninterested in bringing EU issues to the fore. Had they decided to do so, it is safe to suggest that these parties would have been unlikely to join forces in a common soft-Eurosceptic campaign because they advocate very different reasons behind their Eurosceptic views. The Danish People's Party had a few quips about a demand for a referendum for the accession of Turkey to the EU, playing to its anti-immigration audience, but the issue was not a major pillar in this party's general election campaign.

### **Conclusion and Perspectives**

The election result displayed stability among those elected, and continuity in relation to core policy areas like the welfare state and labour market issues. The election campaign was largely a race between mainstream politicians trying to prove who was the best defender of the welfare state. All parties essentially agree to a relatively extensive version of the Danish welfare state. It amounted to a campaign with very few news topics or visions. To the international observer it must have been difficult to spot what the issues really were because of the detail in which true differences needed to be observed between the mainstream party positions. The electorate was clearly bored with this too, and the two largest mainstream parties, the Liberals and the Social Democrats lost ground. Those smaller parties signaling more distinctive profiles were rewarded - the Social Liberals, the Danish People's Party, and the Unity List.

The EU was, as always, ignored in the campaign, and it is also clear that the election result will not produce any significant policy changes in this respect. After the election Fogh Rasmussen set the referendum date for the Constitutional Treaty for 27 September 2005.

In the longer run, however, the election result is likely to produce other interesting development in both domestic and EU politics when two important opposition parties in

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<sup>8</sup> This table is based on the official orientation towards the EU as presented in party programmes. The table does not include the four over-seas representatives, or mandates outside political party groups.

parliament will receive new leadership. The Social Democratic Party was due to decide in April 2005 on a new leader by membership ballot. The choice between Helle Thorning-Schmidt and Frank Jensen, however, was primarily one that would affect the line towards domestic politics: Thorning-Schmidt is known as the centrist candidate with an international/European outlook, and Jensen as the more traditional leftist, with a domestic agenda. Both candidates have a pro-EU stance. The Socialist People's Party, however, could go in either a pro or Eurosceptic direction, depending on who is chosen to be the new party leader.

*This is the latest in a series of election and referendum briefings produced by the European Parties Elections and Referendums Network (EPERN). Based in the Sussex European Institute, EPERN is an international network of scholars that was originally established as the Opposing Europe Research Network (OERN) in June 2000 to chart the divisions over Europe that exist within party systems. In August 2003 it was re-launched as EPERN to reflect a widening of its objectives to consider the broader impact of the European issue on the domestic politics of EU member and candidate states. The Network retains an independent stance on the issues under consideration. For more information and copies of all our publications visit our website at <http://www.sussex.ac.uk/sei/1-4-2.html>*