

## ELECTION BRIEFING NO 67 EUROPE AND THE DANISH GENERAL ELECTION OF 15 SEPTEMBER 2011

Ann-Christina L. Knudsen  
Aarhus University  
Email: [alknudsen@hum.au.dk](mailto:alknudsen@hum.au.dk)

### Key Points:

- On 3 October 2011, the Social Democrat Helle Thorning-Schmidt became Denmark's new prime minister. She was the country's 41st prime minister and the first woman to hold this office.
- Mrs Thorning-Schmidt headed a minority coalition government consisting also of the Socialist People's Party and the Social Liberal Party. The new government depended on the left-wing Unity List to make up a parliamentary majority.
- The election brought an end to a decade of Liberal-Conservative minority coalition governments that depended on the nationalist Danish People's Party for its parliamentary majority.
- Despite having to give up government, the Liberal Party won enough votes to remain the single largest party in the *Folketinget*, and it had three more seats than the Social Democrats. As before, there were eight political parties in parliament.
- The most salient topics in the campaign were different models for economic growth, taxation, and welfare services particularly in relation to health and early retirement. Topics regarding the EU were practically absent.

### Context and Background

On 26 August 2011, incumbent prime minister Lars Løkke Rasmussen of the Liberal Party called for a general election to be held on 15 September 2011. The last general election had taken place in November 2007, and he was nearing the constitutional deadline that required elections at intervals of a maximum of four years. Within that term, it was the prime ministers privilege to decide exactly when to call for the general election, and throughout 2011 the entire Danish press had been interpreting his every move as a sign of campaign kick-off. Since 2001, the country was governed by Liberal-Conservative minority governments that had been re-confirmed in the general elections of February 2005 and November 2007. The

nationalist Danish People's Party had, throughout this time, had a strategically important role in keeping the government in power as the minority coalition was dependent on that party for a secure parliamentary majority. This situation essentially made the Danish People's Party the third governing party, and gave it *de facto* veto power over government policy that it used particularly in respect of its priority issues such as immigration and integration, certain welfare services, the annual state finance bill, and to some extent also regarding EU-matters. The fourth political party to support the governing coalition in 2007 was the New Alliance (subsequently called the Liberal Alliance, a party formed in 2007, see below). In November 2007, these four parties – the so-called 'Blue Bloc' - occupied a total of 94 of the 179 seats in parliament, and thus made up a fairly comfortable majority (see also Table 1 below for election result comparisons, and for an overview of the so-called Blue and Red Bloc parties). By 2011, however, the government's parliamentary majority had shrunk, and there were visible signs of fatigue within the Blue Bloc.

The Liberal Party had led the government for a decade, but Mr Løkke Rasmussen's tenure as prime minister had been relatively short. His predecessor, Anders Fogh Rasmussen,<sup>1</sup> had resigned in April 2009 to take up the position as secretary-general of NATO. As deputy chairman of the Liberal Party and a senior minister, Mr Løkke subsequently took over leadership of the government; there were no challengers within the party. However, Mr Løkke took over at a time when public support for the Liberal Party and for the Blue Bloc was dwindling. Compared to most other EU countries, the Danish economy had fared very well during the 2000s until the financial and economic crisis set in during 2008, but the country was soon affected by the contraction of the economy especially in the banking and housing sectors. As elsewhere, the crisis led to growing unemployment and public frustration. The Danish military involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan was increasing unpopular at home, and the so-called cartoon dispute - sparked when the newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* in late 2005 published a cartoon portraying the prophet Mohammed with a bomb in his turban - was part of an escalation of the populist tone in the immigration and integration debates that divided the Danish population in various ways.

The two Liberal prime ministers had very different leadership styles and public reputations. Despite certain controversies abroad over Mr Fogh's nomination to the NATO position - Turkey had particularly objected because of his un-willingness to interfere in the cartoon dispute - he had been chosen on an international reputation as a disciplined political leader and skilled negotiator that he had acquired after the Copenhagen summit in December 2002 where some of the crucial final agreements over the EU's 2004-enlargement were made. Mr Løkke was, by contrast, an unknown quantity abroad. *The Economist*, for instance, portrayed him as an "unremarkable character" who "bungled handling of the Copenhagen climate-change summit in December 2009" and who had a "cavalier attitude to expenses".<sup>2</sup> The latter referred to an expenses episode when journalists in 2008 documented that he had been using public funds to pay for expensive restaurant bills, late-night videos in hotels, cigarettes and

---

<sup>1</sup> Rasmussen is a common name in Denmark, and it is a mere coincidence that the past three prime ministers have had that surname name: Poul Nyrup Rasmussen (Social Democrat, 25 January 1993-27 November 2001), Anders Fogh Rasmussen (Liberal, 27 November 2001-5 April 2009), and Lars Løkke Rasmussen (Liberal, 5 April 2009-3 October 2011). To simplify matters, I will in the following simply refer to them as Mr Nyrup, Mr Fogh and Mr Løkke. This practice is also often found in the Danish press.

<sup>2</sup> See: 'To Helle and Back,' *The Economist*, 10 September 2011.

taxi rides that should have been treated as private consumption. By the time that the election was called, Mr Løkke was still seen by many as a stand-in for Fogh.

In his positions as ministers for the interior (2001-2007) and for finance (2007-2009), Mr Løkke had been a primary implementer of the government's reforms of key welfare state services. Particularly in the area of public health, there had been a concerted move towards public procurement of health services to private enterprises (often, it turned out towards the end of the government's life, the state's purchase prices had been far too high) and tax relief on private health insurances that mainly benefitted middle class citizens employed in the private sector. Since 2001, the government had run a policy of zero tax increases, and even lowered the highest tax bracket in 2003. National public debt had been reduced to a minimum. According to successive quality-of-life surveys, Danes were apparently the happiest people in the world at this point in time. But when the economy began to contract around 2008, the government - supported by all parties in parliament except the small left-wing Unity List - put forward large stimulus plans and bank rescue packages. Shortly after that, the state's budget deficit began to balloon. Yet in spite of rising unemployment, engagement in military operations in Afghanistan and Iraq, and rather grave predictions for the state's future economic health at a time of economic crisis, the government remained loyal to one of its key election promises of not raising taxes.

Not only did Mr Løkke take over a country at a time when the economic situation was changing, but he also inherited a much less stable parliamentary situation. Since 2007, the Blue Bloc majority had been shrinking gradually as several parliamentarians had decided to shift political parties. Most of this traffic was related to members coming in and out of the New/Liberal Alliance. New Alliance was formed in May 2007 by breakaway politicians from the Social Liberals (Anders Samuelsen and Naser Khader) and the Conservative Party (Gitte Seeberg) who wanted to free the government from its dependence on the Danish People's Party. Literally within days of announcing its formation, New Alliance had gained massive support in opinion polls - it stood to win as many as 29 mandates if a general election was called at that point - and people flocked to become members and, apparently, to pay their membership dues; the latter was interpreted by as a sign that paying members would become loyal voters. The party was on somewhat of a roller-coaster ride since then. At the time of the 2007-election, it obtained a mere 2.8% of the votes and only just passed the 2% threshold. The party subsequently sought to get a clearer organisation and party programme, to recruit candidates (from other parties as well as media celebrities from various walks of life), and changed its name to the Liberal Alliance. While the Liberal Alliance was generally in support of the government, its revolving doors also resulted in a few parliamentarians migrating out of the Blue Bloc. By May 2010, the government's secure parliamentary support was hinging on one seat only, and this disappeared when the Conservative Per Ørum Jørgensen - returning to his parliamentary duties after absence of leave and having undergone rehabilitation treatment for alcoholism - decided to (re-)establish the Christian Democratic Party as a one-man enterprise in parliament.<sup>3</sup>

In a multi-party political system like the Danish one there are strong incentives for political parties to enter coalition agreements to gain or retain power. A new co-operation was born when the Social Democrats and the Socialist People's Party in mid-2009 announced that they

---

<sup>3</sup> The Christian Democratic Party had first entered parliament with the 'landslide' election in 1973, but had not managed to gain representation after the 2005 election.

would work together in an upcoming election and, if successful, form a government together. They were the two major opposition parties in the Red Bloc that together had obtained 38.5% of the vote in the 2007 election.<sup>4</sup> In the past, the Social Democrats had primarily collaborated with the centrist Social Liberal Party; a party that in fact over time has collaborated with both 'blue' and the 'red' parties in government. While the Social Liberal Party was in fierce disagreement with the incumbent government and the Danish People's Party over issues of immigration and integration of foreigners, its perspective on matters of economic policy was often not far from that of the 'blue' parties. It is customary that political parties in Denmark during a general election campaign state clearly who they will point to as prime minister, and thus what colour of government the party will work towards; the Social Liberals were the only party that had often not done so and on many occasions its centrist position made it the 'king-maker'. At the time of the 2007 election, the Social Liberals took the somewhat unusual step of insisting until the last minute that its own party leader would be the party's only prime minister-candidate - that is, it presented voters with an alternative to Mr Fogh and Mrs Thorning-Schmidt - and only after the election did it change position to support the Social Democrats.<sup>5</sup> The Social Liberals' argument for this strategy was that it was the only party that could connect and bridge the two Blocs in parliament. The strategy failed, and the Social Liberals had a relatively poor election result in 2007 winning only 5% (9 seats) of the votes compared to over 9% (17 seats) in 2005. Moreover, given that the Social Liberals would have been unlikely to support the appointment of a Blue Bloc government depending on the Progress Party, the Social Liberals fell out of with favour with the Social Democrats for a while. The door for future co-operation did remain open, but the Social Democrats had made it clear that it would then have to be in its alliance with the Socialist People's Party.

In April 2005, both the Social Democrats and the Socialist People's Party had elected new (and somewhat) reformist leaders - Helle Thorning-Schmidt and Villy Søvndal - who had embarked on a path to professionalise their parties' approaches to politics and the media. Mrs Thorning-Schmidt was the first woman to head the Social Democrats, and she had a very different trajectory to this position compared to the party's previous leaders. She was then 38 years old, and held an MA degree in political science from Copenhagen University, and an MA in European Studies from the College of Europe in Bruges. Her parliamentary experience was limited to one term in the European Parliament (EP) (1999-2004), and the *Folketinget* from February 2005, and she had only a few links to the labour unions. She was nevertheless well-acquainted with Social Democratic and European politics, also at the personal level through her family connections to the heart of the British Labour Party (she was married to Stephen Kinnock, son of the prominent Labour and European-politics couple Neil and Glenys Kinnock). Moreover, Mrs Thorning-Schmidt was confident and well-spoken, and managed to win the race for the chairmanship in competition with the party's former 'crown prince', Frank Jensen.

Since the Socialist People's Party was formed in 1959 - by members excluded from the Danish Communist Party for criticising the Soviet Union - it had been the relatively stable political alternative to the left of the Social Democrats. However, when Mr Søvndal took over

---

<sup>4</sup> Plus North Atlantic mandates, see Table 1 for explanation.

<sup>5</sup> Historically, the party had only ever delivered one prime minister, Hilmer Baunsgaard, who led a tri-partite government with the Conservatives and Liberals from February 1968 to October 1971.

the leadership in April 2005, the party had still never been in government.<sup>6</sup> Since the end of the Cold War, the former Marxist-idealist party had been through a considerable transformation and reinvention. Its position on the EU was a good example of this change as the party line had gradually moved from hard Euroscepticism to almost EU-enthusiasm.<sup>7</sup> When the national referendum over the Maastricht Treaty in 1992 resulted in a Danish rejection, the Socialist People's Party came to play a key role in defining the 'National Compromise' with the four Danish opt-outs - on EU citizenship, monetary union, justice and home affairs, and external affairs - that became the basis for the Edinburgh Agreement and was confirmed in a new referendum the following year. The Socialist People's Party supported the Social Democratic-led governments under Poul Nyrup Rasmussen (1993-2001), and decided to not vote against Denmark's participation in the Euro that was put to a referendum in 2000. These political changes caused serious tensions within the party that were often of a generational nature as the 'post-war' old guard found it problematic to revert on these political principles. When Mr Søvndal took over party leadership in 2005, the party became a more mainstream. Mr Søvndal was initially a very popular party leader, and the 2007 election yielded the party's second best ever result as it attracted around 13% of the vote, which made it appear as a serious date for the Social Democrats.

For two years prior to the 2011 election, the Social Democrats and Socialist People's Party had therefore begun to stake out the campaign trail together. The strategy focused on discussions and reports on welfare state reforms, particularly in relation to labour market reform - involving a campaign for working 12 minutes extra a day - and the extent to which the generous early retirement schemes should be limited, which was a very contentious topic that played a part in bringing down the Nyrup government in 2001. With this alliance, the Red Bloc parties began to take a small lead in public opinion polls, though no one could be certain of the outcome before election day as small margins usually make or break governments in the Danish political system. Barely back from his summer holiday, Løkke decided to opt for a short election campaign. When he did so, economic forecasts were pessimistic, unemployment was rising, the property market was frozen, the Blue Bloc's parliamentary majority was uncertain, and internal Blue Bloc negotiations over yet another economic stimulus package had led to dispute among these parties, particularly over the question of whether or not to raise taxes.

## The Campaign

Against this background, the warm up to the election campaign had been on-going for a long time when on 26 August Mr Løkke announced election day to be on 15 September. The actual campaign period was therefore limited to around three weeks, and most of the time opinion polls showed a small lead for the Red Bloc.

The campaign was marked by strongly professionalised strategies in political communication, and the two dominant political coalitions did their best to control and script the campaign,

---

<sup>6</sup> The party gained parliamentary representation in 1960 with 6.1% of votes (11 mandates), and in 1966, it grew to 10.9% (20 mandates). The low-point was in 1977 with merely 3.9% (7 mandates), and the peak was in 1987 with 16.4% (27 mandates).

<sup>7</sup> See the discussion in: Ann-Christina L. Knudsen, 'The European Parliament Election in Denmark, 7 June 2009', *European Parties Elections and Referendums Network, European Parliament Election Briefing No. 42* at <http://www.sussex.ac.uk/sei/documents/epern-no-43-austria-2009.pdf>.

only few topics were allowed to enter the fray, and these had been carefully primed and based on estimates of relevance, salience and momentum. Candidates were instructed in how to present the messages in short and easily digestible phrases. Moreover, recent election campaigns in Denmark have tended to take a ‘presidential’ form where the two main contenders for the premiership - in this case Mrs Thorning-Schmidt and Mr Løkke - were given a central role. The resulting campaign was to a large extent was a triumph of form over substance. For instance, in his relatively brief press statement on 26 August (only 628 words in total), Mr Løkke used the word ‘responsible’, or versions thereof, eight times, and that word was subsequently claimed by opposition leaders already on the same day and throughout the rest of the campaign. Against the backdrop of the financial and economic crisis, all candidates were competing over who could appear as the most ‘responsible’, and to present ‘responsible’ solutions for the country. This strategy became closely linked with the term ‘welfare’ that in current political parlance referred to the extent of welfare state intervention and subsidies as well as to general economic development. Candidates from both the Red and Blue blocs would rhetorically ask questions such as ‘how much welfare can we afford?’ (in the sense of public services and expenditure), and ‘how do we create more/better welfare?’ (in the sense of higher incomes, more jobs and stable growth). Subsequently, the candidates would roll out the party’s strategy in key bullet points, and the answers would come in shades of Blue (i.e. less state involvement, more freedom to the individual, lower taxes) or Red (i.e. stronger state involvement, fewer social inequalities, re-organisation of tax burdens).

Under these conditions, the smaller political parties had to fight to be visible to both their core and marginal voters, and they did so in various ways. One strategy came a few days into the campaign when the leaders of the Conservatives and the Social Liberals, Lars Barfoed and Margrethe Vestager, announced an alternative alliance that aimed to ensure that future important legislation such as the state’s finance bill would have to include parties from the Blue and the Red Blocs. For the past decade, the Conservatives had been in a government that relied on the Danish People’s Party for the majority of votes that were constitutionally required to pass the annual finance bill. If a Social Democratic-led government would come to power, it would in all likelihood have been looking to the leftist Unity Party for support. A Conservative-Social Liberal alliance would ensure the end of *blokpolitik*, as it is widely called in political analysis of Danish politics, when a government relied heavily on only one side of the political spectrum. *Blokpolitik* could in fact be seen as an independent and salient issue in the election campaign that was used not only by the smaller parties but also by Mr Løkke and Mrs Thorning-Schmidt. The difference between them was, however, that for Ms Thorning-Schmidt it was not difficult to warrant that she would ensure ‘cooperation across the middle’ (a term used repeatedly) of the political spectrum but after 10 years of marked Blue *blokpolitik*, this subject was an up-hill struggle for Mr Løkke.

The Danish People’s Party was now for the first time in more than a decade in a situation where there were no direct prospects for inclusion in co-operation. Moreover, the key messages that in the past had proven successful for this party, namely that ‘we’ should first and foremost take care of ‘our own’ (and thus a campaign focusing on anti-immigration, and social welfare for the elderly and low-income social groups) had run into difficulties. The question of social inequalities had to a large extent been (re-)claimed by the alliance between the Social Democrats and the Socialist People’s Party. The anti-immigration and fear-of-foreigners-message had become a hard sell, especially so close to the massacre of young

political activists on the Norwegian island of Utøya on 22 July 2011 by a right-wing extremist Norwegian citizen. In this light, the party was unusually subdued during the campaign. For the first time for a decade, immigration and integration of foreigners were not the hottest topics of debate. The last Blue Bloc party, New Alliance, tried to distinguish itself from the Conservatives and the Liberals by positioning itself as a true ideologically liberal-free-market-and-tax-cuts alternative. Prior to the election campaign it had recruited people who were well-known in the media - for instance the Olympic-class shot put athlete Joachim B. Olsen who had to retire from his sporting career earlier in the year due to an injury - but who were politically un-trained. This meant that the energetic party leader Anders Samuelsen had to do a lot of the hard work. He was still in charge of a fairly un-established political party organisation, and that gave the appearance of a single-issue (or very few-issues) programme, largely focusing on the message that a lowering of taxes would be Denmark's way out of the economic slump.

The Socialist People's Party's ambition for government power had made it an increasingly pro-establishment party, and this meant that the Unity List was able to carve out a position prior to and during the election campaign as the only real alternative for leftist voters. The party had a collective leadership, but placed the very charismatic and confident 27-year old political spokeswoman, Johanne Schmidt-Nielsen, in the forefront. The party's key message was that a radical red-green change of political agenda was needed, including the restoration of solidarity within the Danish welfare state, a fundamental change - rather than bail-out - of the financial sector in Denmark and globally, a radical change in terms of environmental and climate measures, a pull-out of troops from Iraq and Afghanistan, and a clampdown on the tax evasion strategies of multinational corporations that resided in the country. More than any other party, the Unity List used the social media to attract young voters.

There was no place for the EU in the campaign scripts of any of the political parties even though topics relating to the EU had been salient in media over the summer with the unilateral Danish re-imposition of border controls. The increased border controls were, in fact, a disputed theme in Danish politics, and the government had only just managed to get a simple majority (90 mandates) in support of it among the traditional Blue Bloc members of the *Folketinget*. An impromptu survey conducted by the president of the European Movement in Denmark, Erik Boel, during the campaign showed that practically all of the candidates that he had been in touch with (it is not clear how many) said that they would not bring up issues relating to the EU by themselves. Together with the national newspaper, *Politiken*, Mr Boel did organise a high-profile debate on the EU with major figures from all political parties, but to no avail in terms of bringing EU matters into the campaign. This, in many ways, looked like a repeat of previous general election campaigns. In 2007, for instance, the election took place less than a month before the EU-summit to sign the Lisbon Treaty, and the likelihood of a new Danish referendum over this Treaty was on the table, but there was only marginal attention paid to this in during the election campaign. During the 2009 EP election campaign, the leaderships of most political parties watched at a comfortable distance.

## **The Result**

Nine political parties and 804 candidates were competing to fill the 179 seats: 175 in mainland Denmark, 2 in the Faroe Islands and 2 in Greenland. This was in fact the lowest number of candidates for more than fifty years (four candidates less than in 2007), and

substantially less than in the record year 1987 when voters could choose among 1,517 candidates.<sup>8</sup> More than half of the candidates were new compared to the 2007 election (457 candidates, or 56.8% of all candidates). The gender balance among candidates was fairly similar to the previous two elections, namely roughly one-third female candidates (in 2011, 33.2% were female; in 2007 the share of women was 31.2%). Only 22 (2.7%) of all candidates were either immigrants or second-generation immigrants.

87.7% of eligible citizens turned out to vote, and this resulted in the following distribution of mandates elected according to a system of proportional representation:

**Table 1: Results of the 2011-general election in mainland Denmark compared to 2007**

	15 September 2011		13 November 2007		Difference 2007-2011	
	% of total votes	Mandates	% of total votes	Mandates	% of total votes	mandates
Social Democratic Party <i>Socialdemokraterne</i>	24.8	44	25.5	45	- 0.7	- 1
Socialist People's Party <i>Socialistisk Folkeparti</i>	9.2	16	13	23	- 3.8	- 7
Social Liberal Party <i>Det Radikale Venstre</i>	9.5	17	5.1	9	+ 4.4	+ 8
Unity List <i>Enhedslisten</i>	6.7	12	2.2	4	+ 4.5	+ 8
Total Red bloc		89		81		+ 8
Liberal Party <i>Venstre</i>	26.7	47	26.2	46	+ 0.5	+1
Conservative People's Party <i>Det Konservative Folkeparti</i>	4.9	8	10.4	18	- 5.5	- 10
Danish People's Party <i>Dansk Folkeparti</i>	12.3	22	13.9	25	- 1.6	- 3
Liberal Alliance <i>Liberal Alliance</i>	5.0	9	2.8	5	+ 2.2	+ 4
Christian Democratic Party <i>Kristendemokraterne</i>	0.8	0	0.9	0	- 0.1	0
Total Blue bloc		86		94		- 8

Source: Danmarks Statistik, Folketingsvalg torsdag 15. september 2011, Resultater Hele Landet <http://www.dst.dk/valg/Valg1204271/valgopg/valgopgHL.htm> (accessed 5/10/2011); and Folketinget, Folketingsvalgene 1953-2007: [http://www.ft.dk/Folketinget/Oplysningen/Valg/Tal\\_og\\_fakta/~media/Pdf\\_materiale/Pdf\\_download\\_direkte/Folketingets%20Oplysning/Folketingsvalgene%201953%202007%20pdf.ashx](http://www.ft.dk/Folketinget/Oplysningen/Valg/Tal_og_fakta/~media/Pdf_materiale/Pdf_download_direkte/Folketingets%20Oplysning/Folketingsvalgene%201953%202007%20pdf.ashx) (accessed 5/10/2011).

The remaining four seats in the *Folketinget* were occupied by parliamentarians elected in the Faroe Islands and Greenland. These North Atlantic overseas territories had partial independence from Denmark through home rule arrangements, they had their own systems of constituencies, their own separate political party systems, and none of them were members of the EU. The overall result gave one mandate to the Blue Bloc parties, and three to the Red

<sup>8</sup> One reason for the low number of candidates could have been that a reform of constituencies was carried out in 2007, as a result of which there were 92 constituencies compared to 103 before.

Bloc parties which was similar to the 2007-election result.<sup>9</sup> The North Atlantic candidates had in some cases been decisive in government formations or parliamentary votes, but they mostly tended to abstain from participating in matters that pertained to mainland Denmark.

The new composition of the *Folketinget* made it the youngest ever; the average age of parliamentarians elected in 2011 was 44 years old; the average age of all candidates had been 44.6. The gender balance was 70 women (39.1%) and 109 men. The number of parliamentarians with a tertiary education degree increased markedly, and 50.3% of parliamentarians now had what corresponded to an MA-degree, and 24.5% had what corresponded to a BA-degree; 27% of these had degrees in political science. This meant that although the gender balance among elected representatives had never been better, there was a large gap compared to the education levels of the population at large where the corresponding figures for University degrees were 7.3% and 16% for citizens between 20- and 69-year-olds. These balances and im-balances became even more marked in the new government where the average age among ministers came to be 43 years old (compared to 48 in the previous government), the government had more female ministers than ever (nine out of 23), and a vast majority of its ministers (20 out of 23) had - or had attempted to get, or were in the course of obtaining at the time of the call for election - University-level degrees. Most of the parliamentarians with degrees had limited or no experience of working outside of politics. The three ministers who did not have academic trajectories - Ole Sohn, Carsten Hansen and Henrik Dam Kristensen - were among the oldest of the ministers, and this led to much discussion about the advent of a distinct political class in Denmark.

The election resulted in a clear majority for the Red Bloc parties, and the contours of a government consisting of the Social Democrats, the Socialist People's Party and the Social Liberals soon emerged, yet the victory was not unambiguous. The Social Democrats lost one mandate and in fact had its worst result since 1920. The Socialist People's Party lost as many as seven mandates (3.8%). By contrast, the Social Liberals won 8 mandates (4.4%) and regained much of what had been lost in the previous election. The two latter parties, therefore, gained almost similar representation, and each ended up getting 6 ministers in the new government against 11 for the Social Democrats. The three parties in government, therefore, only just managed to secure the status quo compared to the previous election.

The victory of the Red Bloc parties was thus secured by the leftist Unity List that had its best result ever, jumping from 4 to 12 mandates, or from 2.2% to 6.7% of the total vote. This was the most marked increase in absolute and relative terms of any political party in parliament. In particular, the party's political spokeswoman Johanne Schmidt-Nielsen gained the highest number of personal votes in the whole Greater Copenhagen Constituency (*Københavns Storkreds*), and the second highest personal score in the whole country, only trailing behind former PM Løkke. Ms Schmidt-Nielsen was first elected to the *Folketinget* in 2007, becoming one of the youngest parliamentarians ever, and then she had already received more personal

---

<sup>9</sup> In the Faroe Islands, as many as six different political parties, as well as candidates outside the lists, competed to attract the attention of the approximately 35,000 eligible voters. The election result gave one mandate to the *Sambandsflokkurin* (the unionist party which is a conservative/liberal grouping), and one to the *Javnaðarflokkurin* (a social democratic party). In Greenland, four different political parties, as well as candidates outside these lists, competed for the nearly 41,000 eligible votes. One mandate was won by the *Siumut* (a social democratic party), and one by the *Inuit Ataqatigiit* (a leftist/separatist party). Voter turnout in the Faroe Islands was only 58.9%, and in Greenland it was 57.4%. Two men were elected in the Faroe Islands whereas the Greenlanders chose two women.

votes than any candidate from the Unity List had ever done before. The Unity List was founded in 1989, gained parliamentary representation in 1994, and by 2011 it had never cast a vote in favour of the state's finance bill.<sup>10</sup> It could therefore be seen as the only clear anti-establishment place for protest voters to cast their ballots, and it appealed strongly to younger voters. The party operated with a principle of rotation which meant that its representatives could serve in an elected position for a maximum of seven years, and it will, therefore, be interesting to see if it can hold on to this advance when Ms Schmidt-Nielsen will have to step down around 2014, which could be within the current election term.

The Liberal Party lost power over the government, but it gained one mandate and achieved its second-best result ever; the best result was in 2001 when it won 31.2% of the votes. Løkke did not get a second term as prime minister, but he nevertheless managed to attract the highest number of personal votes of any politician at this election. This election result, therefore, promised a new beginning for Mr Løkke who could finally step out of Mr Fogh's shadow and begin his own project as leader of the Liberal Party. By contrast, 5.5% of the voters who cast their ballot for the Conservative Party in 2007 decided to support someone else, and this party lost as many as 10 mandates. It experienced its worst result since the party was established in 1915, and became the smallest party in parliament. This may to some extent be seen as the cost for having been the 'little brother' in the government coalition for so long where it had to accept a number of legislative initiatives that ran contrary to the party's programme, but it was also clear that several of the party's prominent personalities had been through rough rides in the press.

What the Conservative Party lost to some extent went to the Liberal Alliance that experienced a gain of 5%, and nearly doubled its mandates. The Danish People's Party lost three mandates, but it still had 22 mandates and 12.3% of the votes. Moreover, in the 2009 election to the EP, the party's candidate Morten Messerschmidt had the best personal election result of all Danish candidates and received over 280,000 personal votes. So, although the party had clearly moved towards a period of restitution after a decade of having a very marked profile in Danish politics and a large impact on the policies made, it still had a very strong base in the population. The last Blue Bloc party to compete in the election, the Christian Democrats, did not make it past the 2% threshold.

## **Conclusion**

The election resulted in a change of government, and strengthened the left-wing parties. The way ahead for prime minister Mrs Thorning-Schmidt would, however, not be easy. To try to get as firm an agreement as possible to the government basis, the leaderships of the three parties spent more than two weeks after the election in practical isolation from the media to try and come to a rudimentary agreement that all could live with. A basic problem is that the two other parties in the government, the Socialist People's Party and the Social Liberals, tended to disagree over matters pertaining to economic policy which - in the midst of a financial and economic crisis - would be a recurrent theme. Moreover, the government had to open towards the left-wing Unity List, and possibly give up on one of its key election themes of working 'across the middle' of the political spectrum. In the previous parliament, certain issues could on occasion muster a majority of parliamentarians outside of the government -

---

<sup>10</sup> The 'virgin' vote of the Unity List in favour of the proposed state finance bill came on 20 November 2011.

such as organ donation or certain social issues - in cases where the Danish People's Party would team up with Red Bloc parties.<sup>11</sup> The reverse situation was unlikely to occur in the current parliament due to the weakening of both the Conservative Party and the Danish People's Party.

Denmark took over the Presidency of the EU in early 2012, something that was not necessarily an easy task given that the country was not a member of the Eurozone (nor the Common Foreign and Security Policy and Justice and Home Affairs). The EU was not an election issue, but the new government was likely to give EU matters more serious attention than the previous one. The new government created the country's first real Ministry for Europe, carved out from the Foreign Office. The Ministry for Europe was headed by the 40-year old Social Democrat Nicolai Wammen who was a first-term parliamentarian, but who had significant political experience as mayor of Denmark's second largest city, Aarhus. Mr Wammen was an unexpected choice for this ministry - given his background experience in high-level local politics, he was tipped as the new home affairs minister - but he was considered a very reliable capacity. Moreover, given prime minister Mrs Thorning-Schmidt's background as an MEP, she moved with greater ease in EU circles than her predecessor. It was highly likely that the government would continue the strategy of managing the EU-Presidency behind closed doors, as the election campaign again showed that the public was relatively disinterested in EU matters.

**Published: 30 January 2012**

*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/research/europeanpartieselectionsreferendumsnetwork>.*

---

<sup>11</sup> Although it can be a problem for the government's political reputation if it encounters a majority against it, this was not, in the Danish parliamentary tradition, necessarily a reason for the government to step down. The government is only forced to step down if it encounters a majority against the annual state finance bill.