

Real issues avoided in Danish elections

by Poul Rasmussen

With the results of the Danish parliamentary elections on Sept. 8, conservative Prime Minister Poul Schlüter has provided proof that in politics it is possible to shoot oneself in both feet with just one shot. On Aug. 18, Schlüter had launched what he thought was a shrewd Machiavellian move, by announcing that parliamentary elections would be held on Sept. 8. This was two or three months earlier than expected, and the announcement left only three weeks for the election campaign. By this move, the prime minister had hoped to catch the opposition parties off guard, giving his four-party coalition government a free ride to a resounding victory. On Sept. 9, Schlüter found himself with two bloody feet and an unsolvable mess on his hands.

What went wrong?

The Sept. 8 elections distributed the 179 seats in the Danish Folketing (parliament) among nine different parties, in such a way, that the formation of any stable government became an absolute impossibility. The four conservative-liberal parties (Konservative Folkeparti, Venstre, Centrum-Demokraterne, Kristeligt Folkeparti) that had formed the coalition government led by Schlüter, collectively lost 7 of their 77 seats. Worst hit was Schlüter's own Conservative Party, which lost 4 of its 42 seats.

The small liberal party, Radikale Venstre, not part of the coalition, but still supporting the government, increased its representation from 10 to 11 seats, but this was not enough to give a new Schlüter government the 90 seats needed for a majority. Schlüter's worst possible nightmare had come true: He would have to form a minority coalition government dependent upon the support of two very different parties, the liberal Radikale Venstre and the right-wing Fremskridtspartiet, led by the incalculable Mogens Glistrup. It was exactly the same situation that last year brought down the Norwegian conservative government of Kaare Willoch.

Schlüter has nobody but himself to blame for the debacle. First, he was wrong to believe the soothsayers of the public opinion polls, who told him that he would win a comfortable majority at exactly this time of the year. Second, Schlüter

put the noose around his own neck by making his economic policies the central theme of the election. While his Thatcherite austerity policies undoubtedly have been popular in most banking circles, they have never been the source of any enthusiasm in the Danish population. Very tough austerity packages have made the economic crisis very palpable for the population. Despite this, Schlüter copied the worst follies of President Reagan by campaigning on the theme of the "Schlüter upswing."

But worst of all was the lack of reality in the election campaign. The present unstable and incalculable situation in the Danish parliament is the natural consequence of a political debate, in which none of the 16 parties running in the election addressed the fundamental problems of the Danish economy, the danger posed by the AIDS epidemic, the international strategic crisis, or even the question of the national defense. With its ship-building industry almost gone and other heavy industries hanging on a cliff, Denmark's economy is rapidly heading toward a blow-out.

Crisis in agriculture, AIDS, defense

The spark that will ignite the bomb is the agricultural crisis. The Danish farm sector supplies the country with more than one-quarter of its export income. Ninety-thousand farm families produce food for 15 million people, and with only 5 million inhabitants, two-thirds of the production is exported. In recent years, the Danish farm sector has been severely hit by the austerity policies dictated by the European Community in Brussels, and on top of this, an insane campaign in the Danish media is portraying the farmers as the worst environmental polluters in the world.

Danish farmers are faced with the worst debt crisis in history. Last year, their average net income was negative, and within one year, somewhere between 5,000 and 10,000 farms will face foreclosure. If this crisis is not reversed, the bottom will fall out of the Danish economy. With a trade deficit of almost \$5 billion last year, Denmark could not afford to lose its yearly \$6 billion in net agricultural export income.

Not even the traditional farm party, Venstre, dared to bring up the farm crisis in any constructive form, and they paid dearly for that. Venstre lost 3 of its 22 seats in the parliament.

The other side of the economic crisis, the hideous AIDS epidemic, was not addressed either. With 192 officially diagnosed cases of AIDS, and an estimated 20,000 infected in a population of only 5 million, Denmark is the worst hit country in all of Europe. Recently, the municipal health administration of Copenhagen, where the AIDS rate is one of the worst in Europe, announced that by 1991, the entirety of the health budget of the city would be spent on treating AIDS patients. But still, none of the parties took this problem on.

The unfolding world strategic crisis simply did not exist

during the election campaign. Even the ongoing debate on the Danish defense budget was nicely packed away during the three weeks of campaigning. Therefore, it should surprise nobody, that the new parliament reflects an attitude on defense exactly the opposite to that of the Danish population. In recent years, opinion polls have shown that over 70% of Danes support their country's membership in the NATO alliance.

Despite this, a solid majority in the newly elected parliament is either de facto or openly against NATO. These are the three Socialist opposition parties and the Radikale Venstre. The Danish Social Democratic Party is nominally pro-NATO, but since 1982, its policies have been contrary to those of NATO. Radikale Venstre has always been against Danish membership in NATO, and so has the left-wing Socialistisk Folkeparti, the major winner in the Sept. 8. elections.

The new party in the parliament, the left-wing Faelles Kurs, led by the rabble-rousing chairman of the Danish Seamen's Union, Preben Moeller Hansen (famous for his role in the ongoing disclosures of Denmark's link to the Iran-Contra scandal), shows its Communist roots in a rabid anti-NATO policy.

These three parties command 96 seats, a comfortable majority in the parliament, which means a dangerous weakening of the Danish contribution to NATO.

Prime Minister Schlüter thought he was being clever, when he called early elections. But now he has a bigger mess on his hands than he ever did before.

Nobody believes that Poul Schlüter's new coalition government will last for more than a few months. The first major hurdle will be the parliamentary vote on the national budget in October. It is doubtful that the government will survive even that.

The one bright spot in the picture is the appointment of a new health minister, Agnete Laustsen. She is a long-standing and outspoken opponent of the Copenhagen drug haven, Christiania. In her first interview to Danish Radio following her appointment, Minister Laustsen said that some form of public registration of AIDS carriers must become a reality.

She will have to move fast to implement her program, before the government falls.

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