



Evolving Patterns of Euroscepticism in the Danish Political Landscape

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The most significant result of the Danish elections on June 18th was not the change of government from centre-left to centre-right. That is but the usual oscillation in Danish politics that tends to take place at least once every decade, without major implications outside the domestic arena. Indeed, the new Prime Minister, Lars Løkke Rasmussen of the Liberal Party, is a familiar face: he was also in office between 2009 and 2011.

The most significant result, instead, was the possibility that the anti-immigration, anti-European integration Danish People's Party (DPP) would enter into the government. For one week following the election, this looked like the most plausible new formation. The DPP jumped nine percentage points to take more than one-fifth, 21.1%, of the vote, thus becoming the biggest of Denmark's four right-leaning parties and the second-biggest party overall. Its electoral gain is what ousted the centre-left government: Rasmussen's own Liberal Party suffered its worst result in 25 years. Per Danish political tradition, and, some might say, best democratic practice, the DPP party-leader, Kristian Thulesen-Dahl, should now be Denmark's Prime Minister – not Rasmussen.

The main reason why this is not the case is that Thulesen-Dahl did not want to become Prime Minister. He strongly resisted bringing his party into government. A seasoned politician, Thulesen-Dahl knows that his best options for continued mass popularity and real political influence lay outside, and not inside, the formal centre of power.

Rasmussen's new team, conversely, is a small and wobbly one-party government. The Liberals are fully dependent on broad alliances to achieve their policy goals. While, in principle, they can look both to the left and to the right of the political spectrum in doing so, they will need the general backing of the DPP to stay in power. Even without ministerial titles, the DPP's massive influence on Danish politics is about to become more direct and more visible.

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The DPP's newly gained clout also means that it may be held more accountable for the direction of Danish politics than ever before. Last month's landslide result is its biggest electoral feat to date (this has to be seen against a backdrop of continuous electoral successes since the party was formed in 1995), but it may also represent its biggest challenge yet.

There are at least three main policy differences between the DPP and the Liberals.

Immigration is one. The DPP is unwavering in its demand to see a reduction in the number of new asylum-seekers and immigrants in Denmark. This is causing some tension amongst Liberal MPs.

Public spending is another main policy difference. The DPP wants it increased by 0.8% and also rejects the Liberals' campaign pledge to lower corporate taxes.

But it is over EU policy that the parties disagree the most. Such is the prominence of the DPP's euroscepticism that it may bring about a rupture with the principled pro-European consensus that has characterised mainstream Danish politics for decades. During this time, one constant feature has been an agreement between the centre-left and the centre-right to steer Denmark "as close as possible to the core of European cooperation". This guiding principle is likely to be a thorn in the eye of the DPP.

So, at a minimum, political rhetoric will most likely become more eurosceptic.

In terms of substantive change, the DPP, like its declared political beacon, David Cameron, will have to convince supporters that it is able to make a difference and actually reclaim some of the Danish sovereignty that it insists the EU has taken away.

But where to launch the attack?

Earlier this year, the biggest-ever formal Whitehall examination of EU powers found no evidence that the EU was interfering excessively in any aspect of British life. A hypothetical Danish 'balance of competences' review would be unlikely to yield a different result. There are unlikely to be low-hanging fruits. The electorate, however, has been induced to expect clear, tangible change.

This is perhaps why the DPP has already spearheaded an unusual advance declaration of support by the four right-wing parties for David Cameron's attempts to get a better EU deal for the UK, ahead of a British in/out referendum.

While we await Mr Cameron's final referendum blueprint, the DPP will use its enhanced influence to push two main issues: border controls, and restrictions on EU migrants' access to social benefits. These issues combine the DPP's anti-immigration and anti-European integration platforms and take centre stage when it comes to understanding its stance on Europe. However, across the left/right divide in the Danish parliament, there is still a comfortable pro-European integration majority. So, what changes to Danish EU policy will the DPP be able to impose?

Despite its controversy, the former issue, border control, may in the end not bring about any grander change than some extra customs officials and spot tests to be carried out within the remits of Denmark's Schengen commitments. The DPP opposes Schengen, but a full confrontation has no parliamentary backing (and most likely no

public backing either), and at least for the foreseeable future it is an improbable scenario.

Attempts to restrict migrant workers' social benefits are likely to be taken a little further. The DPP, for example, will push for the reintroduction of a two-year qualifying period for access to Danish children's allowances. The outgoing centre-left government abolished this requirement after the European Commission deemed it to be in conflict with EU law. It is quite likely that the DPP will use its leverage on the Liberals to insist that they bring it back, and thus that a high-profile case at the Court of Justice of the European Union will ensue.

Then there is the issue of the Danish EU opt-out from cooperation on justice and home affairs. This is an urgent issue due to the advanced negotiations in Brussels on a new Europol regulation, which will enhance police cooperation in the EU. The Danish opt-out is designed in a way that excludes Denmark from supranational cooperation on justice and home affairs. Since the entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty, that now includes all new laws within this vast and expanding policy area. Unless the opt-out is abolished, which can only happen through a referendum, Denmark will be forced to leave Europol when the new regulation is adopted.

Last December, the Liberals, Conservatives, Social Democrats, Social Liberals and Socialist People's Party co-authored a Joint Agreement in which they committed their support to such a referendum by March 2016. This five-party alliance continues to enjoy a parliamentary majority, and upon assuming power the Liberals announced that the vote is to take place before the end of the year. It will offer the Danes the opportunity to change the 23-year-old opt-out into an 'opt-in' similar to the British and Irish model.

The DPP is strongly in favour of Danish membership of Europol, acknowledging that an exit could isolate Denmark in the fight against organised crime and terrorism. Nevertheless, it will recommend a no-vote at the referendum. The DPP fears that pro-EU parties will use the opt-in to sign-up Denmark to cooperation on asylum and immigration matters, despite the Joint Agreement's commitment to the contrary. A no-vote, the party argues, will instead pave the way for a special Danish bilateral arrangement on Europol, similar to the arrangement that Norway, a non-EU member, was able to negotiate with the EU in 2001.

This disagreement may go a long way towards explaining why the Liberals and the DPP could not agree to form a coalition government. It may, however, be one EU policy area where the DPP is defeated. Regular polls carried out by YouGov for Think Tank EUROPA suggest that a comfortable majority of Danes favours the opt-in. Nine out of ten Danes want Denmark to stay in Europol. The DPP's vague suggestion to seek a (doubtful) bilateral agreement (the Norwegian situation is fairly specific and thus not easily comparable) is unlikely to be a winning argument against an opt-in where Denmark can pick-and-choose the justice and home affairs cooperation it wants to participate in.

Finally, a fourth EU policy issue where the June election result is likely to have a direct impact is the banking union. As a non-eurozone member, Denmark can choose

whether or not to take part in this strengthened cooperation on banks – it currently is not a member and the public is not overwhelmingly supportive. The Liberals are positively inclined and could, together with the centre-left parties, secure a parliamentary majority on joining the banking union. However, the DPP, deeply opposed, insists on submitting the question to a referendum. This is one demand on which the Liberals –reluctant to persevere in promoting an issue that enjoys low levels of public support – may decide to give way.

The general consensus in Danish politics is that the DPP's growing success has persuaded parties such as the Liberals and the Conservatives to adopt a more eurosceptic outlook.

But it is important to note that the DPP has in fact also adapted its own views towards the EU.

This change is surprisingly overlooked. One may ponder why pro-EU politicians, weary of dancing to the DPP's tune, have not jumped at this opportunity to expose how the party's former EU-rejectionist stance has all but vanished.

Until recently, the DPP opposed EU membership itself, and many Danes still assume that this is the case. But gradually, and without any formal announcement, the party has modified its position. Today, it accepts membership, but wants the EU to focus on a leaner version of the single market – not wholly unlike the British Conservatives with whom they share their political group in the European Parliament. This crucial move of reverse euroscepticism is likely to have been engineered by the party's young and charismatic MEP, Morten Messerschmidt.

The implications of DPP's new stance on the EU deserve to be more broadly discussed. In fact, it could make the party a potentially more constructive player in Danish EU-political debates than is generally the case today.

Although policy towards the EU was probably the biggest stumbling block for the formation of a new coalition government between the DPP and the Liberals, it was virtually never discussed during the election campaign. This paradox needs to be addressed now. While the EU impacts Danish politics and society to a significant degree, it remains a largely alien topic to many voters. The best way for the general public to understand how and why the EU affects their lives is through everyday 'domestic' political debate.

One positive outcome of a new pro-European government that is dependent on a largely eurosceptic supporting party could be that EU issues will finally get the prominence in Danish politics that they deserve.