

# RADICALISM AND LIBERALISM IN DENMARK

In May 2005, *Det Radikale Venstre* – the Danish Social Liberal Party – celebrated its one-hundredth birthday. Throughout the twentieth century and beyond, the party has played a central role in Danish political history, a story well known to Danish readers, but probably not to a British audience. Hence this article, which is intended to provide a comprehensive insight into one of the Liberal Democrats' European sister parties. By **Tomas Bech Madsen.**

FIRST, A word about the party's name: *Det Radikale Venstre*. Literally translated, it means 'The Radical Left'. That, however, sends the wrong signal, as we're not talking about some loony left Trotskyite fringe party, but instead about a social liberal centre party which for a good deal of its history has led, participated in or cooperated with Danish governments. This confusing name originates from the great political struggle of the last three decades of the nineteenth century between the power-holding *Højre* (which means 'right') based on the King, the nobility, the military, conservative civil servants, and – in short – all the reactionary forces of the society of the time.

Opposing *Højre* was *Venstre* (meaning 'left'), which was a broad and loose alliance of the opposition, mainly based on farmers and smallholders (in a country which was predominantly agricultural), but which also appealed to many other, more urban-based, groups. This opposition reached a majority in

the lower chamber of the Danish Parliament from the 1870s, but the King had both a loyal upper chamber (partly filled with members appointed by himself) and the constitutional right to appoint Prime Ministers and governments of his own preference, which he continued to do right up until 1901, when the first *Venstre* government was allowed.

Within *Venstre*, divisions began as early as the 1870s and they quickly developed into more or less firmly-structured party factions. The main controversies were whether to cooperate with or to oppose (by peaceful means) the reactionary government, whether to be understanding or critical towards conservative institutions like the state church and the military, and whether to see the gradually advancing Social Democrats as potential friends or foes. To the public and to many liberals, the main ground for disagreement within *Venstre* was the defence question, i.e. whether the economic and political price for a militarily fortified Copenhagen was worth paying.

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## RADIKALE VENSTRE

The left wing of *Venstre* consisted mainly of a rather strange alliance of anti-conservative rural smallholders and urban professionals and intellectuals, who were above all inspired by the French Radicals. These people favoured a *radical* approach towards a more thorough but parliamentary-based break with the reactionary traditions. Within *Venstre*, the radicals were bitterly opposed by a vehemently anti-socialist and authoritarian right wing. Between these two was a large, more undecided group.

In 1901 the King finally gave in to the people's wish for a democratically-elected government led by *Venstre*. In this government all three party factions participated, but tensions grew, and in early 1905 this culminated in a bitter split resulting in the formation of two new parties. The centre and right-wing factions together kept the old name and formed the new *Venstre* (or Liberal Party), while the left wing constituted *Det Radikale Venstre* (or Social Liberal Party). In addition to the acrimony of the split, the personal chemistry between

the leaders of the two parties was very bad. Ideologically, *Det Radikale Venstre* was more or less equidistant between *Venstre* and the Social Democrats.

### The first, successful years of *Det Radikale Venstre*

In the first years of its existence *Det Radikale Venstre*, holding an average of around 15 per cent of the vote, actually came to form a minority government twice. The first one, in 1909–10, was short-lived and only came to power because of new internal turmoil in *Venstre*. The second Radical government, however, proved to be a long-lasting success.

The 1913 general election for the Parliament's lower chamber gave a majority for the Social Democrats and *Det Radikale Venstre*, with the former as the bigger party. At this time, however, it was official Social Democrat policy not to enter government before the party had gained 50 per cent of the vote (not as unrealistic a target as it might seem today, when the party languishes at around

*Det Radikale Venstre* leader Margrethe Vestager

25 per cent of the vote. In the first half of the twentieth century, the Social Democrat share of the vote grew substantially at each election). And so opportunity knocked for *Det Radikale Venstre*, which formed a government led by Carl Theodor Zahle and which included strong personalities such as Finance Minister Brandes, Defence Minister Munch, Interior Minister Rode, and Foreign Minister Scavenius. This government immediately embarked on a far-reaching reform programme, one of the main elements of which was the new constitution passed in 1915, which included, among many other things, voting rights for women and the poor. This constitution was irrefutably the greatest progress for democracy in Denmark since the first semi-democratic constitution in 1849.

The government, of course, was severely affected by the First World War. Denmark was fortunate to escape direct involvement, not least because of the masterly diplomacy of the Radical Foreign Minister Scavenius, but the economy was seriously affected. Until then subject to

little regulation, the economy had to become much more rigidly controlled by the state in order to prevent corruption and over-pricing in securing food and other goods for the population. The efficient Interior Minister Rode played a significant role in the successful implementation of this state control.

The Social Liberal minority government managed to run the country for almost seven years thanks to the high calibre of its cabinet ministers and good cooperation with the Social Democrats, who even joined the government with one ministerial post from 1916. *Det Radikale Venstre* achieved its best election result ever in April 1918, when the party gained no less than 20 per cent of the vote.

The opposition consisted of *Venstre* and the Conservative party (the democratic heir of the former power-holding *Højre*). There were some parliamentary clashes between the centre-left government alliance and the right-wing opposition during the war, but on a civilised scale. Nobody wanted internal turmoil to descend into chaos or anarchy, as was the case in so many other countries, especially from 1917. But in 1919–20 circumstances changed.

After the German capitulation in November 1918 the possibility emerged of reunification between Denmark and the Danish-inhabited areas of Schleswig. Denmark had lost the Duchies of Schleswig and Holstein to Germany in 1864, but with Imperial Germany's defeat everything changed. In Denmark this led to discussion about how far to the south the new border should be drawn. Should it be decided by a free, secret referendum or according to historical-ideological sentiment?

While the parties behind the government strongly supported the international rule of law and the 'nationality principle', i.e. the belief that the political border should be set after a referendum

in which all inhabitants of Schleswig could participate, forces in the right-wing opposition wished to annex substantial areas with a clear German majority. The King supported the opposition, and it all ended with the dramatic 'Easter crisis' in 1920, when the King sacked the Radical government led by Prime Minister Zahle even though it still retained a majority in the lower chamber of the Parliament. The Social Democrats called for a general strike in protest, and many also called for the abdication of the King and the establishment of a republic.

After some days of intense negotiation, the crisis was solved with a promise from the King never again to go against a parliamentary majority, and an agreement between the parties hold a quick general election. This was won by *Venstre* and the Conservative party, and so *Det Radikale Venstre* spent the years that followed in opposition.

### A new role

The May 1920 general election was a disaster to the party, whose share of the vote slumped from 20 to 12 per cent. From then on, the Social Democrats were clearly the bigger brother on the centre-left. From this point on in Danish politics, *Det Radikale Venstre* has had to cooperate with one or more of the bigger parties in order to gain influence. The party has played its role cleverly, however, under the possibilities of the proportional election system.

In the first half of the 1920s, relations between *Det Radikale Venstre* and *Venstre* improved, but *Venstre* took a sharp turn to the right from 1926, with the result that Social Liberals and Social Democrats were thrown into each other's arms again. After the 1929 election a majority coalition government was formed by Social Democrats and *Det Radikale Venstre*, its leading personalities being Social

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Democratic Prime Minister Stauning and Radical Foreign Minister Munch. The Stauning-Munch government turned out to be the longest lasting in the twentieth century, as it held power for eleven years until the German occupation of Denmark changed the status quo.

During the 1930s the government introduced many far-reaching social reforms and made many economic investments to eradicate poverty, reduce unemployment, and keep the country in safe democratic hands in an internationally perilous era of Nazism, Fascism and Communism. These tactics worked, and the extremist parties of Denmark remained small and uninfluential. It also helped that the opposition parties *Venstre* and the Conservatives stayed on a wholly democratic course, unlike many other right-wing parties in Europe.

Foreign Minister Munch continued the traditional support of *Det Radikale Venstre* for an international system based on the rule of law, and he was therefore very active in the League of Nations. However, the failure of the League and the growing threat from Nazi Germany meant that it was impossible for a small county like Denmark to adopt a conspicuous stance against dictatorship. In international power politics, many Radical principles unfortunately had to be dropped.

Denmark's extremely cautious (and frightened) dealings with Germany ended both in failure and success. In one sense they were a failure, because in the end Hitler decided to occupy Denmark, along with Norway, on 9 April 1940. Yet in another sense they were a success, because the first couple of years of German occupation were quite peaceful, there were no waves of arrests or terror, the Danish Nazi Party was kept out of power, and the Germans did not annex the territories lost to Denmark in 1920.

A coalition government based on all the democratic parties functioned under increasing difficulties from July 1940 to August 1943, when it finally resigned over German wishes to introduce legislation amounting to war crimes, including anti-Jewish laws and the death penalty for saboteurs. From then until the liberation in May 1945 Denmark was without a government.

### Changing times

After 1945, *Det Radikale Venstre* experienced difficult times, when it was under strain for different reasons, mainly because it lacked a clear profile in a changed world, but also because some voters believed that the party had been too closely connected with – or at least not hostile enough to – the German occupiers.

Notably, though, it was the only democratic party to oppose Denmark's membership of NATO in 1949. The reason for this was the party's neutralist and anti-militarist tradition. The party's share of the vote decreased slowly to around 6 per cent due to the falling number of agricultural smallholders, a group which had traditionally favoured the Radicals. Fortunately, however, due to the expert dual leadership of former ministers and political veterans Bertel Dahlgaard and Jørgen Jørgensen, the Social Liberal Party retained political influence. Ideologically, *Det Radikale Venstre* stuck to most of its original beliefs as described at the beginning of this article, but times were changing under the pressure from both the Cold War and the difficult post-war struggle for economic recovery.

After some years of political equidistance between the Social Democrats and *Venstre* and the Conservatives, *Det Radikale Venstre* entered government once more in 1957. Once again, the Radicals' main partner was the Social Democrats, and this alliance lasted for seven years, a

period of economic growth, domestic reforms and enlargement of the welfare state. In other words, these were good years for the country, but it was the Social Democrats who reaped the reward, with over 40 per cent of the vote. The Social Liberal share of the vote continued to fall, and after another disappointing election result in 1964, it left the government in order to be in a freer position politically.

This peaceful break from the Social Democrats marked the beginning of the reign of Hilmar Baunsgaard, one of the more prominent liberal, anti-socialist party members. He sought a closer cooperation with first *Venstre*, then the Conservatives, and appealed to the new urban white-collar workers and functionaries. Suddenly voters started to come back to *Det Radikale Venstre*. After an increase from 6 to 8 per cent of the vote in 1966, the great, historic breakthrough came in the general election of January 1968, where *Det Radikale Venstre* received almost 15 per cent of the vote, its highest share since 1918.

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### Zenith and nadir

With this election victory, Hilmar Baunsgaard became the first Radical Prime Minister since Zahle in 1920, forming a majority government together with the Conservatives and *Venstre*. This step to the right was popular with the new types of voters, not least urban functionaries. But in *Det Radikale Venstre* many party members remained sceptical towards the Baunsgaard 'deviation'. In fact their scepticism turned out to be groundless, given that the government generally followed a very modern, undogmatic and progressive Social Liberal line, which could not be said to be much to the right of centre.

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blocs, not just to be a poor relation of the Social Democrats. The government remained in power until the election of September 1971, when it very narrowly lost its majority. *Det Radikale Venstre*, however, kept its share of almost 15 per cent of the vote, a remarkable result.

In the years that followed, however, the party – surprisingly – quickly declined. In each of the elections of 1973, 1975, and 1977 (in the unruly seventies, elections kept coming every other year without really producing any workable majorities), *Det Radikale Venstre* lost between 3 and 4 per cent, and were eventually left with an all-time low of just 3.5 per cent of the vote and six members of the 179-seat Parliament.

New political topics came on to the agenda in the 1970s and *Det Radikale Venstre* was one of the most outspoken environmentalist parties. The party also had a high profile on human rights, civil liberties, asylum, and immigration. All these new political topics are still core radical values today.

Luckily things started to improve at the end of the decade. Under the leadership of Niels Helveg Petersen, the Radical vote grew, not to the Baunsgaard heights, but to an acceptable 5 to 6 per cent of the vote – a level which stayed more or less constant for ten years. From 1979, *Det Radikale Venstre* cooperated with the Social Democratic minority government, but as this government resigned in the summer of 1982, *Det Radikale Venstre's* Helveg Petersen chose to change sides to support a new centre-right coalition government (without the Social Liberals) under the first Conservative Prime Minister for eighty-one years, Poul Schlüter. This turned out to be a wise choice.

### Focus on economic reform

The Schlüter-Helveg Petersen axis showed itself very effective

in reshaping and reforming the crisis- and inflation-ridden Danish economy. It generally took a more right-of-centre line than Baunsgaard, but at the same time *Det Radikale Venstre* leaned to the left in foreign and defence policy, where many party members still had a very pro-UN, but simultaneously fairly Euro-sceptic and neutralist outlook. Eventually this contradiction – working both for and against the government – could not last, and after the election of May 1988 a new three-party government of Conservatives, *Venstre* and *Det Radikale Venstre* was created.

This was the beginning of a more pro-EU and pro-NATO line for the Radicals, but their participation in government never became a success. *Venstre* and, to a certain extent, the Conservatives, started drifting further to the right, and among Social Liberals the government became more and more unpopular. After a very bad election result in December 1990, *Det Radikale Venstre* left the government to be independent again, as in 1964. And Niels Helveg Petersen resigned as political leader to be replaced by Mari- anne Jelved.

In the beginning of 1993 the right-wing government was forced to resign over an asylum scandal. *Det Radikale Venstre* decided to support the recently elected ‘new Labourite’ Social Democrat leader Poul Nyrup Rasmussen as Prime Minister of a new centre-left government, in which the Social Liberals took part together with two other small centre parties. Unlike the unhappy 1988–90 experience, the Nyrup-Jelved cabinet became a success, especially in the years from 1993 to 1998. Many reform bills were passed, including ones concerning tax and investment in lifelong education. In the first election under the new government, *Det Radikale Venstre* made gains, reaching its 1980s level again. Both Economy Minister Jelved

and Foreign Minister Helveg Petersen played important roles in the government.

After some good years, problems between the Social Democrats and the Radicals started to emerge. The main grounds of disagreement were asylum and immigration, where Social Democrats increasingly drifted away from an earlier humanitarian-liberal line, and the attractive, but costly, pre-pension package, where Radicals were much more supportive of bold, but unpopular, reforms than traditionalist Social Democrats.

The Social Democrats had a very good election result in March 1998, and *Det Radikale Venstre* a very bad one, revisiting their 1977 nadir. At the end of that year, however, the Social Democrats broke an election promise over the pre-pension package and immediately slumped in the opinion polls from 36 to around 20 per cent. In December 1998, Prime Minister Poul Nyrup Rasmussen’s position was so precarious that he had to take the highly unusual step of apologising to the voters on national television.

### More votes, less influence

The Social Democrats never overcame this crisis and lost the subsequent general elections in 2001 and 2005, but for *Det Radikale Venstre* things started to brighten from 1999. In fact, this was the beginning of a golden era, with both voters and members streaming into the party. A couple of figures should illustrate this. In 1999 the Danish Social Liberal Party had less than 6,000 members and around 4 per cent in the opinion polls. By August 2007 the party had grown to around 8,500 members and around 8 per cent in the opinion polls (having gained 9.2 per cent in the 2005 general election).

So what happened? In short, the three biggest parties – *Venstre*, the Social Democrats, and the anti-immigrant and anti-EU

Danish People’s Party – have all steered a course that tends to appease the majority (around 65 per cent) of the voters who dislike reforms that would benefit the country but could mean change for themselves, and are very mistrustful of groups such as foreigners (especially Muslims) and suspicious of the old progressive cultural, educational and political elite. Among the people who dislike this populist trend (the remaining 35 per cent) *Det Radikale Venstre* has been able to attract many new supporters. To a certain extent this is a disadvantage because, as the Social Liberals have grown in size, their political influence has diminished, as the party lies in fundamental opposition to the majority on a large number of issues. Another area in which *Det Radikale Venstre* is opposed to the right-wing government is local government. During the big local and regional council reform of 2004–05, *Det Radikale Venstre* advocated decentralisation, while the government adopted a very centralist position.

After the general election in November 2001, a new right-wing government with a very anti-Radical and anti-left-wing outlook took over, under the leadership of Anders Fogh Rasmussen, and since then *Det Radikale Venstre* has played a marginal role. The government was re-elected in February 2005, and until the spring of 2007, Danish politics continued in the same pattern.

However, in May 2007 two leading Radicals and one leading Conservative left their parties to form a new moderate liberal-conservative party: New Alliance. This new party enjoyed a good start in the opinion polls and in enrolment of members, but over the summer New Alliance quickly dropped in the polls because of its lack of political substance. After the initial confusion *Det Radikale Venstre* regained its ground. In June 2007 former Minister Margrethe

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Vestager was elected as the party's new leader, and she has had a very good and positive start.

Finally, it should, of course, be stated that the system of proportional representation has been vital to the great role a relatively

small party like *Det Radikale Venstre* has been able to play over the past hundred years. The outcome of each Danish general election since 1906 has been a hung parliament, where at least two parties (if not more) have had to work together to obtain a majority.

By comparison, the British Liberal Democrats are in a completely different and more difficult position, notwithstanding a good share of the popular vote. Nonetheless, I hope that this article has given an impression of how much influence the

British Liberals could have had under a fairer election system.

*Tomas Bech Madsen is an organisational consultant for the Danish Social Liberal Party and holds an MA in Contemporary History.*

## RESEARCH IN PROGRESS

If you can help any of the individuals listed below with sources, contacts, or any other information — or if you know anyone who can — please pass on details to them. Details of other research projects in progress should be sent to the Editor (see page 3) for inclusion here.

**Hubert Beaumont MP.** After pursuing candidatures in his native Northumberland southward, Beaumont finally fought and won Eastbourne in 1906 as a 'Radical' (not a Liberal). How many Liberals in the election fought under this label and did they work as a group afterwards? *Lord Beaumont of Whitley, House of Lords, London SW1A 0PW; beaumontt@parliament.uk.*

**Letters of Richard Cobden (1804–65).** Knowledge of the whereabouts of any letters written by Cobden in private hands, autograph collections, and obscure locations in the UK and abroad for a complete edition of his letters. (For further details of the Cobden Letters Project, please see [www.uea.ac.uk/his/research/projects/cobden](http://www.uea.ac.uk/his/research/projects/cobden)). *Dr Anthony Howe, School of History, University of East Anglia, Norwich NR4 7TJ; a.c.howe@uea.ac.uk.*

**Cornish Methodism and Cornish political identity, 1918–1960s.** Researching the relationship through oral history. *Kayleigh Milden, Institute of Cornish Studies, Hayne Corfe Centre, Sunningdale, Truro TR1 3ND; KMSMilden@aol.com.*

**Liberal foreign policy in the 1930s.** Focusing particularly on Liberal anti-appeasers. *Michael Kelly, 12 Collinbridge Road, Whitewell, Newtownabbey, Co. Antrim BT36 7SN; mmjkelly@msn.com.*

**Liberal policy towards Austria-Hungary, 1905–16.** *Andrew Gardner, 17 Upper Ramsey Walk, Canonbury, London N1 2RP; agardner@ssees.ac.uk.*

**The Liberal revival 1959–64.** Focusing on both political and social factors. Any personal views, relevant information or original material from Liberal voters, councillors or activists of the time would be very gratefully received. *Holly Towell, 52a Cardigan Road, Headingley, Leeds LS6 3BJ; his3ht@leeds.ac.uk.*

**The rise of the Liberals in Richmond (Surrey) 1964–2002.** Interested in hearing from former councillors, activists, supporters, opponents, with memories and insights concerning one of the most successful local organisations. What factors helped the Liberal Party rise from having no councillors in 1964 to 49 out of 52 seats in 1986? Any literature or news cuttings from the period welcome. *Ian Hunter, 9 Defoe Avenue, Kew, Richmond TW9 4DL; 07771 785 795; ianhunter@kew2.com.*

**Liberal politics in Sussex, Portsmouth and the Isle of Wight 1900–14.** The study of electoral progress and subsequent disappointment. Research includes comparisons of localised political trends, issues and preferred interests as against national trends. Any information, specifically on Liberal candidates in the area in the two general elections of 1910, would be most welcome. Family papers especially appreciated. *Ian Ivatt, 84 High Street, Steyning, West Sussex BN44 3JT; ianjvatt@tinyonline.co.uk.*

**Liberals and the local government of London 1919–39.** *Chris Fox, 173 Worplesdon Road, Guildford GU2 6XD; christopher.fox7@virgin.net.*

**The Liberal Party in the West Midlands from December 1916 to the 1923 general election.** Focusing on the fortunes of the party in Birmingham, Coventry, Walsall and Wolverhampton. Looking to explore the effects of the party split at local level. Also looking to uncover the steps towards temporary reunification for the 1923 general election. *Neil Fisher, 42 Bowden Way, Binley, Coventry CV3 2HU; neil.fisher81@ntlworld.com.*

**Recruitment of Liberals into the Conservative Party, 1906–1935.** Aims to suggest reasons for defections of individuals and develop an understanding of changes in electoral alignment. Sources include personal papers and newspapers; suggestions about how to get hold of the papers of more obscure Liberal defectors welcome. *Clr Nick Cott, 1a Henry Street, Gosforth, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, NE3 1DQ; N.M.Cott@ncl.ac.uk.*

**Life of Wilfrid Roberts (1900–91).** Roberts was Liberal MP for Cumberland North (now Penrith and the Border) from 1935 until 1950 and came from a wealthy and prominent local Liberal family; his father had been an MP. Roberts was a passionate internationalist, and was a powerful advocate for refugee children in the Spanish civil war. His parliamentary career is coterminous with the nadir of the Liberal Party. Roberts joined the Labour Party in 1956, becoming a local councillor in Carlisle and the party's candidate for the Hexham constituency in the 1959 general election. I am currently in the process of collating information on the different strands of Roberts' life and political career. Any assistance at all would be much appreciated. *John Reardon; jbreardon75@hotmail.com.*

**Student radicalism at Warwick University.** Particularly the files affair in 1970. Interested in talking to anybody who has information about Liberal Students at Warwick in the period 1965–70 and their role in campus politics. *Ian Bradshaw, History Department, University of Warwick, CV4 7AL; I.Bradshaw@warwick.ac.uk*

**Welsh Liberal Tradition – A History of the Liberal Party in Wales 1868–2003.** Research spans thirteen decades of Liberal history in Wales but concentrates on the post-1966 formation of the Welsh Federal Party. Any memories and information concerning the post-1966 era or even before welcomed. The research is to be published in book form by Welsh Academic Press. *Dr Russell Deacon, Centre for Humanities, University of Wales Institute Cardiff, Cyncoed Campus, Cardiff CF23 6XD; rdeacon@uwic.ac.uk.*

**Aneurin Williams and Liberal internationalism and pacificism, 1900–22.** A study of this radical and pacifist MP (Plymouth 1910; North West Durham/Consett 1914–22) who was actively involved in League of Nations Movement, Armenian nationalism, international co-operation, pro-Boer etc. Any information relating to him and location of any papers/correspondence welcome. *Barry Dackombe, 32 Ashburnham Road, Amptill, Beds, MK45 2RH; dackombe@tesco.net.*