

“Everything is Changing in Politics Right Now”: Green Politics in Denmark

Article by Pia Olsen Dyhr
September 29, 2021

Across much of northern Europe, broad-church governments of centre-left, green, and liberal parties rule. Such alliances are in power in Finland and Sweden and the results of Norway’s September election point in the same direction. Since coming to power in a minority government in 2019, the Danish Social Democrats have governed with the outside support of Greens, Liberals, and the Left with an agenda centred on climate action and economic inequality.

At the same time, the Danish government has been widely criticised for adopting a hard-line stance against asylum seekers and migrants. For the green Socialist People’s Party (Socialistisk Folkeparti), the approach has been constructive yet critical engagement in the knowledge that the numbers are stacked against them on some issues. As part of our series on green parties around Europe, this summer we sat down with leader Pia Olsen to discuss the party’s growing support, climate policy, and Denmark’s relationship with Europe.

This interview is part of a [series](#) that we published in partnership with [Le Grand Continent](#) on green parties in Europe.

Green European Journal: What are the main issues in Danish politics in 2021 and how is the Socialist People’s Party (SF) approaching them?

Pia Olsen Dyhr: The Danish government is a minority government led by the Social Democrats that has been in place for two years. The first focus for the government, as well as for the majority in Parliament which includes SF, is inequality: making sure there are more equal rights to participate in society, reducing economic inequality, and rebuilding the Danish welfare state. The second focus is climate change. Denmark has huge ambitions when it comes to fighting climate change with a target of a 70 per cent reduction in greenhouse gas emissions by 2030 and between 50-54 per cent by 2025. These issues aren’t separate as it is often the people with fewer resources who are hit by the climate crisis disproportionately.

Besides that, Denmark is, like any other country at the moment, focused on Covid-19. We have not had the third wave like in the rest of Europe. Denmark is one of the most open societies because it was strict since the beginning of the pandemic; you could go to the theatre and eat out in restaurants. All through Covid-19, production sites remained open and people could go to work. But, other than the healthcare sector, much of the public

sector was closed, with many people working from home.

Another issue that we have to reckon with is the strong majority of around 70 per cent – including the Social Democrats – in the Danish Folketinget [national parliament] supporting a very different approach to migration and asylum to ours. Everyday, we fight to push the migration and asylum policy in a more human direction, but there's a strong majority against us.

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So climate is a priority for the government. Is it a matter of consensus? Are there different views on how to undertake the climate transition?

Actually, there is a near consensus in parliament on reducing emissions by 70 per cent by 2030. This goal is secured in Denmark's climate law. It means that even if we have a change of government, these objectives will still stand. That certainty is quite important for that target to be reached. The decision to reach 50 to 54 per cent by 2025 is less consensual but we have decided to stick with it. Only the government and the parties supporting the government support this goal: that's the Social Democrats, the Social Liberals, us in the Socialist People's Party, and the far-left.

Does the consensus on climate change pose a challenge to the Socialist People's Party in terms of finding a message?

The parties may agree generally on climate change and targets but the measures to get there are always up for debate. For example, there have been negotiations running for six months on how much agriculture should contribute to meeting targets. Agriculture is huge in Denmark – 60 per cent of the country's total area is agricultural land – and the right-wing parties and the government are pushing for lighter measures for the agricultural sector. However, on other green issues, there have been wins for SF. In 2021 budget, it was decided to clean up all of the polluted grounds in Denmark. Even though the majority behind the budget involved several parties, the media recognised our role in that and the same for the creation of 15 new nature areas in Denmark.

The consensus on climate is not an issue; the real question is how you deliver on the targets. Denmark is a rather consensus-based democracy and that is reflected on climate issues. But never forget that it's always when it comes to paying for and delivering on specific targets that the large cleavages emerge.

What level of politics will be most important for SF in the years ahead? Will it be national, local, or European?

Denmark will hold local elections in mid-November and national elections within two years. Slowly, the focus on the national level will increase because we are fighting to get into government. I'm confident that we will gain members in the local elections in November and raise our party's profile. We'll make a real push to emphasise the importance of clean drinking water because although Danish ground water is generally drinkable, the use of

pesticides is contaminating increasing numbers of wells. It's a huge local issue.

How is the political landscape looking ahead of the national elections in two years? What could that mean for the Danish government?

Thirteen parties are running for parliament so competition is high and actually there will be six green parties in the race, including SF, the Vegan Party, the Independent Greens, and the Red-Green Alliance. Many will not manage to enter parliament so the votes will sadly be wasted. For example, the Vegans have their very narrow focus on vegan food; politically, they are not interested in inequality. But they will probably gain 0.5 per cent. It's not much but with a 2-per-cent threshold, it means that their votes will be lost. But it does mean that green issues will be high on the agenda. Governments in Denmark are always minority governments, but it is possible that SF, together with the Social Democrats, gain more than 40 per cent, and would only need one more party to form a majority.

However, everything is changing in politics right now. The populist vote is rising in Denmark on the Right and Left – probably as a part of the broader trend that we see all over the Western world. On one side of politics, the far right is clearly gaining ground, whereas on the Left, it is more the case of many new and popular ideas coming onto the agenda. Austerity policies have left many people with very little hope and that has definitely had an impact on the rise of populist politics all over Europe. At the same time, we are in an emergency situation regarding the climate and that definitely paves the way for more radical thinking.

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How do you see Denmark's place in the wider European political scene, and what is SF's view on Denmark's role in Europe?

Denmark is often seen as a “secondary” member of the European Union because of the three opt-outs on the euro, police and justice, and defence. But there is strong support for the EU and it has been rising. Especially after Brexit, awareness about what Denmark gains as a small state from being a part of the EU has grown. SF are strong and committed supporters of Danish EU membership and consider the EU extremely important to finding solutions for poverty, inequality, and climate change. The romantic idea of going back to when Denmark was not a part of the EU is just not viable. Denmark would be just a small state in Europe without a voice and would be very dependent on Germany. Many Danes are very much aware of that.

How do you see the future of the European Union?

I think the EU will move ahead but its internal divisions make it very hard to have a coherent Europe. We see Eastern European countries no longer implementing the rule of law, Poland limiting reproductive rights, and Hungary violating human rights. We can work

towards more coherence but we also need to be prepared to say, if we can't move forward, then those who want to move forward through enhanced cooperation should. To tax the tech giants or create a common rate of corporate tax, those countries that want to work together should press ahead.

When it comes to European and green issues, or just more generally, do you work with your green sister parties? Either on your borders in Germany and Scandinavia or elsewhere in Europe for that matter?

Our closest cooperation is on political issues. We discuss experiences about government or coalition negotiations, about coping with Social Democrats and Christian Democrats, and about how to make these political processes more transparent for voters. We work closely with the German Greens and the Greens in Sweden (we also support them in elections), as well as the red-green Socialist Left (SV) in Norway to which we are closer for historical reasons. Of course, we are connected to Greens across Europe through our two seats in the European Parliament, which are a lot because Denmark only has 13 mandates.

To what extent do elections in other European countries influence Danish politics?

They can inspire us and they also matter because of their proximity. Half of Danish exports go to Germany so we're clearly very dependent and everyone is following the German elections. However, I'm not sure if the results themselves will have any impact on our position. Danish voters vote for parties that deliver in their everyday lives.

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The EU faces many important strategic questions, not least the surging rivalry between the US and China. How does SF see Europe's place in the world, and the role that Europe should try to have?

The EU should take a stronger global leadership. I was minister for trade for two years and participated in international meetings. The EU has a fundamental basis that is human rights, green issues, equality, and fair trade. If we do not help set the agenda, it will be fundamentally up to the US and China. The EU has to step up to make sure that the bar is higher.

Currently, too much foreign policy is left to France and Germany, whereas it would be important to formulate a European response that is not just a national response. Of course, France has its history in some parts of the world, as did the United Kingdom before Brexit. But the voice of the European Union would be stronger if it wasn't for national voices undermining the common points where the EU should stand together.



Pia Olsen Dyhr is a Danish politician who has been a member of the Folketing [National Parliament] for the Socialist People's Party since the 2007 general elections. Dyhr has served as Minister for Trade and Investment and later Minister of Transport in the first Helle Thorning-Schmidt Cabinet. Following her party's resignation from the cabinet, Dyhr was elected as chair of the Socialist People's Party in 2014.

Published September 29, 2021

Article in English

Published in the *Green European Journal*

Downloaded from <https://www.greeneuropeanjournal.eu/everything-is-changing-in-politics-right-now-green-politics-in-denmark/>

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