

# DON'T PANIC

ANALYSIS & STRATEGIES ON  
RIGHT-WING POPULISM



**DEO**  
democracy in europe



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# Introduction

*By Rasmus Nørlem Sørensen, editor and general secretary of DEO*

The past ten years have seen a rise and consolidation in the support for right-wing populist movements and parties in many countries. This is reflected increasingly in parliaments and governments alike. At all levels of governance across Europe, the populist right's influence on the political discourse as well as everyday policymaking is becoming more tangible. In many countries the logic and language of far-right populism is being adopted by traditional centre and centre-right parties.

This poses a series of challenges to the parties of the left and in broader terms to central values in liberal democracy. This right-wing influence cannot be quelled in a single battle where political parties rally around their banners. It is rooted in a deeper crisis of liberal democracy, globalisation, and 21st century capitalism. Economic inequality has widened the gaps between elites and the people and is entrenching political inequalities. The ensuing feeling of being left out in the race of globalisation is fertile soil for right-wing populism.

Nationalism, populism, and racism often operate on a binary logic of "them" and "us". They are seen as a primary cause of problems and challenges in the society that rightfully belong to us. They can be the refugees, the foreign workers, the institutions of human rights, the European Union, the academic or cultural elites or all of these at once. The core strategy of right-wing populism is to fight them to save us, and this simple narrative seems efficient in mobilizing and building political support.

## **Don't Panic**

To challenge and outmaneuver the many variations of the populist logic, at least three pressing questions must be addressed.

1. How has the continued and reinforced presence of the populist right in parliaments affected the political and societal landscape broadly and the capacity of left-wing and progressive parties to resist right-wing policies in particular?
2. What strategies does the left apply in practice in the fight against the populist right in parliaments at different levels of government?

3. How can we envision an ideal or perfect left fit to meet the challenges of far-right populism? What could be a vision for a left-wing party that can help stop the populist right gain more ground?

## **Background**

This anthology presents a series of analysis of these questions and a handful of strategic suggestions. They build on discussions in a larger project initiated by the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation and the Democracy in Europe Organisation in 2019. Over the course of two years the project has brought together representatives of left-wing parties, academia, and civil society from Sweden, Denmark, and Germany for a series of events to discuss current dynamics, trends, and challenges to democracy with a focus on the Nordic countries.

The chapters of the book are based on papers presented and debated at an on-line impact workshop in November 2020 where the focus was on identifying approaches and strategies practiced by left parties and activists in Denmark, Germany, and Sweden. We put centre stage the exchange on best practice and experiences in dealing with right-wing populism in the three countries, joined in knowledge exchange and in the development of useful tactics and strategies.

## **The Chapters and the Authors**

The book is divided into three main sections each with a contribution from Germany, Sweden, and Denmark respectively.

### ***1. Analysis of Right-Wing Populism***

The contributions in the first section, outline the current political landscapes in Germany, Sweden, and Denmark with a specific focus on recent developments in right wing populism. The authors of the three chapters are recognised experts in their fields and regularly contribute to the public or academic debate on right-wing politics.

Carina Book is a political scientist and editor at the independent, leftist newspaper *Analyse und Kritik*. Book's writings focus on anti-capitalism, anti-racism, feminism, and social movements.

Susi Meret is an associate professor at the Institute for Political Sciences at Aalborg University (AAU). Her research specializes in right-wing populism in Denmark and the EU, right-wing movements, and xenophobia. Anita Nis-



sen is employed as postdoc at AAU. Her work focuses on far-right groups and movements, Danish politics, and minority rights in the EU.

Mathias Wåg is an anti-fascist researcher with more than twenty years of experience in documenting the Nordic movements of the extreme right. He works as a freelance journalist and is part of the founding members of journalistic and political collective the Research Group (*Researchgruppen*).

## ***2. Tactics and Counter-Tactics***

In the second section, three authors with hands-on experience from the political world analyse tactics and methods employed by left-wing politicians when encountering and working alongside right-wing parties and other exponents of right-wing populism.

Rosa Lund is a member of the Danish Parliament for the Red-Green Alliance (*Enhedslisten*). She holds a master's degree in law from the University of Copenhagen and is the spokesperson on Democracy, Integration, Justice, and Immigration for the Red-Green Alliance.

Håkan Blomqvist is a member of the Swedish Left Party (*Vänsterpartiet*) and former director for the Institute for Contemporary History at Södertörn University. He is a Doctor of Philosophy in History and is specialised in the labour movement, nationalism, and antisemitism.

Anika Taschke is Senior Advisor for Contemporary History at the Rosa-Luxemburg Foundation in Berlin (*Rosa-Luxemburg-Siftung*) whom she writes and produces media for. She is co-author of *Counsellors Against the Right (Rat\*innen gegen Rechts)*.

## ***3. The Perfect Left***

In the third section, we turn to more ideological, overall strategical, and organisational matters and search for visions for a perfect or ideal left.

Aron Etzler is Party Secretary and Chief Strategist at the Left Party (*Vänsterpartiet*) in Sweden. He is a journalist and author of several books about the political situation in Sweden and Europe.

Kerstin Wolter is Policy Advisor and an active member of the Left Party (*Die Linke*). Wolter has contributed to several publications and has an academic background in Cultural and Social Geography from the Humbolt University in Berlin.

Esben Bøgh Sørensen is the Regional Party Secretary for the Red-Green Alliance (*Enhedslisten*). He holds a PhD in History of Ideas from Aarhus University on a dissertation about the history of capitalism and is a regular contributor in the public debate in Denmark.

### **The Rosa Luxemburg Foundation**

The *Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung* is named after Rosa Luxemburg, the Polish-German politician of Jewish origin who was murdered in 1919. The Rosa Luxemburg Foundation locates itself in the spectrum of democratic socialism and is close to The Left Party (*Die Linke*) in Germany. It has dedicated itself to the heritage of Rosa Luxemburg in its most modern sense: emancipative and critical of capitalism, radically democratic and opposed to all forms of dictatorship, dedicated to solidarity, and opposed to imperial power. Political education, critical societal analysis, comprehensive international work, and research grants are its most important areas of work.

The slogan of the foundation is (summarizing the ideas of Rosa Luxemburg): Freedom without equality is exploitation; equality without freedom is oppression. Solidarity is the common root of freedom and equality.



[www.rosalux.eu](http://www.rosalux.eu)

### **The Democracy in Europe Organisation**

DEO is a Danish liberal adult education organisation working to improve democracy in Europe. We are independent of political parties and EU bodies. We have no political agenda but aim to be a critical voice raising political questions, addressing challenges, and discussing European politics. From a participatory democratic ideal we strive to engage the public in EU-matters and aim to create a critical, rich, and nuanced democratic debate.

The motto of our organisation is: Democracy demands participation!

**DEO** [www.deo.dk](http://www.deo.dk)

# 1.1 The Impact of the AfD on Politics and Society in Germany



By Carina Book.

Political scientist and editor at *Analyse & Kritik*,  
Germany

The atmosphere in German society has markedly changed as a result of the rise and institutionalisation of the right-wing party Alternative for Germany (*Alternative für Deutschland*, AfD). Along with this development, we are seeing an increasing brutalisation of language and the gradual abandonment of democratic norms and practices in the public discourse. However, this erosion of democratic forms of interaction has roots that predate the founding of the AfD.

A much-discussed turning point was the 2010 publication of the bestselling book *Deutschland schafft sich ab* (Germany Abolishes Itself) by former social democrat and former head of the *Bundesbank* Thilo Sarrazin. Having topped the bestseller list for 21 weeks at the time of its publication, 10 years on it is still one of the bestselling books in the history of the Federal Republic of Germany. It articulated publicly and prominently several racist ideas that had previously been limited largely to pub talk.

The *Mitte-Studien*, a long-term survey on group-focused enmity in Germany, also shows that, rather consistently over time, about 20 percent of society has been open to or supports right-wing and extreme right-wing positions. In 2013, the AfD emerged, ready to transform this existing potential into votes.

The party constitutes the parliamentary arm of a heterogeneous right-wing milieu, consisting of right-wing think tanks, publishing houses and publications, as well as actors who focus primarily on street-based mobilisations, such as Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamisation of the Occident (*Patriotische Europäer gegen die Islamisierung des Abendlandes*, Pegida), Hooligans against Salafists (*Hooligans gegen Salafisten*, HogeSa), and the *Querdenken 711*

protests against the coronavirus protection measures. This said, the AfD itself is not a homogeneous party. It brings together religious, national-conservative, free-market radical and ethnonationalist groups, which repeatedly leads to internal ideological battles.

### **AfD as a New Worker's Party**

Despite being established in 2013, the AfD has still not developed a comprehensive, encompassing political programme. Major gaps persist regarding social policy. This has apparently not been an impediment to the party's success, however, as the AfD has been successful in mobilising racist and nationalist sentiments and in reaching the working class with these sentiments.

The AfD has always argued that downward pressure on wages and social inequality result from a competition between native Germans and foreigners. The AfD makes an exclusive offer to the native German white working class by offering them long-term preferential treatment over migrants. At the same time, it agitates against benefit recipients, especially if they are Sinti or Roma, or long-term unemployed. The motto of the AfD is that only those who "contribute to society" should receive benefits. This contrasts with the fact that – seen from a left-wing perspective – the party is pursuing a largely anti-labour agenda: the party could barely commit itself to support a minimum wage and recommended buying property during the rent crisis.

Nevertheless, in the 2017 federal elections, the AfD was able to gain considerable support among working-class voters. 18 percent of this group voted for the AfD, which, compared with the 12.6 percent of the total German electorate, indicates an above-average, albeit not exuberant, approval among workers. The AfD also gained the slightly above-average result of 14 percent among trade union members. In the state elections in 2016, the AfD won 30 percent of the workers' vote, and did even better in some local elections, for example in Saxony-Anhalt, where it got 35 percent of working-class votes. It appears that the voters can live with the gaps in the AfD's socio-political programme and its, in part, strongly anti-worker politics.

Yet the social question is a problem for the AfD when it comes to internal dynamics, where it constitutes the driving force behind a pronounced dispute among different party fractions. While at the time of its founding, the AfD considered itself a party of market-radical professors, it is now becoming

clear that the party will not succeed in controlling the competing ethnonationalist wing.

### **An Ethnonationalist Turn**

The ethnonationalist wing pursues a national-social programme and is thus in partial opposition to the radical market wing, which is increasingly perceived by supporters of the ethnonationalists as too loyal to the system and as slowing down the far-right movement. In other words, a lean state, privatisation of public services and social (national) insurance compete with the concept of a welfare state for native Germans. The leader of the ethnonationalist wing, Björn Höcke, announced in 2018 at the Kyffhäuser meeting of his party wing: “The social question was the crown jewel of the Left; it was its rationale and guarantee of existence. And if we remain credible and determined as the AfD, we can now take this crown jewel from the Left! And we should do that!”

Several extraordinary party congresses, scheduled to clarify common social policy positions, were postponed, and the party still has no pension reform plan. This is partly due to the clash of approaches that are impossible to reconcile: Björn Höcke of the Thuringian parliamentary group is pushing for additional tax-financed pension allowances for German citizens only, while Jörg Meuthen, who is a member of the European Parliament and one of the party’s two federal spokespersons, wants to abolish the contribution-financed statutory pension, which is co-financed by contributions from employees and employers, to replace it with a tax-financed minimum pension that is just above the breadline.

This is a cause for concern for the AfD’s free-market radicals. The ethnonationalist wing around Björn Höcke has so far won every dispute and shifted the balance of power in its favour. The AfD has shown a certain resilience as a party. After all, large parts of previous party leaderships have been sacked, including party leaders Bernd Lucke (2015) and Frauke Petry (2017). The remaining wing of free-market radicals must now fear that the ethnonationalist wing will once again assert itself with its national-social programme, which could lead to losses among West German supporters.

### **Right-Wing Employee Associations and Trade Unions**

The forces of the ethnonationalist wing, which are particularly successful in

eastern Germany, have recently started to address the social question from the right and have gone into open opposition to existing trade unions. The AfD accuses the trade unions of betraying the interests of the workers. In this context, parts of the AfD are trying to establish independent workers' associations. The party has three such organisations: *AidA* (Workers in the AfD), *ALARM* (Alternative Workers' Association of Central Germany), and *AVA* (Alternative Association of Workers).

Their influence remains limited. In fact, they should be seen as window dressing designed to present the AfD as a workers' party. Nevertheless, there are persistent efforts to put pressure on the trade unions within the shop stewards' committees (work councils). In the works council elections in 2018, candidates considered close to the AfD formed the *Zentrum Automobil* list, focusing their attempts on the automotive industry – with little success. Indeed, the results could not be described as the right-wing populist triumph that some media reports had predicted before the works council elections.

Nevertheless, the trade unions are on a slippery slope in their approach to AfD supporters. For a long time, the unions were in denial about the growing problem with right-wing workers. Currently, however, the “danger from the right” is used as justification for an industrial and employer-oriented line taken by Germany's largest trade union, *IG Metall*.

This is what happened in June 2020, when *IG Metall* campaigned for a state-sponsored premium for diesel car sales (to support the car industry in light of the economic impact of the pandemic) and tried to present this as a quasi-anti-fascist act. They argued openly that, given the AfD supporters demonstrating in front of the factory gates in support of the diesel premium, opposition to the premium was not an option.

The head of the German Trade Union Confederation (DGB), Reiner Hoffmann, told the Social Democratic Party of Germany (*Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands*, SPD): “You also have to look at industry and workers if you want to keep the AfD small.” In a context of great uncertainty linked to the coronavirus pandemic and the intensification of social divide, the ethnonationalist wing of the AfD is optimistic about promoting its national-social programme and pushing into a segment of society previously organised and represented by trade unions.

## **Culture and Education**

From the start, the AfD has launched attacks on cultural and educational institutions, which it views as representative of a red-green post-68 establishment. The activities of the AfD in cultural and educational matters have also constituted fertile ground for non-parliamentary far-right forces. The party uses a variety of instruments for its attacks, including parliamentary instruments of scrutiny, such as minor interpellations. They demand that organisations publish all announcements, documents, programmes, etc. in German. In some cases, they even use death threats – the attacks and harassments from the right are manifold.

This is a new situation for many cultural and educational institutions, which are typically white, bourgeois, and academically dominated. They are not well prepared for – and probably did not expect to be part of – a struggle that has long been waged against people of colour, Sinti and Roma, Jews, feminists, and leftists.

Many cultural workers have only now become aware of how great their own white ignorance was towards those affected by right-wing and racist violence. They are beginning to develop counterstrategies, to build alliances, to defend themselves jointly and to examine their own structures with regard to racism. Others, however, prefer focusing on “cancel culture” and are ultimately legitimising the far right, which has long since found its strategy.

## **Metapolitical Strategy**

The new right calls this strategy “metapolitics”. It is aimed at the continuous transformation of social values, with achieving opinion leadership being a top priority. Only then, the rationale goes, would far-right parties be able to be truly successful and translate the social climate favouring the far right into seats in parliament and government. With reference to the right-wing philosopher Alain de Benoist, writing in 1985, the cultural sector is perceived as the central battleground, understood as the “place where values and ideas are being commanded and issued”. The goal is “the transformation of predominant ideas in society [...], which is tantamount to a slow transformation of minds”. This discourse sees the cultural sector as one of the hegemonic centres of a supposed “totalitarian regime of 68”.

Wherever you look – at the *Deutsches Theater* in Berlin, at the Frankfurt Book Fair or in the Hamburg *Öffentliche Bücherhallen* (public libraries offering a

large cultural programme) – the AfD and its supporters suspect the apologists of the totalitarian regime of 68 to be at work. According to this view, the cultural venues are transmission belts of the current system, conforming to it without any subversive character.

On the one hand, the new right is trying to bring down this “pillar of the system”; on the other hand, it seeks to establish its own intellectuals in the cultural sector – to pave the way for a new system, for what it considers the “best of all worlds”. But make no mistake. In its “best of all worlds” the new right aims to reconstruct the privileges of the white man and, in line with Carl Schmitt’s ideas, eliminate all heterogeneity. In essence, this is about revitalising a nationalist worldview in a new guise, the ideology of an ethnically homogenous national community, nationalism, friend-foe thinking, authoritarian subordination and anti-egalitarianism.

### **Schools as “Hotbeds of Left-Green Ideology”**

Even schools have become a place of regular interventions by the AfD. The party considers them to be hotbeds of “filthy left-green ideology”. Since 1976, the guiding principle for political education in schools in Germany has been the Beutelsbach Consensus with its three central pillars: 1) pupils must not be overwhelmed, which means that teachers are not allowed to indoctrinate; 2) controversial matters, such as in science and politics, must be taught and discussed as controversial positions in class; and 3) pupils must be put in a position to analyse and assess their own interests in political situations.

The AfD attempted to claim the Beutelsbach Consensus for itself and alleged that teachers did not adhere to it. This has created uncertainty among many teachers and educators, not least as the AfD set up online forums aimed at denouncing teachers. The party presented these *Petzportale* (snitching portals) to the public as a great success story. In Hamburg, for example, the AfD claimed that eight disciplinary complaints had been filed and the education authority had “in numerous cases [...] confirmed violations of neutrality and intervened against the teachers or school administrators responsible”.

Part of the media spread these AfD claims without questioning or checking them. In fact, however, all formal complaints by the supervisory authority were dropped. Many teachers are now afraid of being denounced on one of the online portals and ask what constitutes a democratic attitude these days



and what they may or may not do in their role as teachers of (among other things) civic values in a democratic society.

## **Media and Discourse**

As the right-wing publisher and AfD sympathiser Götz Kubitschek emphasises: “Our aim is not to participate in the discourse, but to end it as a form of consensus.” Martin Sellner, one of the leading new right cadres in the German-speaking world, even called for an “infowar” in order to “dry up and paralyse the enemy’s sources of power” by destroying the discourse.

It is obvious that the new right is not a group that feels excluded from the democratic discourse and that should now be reintegrated into the community of democrats. Their aim is not to enter into a process of societal discourse and negotiation. They despise it and want to destroy exactly that. To make this clear and to inform society about this agenda was and is one of the great challenges for the left.

In the field of culture and education, it has become apparent that the definition of terms like “freedom of opinion”, “neutrality” and “artistic freedom” and what they mean in practice are far from clear even among established and experienced figures representing the German cultural and media sectors. In 2017, many proclaimed that “talking to the right” was a strategy to be used against the right. This was followed, among other things, by interviews with Marc Jongen, the AfD’s cultural officer, in which various major players in the cultural sector were torpedoed. Later on, a right-wing chorus of indignation triggered a debate about a children’s choir, which had taken a stand against climate change. The debate led the director of public broadcaster *Westdeutscher Rundfunk* to publicly apologise for broadcasting the song.

The right, and most prominently the AfD, have repeatedly staged such debates as interventions that have revealed a disturbing lack of “democratic compass” in the cultural sector. Another debate that caused confusion among those in the cultural sector was that surrounding the issue of neutrality. Numerous written minor interpellations and parliamentary proposals by the AfD insinuated that the art and culture sectors had to commit themselves to neutrality if they were to receive public funding. This caused great uncertainty and resulted in a discussion about the concepts of freedom of art and freedom of expression, ultimately leading to the “cancel culture” debate.

## Historical-Political Turn-Around

The AfD is a parliamentary actor that is continuously shifting the boundaries of what is acceptable in society, while simultaneously claiming that the party is being subjugated by a left-green opinion corridor (i.e. an exclusion of unwanted opinions from the public debate) and that freedom of opinion is under threat in Germany.

Björn Höcke described the Holocaust Memorial in Berlin as a “monument of shame” and party chairman Alexander Gauland has described the Nazi regime as “a speck of bird poop in more than 1,000 years of successful German history”. According to Gauland, Germans should be “proud of the achievements of German soldiers” in the world wars. Leading members of the party relativise the Holocaust. Höcke has even demanded what he calls a “historical-political turn-around”. For the first time since 1945, challenging Germany’s war guilt, questioning or relativising the Holocaust, and venerating the Wehrmacht are deemed acceptable again.

In May 2020, the AfD called on the federal government to establish a memorial for the “German victims of the Second World War and the post-war period”. Commemorations for Holocaust victims and even memorials on the sites of former concentration camps are now regularly subject to disturbances and provocations from the right, which have increased markedly in recent years. A particularly outrageous example was an attempt by the AfD to lay a wreath at the Buchenwald memorial site on Holocaust Memorial Day in 2015, in the presence of Auschwitz and Buchenwald survivors, in order to remember the dead in the Soviet special camp. Leading members of the AfD have since been banned from the Buchenwald memorial.

These continuous attacks on commemoration and the process of coming to terms with Germany’s Nazi past have taken their toll: the recent demonstrations against the coronavirus protection measures clearly indicate that a part of German society has lost its democratic compass and the “historical-political turn-around” Björn Höcke called for is already well under way. At coronavirus demonstrations, protesters wear *Judensterne* (Jewish badges) with the inscription “unvaccinated”, thereby claiming that they, as COVID-19 deniers, are in a situation comparable to the persecuted Jews. It seems as if the bourgeois middle class has largely rid itself of former taboos. In combination with discourses of exclusion, the far-right democratic opposition is creating an aggressive mood. The possibility that they may resort to violence can no longer

be ruled out. The AfD's constant relaying of doom-and-gloom scenarios and talk of impending civil war also contributes to this.

### **Doom-and-Gloom Scenarios**

Renaud Camus's concept of the Great Replacement has become one of the most powerful narratives of the extreme right worldwide. This conspiracy theory claims that a left-green 68 multicultural elite is planning the replacement of white people. It is not hard to identify this as a variation on the Nazi narrative of the Jewish-Bolshevik world conspiracy. According to the Great Replacement narrative, the white population is being gradually replaced through steered migration from Africa and the Middle East and the alleged higher birth rates among migrants.

Further, it claims that the white or European birth rate is being artificially lowered through gender mainstreaming, feminism and access to abortions. Moreover, sex education in schools is supposed to be aimed at making boys gay. According to the narrative, this in turn leads to a situation where white men are no longer able to defend themselves against the alleged threat from Muslim men. It is the tale of a last chance to avert a doomsday scenario, familiar from the writings of the masterminds of the Conservative Revolution, such as Ernst Jünger and Oswald Spengler, who shaped the idea of the heroic struggle to hold a lost position – a notion to which the new right narratives are clearly allied.

### **Right-Wing Terror**

This doomsday scenario boils down to a logic of kill or be killed and serves to justify an alleged heroic right of resistance. Right-wing terrorists over the past decade have referred to the narrative of the Great Replacement in their manifestos. Belief in the Great Replacement turns terrorists into resistance fighters for the "white race". The victims of the right-wing terrorist attacks in Utøya and Oslo (Norway), Christchurch (New Zealand), and El Paso (USA) were Muslims, people of colour, Jews, and leftists. The murders were justified with this ideology that unites the far right.

Followers of this right-wing ideology have committed attacks in Germany too. On Yom Kippur 2019, a far-right attacker tried to enter a synagogue in Halle and kill as many people as possible. He murdered two people (although not at the synagogue) while live-streaming his attack online, following the

example of the far-right attacker in Christchurch. He addressed a virtual, global movement of violent, racist, and anti-Semitic white supremacists and began the video in English with the words: “Hi, my name is Anon, and I think the Holocaust never happened.”

On 19 February 2020, a neo-Nazi killed 10 people and later himself in Hanau, Germany. He, too, had uploaded a video to YouTube before his attack, in which he addressed “all Americans”. America, he claimed, was ruled by secret powers that paid homage to the devil. They mistreated and killed children in military facilities. American citizens had to wake up and “fight now”.

### **Infiltration of the Security Forces**

For a long time, the ethnonationalist wing of the AfD, and most notably its leader Björn Höcke, has been calling on police officers and soldiers to join the extreme right-wing camp. Höcke’s aim is to bring about a radical change of both the state and society. He presents the AfD as “the last peaceful chance for our fatherland”. He and large parts of the new right believe that, since the admission of many refugees in 2015, Germany has been in a state of emergency that justifies the resistance.

In his Erfurt speech in 2016, Höcke, speaking of a crisis of the state, addressed the Federal Police: “You know that police officers are obliged to check the legality of an official order. This results in the so-called right of remonstrance. [...] An officer carrying out an illegal order is liable to prosecution. Dear Federal Police, it has always been like this: little thieves are hanged, but the great ones escape. It is possible that one day you will be brought to court while Angela Merkel is boarding her plane to South America. I, therefore, ask you, dear Federal Police: stop following this vicious woman!”.

Since then, not a week goes by in Germany without new revelations about infiltration by far-right networks and far-right incidents among the security forces.

Writing in the *Rheinische Post* newspaper, the deputy chairman of the police trade union GdP, Jörg Radek, explained that after 2015 “something got out of balance with many officers, and that became manifest in sympathies for the right-wing national party spectrum”. Essentially, many officers failed to understand why they were asked to deviate from their “legal mandate to prevent unauthorised entry”. According to Radek, this led to “sympathies for the

AfD among federal police officers". Radek views the fact that federal police officers are now running for the AfD in state elections as a belated consequence of the refugee policy of 2015. Ernst G. Walter, chairman of the federal police union, agrees with Radek, saying that we must face reality: "the established parties no longer provide a political home for the police". In the Federal Police, he says, "many are prepared to vote for the AfD".

Another, particularly drastic case of far-right supporters among the security forces came to light in Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania. The extreme-right "prepper" group *Nordkreuz*, organising via WhatsApp groups, was preparing for "Day X". The administrator of the right-wing terrorist chat group was a long-time official of the state police forces who had previously also worked for the special operation forces SEK. Most of the members of the group were part of the German armed forces or the police of the state of Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania. They had legal access to weapons and were trained in shooting. The *Nordkreuz* group had already compiled execution lists and ordered 200 body bags. Three former members and one active official had stolen ammunition in the course of their preparations for Day X, the day of the coup d'état.

In addition to the (northern) *Nordkreuz* group, similar right-wing terrorist cells exist in the eastern, western and southern regions. The *Südkreuz* group became known because of the foiled attack by soldier Franco A. He had disguised himself as a refugee and deposited a loaded weapon in a toilet in a Vienna airport toilet in order to later commit a false-flag attack. The public prosecutor's office opened proceedings against another officer candidate, alleged to be connected with the *Südkreuz* group, for "violation of the War Weapons Control Act". He is suspected of having planned a far-right attack on Ursula von der Leyen.

At an elite unit of the special forces *Kommando Spezialkräfte* (KSK), a birthday celebration turned into neo-Nazi excess, complete with Hitler salutes and throwing of pig's heads. In North Rhine-Westphalia, a sticker of the far-right identitarian movement was found in a police team car. Officers of a special task force in Saxony chose "Uwe Bönhardt" – the name of a terrorist belonging to the neo-Nazi terror group National Socialist Underground (*Nationalsozialistischer Untergrund*, NSU) – as an alias for a colleague.

Using a police computer belonging to the Frankfurt police force, far-right police officers are said to have found out the private address of Seda Başay-

Yıldız, the legal representative of the family of the first murder victim in the NSU trial, and sent her death threats from a fax machine at a police station. These were signed “NSU 2.0”. The situation is becoming more dangerous, partly because little is done to stop these far-right forces. Far-right and racist attacks are rarely punished, and the AfD is now treated largely as a normal party that is given a platform across all media outlets.

## **Conclusion**

Germany is currently experiencing the coalescing of several unfavourable dynamics. On the one hand, parts of the security apparatus seem to be open to the AfD and its agenda. This has an impact on everyday life, with racial profiling and racist investigations now a fact of life for non-white people. Who should those affected turn to? To the police? This dilemma will not be resolved as long as the security authorities receive full cover from Germany’s mainstream political parties the SPD and CDU/CSU. Far-right structures in state institutions must be uncovered and eliminated. Unfortunately, the federal government is more inclined to perpetuate the cover-up by, for example, stopping studies on right-wing extremism in the police force rather than demonstrating the will to investigate and seriously combat these structures within the security forces. It is therefore important that critical journalists and civil society continue to exert pressure.

Another problem is that many on the bourgeois-liberal side of the political spectrum use terms like freedom or democracy as empty signifiers. As a result, when confronted with the tactics of the AfD as described above, they panic and lose their moral/democratic bearings. In addition, society as a whole urgently needs to address structures of white dominance, structures of inclusion and exclusion, and power at the workplace. The debate about right-wing extremism will be in vain as long as people who experience racism do not have a voice in that debate. How can such real alliances against the right be formed?

And the third problem is that the left has not yet developed a successful strategy against the (far) right. This applies to classic strategies defending against the attacks from the right. In the same way, however, the left must not let the AfD occupy the left’s original territory when it comes to criticising capitalism, and it must formulate a credible and strong offer of its own.

## 1.2 The Danish People's Party and the Far-Right Scene



*By Susi Meret and Anita Nissen.  
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The Danish People's Party (*Dansk Folkeparti*) is Denmark's main populist radical right-wing party. Its ideology is characterised by ethnonationalism, anti-immigration (nativism, including welfare-chauvinism), and Euroscepticism. The Danish People's Party was founded in 1995 by former members of the now-defunct Progress Party (*Fremskridtspartiet*). In the 1970s, the Progress Party successfully ran on a platform of ultra-liberal and anti-tax policies and was among the newly formed parties that dramatically transformed the Danish political landscape at the so-called Landslide Election of 1973.

The Progress Party was the forerunner of the anti-tax and anti-establishment wave that swept across Scandinavia and contributed to the disruption of the post-war frozen-cleavage system, introducing new political issues and coalition alternatives. In the 1980s, the party had developed a virulent anti-immigration and Islamophobic agenda. Co-founder and former leader of the Danish People's Party Pia Kjærsgaard held a prominent role in the Progress Party.

In 1995, Kjærsgaard, together with four other Progress Party members, decided to exit the electorally declining and internally split the Progress Party and launched their own party: the Danish People's Party. The party stood on a robustly ethnonationalist, anti-immigration, and anti-Islam platform, and advocated for Denmark to exit the European Union (EU). The anti-EU agenda was based on the EU's abandonment of the free-market project, which the Danish People's Party found, and still finds, criticisable. Unlike the Progress Party, the Danish People's Party advocated a welfare nationalist approach, defining social and welfare rights in nativist terms and argu-



ing that they were reserved for those “who had paid taxes for generations”. Two years after its foundation, the Danish People’s Party could count on a solid parliamentary representation, with 7.4 percent of the vote and 13 seats in the Danish parliament (*Folketinget*).

From the outset, the party was heavily represented among Danish skilled and non-skilled manual workers, giving it a “working-class” profile. This branding helped the party to attract voters from the Social Democrats.

### **From class-voting to issue-voting**

This success can be explained by the political transformations that took place in the late 1980s and the 1990s, which entailed a change in the way voters chose their political parties from a focus on traditional class-based voting towards “issue-voting”. The voters’ agenda started to be influenced by issues such as immigration, environment, gender, and LGBTQ rights, which became prominent questions that defined political competition and voters’ preferences. Within a few years, immigration became one of the salient political issues – a development that strongly influenced voting preferences and the Danish People’s Party’s opportunity structures and the range of options available for coalition-building.

Results from Danish election surveys conducted from 2001 to 2015 also highlight voters’ grievances about immigration and multiculturalism. Since 2001, there has been mounting opposition towards multiculturalism and increased ethnic diversity in the country, partially based on threat perceptions related to immigration. Also worth noting is the generally increased focus on migration, from all parties, and how this tendency has resulted in almost all parties taking a more critical position on the topic. The rise of what is now termed “identity politics” posed a serious challenge for the left, which had traditionally been more focused on socio-economic issues. Instead, these fear-based and xenophobic sentiments broadly aligned with the Danish People’s Party worldview. Since its creation, the party expressed grievances about the effects of what it called the “massive inflow of immigrants” within a “largely homogeneous society”, in its official party programme from 1997. The resulting “multi-ethnic society” would, it argued, endanger the very core and future of Danish national identity, culture, and welfare.



## **The Rise and Fall of the Danish People's Party**

For more than two decades, the Danish People's Party has been a sort of textbook model of an electorally successful and influential right-wing populist party, both inside and outside of the Nordic region. Since 1997, it has increased its vote share at almost every national election, becoming the second-largest party in 2015 with 21.1 percent of the votes. Similarly, in the 2014 European Parliament election, the party gained the largest share of the votes (26.6 percent).

It is important to consider this electoral rise in relation to several structural changes in Danish society, including some critical junctures represented by the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center, the 2005 Muhammad Cartoon Crisis, the 2008 global economic crisis, and the 2015 "refugee crisis". Factors such as the environmental crisis and COVID-19 could have similar implications in the future, although these are currently unpredictable.

Before the pandemic, the Danish People's Party experienced its first electoral defeat. In the 2019 parliamentary election, the party won only 8.7 percent of the votes, meaning that it lost more than half of its MPs, down from 37 to 16. This sudden drop in votes was most likely caused by several factors, amongst these the mainstream parties' reactions. Yet it has also been argued, that the Danish People's Party made itself unpopular because of how poorly it handled the influence it gained after its electoral triumph in 2015. However, when examining the political developments concerning the radical and populist right in Denmark and elsewhere, it is also important to consider the current "multiple crises' scenario".

Over the years, the biggest parties on both sides of the political spectrum have adopted different kinds of strategies to respond to and fight right-wing populism. Their strategic repertoires have varied since the late 1990s, ranging from attempts to dismiss the challenge posed by the Danish People's Party to offers to work with its representatives. The 1998 election delivered a very fragmented and unstable political landscape, with the traditionally dominant role of the Social Democrats (*Socialdemokraterne*) called into question. The rise of the Danish People's Party was accompanied by the decline of the Social Democrats, which was only partly compensated by the success of the Liberal Party (*Venstre*).

## **The Years of Consolidation**

The political period between 2001 and 2011 was particularly important for the success and consolidation of the Danish People's Party. During these years, the party provided external support to minority governments for three consecutive legislative terms. The governments in question consisted of various collaborations between the Liberal Party and the Conservative People's Party (*Det Konservative Folkeparti*). These two parties pursued a strategy of accommodating and cooperating with the Danish People's Party by adopting certain of its policies, thus mixing cooperation and co-optation.

This allowed the Danish People's Party to play the conflicting roles of both "government maker" and "government shaker" as it was unencumbered by the responsibilities of holding political office. The foundations of this win-win strategy were laid as early as 1997, in an official document stating that the main goal of the party is "to give the Danish voters a real alternative to the politics pursued by the existing political parties" and that such an alternative should "play an active role in the parliamentary life" by reaching "political results through the collaboration with other parties [...] to attain as many political results as possible".

For the party, this meant excluding itself from government if doing so offered a better opportunity for exerting political influence. Thus, this position gave the Danish People's Party the opportunity to have a significant say on immigration, asylum, integration, and citizenship policies during political negotiations. The party adopted a give-and-take strategy whereby it would vote in favour of the government's reforms and budgets in exchange for a legislative reward. While gaining increasing political legitimacy thanks to its collaboration with the centre-right parties, the Danish People's Party managed to both grow electorally and strengthen itself on the Danish political scene.

## **The Years of Achievement**

While the centre-right adopted an accommodative approach to the Danish People's Party, the Social Democrats initially attempted to dismiss the challenge posed by the party by focusing on issues with which it was not so directly linked, such as economics and welfare. Nonetheless, the general elections of 2005 and 2007 were won by the incumbent centre-right coalition. Eventually, in the 2011 election, a centre-left coalition between the Social Democrats, the Socialist People's Party (*Socialistisk Folkeparti*), and the Danish

Social Liberal Party (*Radikale Venstre*) returned to power, mainly because of the renewed importance of socio-economic matters in the aftermath of the 2008 global financial crisis.

The focus on socio-economic issues could perhaps have been a favourable strategic opportunity for the first two parties to defuse the salience of immigration-related issues: however, due to the inclusion of the Social Liberal Party, they were unable to side-line the topic. Its inclusion also prevented the new left-wing government from repeating the move made by the previous government, as the Social Liberal Party's stance on immigration was contradictory to that of the Danish People's Party. The Social Liberal Party emphasised its pro-migration positions and support for multiculturalism while opposing the nativist stances of its populist competitor and the immigration policies introduced by the previous government, which had complied with the Danish People's Party's demands.

### **Electoral Success and the “Refugee Crisis”**

The “refugee crisis” of 2015 led to a re-emergence of political debates focusing on migration and asylum politics. The media's framing of the crisis contributed to a shift in public opinion, which started focusing less on economic and welfare issues and more on asylum and migration questions, often regarded as the real problem needing to be solved. This largely benefitted the centre-right, and together with the Danish People's Party, they were able to seize this opportunity by campaigning for stricter rules and controls on asylum and immigration during an electoral campaign that was even more strident than in previous years.

The Danish People's Party achieved its best-ever election results, coming very close to the Social Democrats and surpassing the Liberal Party. However, since it still wished to remain outside of government, it resumed its role as supporting party for the Liberal Party's minority government. Eventually, this forced the Social Democrats to abandon their prioritisation of economic and welfare issues and co-opt policy stances of their competitors on the right. In practice, this submission took physical shape in posters advocating for “tighter asylum regulations and more duties for immigrants” and slogans like “If you come to Denmark, you must work”. Other parties also reiterated their anti-immigration stances through similar means, with added remarks blaming the “relaxed” policies that the left-wing government had approved.

Even prior to the election, under the leadership of Helle Thorning-Schmidt, the Social Democrats had developed tougher positions on immigration and asylum as part of the party's co-optation strategy to deal with the pressures exerted by the Danish People's Party. After losing the election, the Social Democrats even cooperated with the Danish People's Party by voting for some of their measures in parliament. During this period, migration started to be almost unanimously framed as a problem to be solved, often being linked to the vulnerability of the Danish welfare state, while politicians introduced harsher restrictions on inflows, as well as major retrenchments in the extension of rights to asylum seekers and refugees. Regarding integration policy, for instance, new measures approved included the banning of variations of full-face covering from public spaces (known as the "burqa ban") and a plan aimed at preventing the thriving of "parallel societies" in underprivileged urban areas. Both measures were passed by a large majority in parliament, including the Social Democrats.

The Liberal Party's strategy for dealing with the Danish People's Party from 2015 to 2019 was multifaceted and, once again, included forms of cooperation as well as attempts to co-opt the party's policies and positions. As part of this strategy, the Liberal Party appointed Inger Støjberg, a supporter of a hard-hitting approach towards immigration and asylum issues, as Minister of Immigration and Integration. This position allowed Støjberg to implement a strict and unforgiving immigration policy that led to a total of 114 new restrictions on immigration by the end of her term in office in 2019. The large number of amendments that it introduced was viewed as a testament to the ministry's effectiveness by many in Denmark's right-wing and centre parties. Støjberg played into this narrative by making a statement through her public media platform in which she posted a picture with a cake decorated with a Danish flag and the number 50 when the 50th of the restricting amendments was introduced in March 2017.

### **The Social Democrats' Right Turn**

The Social Democrats eventually resorted to more aggressive forms of co-optation to deal with the Danish People's Party and its right-wing populist demands. When Mette Frederiksen succeeded Helle Thorning-Schmidt as party leader in June 2015, the party's stances on immigration and asylum took a turn to the right. Frederiksen publicly acknowledged that the Social Dem-

ocrats had made a mistake by not listening to the immigration grievances expressed by some Social Democrat mayors, who, back in the 1980s and 1990s, had complained that Muslims were a problem and were “incapable of integrating”.

Mette Frederiksen criticised what she described as former party leaders submitting to the “political correctness” agenda, which had led to the integration problems that Denmark was currently facing. This narrative was used to legitimise the harsher line adopted by the party in recent years – for example when it had supported the previous government (the Liberal Party and the Conservative People’s Party) in its decision to reject the UN refugee quotas.

And while this decision was revoked in July of 2019 by the current Minister of Immigration and Integration from the Social Democrats, Mattias Tesfaye, the party proceeded to endorse the so-called “paradigm shift” on asylum matters, which was advocated by the Liberal Party and the Danish People’s Party, also in 2019. This change in the political narrative, especially when coming from a supposedly left-wing party, has affected the way we talk about immigrants in Denmark: refugees are no longer considered as people fleeing from wars and conflicts, who are entitled to rights – including the right to stay and settle in a safe country – but as people who are only temporarily in the country and should be sent back as soon as possible.

The adoption of migration-hostile policies within the Social Democrats has had a negative impact on the Danish People’s Party. At the last national election in 2019, the party achieved its worst electoral result since its foundation in the mid-1990s, collapsing to 8.7 percent of the vote. According to its current leader, Kristian Thulesen Dahl, this plummet was caused by two “mistakes”. Firstly, voters were disappointed with the party’s decision not to partake in the forming of the government in 2015, when it was in a very strong bargaining position. Secondly, before the 2019 election, the Danish People’s Party, which had never fully committed to a comprehensive governmental alliance with the centre-right coalition, started considering alternative options, including a possible collaboration with the main centre-left opposition party, the Social Democrats. This ambiguity might have caused some confusion among the party’s electorate.

Since the election, the Danish People’s Party has been trying to come up with a response to its poor performance. In August 2020, for instance, the newly

appointed “crown prince” of the party, Morten Messerschmidt – who had won landslide victories in two European Parliament elections – announced a new path for the Danish People’s Party, namely a renewed focus on Christianity and Christian values. Hence, one could argue that cooperation and co-optation might help non-populist parties to weaken populist competitors. However, the “mainstreaming” of the Danish People’s Party’s nativist discourse also contributed to the opening of opportunities on the right-wing fringes – as illustrated by the rise of two new far-right actors.

### **New Actors on the Danish Far-Right Scene**

The 2019 election saw the emergence of two new far-right parties, the New Right (*Nye Borgerlige*) and the anti-immigrant and strongly Islamophobic Hard Line (*Stram Kurs*). Hard Line’s leader, Rasmus Paludan, achieved internet fame in 2018 when he started organising protests in Danish areas with large Muslim populations, including provocative, defamatory, and blasphemous actions such as burning the Quran in public.

The New Right’s election campaign was based on an adversarial strategy against the migration and asylum policies approved by the centre-right government. Both far-right parties attacked the Danish People’s Party, accusing it of having moderated its original positions on immigration and asylum and criticising its support of the “mainstream” centre-right government. At the same time, the New Right leader, Pernille Vermund, portrayed her party as the only genuine champion of stricter immigration and asylum rules and the only viable alternative for voters who were unhappy with the Liberal Party and the Danish People’s Party.

Only the New Right passed the electoral threshold of 2 percent, gaining 2.3 percent of the vote and four parliamentary seats. Yet the rise of these two new parties is noteworthy, especially when considered in relation to the electoral decline of the Danish People’s Party.

### **Far-Right Extra-Parliamentary Milieus**

The Danish People’s Party has, in an effort to gain more legitimacy and reach more voters, tried to disassociate itself from extreme-right actors, especially those directly associated with fascist and neo-Nazi ideology and symbols. Like the French National Rally (*Rassemblement National*) under Marine Le Pen, the Danish People’s Party’s leadership has pursued a de-demonisation strate-

gy, throwing out all party members expressing extreme-right viewpoints and generally striving to distance themselves from actors from the extreme right.

It is not the first time that the Danish People's Party has employed such a strategy: in the 1990s, the party expelled several members because of their affiliation to far-right movements or organisations, most commonly the National Socialist Movement of Denmark (*Danmarks Nationalsocialistiske Bevægelse, DNSB*). Because of these measures, the Danish People's Party cannot as such be considered to have roots in or be part of a larger far-right milieu – unlike, for example, its German counterpart Alternative for Germany (*Alternative für Deutschland*). To strengthen the party's "reputational shield", the Danish People's Party has avoided close ties or alliances with any extra-parliamentary far-right actors, although it has shown its unofficial support for a few far-right initiatives and, informally, participated in some of their events.

Following the 2005 Muhammad Cartoon Crisis, a large segment of the Danish far right began uniting around anti-Islam frames and the defence of "freedom of speech" – a trope that is still the main rallying point of certain protest groups and associations in Denmark today. The demand for free speech has long been a rallying cry for the right, and Denmark is no exception. In 2004, two members of the Danish People's Party, Søren Krarup and Jesper Langballe, helped establish the Danish Free Press Association (*Trykkefrihedsselskabet, TFS*).

The association acts "in defence of the right to express oneself freely", focusing on countering the suppression of Islam-critical voices in Europe such as Flemming Rose, Kurt Westergaard, Geert Wilders, Ayaan Hirsi Ali and Ehsan Jami. Almost all of its articles revolve around the role of, and the problems with, the press, Islam, and other "free speech inhibitors". Despite it being founded by members of the Danish People's Party, the party has never officially participated in TFS events or proclaimed support for the group, although the two have seemed like unofficial partners since TFS's founding. Currently, however, TFS appears closer to the New Right ideology-wise, considering that the association's latest chairman (since March 2018), Aia Fog, is a member of the New Right, who ran for a seat on Copenhagen Council at the last local elections (2017). Fog left the Danish People's Party in 2016, stating that it had become "too complacent and languishing", and chose instead to join the New Right.



On 9 January 2020, TFS organised a panel debate in the Danish parliament titled “Who is Generation Identity?”. At this event, Frederik Rye Skov, the current leader of the Danish branch of the Generation Identity network (*Generation Identitær*), presented the organisation to a crowd that supposedly consisted mostly of New Right members. However, support for the extremist group can also be found within the Danish People’s Party: Marie Krarup (MP) has expressed sympathy with Generation Identity and previously made suggestions that the party’s youth organisation, DFU (*Dansk Folkepartis Ungdom*), should collaborate with the group. Despite becoming an official part of Generation Identity in 2017, the activity of the Danish branch seems currently to have stifled, both by COVID-19 restrictions and by the bans imposed by Facebook and Twitter in the last three years to tackle right-wing extremism.

Despite its general distancing from extremist groups, the Danish People’s Party, along with other European far-right parties, has expressed support for the national offshoot of the Pegida movement (*Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamification of the Occident*). In 2015, when the then Pegida-DK began organising protests in Aarhus and Copenhagen, led by a former member of the Danish People’s Party, the party expressed its support for the cause, stating, “We have great understanding for Pegida”. In the autumn of 2015, Pegida-DK changed its name to For Freedom and began organising protests in Copenhagen alone, due to low participant numbers. In January 2017, Tania Groth, the protest group leader, had a meeting with Martin Henriksen - the integration spokesperson for the Danish People’s Party - to discuss threats and harassment from left-wing protesters. At the time, Henriksen was contemplating initiating a legislative and policy proposal targeting the activist group Anti-Fascist Action (*Antifascistisk Aktion, AFA*) in particular.

Moreover, in 2018 when Denmark adopted the “burqa ban”, Henriksen attended a For Freedom demonstration in front of the Danish Parliament, where he was praised for his role in the policy development. The Danish People’s Party’s public association with more controversial Danish far-right actors might be interpreted as an attempt to recapture the votes that the party lost to the new, more radical right right-wing parties. These tendencies illustrate that the mainstreaming of right-wing populism opens up new opportunities at the far-right of the political spectrum.



## 1.3 The Sweden Democrats



*By Mathias Wäg.  
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The Sweden Democrats (*Sverigedemokraterna*) are unique among Nordic and European right-wing populist parties in having so clearly emerged from a far-right, post-fascist environment and yet succeeded in becoming one of the largest parties in their respective country. The party is not the same as it was when it was formed in 1988, as it has split several times and undergone numerous transformations, and the political landscape in which it operates has also changed since the party first emerged. What stages has the party passed through on its road to representation in the Swedish parliament, the *Riksdag*, and what obstacles has it had to overcome to join a government? And what policy changes has it embraced along the way?

The Sweden Democrats were formed ahead of the 1988 election through the merger of a small local protest party based mainly in the county of Skåne, the Progress Party (*Framstegspartiet*), and another grouping, Keep Sweden Swedish (*Bevara Sverige Svenskt*). The members of Keep Sweden Swedish came in turn from the national-socialist Nordic Realm Party (*Nordiska rikspartiet*) and the fascist New Swedish Movement (*Nysvenska rörelsen*), the two most important right-wing extremist organisations that represented a link to the right-wing groupings of the 1930s and the new far right.

The new party did not manage to get any candidates elected to municipal councils in its first election, but it was only a few votes away from doing so in the case of the Vårgårda local authority in western Sweden. Its campaigns in the early 1990s stressed opposition to refugee reception centres for asylum seekers fleeing the civil war in Yugoslavia. The party's main activities in its early years involved extra-parliamentary activities in the form of demonstrations and gatherings held on significant national anniversaries. In this way, it initially worked on establishing a party presence in the streets.

## The Sweden Democrats and the Far Right

Not only did the Sweden Democrats have their roots in far-right groupings, but branches of and spin-offs from the party have laid the groundwork for various Swedish white-power organisations. Indeed, the Sweden Democrats, in particular its youth movements, became a breeding ground for far-right organisations. By the mid-1990s, Sweden had become the world leader in the production of white-power music, with local chapters of the Sweden Democrats and their youth movements playing a key role in popularising that music scene.

The party's first youth organisation, Sweden Democratic Youth (*Sverigedemokratisk ungdom*), was dissolved in 1995, after its members, at the same time as they were building up their own organisation, also forged the network Young National Socialists (*Unga nationalsocialister*). Via their magazine, and later their website *Infor 14*, the Young National Socialists created a movement which embraced the non-affiliated nationalists and old comrades' associations that played a vital part in the wave of neo-Nazi terrorism in 1999, and later in the demonstrations – involving international participation – "against anti-Swedish sentiment" in Salem outside Stockholm. The Sweden Democrats' new youth branch, Nationalist Youth (*Nationell ungdom*), founded the Swedish Resistance Movement (*Svenska motståndsrörelsen*), today called the Nordic Resistance Movement (*Nordiska motståndsrörelsen*), an openly national-socialist paramilitary organisation.

In the mid-1990s, the Sweden Democrats changed leaders, replacing Anders Klarström (a previous member of the Nordic Realm Party) with Mikael Jansson, who was given the task of cleaning up the party and drawing a clear line between it and the far right. This led to expulsions and defections, and in 2001, the Stockholm party organisation and many other members closely associated with party organiser Tor Paulsson established the National Democrats (*Nationaldemokraterna*), resulting in the biggest split in the Sweden Democrats' history.

From the start, the Sweden Democrats were characterised by internal conflicts between innovators and traditionalists. The innovators were found mainly in Skåne and the traditionalists in Stockholm and Gothenburg. After 2001, the innovators gained control of the new youth organisation, headed by Jimmie Åkesson. In 2005, the Youth League (*Ungdomsförbundet*), under Åkesson, managed to take over the entire party by outmanoeuvring the traditionalist

faction, but inside the party, this event has continued to result in tension, rifts and expulsions of party members. However, it was only after this change in leadership that the party's success story began.

### **Anti-establishment Populism**

The anti-establishment populism that emerged in the other Nordic countries in the 1970s and 1980s did not take root in Sweden, except in Skåne where a party based on the Danish model was founded in the 1980s and secured election to local authorities in many places. The Skåne anti-establishment parties united at a regional level behind the party list For Skåne (*Skånes väl*) in 1998. The first populist party at the national level in Sweden was New Democracy (*Ny demokrati*), which took the *Riksdag* by storm in the 1991 election when it became the party holding the balance of power. That new party quickly disintegrated and dropped out of the *Riksdag* in the 1994 election.

It was the collapse of New Democracy and the conflicts inside For Skåne that enabled Jimmie Åkesson to found a new party, the Sweden Democrats. In Skåne, Åkesson negotiated an electoral pact with For Skåne, after which the Sweden Democrats picked up the local supporters of the other anti-establishment parties, thereby eliminating them one by one. In the 2002 election, the Sweden Democrats became the largest party that was not represented in the *Riksdag*, and the party strengthened further in the 2006 election, building up a strong base in southern Skåne and Blekinge, where the majority of the party's 280 municipal council seats were located. When the party entered the *Riksdag* after the 2020 election, the largest share of the votes cast for its candidates for the Swedish parliament came from Skåne, and it had its 14 best local council results in Skåne. The party had a poorer showing in the rest of the country.

However, it was not only the backing of voters in Skåne that got the Sweden Democrats into the *Riksdag*. A plethora of "alternative media" had also emerged – a virtual popular movement on the internet involving a lot of pundits and commentators. This was where the Sweden Democrats' "culture war" was waged, and the party acquired a lively group of followers on the internet. The party stood out from the others in the parliament because of its strong internet presence and its interaction on social media. The largest pro-Sweden Democrat website, *Avpixlat*, was operated by *Riksdag* member Kent Ekeröth.

The Sweden Democrats' media office set up various anonymous support sites and the party leadership engaged with their supporters through social media. In this way, the party had an alternative public sphere at its disposal and was able to deliver its message to a substantial section of the population. Media reports on posts by Sweden Democrat representatives on social media led to a series of racism scandals and expulsions of party members throughout the Sweden Democrats' first term in the Riksdag. A rapid increase in the number of party members elected to public office made it necessary to have a large-scale internal control mechanism to scrutinise these elected representatives' backgrounds and activities on social media, which soon caused frictions inside the party.

During the Sweden Democrats' second term in parliament, their increasingly radical internet advocates had become more of an embarrassment than an asset for the party, and the leadership started cutting its ties with alternative media. Party leader Jimmie Åkesson's sick leave (due to burnout) also caused a new conflict with the traditionalist faction in the party, which leaked the party's email server and its entire membership register to the media after a botched attempt at an internal coup. In 2015, the youth organisation was once again disbanded and its members expelled, along with the party's Stockholm organisation, which then formed a party called Alternative for Sweden (*Alternativ för Sverige*), taking the alternative media with it.

### **The Cordon Sanitaire**

Between 2006 and 2014, Sweden was governed by the Alliance, a political coalition of the four non-socialist parties in the *Riksdag*. When the Sweden Democrats were elected to parliament in 2010, their party held the balance of power. The Alliance then made an agreement on immigration with the Green Party (*Miljöpartiet*), which made it possible to establish a *cordon sanitaire* around the Sweden Democrats (i.e. to refuse to cooperate with them) in connection with their refugee policy.

When the red-green parties – an umbrella term for the three centre-left and left-wing political parties in Sweden: the Swedish Social Democratic Party (*Sveriges Socialdemokratiska Arbetarepartiet*), or the Social Democrats (*Socialdemokraterna*) for short, the Left Party (*Vänsterpartiet*) and the Green Party – formed a government after the 2014 election, the Sweden Democrats launched a more proactive policy in the *Riksdag*, exploiting their role as a

political kingmaker. Flying in the face of tradition, they voted in favour of the Alliance's proposed budget, which forced the Social Democrats to govern with a non-socialist budget.

Then, in December, the *Riksdag* parties, with the exception of the Sweden Democrats and the Left Party, which were excluded from the negotiations, forged an agreement under which minority governments would have their budgets approved. The December Agreement was supposed to remain in force until election day in 2022, in order to maintain the *cordon sanitaire* around the Sweden Democrats. But during the "refugee crisis" in 2015, there was a lively debate on immigration policy, which resulted in the Christian Democrats (*Kristdemokraterna*) withdrawing from the December Agreement.

Pressure to drop the December Agreement came from several quarters, including the Moderate Party (*Moderaterna*) and the Christian Democrats, who believed the Alliance should open the door to the Sweden Democrats and end the isolation strategy because the non-socialist right-wing could gain a majority in parliament if they made a conjunction with the Sweden Democrats. But there was also pressure from business and industry players. In spring 2015, several private-sector lobbyist organisations started visiting the Sweden Democrats, trying to persuade them to adopt non-socialist policies.

In the same period, the Sweden Democrats' economic affairs spokesperson, Oscar Sjöstedt, managed to persuade the party to move to the right on several public-welfare issues where the party had previously pursued a centrist policy. The most important issue was the Sweden Democrats' policy reversal regarding the issue of profiteering by private-sector providers of welfare services, a matter that the government made up of the Social Democrats and the Green Party, with the support of the Left Party, was investigating with a view to imposing restrictions. Representatives of lobbyist groups contributed directly to formulating the Sweden Democrats' energy and climate policies.

### **A Party Outside Coalitions**

The parliamentary deadlock between the left- and right-wing blocs persisted after the 2018 election. In January 2019, the Social Democrats, the Green Party, the Centre Party (*Centerpartiet*), and the Liberal Party (*Liberalerna*) concluded the January Agreement featuring 73 points, allowing the centrist parties to clear the way for the formation of another government bringing together the

Social Democrats and the Greens. As a result, the right-wing Alliance broke up, and the Christian Democrats and the Moderates were left out in the cold. Since then, these two parties have openly moved closer to the Sweden Democrats, while the coalition of the Social Democrats and the Greens, with the support of the Liberals and the Centre Party, has ensured that they do not exert an influence.

However, the Sweden Democrats have participated in majority coalitions at local government levels and have had their own municipal councillors. The coalition in the Sweden Democrats' flagship municipality of Sölvesborg in Blekinge illustrates what a conservative bloc's policies might look like if the Sweden Democrats were to be brought into government at the national level.

Despite their relative success on a national level, the Sweden Democrats have had trouble finding cooperation partners on a larger European scale. They have got stuck in a position where their post-fascist background has been an obstacle when trying to join the groups of parties to which they feel they belong. In the late 1990s, they joined Euronat, a political alliance established by the French National Front (*Front National*), but left after only three years and attempted instead to forge closer links with the Danish People's Party (*Dansk Folkeparti*).

Under pressure from the latter, the Sweden Democrats decided not to join the group in the European Parliament that the French National Front belonged to and instead teamed up with the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) (called "Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy" at the time), whose member parties also include Poland's Law and Justice (*Prawo i Sprawiedliwość, PiS*), Brothers of Italy (*Fratelli d'Italia*) and Spain's VOX.

The Sweden Democrats have never had a theoretical periodical or forum for ideological debate. In 2020, the party's former group leader, Mattias Karlsson, launched the conservative think tank *Oikos*, which is financed by the party, despite being officially independent. *Oikos* maintains close cooperation with ECR and its think tank, New Direction, whose executive director, Naweed Khan, is also a member of *Oikos's* board of directors. In Sweden, *Oikos* also has close contact with a student organisation, the Conservative League (*Konservativa förbundet*), which has clubs at most Swedish universities. Together, they organise the conservative leadership conference *Skoklosterakademin* to train the next generation of conservative ideologists and leaders.

## The Voter Base of the Far Right

The 2018 election was the first in which the Sweden Democrats did not double the number of votes the party received. The election results reveal a number of factors about the Sweden Democrats' voter base: It has had problems gaining support in large cities, among women voters, and in northern Sweden. Its support is greater among those aged 50+ than it is among younger age groups. In general, women are more likely to vote for left-wing parties, and fewer women in all age and occupational groups vote for the Sweden Democrats than do men in the same groups. Men have increasingly experienced a deterioration in their financial situation relative to women, even though men's incomes are still higher. Men have also seen a more rapid rise in unemployment during economic recessions than have women.

At Stockholm University's Institute for International Economic Studies (IIES), Sirius Dehdari conducted a study on how those who were given notice during the economic crisis in 2008–2009 voted in the 2010 election. Every fifth person who lost their job voted for the Sweden Democrats, which corresponds to the party's 10 percent increase in support in that election. Its vote among those who had been fired increased, particularly in socially disadvantaged areas with large immigrant populations.

Among trade union members, the Social Democrats were the largest party in the most recent national election in 2018, with the Moderates being the second largest, and the Sweden Democrats coming in third. Support for the Social Democrats in the Swedish Trade Union Confederation (*Landsorganisationen i Sverige*, LO) dropped from 60 percent in 2010 to 30 percent in 2018, with the party getting more votes from women than from men. In opinion polls carried out since that election, there has been an increase in the number of women LO voters considering voting for the Sweden Democrats.

In the 2019 opinion polls of LO members, there was a dead heat between the Social Democrats and the Sweden Democrats. One change seen among unionised voters is that those who previously voted for other right-wing parties now vote for the Sweden Democrats – worker conservatism in the unions has shifted further to the right, and this support is greater among those aged 50+ than it is among those who are 49 and younger.



## Swing Voters and Social Democrats

In 2018, the Institute for Future Studies conducted a study for the social-democratic think tank Arena on whether the Social Democrats' attempts to move closer to right-wingers' restrictive immigration policies might be a way to lure voters back. The premise was that 350,000 voters were wavering between the Social Democrats and the Sweden Democrats.

The study showed that voters who switched allegiance from the Social Democrats to the Sweden Democrats had far-right views on socio-economic issues, rather than a left-leaning stance as previously believed. A more restrictive migration policy is therefore no guarantee of regaining these voters. A substantial number of those who defected to the Sweden Democrats said the conservative Moderate Party would be their second choice, not the Social Democrats, if they had to vote for a party other than the Sweden Democrats. The voters who left the Social Democrats for the Sweden Democrats tended, to a greater extent than other Sweden Democrat voters, to view immigration as both an economic and a cultural threat.

In the 2018 election, the Sweden Democrats took almost as many voters from the right-wing Moderate Party (18 percent) as it did from the Social Democrats (19 percent). These were the two main sources of voters who switched to the Sweden Democrats between elections. Conversely, the Social Democrats took one percent of its voters, and the Moderates three percent of its voters in the same period, according to election surveys by Swedish public service television for the elections in 2014 and 2018.

In the 1990s, the parties in the *Riksdag* did not prioritise explaining how they differed from the Sweden Democrats. Anti-racist and anti-fascist work took place mainly in the form of street protests and demonstrations. At the local government level, the Sweden Democrats were denied political influence through the usual cooperation across bloc lines and coalitions between the left- and right-wing blocs. A lot of the work countering the Sweden Democrats was centred on journalistic investigations of the party's representatives, their political backgrounds, the offences of which they had been convicted, their ties to right-wing extremists and what they wrote anonymously on social media. There was no pushback on the party's actual policy proposals. Discussion of racism was the main theme. This all changed when the Sweden Democrats entered the *Riksdag* in 2010.



## Normalisation of the Sweden Democrats

During the party's first term in the *Riksdag*, the *cordon sanitaire* policy towards the Sweden Democrats had major support from all the parties on both sides of the political spectrum. The Sweden Democrats' fascist past was cited as a reason for keeping them out of the political decision-making process. In order to deprive them of the ability – as the party holding the balance of power – to influence refugee policy, the non-socialist parties made an immigration-policy agreement with the Green Party. During the Sweden Democrats' second term in parliament (2014–2018), right-wing movers and shakers and business and industry increasingly challenged the *cordon sanitaire* policy.

The Social Democrats, as part of their minority government, tried to maintain the Sweden Democrats' isolation with the December Agreement. Even after the Christian Democrats withdrew from the agreement, it continued to function, *de facto*, for the rest of the electoral period. However, the Social Democrats' rhetoric and strategy for countering the Sweden Democrats did change. The party toned down its previous emphasis on the Sweden Democrats' background, trying instead to demonstrate – in terms of real policy – how the Social Democrats were actually a non-socialist party by voting with the other non-socialist parties on most issues. The trade unions pursued this line of argument in an attempt to forestall voter defections among union members to the Sweden Democrats.

In the same period, the Sweden Democrats tried to sell themselves as a party outside bloc politics which pursued a centrist course on economic policy. In the party's third term in parliament (2018–present), the Social Democrats have been forced, once again, to change their strategy regarding the Sweden Democrats. Following the January Agreement, the Social Democrats have governed on a programme that is in part neoliberal, with the support of the Liberals and the Centre Party. The agreement involves a curtailment of rights in labour law (the Employment Protection Act) and restrictions on the right to strike, as well as proposals for the introduction of market rents on the housing market.

The January Agreement is justified with the argument that it enables the *cordon sanitaire* around the Sweden Democrats to be maintained. The party is once again being called neo-fascist, at the same time as the rhetoric about the Sweden Democrats being a supporting party for non-socialist econom-

ic policy has been toned down considerably, because the Social Democrats themselves, with the January Agreement, are making the same changes for the worse.

The January Agreement relies on support from the Left Party, and the tensions in Swedish politics in this parliamentary term have revolved around how the Left Party has tried to block the neoliberal proposals in the agreement by threatening to bring down the government if they are implemented, whereas the government, with its supporting parties, has pointed to the risk of the Sweden Democrats forming part of a new, non-socialist government if the current government collapses, in order to push through its policies and force the Left Party to vote for them.

## 2.1 Right-Wing Populism Seen from the Danish Parliament



*By Rosa Lund.*

*Member of the Danish parliament  
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In Denmark, we are currently experiencing a change in the political landscape and a shift in the exponents of right-wing populism.

For many years, the Danish People's Party (*Dansk Folkeparti*) has ruled on the farthest right of the political spectrum. In recent years, the party has gone through dramatic ups and downs: In the parliamentary election in 2015, the party managed to attain 21.1 percent of the votes, making them the second-largest party in Danish politics for the first time in their history. They became the largest right-wing party with 37 out of the 179 mandates in the *Folketing* which meant surpassing the Liberal Party (*Venstre*) that they had previously supported as the leading party in a minority government.

Despite the success of the Danish People's Party, which was generally attributed to their strict and consistent anti-immigration and anti-Muslim agenda, they turned down the opportunity to be part of the government coalition. Instead, they again opted for the role as support party, but still secured Lars Løkke Rasmussen from the Liberal Party a second term as Prime Minister.

This decision was met with widespread criticism from large parts of their voter segment and mainstream media in Denmark. In the following 2019 election, they lost more than half of their previous mandates (from 37 to just 16 seats in parliament), and their declining of formal power as a government party is generally seen as a major reason for the poor result.

### **Pressure From the Far Right**

The downturn for the Danish People's Party can also be attributed to the emergence of two new extremist right-wing parties: The New Right (*Ny Bor-*

*gerlige*) and Hard Line (*Stram Kurs*). Of the two, only the New Right managed to win mandates in parliament, and currently occupies four (out of 179) seats. However, the other, Hard Line, was not too far behind, and with 1.8 percent of the votes, they were only missing 0.2 percent to clear the election threshold of two percent.

The emergence and popularity of the new parties are exponents of the extreme right movements that are currently gaining traction across Europe, and they demonstrate that Denmark is no exception. The hard truth is that the political landscape in Denmark is being heavily influenced by right-wing populist discourse – and it is no longer just coming from the right-wing parties. Between the last two elections, Denmark’s largest party, the Social Democrats (*Socialdemokratiet*) – technically a left-wing party with a historically strong connection to the trade unions and the workers’ movements - has taken a sharp turn to the right, especially on migration and integration issues.

During the 2019 electoral campaign, the party explicitly proclaimed its wish to “take care of the immigration policy” and remedy what they have described as “mistakes” that they made in the 1990s, where the party had a more lenient approach to immigration policies. The party itself has admitted that its success at the most recent election can, in large parts, be attributed to the increased focus on anti-immigration policies – a strategy that they implemented to purge a large chunk of the Danish People’s Party’s voter base. However, it cannot be assumed that this has simply been a temporary strategy, rather, the Social Democrats seem to have wholeheartedly committed to these new changes. They seem to have bought into the idea that resources for welfare and resources for “foreigners” are somehow mutually exclusive and that there exists an incompatible distinction between caring for the socially exposed Danes and promoting a humane migration and integration politics. This belief creates a false narrative of “us” and “them” – rhetoric that has been used by the Danish People’s Party and the right-wing for a long time.

### **Everything is Migration Politics**

Right-wing populism in Denmark has since the 90’s placed migration and integration politics at the centre of the political discourse and, due to the recent development with the Social Democrats, it is now happening to a degree where it is possible to claim that practically everything is migration politics. The Social Democrats have joined their voices to the group of right-wing par-

ties that yells “but what about the immigrants” at everything in the Danish parliament. One of the ways they practice this is by including the Minister of Immigration and Integration, Mattias Tesfaye, in every public event, debate, or press meeting regardless of whether the topic is actually relevant for his department or not.

This means that migration is now always brought up in every debate about any topic at all: If the topic is Covid-19, we are suddenly in a discussion about how some municipalities or cities that have a high infection rate also has a high rate of migrants and whether or not allowing people to celebrate their non-Danish holidays is a risk to the public health. If the topic is education, the focus point becomes how many children of migrants or “non-western foreigners” there are in this or that school. If the topic is in any way related to our justice system – like our current debates on a reform of the police forces – the right-wing parties manage to talk exclusively about the crimes committed by people with migrant backgrounds.

The way in which immigration has taken over diverse political talking points and transform them into single-issue policies can be exemplified through the Danish “*Ghettolisten*” (the Ghetto Legislation). This legislation targets public housing areas that have a larger concentration of groups of ethnic minorities, usually Muslims. The legislation thereby indirectly focuses on the issue of migrants in a way that emphasises crime and unemployment statistics instead of treating it like the housing issue that it is. However, the focus on migration is only one of three of the main strands in the strategic success of right-wing populists. The all-encompassing focus on migration is accompanied by two other main tendencies, namely, the attempt at invalidating our arguments through tone policing and the shift from economic politics to value politics.

### **Beyond Tone Policing**

The all-encompassing focus on migration issues has caused a disruption in the political conversation and has made it difficult for the Red-Green Alliance to discuss the subjects that matter to us. It has also meant that we are always one step behind in the debates because we always have to start by addressing the migrant-angle. And this development has left us defensive because we are not allowed to cut straight to the point and address our actual issues and policies. Furthermore, the right-wing has managed to use this defensiveness

against us. In Denmark, we tend to talk a lot about how we feel. It is not uncommon to hear arguments like “I do not like the way you said that” or “I do not like the way you talk” in the parliament, in retribution to our attempts at shifting the conversation and talking about the policies that matter to us.

Of course, we should still be allowed to use our feelings in politics, and there are topics where it is totally warranted – if we, for example, are talking about politicians abusing their power, it is entirely justified to express outrage – but when we are discussing issues like immigration, it tends to hurt us more than it helps.

Furthermore, we, on the left, should be extra wary when using our feelings in political discussions, because of the tendency that we have observed, at least in Denmark, where voters react negatively when we argue with too much feeling. It is, therefore, important to mind how we speak - especially on topics like migration. We should, of course, still be allowed to feel strongly for the arguments and policies that we advocate, but we must mind how we speak on such matters – we need to focus on our solutions for the problems and not the problems themselves.

The issue of arguing from emotions is not an issue for the right-wing, at least not to the same extent: When we on the left talk about our feelings in relation to things like immigration politics, people tend to view it as elitism and we are seen as a bunch of fancy academics that know all the right things to say, but who are out of touch with what the people need. But when people from the right does it, it is much more likely to be received as expressions of the concerns and fears of the public.

To turn this tide, we cannot let ourselves be caught in a quarrel over the “tone” of the debate – and we cannot accept, that debates on basic human rights are reduced to clashes of different opinions based on feelings. For matters like the Ghetto Legislation, this would mean changing our approach: we do not need to talk about how we feel that the legislation is racist or how it is disproportionately targeting minority groups. We need to talk about the rights and policy issues that the legislation entails.

## **Value Politics**

It is time for the left to regain power over the debate, starting with the issue of value politics. The way to do this is by talking about rights because rights do not sway under the pressure of fearmongering. Rights are a matter of the law

and the constitution. We all have the same rights, no matter what our belief systems, the colour of our skin, our gender, and our sexuality may be.

If we return to the example of the Ghetto Legislation, I believe that the left could win the debate if we reclaim it as a matter of housing politics and living circumstances. This would allow us to talk about actual socio-economic issues and how we need places in our big cities, like Copenhagen and Aarhus, where people with a normal income level can afford to live. We could talk about the things that matter to us and the policies that we on the left think are important for our society.

The tendency of diverting the political debate from economic politics and instead focus on value politics is also part of the strategy of the populist right-wing parties. In value politics, the fear of foreigners and everything foreign or “un-Danish” is at the centre of the debate. It is important for the left to distinguish between the real problems of integration and the all too simple (but very clear) populist answers to the promoted generalized fear and feeling of insecurity in the public. Our answer to right-wing populism must be an answer to inequalities. We must develop and promote realistic solutions to integration issues. We must stand firm on defending basic rights – and defending the claim that refugees and migrants also hold these rights. We cannot hide from right-wing populism or feel above debating with them. We must disprove their fake news and insist on basic facts and basic rights.

### **Can Right-Wing Populism Be Ignored?**

Another issue that the left is facing has to do with the way we are forced to fight with the right-wing parties. Currently, the Danish People’s Party is not our biggest issue: They are too busy competing with the New Right and the Social Democrats. However, the current crisis of the Danish People’s Party is not a victory for us but, rather ironically, a victory for them and for the right because it is a direct result of their agenda being legitimised and infiltrating the general political discourse. The Social Democrats’ bending to the loud minority of xenophobic voices among voters shows us just how commonly accepted the right’s political stances on issues of migration and immigration have become. This is also the reason why we should be very careful in how we chose to fight back.

An issue that we try to be very aware of in the Red-Green Alliance is the aggressiveness of the New Right. The issue is that, while their extremist politics

regarding migration and nationalism do, of course, pose a huge problem for us – and I do believe that we should and will fight them on these issues - they are currently making it very difficult for us to debate with them, especially in parliamentary discussions.

The New Right is very dedicated to picking a fight with the Red-Green Alliance and the other parties in the parliament and they are persistent. They actively try to provoke us and use the footage for their social media. They do this in order to further their own point of view, acting the role of the “under-dog” or the “voice of reason” in these fights, which has a massive ethos appeal for the voters, and which makes everyone who opposes them or fights them on these issues seem elitist and distanced from the people by comparison. It is a cheap tactic that is undeniably linked to the recent rhetorical developments in U.S. politics under Donald Trump’s presidency – but it is also very effective at capturing the public.

At the same time, it is absolutely necessary that we speak up against the populist discourse and prevent the right from conquering the public agenda and establishing their claims as truths. This is our core dilemma, and it becomes increasingly important in matters of immigration policies, because, as we have seen with the overall development of the anti-migration sentiment in Danish politics, the more we talk about it – even if we try to argue against it – we are providing the right-wing with a platform and amplifying their voices.

However, this is not to say that we should still be defensive on the topic of migration, on the contrary, we need to be assertive in our opposition, but we need to be smart about it. If we are assertive, we can determine the angle and the topic and focus on the things that are important. If we are assertive, we can talk about economic issues. If we are assertive, we can talk about welfare. We need to be assertive because then we can stop talking about migration issues all the time. But in order for us to do so, we must drop the standard parables that we use in these kinds of debates. We need to address the hard problems and the difficult dilemmas because when we shy away from them, we lose the battle over value politics.

### **Winning over the Public Opinion**

Part of the issue is also that, for a long time, the politics of the Danish People’s Party was considered “symbolic politics”. The attempt at disregarding their



policies through this labelling has backfired and it is time that we stop referring to it as such. We called it symbolic because it does not work, however, the consequences of legislation based on this kind of politics are very real: it is real to people who can no longer wear a Burqa; it is real to people who can no longer move freely across borders; it is real to people who now receive double punishment because they live in the ghettos. These kinds of policies might be false advertisements that panders to a scared, xenophobic voter base but that has not stopped them from being implemented by both the former and the current government, and their consequences affect the everyday lives of our citizens.

My last point is therefore about what happens outside of the parliament. And because of the situation with the Social Democrats on the right-wing, we stand before a difficult task when it comes to winning over the people. We need to convince the public and get them on our side – and we need to do this through coordinated activist efforts. Like with all good activism, our job is to take the fight to the streets. Currently, this kind of effort is limited by the Covid pandemic but can start preparing, so that we are ready when the time comes. When we can go outside again, we need to reconnect with our activist support base; we need to start knocking on doors and talking to the people at their eye level.

We need to engage with people in a conversation and ask them about their concerns – we need to ask them what they are afraid of, why they think Muslims are bad people, or why they are opposed to movements like Black Lives Matter. Maybe this approach seems a bit naïve, but we need that kind of dialogue. As we have seen in the last couple of national elections in Denmark, the right-wing parties are on a rise, which means that they have support from a lot of voters. The only way for us to fight the influx of right-wing policies in the parliament is therefore to talk to these voters and engage in conversation with them to see if we can understand them and maybe make them change their minds.

We do this by addressing their concerns: If, for example, we consider the pressing problem with gang violence that we are facing in Denmark now, we need to focus not just on the issue itself, but also on how we can talk about it in a way that makes people feel heard. The left can sometimes tend to overlook certain kinds of concerns if they address a symbolic politics' issue, but

if we only focus on the issue of racism in the police force, that does very little to address the problems of a person who might have genuine worry over the amount of gang violence in their neighbourhood. Instead, of focus on issues as only matters of politics, and not on the personal aspect, makes the people feel ignored.

My point is that the anti-migrant and anti-Muslim fearmongering of the right-wing has had very real consequences that needs to be addressed for them to be undone – but we need to take them up with the people, not with the New Right or any of the other populists on the right. This is how I believe that we can turn the tide and fight back against right-wing populism and extremism, both in Denmark and across all of Europe.

## 2.2 “The Floor” and Parliamentary Tactics



*By Håkan Blomqvist.*

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The raid on the US Congress that followed Donald Trump’s claims of election fraud and calls to action – like the political consequences thereof – pedagogically illuminates a central starting point for discussions concerning parliamentary tactics against right-wing populism and fascism. The fight within decision-making councils cannot be isolated from social struggles.

“You are only as strong at the negotiation table as you are on the floor”. With his experience as a unionist, the former speaker of the Swedish Left Party (*Vänsterpartiet*), Jonas Sjöstedt, was able to consider the relationship between the parliamentary game and social relations of power in society. Strong social movements and opinions, protests, fights, and activism – and the pressure for change’s impact on the public – created preconditions for parliamentary politics and tactics, which in turn might influence developments on “the floor”.

In the communist movement from way back, parliamentarism was entirely secondary and the parliament was virtually reduced to a pulpit for the revolutionary message. The changes that took place throughout the 1900s, both in the status of the parliament and in the communist imagination, prioritised result-oriented politics. But “the floor” – the activity and strength of labour and of people’s movements – was long viewed as the sole condition for parliamentary action around the negotiating table.

The drastic weakening in the 21<sup>st</sup> century of people’s movement-led parties, union movements and the widespread popular organisations of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, alongside the increasing importance of the media, policy entrepreneurs, and the professionalisation of state-paid politics, has reinforced the focus on politics as an independent parliamentary power play. Neoliberalism’s reduction of political influence in favour of the market seems to have robbed “the

negotiation table” of its former dependence on “the floor”. “You are only as strong at the negotiation table as you are in the media” is perhaps a more accurate formulation of the not-so-new parliamentary reality, however deceptive this might be.

Social processes tend, if conditions allow, to develop beneath the surface and, with growing strength, acquire the carriers and tools they need to create influence. A textbook example is precisely the way that right-wing populism and its nationalistic anti-migration bias was resisted and silenced both by established policies and the public – and on “the floor”.

### **Crush Fascism in its Cradle**

In the early 1970s, left-wing activists in Sweden tried to “crush fascism in the cradle” by preventing the remaining, increasingly elderly, Hitler supporters – together with a few younger recruits – from parading in honour of “warrior king” Charles XII of Sweden. The ideological and physical grassroots struggles of the 1980s and 1990s against the attempts of the white power movement and neo-fascists to obtain space in Swedish society were often accused of paying too much attention to these extreme right-wing forces – but the contribution made by these struggles may also have held back the most militant fragments of the right.

By contrast, the fight taking place on “the floor” was futile in its attempt to prevent right-wing extremists of different backgrounds from finding new tools and alliances. The far right had its first breakthrough in Sweden in the 1980s, where it experienced a significant increase in support across a few municipalities. However, it has enjoyed a second wind, brought on by the 2006 election where the Sweden Democrats (*Sverigedemokraterna*) won more than 280 municipal seats across the country. However, as they secured barely three percent of the votes in the parliamentary election that year, they did not win any parliamentary seats, but the state and municipal funding still provided millions for the party during the following term.

Thus, the party was able to pay more representatives and build a stronger organisational system. This was crucial for its entry into the Swedish parliament (*Riksdag*) in 2010, with 5.7 percent voter support, which made a huge difference in terms of financial resources. It took around 40 years of battles on the ground, with local advancements and setbacks, divisions, and ideological

changes before the far right conquered the public and won its first seat in the Swedish parliament.

### **Not a Moment's Rest**

It is not difficult to see the external connections. The end of the long economic upswing that followed the Second World War, ushering in neoliberal policies and the demolition of social welfare, as well as the changes in the country's demographics, created scope for both traditional and novel forms of xenophobia. In the beginning, the extreme right wing spread its efforts across different sectors: political, cultural, and militant. As the extreme nationalism and race war of a previous era became increasingly distant, the lingering ghosts of these outdated ideas were able to seep in and grab hold of the minds of a new generation – adapted to the costumes of the changing times.

For the left, the attempt at blocking and exorcising the racist right-wing extremism followed the politics from “the floor”, through municipal gatherings, to the level of national politics. Over the years, the various anti-racist resolutions of the Left Party established that the Sweden Democrats were to be considered as a uniquely “racist, right-wing extremist party” whose policies profoundly diverged from Sweden's other non-socialist parties. Before the Sweden Democrats gained a foothold in parliament, the left's main objective was to contribute to a broad public anti-racist movement, to combat racist messages everywhere, and to “not give the racists a moment's rest”.

The strategy was limited to non-violent actions, but the general idea was to never let the racist propaganda stand unopposed. Wherever the Sweden Democrats propagated their views, Left Party supporters should be present “within 24 hours” to distribute flyers and expose the racists' lies, organising counter-meetings and demonstrations. Simultaneously, no “free publicity” or legitimacy should be allotted to the racists through debates in schools or other public forums. Rather, representatives from the Sweden Democrats should only be countered in local assemblies or wherever they had a “strong anchoring”.

The increased influence of the Sweden Democrats in the *Riksdag* did not immediately change that strategy. On the contrary, in 2014 the Left Party emphasised how “the collective goal in the relationship with the Sweden Democrats and similar parties in parliament is to avoid normalisation and prevent other

parties from following in their political footsteps". There would never be any cooperation with the Sweden Democrats, politically or electorally, at the municipal, regional, or parliamentary level, and "collective motions, proposals, opinions or other documents" or voting for proposals from the Sweden Democrats – whatever these entailed – would never be acceptable in parliament. It was stressed that the Left Party should form its own policies "without consideration to how the Sweden Democrats might position themselves".

If the Sweden Democrats were to vote in favour of Left Party proposals, that "is not something we can influence or have to take responsibility for". The Left Party also demanded the same blockade against the Sweden Democrats from the other parties – from the parliamentary floor all the way to the "negotiation table". For a long time, a similar approach was adopted by the Social Democrats (*Sveriges Socialdemokratiska Arbetarparti*) and the non-socialist parties, but that blockade has now long since been broken.

This first happened, almost inevitably, in the media, as the Sweden Democrats gained ground and became increasingly newsworthy. In 2016, conservatives attempted to engage in local collaborations at the municipal level. Following the Sweden Democrats' major electoral success in 2018, such collaborations are now happening in numerous municipalities, particularly in the south, where the Sweden Democrats are often amongst the two largest parties.

### **A Fascist Party in the Swedish Parliament?**

A view within the leadership of the Left Party is that the Sweden Democrats are not only a "racist right-wing extremist party", as stated in the resolutions, but also a fascist party. This view is seemingly not unique to the Left Party since a similar judgment is also to be found within the Social Democrats, as expressed by party leader and Prime Minister Stefan Löfven in 2014.

It was with the motive – or pretext – of keeping a "neo-fascist party" out of reach of any political influence that the Social Democrats invited the non-socialist Alliance (the Moderate Party (*Moderaterna*), the Centre Party (*Centerpartiet*), and the Liberal Party (*Liberalerna*)), who had lost their position in government at the 2014 election, to collaborate. "I am never going to act in a way that will deliver the power of the development of this country to a neo-fascist single-issue party," declared Löfven, as he offered the non-socialist parties influence on all political fronts. However, the Alliance chose to reject the offer in favour of the so-called December Agreement.

This outcome meant that the Social Democrats and the Green Party (*Miljöpartiet de Gröna*) could build a government with support from the Left Party, without obstruction or blocking of the budget proposal from the non-socialist parties. Together, the Sweden Democrats and the non-socialists could have held the majority in parliament. But any collaboration with the Sweden Democrats was still unthinkable.

This meant that the Left Party was able to influence several important aspects of government policies, as it could operate outside of the government while maintaining its position as its parliamentary foundation. In fact, the 2014–2018 term is commonly considered a political success story for the Left Party. The party managed to successfully implement around 80 important reforms, from free dental care and medicine for children to increased benefits during sick leave, and better student pay. At the same time, the Sweden Democrats were kept out of parliamentary influence. However, after nine months, in October 2015, the Christian Democrats (*Kristdemokraterna*) had had enough and left the agreement under their new party leader Ebba Busch. The Christian Democrats now wanted to oppose the government, even if this meant relying on the support of the Sweden Democrats.

Meanwhile, the conservative Moderate Party had also acquired a new leader, Anna Kinberg Batra, who was trying to shift the party's migration and refugee policies away from the liberal positions of the former leader, Fredrik Reinfeldt. This happened in the wake of the "refugee crisis" of 2015, when 160,000 asylum-seeking refugees arrived in Sweden, double the number in the previous year, which in turn represented a doubling of the number of asylum seekers from what was previously recorded during the 2000s.

### **The Turning Point**

"My Europe will build no walls," declared Prime Minister Stefan Löfven as recently as September 2015, in front of 15,000 people in Stockholm gathered in defence of a refugee policy based on solidarity. They represented the strong public opinion that mobilised civil society in favour of major practical efforts under the motto "Refugees Welcome". But just a few weeks later, after pressure from local politicians and authorities, the government, comprising the Social Democrats and the Green Party, changed course, and implemented tougher border controls and restrictions on immigration.

It was during this period that the Christian Democrats started to break their taboo on working with right-wing populists and that the Moderate Party's conservative leader Anna Kinberg Batra began her reassessment. A year later, she declared an end to her commitment to a liberal migration policy and envisaged the possibility of cooperating with the Sweden Democrats on individual issues. The Moderates could now also, she decided, consider presenting a joint budget with the rest of the Alliance parties by autumn and overturn the incumbent government parties – with the support of the Sweden Democrats.

This attracted strong criticism from the liberal media, the governing parties, and the Left Party, but the more important factor behind Kinberg Batra's subsequent resignation was the internal willingness, within the Moderate Party, to go further. Ulf Kristersson became the new party leader in autumn 2017, and with him the party's willingness for parliamentary, and future governmental, cooperation with the Sweden Democrats increased. And thus, the Moderate Party's policy of non-cooperation with the extreme right-wing populists was broken.

The parliamentary elections in autumn of 2018 brought a new, drastic increase in votes and seats for the Sweden Democrats. The Alliance parties now stood to gain a crushing majority if they could make a united front with the Sweden Democrats. During the long governmental negotiations, the Social Democrats tried to repeat their 2014 offer to the non-socialists: let us work together and make compromises on all political fronts to keep the right-wing populists out of power. Thus, the once successful alliance between the liberal and conservative parties in parliament split up.

While two of Sweden's non-socialist parties, the Centre Party and the Liberals, reached an agreement with the Social Democrats and the Greens, the Moderates and the Christian Democrats remained in opposition but kept the door open to the Sweden Democrats. The "neo-fascists" had, as promised by Löfven and the Left Party, been kept out of government, but the price was high. The January Agreement that the Social Democrats and the Green Party established with the Centre Party and the Liberals at the beginning of 2019 excluded the Sweden Democrats from having any influence in government, but it also explicitly excluded the Left Party.

The so-called *förnedringsklausulen* (humiliation clause) against the Left Party was one of the conditions imposed by the Liberals and the Centre Party.



The agreement's comprehensive 73-step programme contained an entire policy for the government, entailing neoliberal market solutions on several issues. Gone were many of the remnants of the leftist influence, like the plans to stop private profiteering on public welfare, implement stricter taxation of the richest, and expand public welfare.

### **An Independent Left-Wing Opposition**

The Left Party, which also made strong progress during the 2018 election, faced a drastically changed situation in parliament. Instead of the influential position it had held in the previous electoral period, it was now excluded by the governing parties. Allowing the Moderates to build a blue-brown government with support from the "neo-fascists" was of course unthinkable, but so was the idea of accepting the 73-step programme of the January Agreement.

"The Left Party is the only party that clearly states that we want a government without bourgeois parties and right-wing extremists," declared the party's 2018 campaign platform. The party then chose to let Löfven's red-green government slip through by abstaining during its vote in parliament, albeit with fierce criticism of the January Agreement and with the promise of an absolute red line: if the new government put forward the January Agreement's deal regarding rents set by market price or legislation against job security, the Left Party would vote to remove Löfven. That this would only be possible with the support of the conservative right and the Sweden Democrats was quickly criticised, most prominently by the supporters of the Social Democrats, for breaking with the policy of isolation against "neo-fascism" that had been the Left Party's guiding principle.

In the Left Party's new, more independent role in parliament, the task at hand was to "create a policy positioned to the left of the government's politics, together with parties outside of government". It was obvious that this could only mean the right-wing parties. It was a question of negotiations and settlements on individual issues, "but only if it makes Sweden a more just and equal country". However, that the Sweden Democrats could be one of these parties was completely ruled out.

Leaving aside the political company it has had to keep, the role of the Left Party as independent opposition in parliament has yielded some important results. The party's activity has succeeded in creating parliamentary major-

ities against cutbacks or in favour of improvements in alignment with the party's ideology on more than 10 occasions since the autumn of 2019, both through negotiations with the Moderate Party and the Christian Democrats and through proposals that included a vote from the Sweden Democrats. It has successfully pushed for caps on EU taxation, increased public spending on municipal welfare, stricter rules against the exploitation of immigrant labour, nationalisation of personalised assistance, and more reasonable assessments on health insurance.

Perhaps most remarkable of all was how the Left Party, with the support of the Moderates, the Christian Democrats, and the Sweden Democrats, in December 2019 pursued a vote of no confidence in the Minister of Employment if the government did not put an end to the chaotic privatisation of the employment service. This could be said to mark the beginning of the Left Party's new role as an independent opposition party.

It is, of course, widely recognised that the right-wing parties had ulterior motives for supporting proposals from the Left Party, which had nothing to do with enforcing leftist policies. The support from the Sweden Democrats is essentially about finding ways to establish a united right-wing front to secure future participation in government. At the same time, the political stances of both the Moderate Party and the Christian Democrats on migration, integration, crime-fighting policies, and nationalism have moved closer to those of the Sweden Democrats.

Can the red line hold? This is not the place to discuss the political and technical struggles for job security and rents set by market price. However, it is currently difficult to ignore the January Agreement, with its legislative threat, which is about to weaken employment protection and invite free-market investors into every new construction project. Is it then possible for the Left Party to keep its promise to overthrow the red-green government – even if this is only possible with the support from the blue-brown right, which would also include the Sweden Democrats?

## **A Historical Analogy**

If the current political landscape is in any way related to that of the past, this scenario would of course be an astonishing situation for a left-wing party to find itself in. When the Left Party was a communist party during the 1930s

and 1940s, it propagated a “people’s front against fascism”, a strategy that had significant meaning in countries where fascist movements lurked, like France and Spain. The communists forged an alliance against fascism, not just with the Social Democrats but also with the non-socialist democrats.

At that time, the opposition from the revolutionary left-wing warned against these kinds of “popular fronts” with parties from the bourgeoisie, because they worried that showing leniency to conservative allies would demoralise the proletarian anti-fascists and undermine the resistance – which was indeed the outcome in many cases. However, the earlier communists’ disregard of the difference between “bourgeois democracy” and dictatorship had recently led to the terrible defeat against the Nazis in Germany. The vote by the German communist party in Prussia, in collaboration with the Nazi Party, to overthrow the local social-democratic state government was a disgraceful act of defeat.

The historical differences in comparison with the current situation are, of course, significant. Back then, the industrial world and its inhabitants were marked by the aftermath of the First World War, famine, and poverty. The democratic systems were new and fragile, and the prevailing ideological view was based on nationalism and pseudo-scientific racism. A mass of grassroots movements marched to both the right and the left. Revolutions, civil wars, and class struggles shaped the collective memory and expectations held by the generations of the interwar period.

In our “post-political” era, the current battles seem like pale – or imagined – reminders of the conditions of the past. The old concepts have gained new meaning as they have adapted to the changing times and absorbed new content, while new expressions disguise their initial context. While the term “revolution” has been scrubbed of any association with bullets and gunpowder, “right-wing populism” is masquerading as fascism, and the charge of “fascism” is readily hurled at ideals that previously belonged to conservatives – in a constant battle over the right to define terminology.

But if we consider the analogy of the interwar period, and we deem a party like the Sweden Democrats to be “fascists” – actual fascists, rather than the term just being meant as an insult – the “people’s front policy” of the Social Democrats, together with the non-socialist middle, is akin to the pursuit of a people’s front in the 1930s. And in an echo of the experiences of 1930s Europe,

the Social Democrats are paying the price by selling out on their own programme and many important working-class issues.

Meanwhile, the new strategy that the Left Party has implemented after being locked out of power seems eerily reminiscent of that of the former German communist party, in that they are both examples of leftist parties being eager to overthrow a condemnable social-democratic government, even if it means having to secure support from the fascists. However, in the 1930s this was done in the hope of an immediate revolution and, consequently, a seizure of government power by the communists. This time, the only outcome to look forward to is a governmental crisis, a new election, or a possible reshuffle of government without impairments to job security and rent.

This kind of outcome has been contested, especially by critics from within the Left, who were fighting for tougher ultimatums against Löfven's red-green government from the start – even at the price of a new election. These critics thought that the Left Party's success in pushing through reforms, with support even from the Sweden Democrats, meant that the right-wing populists acquired access to the parliamentary arena and had more scope to collaborate with the Moderate Party and the Christian Democrats. Rossana Dinamarca, a Left Party member of the *Riksdag*, explained the criticism in a drastic statement: "The victories we are currently winning might turn out to be Pyrrhic victories when we have a government led by the Sweden Democrats which we helped to launder."

But while the Left Party's threat of a vote of no confidence against the Social Democrat government is an expression of a new parliamentary strategy, it is not an unprecedented one. Party Secretary Aron Etzler remembers how the party joined forces with the non-socialist parties in 1990 to overturn a social-democratic government when it tried to introduce a freeze on pricing and wages, as well as a ban on strikes and an increase in strike-related fines. The social-democratic government was reconstituted and came back without the strike ban, meaning that the operation had been a success.

But here, too, we need to consider a big difference compared with the current situation. The conservative and non-socialist parties at the time did not contain extremist right-wingers or fascist elements, if this is how we choose to define the Sweden Democrats. The labour movements were still strong, and representatives of several hundred thousand workers belonging to trade

unions had mobilised against cutbacks just a couple of years beforehand. Internationally, the Berlin Wall had come down, but the perestroika Soviet Union was still, to a degree, a representative for a socialist alternative. By the late 1980s, the looming threat of a power grab from the right was not a significant possibility.

Today, the situation is different. And in the wake of the raid on the US Capitol by the American far right, few would dare neglect the threat against liberal democracy. But, in that case, what options do we have?

### **Strategic Main Line**

Many left-leaning activists consider “the floor” to be the main starting point and the most important strategic factor. A new strategy document released by the Left Party in 2020 describes the party’s ambitions to focus the political strategy more towards issues that affect people’s everyday lives, give greater prominence to representatives from the working class, and strengthen the structure of trade union organisations. Among other things, this focus entails “shaking off some old stereotypes” and excluding cultural traits from academic and bureaucratic contexts. “It should be easy for people in contemporary society to be leftists [...] You can feel at home exactly as you are with the left, regardless of what you eat, which music you listen to or what you do in your spare time”.

The aim is to popularise the left in order to develop a party of the masses with the capacity to fight for political power and influence – without “triangulating” and adopting the migration policy of the right, as the Danish Social Democrats have done. Attempts at following the Danish way are still being made, primarily on the margins of the Swedish left by smaller groups with “red nationalism” on their agenda – but, more importantly, by the influence of the arguments advanced by the social-democratic think tank *Tiden*.

A more populist Left, with the purpose of ridding the earth of right-wing populism and racism, must not be tempted to adopt some of the agenda of right-wing populism in the hunt for voters and support in parliament. Not only because voters tend to prefer the original to the copy but even more so because of the risk of “becoming what you eat” – or as Socrates put it in one of Plato’s dialogues: “It is not enough to imitate them superficially, you must share their nature.”

Nor can the popular strategy solely be about party building in the narrower sense. It must be about uniting the many people that the Left tends to think of as working class around economic interests and lowest common denominators. The left needs to show that united forces, and movement across ethnic and various other differences, are more successful in achieving results than ethnic divisions are.

In the struggles around common interests, participants tend to see each other as fellow human beings and develop a “we” mentality, as well as growing in both individual and collective self-confidence. It is through such practices that most of these people also discover the intricacies of society and its power relations. This is where the Left should take seriously the concerns, frustrations and objections of fellow workers, neighbours and other proletarians and seek practical solutions to real problems – regardless of what the Sweden Democrats and other right-wing populists might think.

### **Pragmatic Realism**

The Sweden Democrats still hold a relatively weak position in many places, and so do not pose a problem at the municipal level. But where they have found broad legitimate favour with working-class voters, the political blockade against the right-wing populists is dependent on local political strengths and must not get bogged down in minor issues. The interests of workers must be the ruling factor on all fronts, as interpreted from a socialist perspective. Suggestions for improvements to welfare and living conditions – even if these are presented by the Sweden Democrats – cannot be ignored.

Local experiences demonstrate that the Left often prefers to abstain and “lie low”, rather than supporting a proposal from the Sweden Democrats. This creates a problem when the Sweden Democrats occasionally “steal” a left-wing issue. An example of such an incident occurred in the municipality of Hässleholm in southern Sweden, where the Sweden Democrats currently hold a position as the leading party, and where the Left Party is one of the smallest. Here, the Sweden Democrats presented the city council with a proposal concerning municipal kindergartens that provide childcare outside normal working hours (*nattis*).

This has been one of the core demands that the local branch of the Left Party has been pushing for at every election. Because the motion was passed with-

out a vote, the Left Party councillors did not have to declare their vote and could make do with commenting that “even a blind hen can find a grain of corn”. As stated by one of the party’s regional group leaders Magnus Åkeborn. But if it had come down to a vote, they would not have renounced their demand. “We cannot have such a principle of abstention”.

In Sölvesborg, another municipality in the south and a regional “poster child” for the Sweden Democrats, the right-wing populists are in power with support from the Moderate Party, the Christian Democrats, and an additional local party. “We vote for our own proposals and the proposals we think are good, no matter who puts them forward,” states a local Left Party representative, Willy Söderdahl. A municipal council meeting, he says, can deal with 25 to 30 issues, such as the repairing of a street, for example. “It would look ridiculous if we voted against something like that just because the proposal came from the Sweden Democrats. We cannot pretend that we are against it if it is a good thing to do. If you want the people’s respect, you can’t do something like that”. As the Sweden Democrats currently control the entire council, Söderdahl worries that this is a position that the Left might be forced to take, since it is often the officials, not the politicians, that put the proposals forward.

Willy Söderdahl believes that this tactic is the only way forward: “However, we are always watching carefully to see if there is anything tricky here. The Left’s actions have been loud and clear when it comes to racism and democracy. When the Sweden Democrats wanted to close the library, we were the first to fight them. That is the kind of thing we get a response on and there is no risk of people not understanding where we stand, everyone knows. We took a leading position on these ideological questions, which we would not have been able to do if we voted against the crossings. We have chosen not to hold back on issues where we have ideological disagreements, but we don’t spend time on quarrels over bike racks.”

It is not going to be easy for the right-wing populists to blame the lack of improvements on the Left. The issues of wage earners, democracy and welfare constitute the starting point for the actions of the Left, not the manoeuvres of the Sweden Democrats.

Although “the floor” rarely attracts the media spotlight, this does not change the fact that political tactics and media flow must focus on consolidating and

strengthening activity that affects everyday life. The parliamentary level is indeed independent, with political issues that cannot be immediately linked to the needs of social movements. But politics “as a game” cannot replace the social struggle on “the floor”. The tactics of parliament are dialectically related to the strategic need of “the floor”. This is also true when it comes to fighting right-wing populism and fascism.

### **Balancing the Scales**

In the case of Sweden, the lockout of the Left Party meant that the party, in order to keep its role in parliament, took on the responsibility of balancing the power in parliament and forced its proposals through, even though its success in parliament was dependent on calculated support from the Moderate Party, the Christian Democrats and the Sweden Democrats. This has gained the media’s attention and been a positive factor in the polls, even among working-class voters. But to go all the way and take down a Social Democrat government with the help of the far right?

“That is a risky line to walk and a hell of a gamble. But if we were not prepared to follow through on the threat that the red line poses, we would be accused of empty promises”, says Left Party representative and union spokesperson Jan-Olov Carlsson. “And it was with the help of that threat that we managed to gain at least some of our concessions”. But if the Left Party, with its back against the wall, had been forced to live up to the threat and thus opens the door for a right-wing government, “we would have been met with a hurricane of protests from unionists in the workplaces”. In the absence of an effort to mobilise from below, a lack of oxygen at the negotiation table in parliament can lead down undesirable paths.

When a party like the Sweden Democrats has already acquired a prominent place in the public eye, an open political battle becomes the only option. This is true on all platforms and available forums, not just in parliamentary assemblies. It forces leftists to train themselves to confront the ideas being put forward and, by means of a pragmatic approach, to reach out to the frustrated parts of the working class that should be supporting the Left instead of the right. Alliances on “the floor” – in trade unions, grassroots movements and among the general public – also provide opportunities at the parliamentary table. The Left’s parliamentary tactics should ultimately be based on the needs of these groups.



## 2.3 Dealing with AfD at Different Levels of Government



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Alternative for Germany (*Alternative für Deutschland*, AfD) has been represented in all the parliaments of the federal states (*Länder*) for several years now and in most of Germany's municipal bodies, and in 2017 it managed to secure seats in the country's federal parliament, the *Bundestag*, for the first time. This means that left-wing parties, parliamentary/council groups, and municipal politicians are facing the question and challenge of how to deal with far-right forces in their respective bodies and therefore also in everyday political life.

Far-right parties are nothing new in Germany. Many longstanding members of the respective bodies can look back on their experiences and dealings with representatives of the National Democratic Party of Germany (*Nationaldemokratische Partei Deutschlands*, NPD), the German People's Union (*Deutsche Volksunion*, DVU), and the various parties with Pro in their name, such as the Pro Germany Citizens' Movement (*Bürgerbewegung Pro Deutschland*). However, whereas the democratic parties used to draw a clear line in the sand between themselves and those parties, this unequivocal approach is now faltering.

With the AfD's arrival in the *Bundestag*, and as a result of its origins as a liberal, conservative, Eurosceptic party, many are no longer finding it that simple and straightforward to make a clear stand in their own behaviour. It is true that the AfD cannot be equated with the neo-fascist parties mentioned above – and yet it would be wise to adopt a consistent, recognisable position vis-à-vis the AfD in Germany's parliaments and municipal bodies.

This text is based on a handbook I co-authored about this topic, aimed in particular at municipal politicians, as well as on experiences from seminars and training courses with politicians from various parties, levels and bodies on dealing with and delimiting far-right parties.

### **Is Non-Cooperation Always the Answer?**

The AfD is an ethnonationalist, racist party that, with its members and operatives, promotes a politics of exclusion. It is committed to combating feminism, diversity, and tolerance. It regards always keeping in mind the party's ideology, programme and personnel and doing so clearly and explicitly as fundamental to its own political dealings. Therefore, especially in smaller bodies or in municipalities, it is best to see the politicians of far-right parliamentary groups in the context of their party and its programme, as they have made a deliberate choice to run as candidates for this party and to endorse its programme. This means that no matter how personable someone is or how long one has known them in a private or social context, they still stand for racist politics.

For this reason, the *Die Linke* (The Left Party) Executive Committee adopted a resolution in 2016 that ruled out cooperating or submitting joint proposals with the AfD, agreeing to their proposals, or running joint projects, press releases or events with them. This resolution reads as follows:

“As a result of the AfD's radicalisation and the shift of forces within the party, it is now characterised in the political debate as a party of right-wing populism or of the far right or even as a far-right party. Initial attempts to use the AfD as a coalition partner or a builder of majorities for the Union [the Christian Democratic Union of Germany (*Christlich Demokratische Union Deutschlands*, CDU) and the Christian Social Union in Bavaria (*Christlich-Soziale Union in Bayern*, CSU)] [...] were unsuccessful and have been abandoned. [...] However, so far there has been no consensus among the democratic parties about how to deal with the AfD. In particular, the media's dealings with the party are contentious. [...] It is clear that widespread far-right resentment in “mainstream society” is reinforced in its effect by the organisational possibilities provided by a set of parliamentary representatives. When other players take up these issues, this does not lead to the weakening but to the further strengthening of the AfD.”

In doing this, the *Die Linke's* Executive Committee has provided its various branches and politicians with recommendations for action. The CDU has ruled out collaborating with either *the Left Party* or the AfD, and following multiple incidents, the Social Democratic Party of Germany (*Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands, SPD*) is also set against working with the AfD in the various parliaments. However, especially at the municipal level, there are ample examples of cooperation with the AfD, on the part of several parties.

### **Why a Clear Line Must Be Drawn**

Where does the problem lie? As mentioned above, the AfD, the NPD and their like stand for exclusionary, racist, ethnonationalist politics, and tolerate anti-Semites and neo-Nazis in their ranks. Another reason not to work with them is their routine and strategic use of linguistic and political attacks. These must be called out and condemned.

At the same time, it is worth pointing to the differences between their proclaimed politics and how they actually behave in the political arena. The AfD always tries to characterise itself as an anti-elite party. The claim that it is the only political alternative to what it often calls the 'traditional parties' is based primarily on this assertion that it is fundamentally different from all the other parties.

However, there is little sign of this in the party's day-to-day political activities. For example, a *Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung* (RLS) study reveals that AfD's voting behaviour in parliaments hardly differs from that of other parties.

Tilo Giesbers and Ulrich Peters has explained it this way in a publication from the *Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung* (2020): "Despite its aggressive rhetoric against the federal government and especially Chancellor Angela Merkel, the proposals most often supported by the AfD are those submitted to the *Bundestag* by the federal government or by the CDU/CSU and SPD parliamentary groups that make up the governing coalition. Substantively, though, it is most closely aligned with the positions of the [liberal] Free Democratic Party (*Freie Demokratische Partei, FDP*)."

Left-wing, solidarity- and diversity-based parties and politicians in particular should therefore put their own politics front and centre instead of getting involved in supposedly harmless proposals by far-right political players, thereby giving the AfD legitimacy.

Austria's experience is a very good illustration of this. At an event about the far right in parliaments, a former Green Party member of the Austrian National Council (Austria's parliament) talked about this experience. The Austrian Greens lost their representation in the National Council in 2017, and this former member of parliament said self-critically that one of their biggest mistakes was to treat the far-right Freedom Party of Austria (*Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs*, FPÖ) like any other party and to accept them as "normal" parliamentarians. This meant that the momentum for indignation was lost, yet this was, he said, precisely what was important in the debates about the basic pillars of our society, about language and politics.

In the end, how far such non-cooperation goes must always be negotiated in the relevant body or in your own parliamentary group. Various dimensions can be distinguished here.

Firstly, each individual should decide for themselves how to deal with members of a far-right party on a personal level but then discuss this with colleagues to ensure that they have plans ready to get out of awkward situations (such as small talk). Therefore, at various seminars, many MPs have voted against shaking hands or greeting members of far-right parliamentary/council groups. What works fine in the *Bundestag* due to the size of the body and its higher profile, only works to a limited extent at municipal level, where the council members may have known each other for over a decade, have children who play football together, and so on. Against this backdrop, drawing a line is often more difficult when it comes to personal interaction. However, even in this case, it is advisable to maintain polite formality in dealings with far-right peers. In particular, forms of address should be used that create a distance while remaining courteous (e.g. *vous* in French, *Sie* in German or *usted* in Spanish).

Secondly, in terms of relations in the relevant body, on the one hand it is best to opt for a written statement by the respective group, which makes it clear why there will be no cooperation with group XYZ and what implications this has. On the other hand, there should also be communication with other democratic, left-wing groups, in order to agree, where appropriate, to act together when it comes to day-to-day politics.

The *DIE aNDERE* group sent a communication to the other groups in Potsdam City Council to express their attitude to the AfD and their own way of

dealing with that party, with a view not only to informing other groups in the body about this but also to enabling a joint approach.

*“DIE aNDERE would welcome some degree of consensus on how to deal with the AfD group in Potsdam City Council. In the future, our group will not sign any letters, proposals or declarations that are also supported by the AfD. Anyone who values our support must do without that of the AfD. We ask you to understand this position. Of course, we would also like other groups to share our view.”*

Such a statement is a chance not only to explain your own actions to colleagues but also to be transparent to voters. However, it can be tiring to maintain this from day to day, and so in political actions it is important not to respond to every provocation from the far right. Here some sensitivity is needed. When the NPD entered the Mecklenburg-West Pomerania state parliament, for example, the democratic parties decided that only one speaker in a parliamentary group would react to proposals from the NPD (if a debate was necessary at all) in order to avoid paying too much attention to far-right discussion points. This still holds good as a way of working today.

Thirdly, our own actions should always focus on conveying our own content. However, politicians today must also listen carefully to what is being said by the far right and what tenuous arguments the latter are putting forward and to what extent they are promoting inhuman ideologies or supporting neo-Nazis. If they go beyond what is acceptable in terms of their rhetoric, moving into clear far-right agitation, this should be discussed and condemned in the relevant meeting, because the limits of what can be said have shifted significantly to the right in recent years, yet there has been barely any sign of outrage about this. Any normalisation of this should be clearly opposed.

### **How Does it Work in Practice?**

As already mentioned, it works differently at the different federal levels – indeed, one hypothesis is that in arenas that are the focus of a lot of media coverage, a clearer line is likely to be rolled out in practice vis-à-vis the far right than in settings that are scarcely reported on. Municipal bodies in particular often operate under the radar of major press outlets and also often under that of party hierarchies.

Collective, joint action in this area is important. Not only do municipal politi-

cians face the problem that they may have known their far-right counterparts for years, but the physical proximity is also even smaller. Moreover, they often take on political office on a voluntary basis, alongside a regular job, family commitments, and so on. This means they simply do not have the time to scrutinise the personal details, programme or individual proposals enough to be always consistent in their approach to far-right provocations. In this context, other levels could provide support as well as recommendations for action. Experience from our own seminars shows that politicians are grateful to have someone watching them and standing by them in their day-to-day political work.

One of the main arguments why there is nevertheless cooperation with far-right groups and parliamentary/council groups is issue-based politics. After all, so the argument goes, politics should work for the good of citizens and ensure that specific concerns and problems are addressed – and that of course happens across party lines. This is an argument that can be found at all levels: it wasn't possible to sidestep the whole situation, and besides, other people also cooperated.

As mentioned above, such examples can be found across various parties. As recently as November 2020, the SPD, *Die Linke*, the CDU and the AfD introduced a joint bill in the Saarland state parliament on the COVID-19 containment measures. In 2019, an NPD politician was elected a mayor in Hesse, thanks to votes from the FDP, CDU and SPD, sending shock waves through the German press and sparking debate. He was subsequently voted out of office again.

In a municipal council in Saxony, the Greens even entered into a joint parliamentary group with the AfD in 2019 – here again the alliance was dissolved after substantial media coverage. Meanwhile, in Forst, a town in Brandenburg, a politician from the *Die Linke* group issued a press statement with an AfD politician. This led the *Die Linke* group to part ways from this individual, and he is currently the subject of a party expulsion procedure.

In 2019, an FDP minister president was elected in Thuringia thanks to votes from the AfD. In the aftermath, there were many discussions, both in the various parties and in society, about the extent to which the AfD should be ostracised and why. The leader of the *Die Linke* group in the Thuringian state parliament threw the congratulatory bouquet at the feet of the newly elected

minister president – a gesture of indignation, anger and non-acceptance that caught the imagination of many anti-fascists. This freshly minted FDP minister president, Thomas Kemmerich, resigned after only a few hours.

Many such examples can be found, especially in cases where they have received media coverage. It can be assumed, however, that while alliances are officially split up, cooperation still goes on.

But things like this which seem like just footnotes break down the firewall separating off the far right: they result in far-right parties being re-elected because they gain acceptance and find ways to develop locally. It also means that they get heard. For this reason, it is best to always submit your own proposals or put up your own people for positions. This strengthens your own actions, highlights your own political goals and, through the wording used and the diversity of proposals, can create an image of greater solidarity.

The issue-based politics argument is to some extent understandable here. After all, what does the pedestrian crossing at the intersection have to do with racist politics? And yet, even here, it is important to keep highlighting the agenda and objectives of those submitting proposals – at least as far as you and your own actions are concerned. Ultimately, it is much more creative and effective from a media perspective to write your own proposal for a pedestrian crossing.

For example, you could propose one that features the colours of the rainbow flag and so expresses tolerance towards the LGBTQ\* community. This might seem like a funny example, but with a little creativity, one's own political goals can be incorporated into such issue-based proposals. Far-right forces are then unlikely to agree to such a proposal, and at the same time the proposal is much more political. To stand up to far-right politicians and to oppose them in the streets and in parliaments takes courage and involves a lot of work. But that is exactly what is needed to achieve a world of solidarity and tolerance as well as for the political work itself.

### **New Dilemmas, Challenges and Opportunities**

The AfD has created a new dilemma, especially for *Die Linke*, because the party of Björn Höcke, Alice Weidel, Alexander Gauland and co. has set out to become the new “caring party”, taking the side of ordinary people. In this way it impinges on *Die Linke's* own profile and poses major challenges for this party.

This often makes it even more difficult to reject proposals in the day-to-day work of elected bodies, because it is not uncommon for these to be the same proposals that *Die Linke* submitted years ago or would still submit today.

But this also provides opportunities that left-wing movements, politicians, and parties should embrace. This new challenge makes it possible to question and hone your own political profile: who do we want to reach with our politics? Who do we represent? What are our strengths and how do we manage to communicate them widely and publicly?

So, if the aim is to continue to be there for broad swathes of the population and to fight for low-income families, single parents or homeless people in parliaments and to improve their lot, then this means doing this systematically in the streets and in parliaments and continually evaluating your own work. At the same time, the situation today, as scary as it is, offers fresh motivation for social change. Broad alliances against the far right and for diverse, tolerant cities can be forged anywhere. Today, more than ever, victim advice centres or women's refuges need support in the fight for their rights – because this is what the AfD and their ilk are scrutinising and attacking, and where they are challenging the use of public funds.

It is at this interface between civil society and a parliament that strong politicians who take a stand are needed. Initiatives such as *Seebrücke* in which municipalities create safe havens for refugees, alternative youth centres, and left-wing concert venues and cultural institutions need the attention of progressive forces to withstand attacks from the far right, whether dealing with the pressure created by parliamentary questions or fending off physical attacks. A new climate of solidarity is needed, in which people, initiatives and groups pay more attention to each other because the daily threats from neo-Nazis are spreading fear and paralysing life in society. We must join forces to prevent this and continue to fight for tolerant and open cooperation in a spirit of solidarity.

## **Conclusion**

Dealing with far-right politicians and individuals in day-to-day politics presents many left-wing players with new challenges. These cannot be addressed in a one size fits all fashion and must always be based on individual decisions and local circumstances. However, there are recommendations for action that



rely on drawing a clear line vis-à-vis the far right. This means that cooperation should not take place either in parliaments or in municipal bodies.

Demarcating your own (party's) policy content from that of the far right is key here, something that will also hone your own profile and strengthen your political action. At the same time, being under some pressure to justify yourself will help you define your own position more clearly and speak more effectively to citizens and cooperation partners.

A resolutely anti-fascist stance, involving a clear position of not yielding an inch to fascist politics, is a key part of left-wing politics. This includes not introducing any joint proposals with far-right parties in bodies' day-to-day activities, rejecting proposals from far-right parliamentary/council groups and not holding joint events with or joining initiatives sponsored by the AfD and similar parties. Personal interaction must also be weighed up in such a situation – using polite forms of address and refraining from small talk can lead to distancing and so counter normalised relations.

These recommendations make day-to-day activities in the body rather difficult and challenge progressive forces. As a result, there is a wide range of experiences in this regard. Implementation differs depending on the level. The more press coverage there is and also the more attention from one's own party, the less often there is cooperation with far-right players.

Germany's federal political system can create the impression that the municipal level is a rather apolitical sphere in which important details are decided – which, however, would be implemented regardless of party programmes and trench warfare. Such an attitude is understandable but does not lead to a clearer definition of the profiles of individual parties and groups. For this reason, every level must be viewed as political, and the party programme of far-right players must be taken into account in every parliamentary initiative. In this context, not every provocation by far-right players should be responded to, but racism, anti-Semitism, homophobia, sexism and other aspects of inhumane politics should be clearly countered in order to prevent a further rightward shift in the limits of what can be said.

This is the only way that progressive, collective and tolerant politics can be conducted. This by no means has to be done alone, because strong demands, projects and parliamentary initiatives are possible with allies inside and out-

side the parliaments. Doing so requires courage from every individual – but together it is possible to show clear opposition to the far right and to fight and stand up for solidarity with each other.

## 3.1 The Perfect Left is Better Organised



*By Aron Etzler.*

*Party secretary at Vänsterpartiet (Left Party), Sweden*

“I love doing this. It’s amazing, we are doing God’s work.”

The boy was just 16, and already a soldier in the battle for Trump. Travelling around the US, learning how to preach to young evangelicals, going on paid trips to practise, refine his skills and inspire others. He played an important role in inspiring the fanatics who made sure that Trump, no matter how he handled the coronavirus epidemic, Russian scandals, or negative media attention, never really lost broad public support.

To many people on the left, it is almost impossible to grasp how a politician like Donald Trump, a billionaire, can attract workers who can’t even afford their own healthcare. Even harder to grasp, for many liberals, is the question of how a narcissist madman who does not understand the laws of his own country, does not speak in full sentences, and does not believe in science, can become president of the United States. The key to understanding this development is to correctly appreciate what Trump actually has. Because, make no mistake about it, he possesses skills that most of us on the left do not.

To begin with, he had the solid support of one of the world’s largest and most overtly political TV networks, Fox News. Together with an army of radio talk show hosts and fringe news outlets, the extreme right has one of the most effective propaganda systems in our time.

His party, the Republican Party, has for decades not only been one of the best funded, but also one of the most innovative and forward-thinking parties when it comes to polling, propaganda – especially negative campaigning – and winning elections. If there is one party that has managed to control most of the agenda in the US since the early 1970s, it is clearly the Republicans, not the Democrats. If evangelicals and Fox stood for the more fanatical support,

the Republican Party was more mainstream. Many of its voters actually felt disgusted by Trump but voted for him anyway.

### **A Winner Narrative**

But Trump does not only have money and organisational strength. Trump has himself. While “The Donald” has never been a nice guy, a thoughtful leader, respectful of science or political decorum, he has been an effective leader in other ways. He is a phenomenal speaker when it comes to building rapport with his audience, a fast-reacting message machine who dominates the news cycle. He pursues goals aggressively with no regard for individuals who cross his path. He is mostly wrong about facts but that does not stop him from getting his way, regardless.

He has what most people previously called “ideology” and today call a “clear and effective narrative” – meaning several interconnected messages that all speak about what is wrong with the world today and what should be done about it. This extreme-right narrative is not new – it is by now decades old. You could see its beginnings in the French “New Right” in the 1970s, which paved the way for the first successful extreme right-wing party in Europe, Le Pen’s Front National (now renamed National Rally) or trace its roots to Nixon’s angry white voters. And the path leads forward to today, with politicians such as Berlusconi, Putin and Orban in the vanguard.

A narrative provides people with a way to see the world. For the extreme right of our times, it can be summarised in one sentence: Western society is on its way towards destruction, at the hands of naive liberals who have opened the gates to immigration and abandoned the values that helped us rule the world: family, nation, fair competition and – when the country is religious enough – God. This narrative has everything. It is extremely urgent, powerful, and simple. Most of all, it is known. Its success can be measured in how many people it influences, how it dominates the debate, and how far-reaching it is. Today, Trump’s narrative may be the most known on the planet.

Evangelical fanatics, Fox News, billions of dollars, effective polling, the planet’s most far-reaching narrative and a guy no one can stop talking about – how could Donald Trump not be a successful force in politics? And: isn’t it pretty clear that his opponents do NOT have what he has?

## **The Lack of a Narrative**

Let us begin with his opponent Joe Biden, the guy who, for now, seems to have defeated Donald Trump. Yes, the Democrats also have a lot of money – as it turned out, even more than the Republicans, in this election at least. They have less overt support from big TV networks like NBC, ABC and CNN. While Trump can count on the support from a lot of really angry people on the internet, Democrats have a stronghold in Hollywood, including most well-known actors, influencers and celebrities, maybe the most important ideological archipelago in the world. Yeah, that is kind of amazing as political currency.

Now, the problem with this awesome apparatus is that – unlike its evangelical Fox counterpart – it does not really have a narrative. How does Hollywood see the world? As an unfair place where billionaires decide the fate of all of us? Or is it a beautiful technological wonder where nice entrepreneurs and philanthropists are inventing a better future? Sort of both, depending on which film you are watching, or which Democrat you ask. Much of the American Democrats' narrative has, just like that of European social democrats, withered away. Once the reference point for political discussions, today many people, including several political leaders of the parties themselves, are asking if there even is a social-democratic ideology at all. In several elections in Sweden, the beacon of social democracy, voters have stated in polls that they no longer know what the social-democratic message really is.

It is a telling fact that the current mainstream leadership of these parties is no longer presented as reformist but centrist. The reforms that used to characterise their movement are now in many ways a thing of the past and holding on to the centre of power has become the main objective. It is also typical of these political parties that they seldom fight for their own values, but rather against their left-wing or right-wing populist opponents' ideas. If they fight for anything, it is the values of statesmanship, believing that what citizens care most about is politicians being competent.

It is also a telling fact that these parties rarely have effective leaders anymore, if political effectiveness is measured in terms of getting a message out, driving change, or building lasting coalitions. Mostly, the mainstream centrists have competent leaders that people may accept, many times as a stand-in for someone they really like. Centrist leaders get elected because, well, they occupy the centre.

Nowadays, though, they get elected a lot less than they used to, and it is easy to see why. In a time when people are vulnerable to the whims of the market, steadily losing buying power, getting more heavily into debt, and more frightened of climate change and other disasters with every passing year, the centrist's promise to simply maintain the status quo is not that attractive anymore. If you feel like you are speeding toward the abyss, you do not get a lot of satisfaction from knowing that the chauffeur is a good driver. The centre has a loud voice and many outlets for it – TV networks, money, organisation, and shrewd politicians. However, you can only survive for so long without a meaningful message. The centre can hold, but only one election at a time, and nowadays barely that.

### **Leverage for the Left**

What is the state of our forces, the socialists, the forces of labour, progressives, the greens, the feminists, and the anti-racists – the whole nebulous thing we call the left? It is easily summed up: the left has no TV networks, very little money, weak organisations, but a strong narrative and a few surprisingly strong leaders. In many ways, the left mirrors the centrists' weaknesses: centrists get elected not because they have the most competitive message, are the most loved as candidates or most efficient as leaders, but because they own the centre. Conversely, left-wing candidates may lose elections not because they lack message or leadership, but simply because they do not have the same powerful backing. It is this weakness that makes us lose most of the time.

Now, just imagine if it was Bernie Sanders who had the full backing of the Democratic apparatus, plus all the influence of donors and commentators. Is there any chance at all that he would not have been chosen as the candidate, and probably gone on to become the president-elect of the United States? Or think what might have happened if staff at the Labour Party's headquarters had worked towards victory for Jeremy Corbyn (instead of actively working against him) – or if he had the support of just one daily newspaper in the whole country?

To many on the left, the focus of a discussion about how to win against fascism should not be powerful institutions but rather policies. Because, and I quote, "ideas should be enough". Well, there are few more efficient ways to be miserable – and lose elections – than to think about how things should be. Apparently, that is not the way things are. Donald Trump, Boris Johnson,

and Vladimir Putin did not come to power because of their philosophical brilliance; rather, it was because they serve powerful interests and proved to be efficient at winning.

To others on the left, the lack of powerful institutions such as the media is completely natural since “it has always been that way”. To some, it is expected because it is seen as a structural element of capitalism. Well, people who talk of structural things often do so to steer clear of any concrete discussion about how to change things. This is also the case here. Why, if this is structural to capitalism, have we lived through decades where the left dominated the public discourse, when public ownership of media, unionisation and progressive education made the left look invincible? In truth, the new champions of propaganda built their own powerful tools to defeat the liberal hegemony of the past. And it took them a long time.

### **Left-Wing Dominance**

Looking to our own history, it is quite simple to see a striking correlation. The left has, for the most part, been successful in the instances where it was able to conquer institutions that made propagandistic dominance possible. These institutions have been different at different times. For instance, newspapers, arranging of public meetings and, especially, union organisation were central to the propagandistic dominance of the left in the working masses from the turn of the 20th century up to the 1930s.

The right, on the other hand, has often pioneered technical inventions and used a lot of money (and sometimes violence) to counter this hegemony. In a historical context it is easy to see, for example, how the German left wing had the upper hand in the propaganda department until it was countered by Goebbels’ effective use of radio, aeroplane speaking tours and street violence. A modern-day equivalent is the remarkably effective use of talk radio and alternative media on the internet. Far from being a structural fact, the field of propaganda is a struggle between different forces. And to win against our fascist foes, we need to beat them at their own game. This is pure logic. In a struggle the strongest win, not the noblest. However, when it comes to left-wing politics, we have people throwing logic to the wind and instead believing that size, reach, depth, speed, force and quality do not matter, but only political content. People who simply do not understand why the left is losing and how someone like Trump could be winning.

## Strongarm Politics

It may surprise you that the focus of this paper is not policies or political strategies. That is a deliberate choice, because, in actuality, policies and strategies are often where we perform best. Instead, we need to be much better in areas where we underperform.

Many left-wing parties of today look like the lonely guy with the skinny legs and overworked biceps at the gym. Originally his arms were only a little stronger than his legs, but he soon began to train what “felt best”, which happened to be what he was already good at – and he ended up with this grotesque physique. While this is tragic in the gym, it is even worse when such unevenly divided efforts become a phenomenon in political reality, where many diehard leftists may respond to another right-wing election win by reading yet another book about an interpretation of the working class, or have another debate about how to refine already fine budgets in the national parliament, without even having a clue about outreach to voters, fundraising or organising.

Generally speaking, the left has really big theoretical biceps and horribly overlooked skinny legs. This is more than dysfunctional. The best strategy in the world is of no use unless it is well funded and executed. The best policy in the world is completely worthless unless everybody knows about it. So, what would help us most of all is just killing the entire amateur notion that our political direction or moral superiority is enough to win.

Yes, amateur is the right word. “Amateur” is not to be confused with “activist” since activism is the basis of most of the left wing’s activity. There is no way we could ever replace all unpaid, hard volunteer work with professionals. It is not desirable, and it is not what I am advocating. The point is that we, parties and organisations on the left, must aim to be excellent and well-funded organisations fostering qualitative analysis, effective political action, highly qualified representatives and working strategies.

We will, in the coming years, take our strategy from the home gym to the weightlifting championship. If we fail due to unwise leadership, lazy staff, bad campaigns, or lack of money, we have only ourselves to blame. While there are few who actively resist building better organisations, many on the left today are undermining concepts that would help us to do so, such as ensuring adequate fundraising, finding talent, training people for political and organisational roles, implementing digital organisation systems, getting



outside professional help when needed, and so on. Let us stop doing that. Please, amateur left, die.

Let's aim for this instead: take command of our own future. Give ourselves a chance to win in the upcoming years. Own the means of election!

## **Five Proposals for a Better Left**

### ***1. Believe in socialism***

Work for its implementation in concrete matters. It is our ideas and values that people like about the left. Hiding leftist values is as stupid as not advertising a sale. We will never win against liberals or Trumpism by trying to avoid the worst or being anti-fascist. That is just playing defence, and ultimately, no one ever won by only playing defence. So, believe in humanity, a better tomorrow and justice.

Some centrists have the idea that socialism is unpopular or too old. It is really hard to find any evidence of that in any reliable poll. People like the idea of equality, affordable care and housing, a living wage, democracy and fairness. Heck, they may even like the word socialism, which is the only way to actually get all of that good stuff. These are our values. They need to be refined, well expressed and propagated often, not forgotten. And you'd better believe them yourself because it's impossible to convince someone of something that you do not believe in.

### ***2. Get a grip on polling***

Polling is not an enemy to socialism; it is a necessary tool. Done intelligently, it can tell us which way is possible when moving forward, and which is not. Done correctly, it points out our weaknesses, so that we can remedy them, and our strengths, so that we can highlight them. Without polling, a left-wing organisation is doomed to fight internally about priorities, often just recycling old arguments about personal preferences.

Within the amateur left, polling may be seen as suspicious, as if it would automatically water down our values and trueness to the cause. This is not the case. Polling can never replace values, heart, or energy. It is not a compass – it is a radar. It simply tells you how things are right now (if you have a good pollster), thus giving you a chance to navigate properly. It provides perspective on how other people think, not on telling you what to think.

### *3. Invest heavily in long-term organising*

Aim to always expand membership, reach and funding. This means involving the whole organisation in strategic planning, in defining winnable goals and the means to get there. Think long and hard about how to win over the next generation – the political attitudes they are exposed to in their teens will follow them for decades. Devote your best people and considerable resources to achieving success. This may all seem obvious, but very few organisations on the left are doing it. Most spend nearly all their money on elections, use their best brains as parliamentary politicians or may even have such low self-esteem that they promote academic careers above political organising as a means to change society.

Yes, investing means having money. Some political parties are so poor they may not even have the means to invest. However, as long as we do not live in a post-money world, a lack of funding just means setting yourself up to fail. Seeing the explicit socialist Bernie Sanders raise \$96 million in a year makes it clear that collective funding for left-wing projects is a realistic prospect. So start fundraising, or go home.

### *4. Create a welcoming, fun, and efficient culture*

By failing to deal with internal culture, the amateur left often recreates the worst possible conditions for human growth. Infighting, mistrust, jealousy, harassment in the name of progressive values, informal leader structures, arbitrariness, lack of elementary care for employees, snobbishness, rudeness and bottomless inefficiency: we have it all.

Many left-wing organisations, while criticising modern-day capitalism, have policies towards their own employees and representatives that are straight from the pre-union 1800s. This comes at a terrible cost, deterring people from working for something good. Left-wing organisations should aim to be among the best employers, simply because it will help them attract the right people. Do not shy away from leadership development courses – just ensure you are getting the best.

### *5. Get the message through*

Politics needs to be relevant and exciting. Do not accept boring presentations about fringe issues in your organisation. Do think hard about everything communicational: not just what to attack or how to exemplify your strengths,

but tone, messenger, and channel. It takes a lot to get a message through in today's myriad of channels. Either you have the resources to pay for presence over the whole spectrum, or, like most organisations, you do not. In the latter case, it is extremely important that you avoid just doing a little bit of everything, because that will guarantee that none of your message gets through.

Rid your organisation of inefficient means of outreach. Just because something worked to protest the Vietnam War does not mean it is the most efficient method in the 2020s. Be rational in your choice, but do not fall into the trap of believing that everything today needs to be high-tech. It is fully possible to build a grassroots campaign by knocking on doors – most organisations that fail do so because they are not really putting any effort into it. The choice of medium is important years ahead of campaigning because it structures your organisation. For instance: calling a million voters means organising tens of thousands of people weeks before election day, which also means work for hundreds of people months before election day, and a good plan one year before.

### **Organise!**

To many, the story about the 16-year-old boy travelling the country learning to preach right-wing evangelical messages would be a symbol of religious extremism. To me, it is clear evidence of the seriousness of our opponents. Trump may be gone, but the ideas, financing and organisations of the extreme right will still be there. Moreover, it is a reminder of the importance of long-term political organising. Here we can see an example of how the right in our times invests time and money into building a movement with the aim to change society. These are things the left used to do when it was successful, albeit in the shape of union organisers, party agitators or community organisers instead of preachers. These thousands of youngsters are trained professionally to make the best possible case for their vision of the world. Is there a clearer image of who is preparing to win the future? And how many examples of the left doing the same thing can you present?



## 3.2 A New Class Movement



*By Kerstin Wolter.*

*Member of the Left Party (Die Linke), Germany.*

The debate about the relationship between party and movement has entered a new phase. The German leftist party *Die Linke* (The Left) wants to be a “party on the move”. This ambiguous concept sums up the ambition and problem of today’s left-wing parties: on the one hand, the experience of the encrustation of left-wing parties in the parliamentary system, up to and including anti-left politics in government (and opposition), has led to a debate about how to prevent such adjustment tendencies. A solution to this problem can be seen in the cooperation between left-wing parties and extra-parliamentary social movements, where these social movements take on the function of a pressure group that tries to increase the scope for left-wing politics in government, sometimes against the will of the government partners. On the other hand, the term “party on the move” also entails a promise to remain politically open and mobile and not be stuck in a deadlocked position, either internally within the party or in parliaments.

But what do left-wing parties and social movements have in common and what are their major differences? What kind of relationship could exist between progressive social movements and left-wing parties, and why do they want a relationship at all? What can parties learn from social movements and vice versa? Is the cooperation between parties and social movements only a temporary interlude or could it be a permanent relationship? And what does the future hold for the left? These are the questions that this chapter will attempt to answer.

### **Social Movements and Political Parties**

Essentially, social movements and left-wing parties cannot be imagined without each other. One of the first major social movements – the labour move-

ment – cannot be conceived without its central organisations: trade unions and trade union parties. Movements such as the anti-nuclear movement led, in Germany, to the founding of the Greens (*Die Grünen*) and the mobilised resistance to the unemployment reforms in 2010, commonly referred to as “the Agenda”, led to the founding of the Electoral Alternative party (*Die Wahlalternative Arbeit Und Soziale Gerechtigkeit*, WASG) and later to the creation of *Die Linke* through the merger with the Party of Democratic Socialism (*Partei des Demokratischen Sozialismus*, PDS).

But can all of these – the labour movement, the anti-nuclear movement, and the anti-Agenda protests – be considered social movements? This is a valid question to ask because the definition of a social movement is a controversial topic within the social sciences. Under its umbrella definition, a social movement can be anything from a short-term protest alliance within a certain conflict, to a longer-term formation of an interest group with a concrete reform agenda, to a broad mass movement – the latter including parties and trade unions dedicated to systematic change. Class conflict can no longer be regarded as the exclusive driving force behind the idea of a social movement, despite most of them having started off as class movements. What is considered a social movement must, therefore, be continually reassessed as time goes on.

While the traditional labour movement organised itself through institutions, such as parties and trade unions, as well as in workers’ leisure and educational associations, the so-called new social movements have clearly distinguished themselves from institutions and parliaments since the 1970s. At the same time, with the founding of the Greens in 1980, a new party emerged from a section of the anti-nuclear, anti-war, post-68 movements. There seems to be a constant tension between social movements and left-wing parties. However, both share the interests of the left-leaning trade unions, as they wish to overcome the hegemony of the capitalist logic of exploitation of people and nature. Therefore, a certain need for cooperation arises, which is why it is worth dissolving the tensions and contradictions by translating them into a common strategy.

Whether today’s social movements or protest alliances such as Fridays for Future, Black Lives Matter or the *unteilbar* (“indivisible”) alliance against the right in Germany can commit themselves to a system-overcoming strategy is yet to

be seen. Nevertheless, it must be said that the new social movements and today's protest alliances fill a gap left by left-wing parties as these have gradually lost their anchoring in the working class, as is the case with the Greens and the Social Democratic Party of Germany (*Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands*, SDP), who have prioritised their role as an electoral party above all other matters. The emergence and formation of social movements are thus directly linked to the crisis of the left.

### **The Crisis of Left Parties**

In view of declining membership numbers, fluctuating and sometimes poor election results, dissolutions, and new formations of left-wing parties in Europe, it is safe to say that left-wing parties are in crisis. There are various reasons for this crisis. On the one hand, it is directly linked to the crisis in trade unions and the disappearance of traditional industrial workers. The latter were the mainstay of the labour movement and its organisations for many decades. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels worked out that only through these movements could capitalism be overcome. The changing mode of production in the transition from Fordism to post-Fordism and the emergence of a (still) diverse and divided working class means that today's left-wing parties need to reorient themselves.

But if the working class is so diverse in its living and working conditions today, what is the right strategy for left-wing parties? This question is the reason why left-wing parties have been arguing among themselves for years - and quite destructively so. In particular, the question of how to deal with the strengthening of right-wing parties and their growing influence over parts of the industrial working class has already led to bitter struggles over political orientation, including within *Die Linke*.

The lack of strategy and of a common narrative has resulted in the public perception of *Die Linke* as indecisive - not helped by the fact that most communication by left-wing parties today takes place via the bourgeois media and thus the public framing of their agenda and policies is in the hands of others. The disappearance of socialist party-affiliated organisations and the increasing importance of the bourgeois media make it difficult to communicate directly with citizens and even with their own party members, and as a result left-wing parties lack a solid support base in the working class. On top of this, there have been recurring disappointments about the political decisions

made by progressive parties in government, most notably the Greens' consenting to send NATO troops to Kosovo in 1999 and the SPD's approval of the sale of state-owned housing company GSW in Berlin.

In practical terms, the absence of new members means that left-wing parties have become increasingly outdated and have often stuck to old forms of political practice that are becoming increasingly removed from the interests of the younger generations. One could even say that the political left has been replaced by the new social movements.

### **What Parties Can Learn from the Movements**

The left-wing history of the post-war period cannot be written without mentioning the new social movements, which saw new actors fill a gap created by the failure to develop new forms of organisation and resistance practices capable of responding to emerging dreams and aspirations. The new social movements were characterised by their methods of organisation, which went beyond the traditional structures of associations, trade unions and parties. As well as making concrete demands and fundamental criticisms of the existing order, the movements attempted to change society directly and sought to develop alternatives to the status quo.

Examples of this are the proclamation of the Free Republic of Wendland (a protest camp against the establishment of a nuclear waste dump) in 1980, the anti-nuclear movement, the squatting movement in Berlin's Friedrichshain district in the early 1990s, and the tree occupations in the Dannenröder Forst. The organisations are – or at least claim to be – open to everyone. To this day, there are often few formal hierarchies and plenty of scope to test new practices.

Parties are often less flexible when it comes to introducing new methods due to the bureaucratic process that requires them to pass a series of formal votes before any new practices can be implemented. Thus, social movements form a kind of testbed for new political practices and forms of resistance, which can be taken over by parties and trade unions if they prove to be successful.

Movements such as Blockupy, Fridays for Future, and the feminist strike movement also search for new ways to form political structures and attempt to influence democratic decision-making. In other words, they fundamentally challenge the way institutionalised politics works. For example, they



prioritise the power of plenaries over decisions taken by small committees or individuals, introduce alternative voting procedures that go beyond mere majority voting, use digital tools for democratic voting, and a few years ago deployed new forms of protest such as civil disobedience.

However, while social movements can mobilise millions of people onto the streets and invite them to participate in their (mostly) open structures, with no obligation to commit firmly to an organisation, questions of sustainable organisation and anchoring arise once again. For the openness of their structures should not obscure the fact that those who organise themselves in alliances such as Fridays for Future find it easier to keep their eye on the ball if they already bring a fair amount of activism and political interest to the table. Therefore, it is hardly surprising that today's social movements primarily mobilise students and academics. Although the proportion of academics on the left wing has increased enormously in recent decades, *Die Linke*, for example, still represents a cross-section of society in its membership, in a way that protest alliances such as Fridays for Future could never achieve.

### **Who is Afraid of the Left?**

Even though the new social movements, at a time when left-wing parties are in crisis, have partly taken over these parties' role in mobilising political protest, the parties have not completely lost their appeal or their social function. Nor have political organisations and trade unions taken over the organisation of the working class. In contrast to social movements and protest alliances, political parties have advantages in the shape of their formal membership structures, their financial and human resources, their democratic constitution, and their direct influence over political decisions in parliaments, and they have proved to be some of the most enduring of all organisations.

Working-class parties have existed for almost 200 years – and although many of today's social-democratic parties have strayed from their socialist roots, some to the point of being unrecognisable, it is nevertheless remarkable that these organisations have survived the decades. Thus, parties represent an enormous repository of knowledge and history, because their history has been recorded by themselves and their foundations as well as by numerous experts and academics, and – perhaps most importantly – has been passed down to each new generation of members within the organisation.

Compared with social movements and protest alliances, political parties have a stronger bond with their members. This also means they have more time for training their activists. It is, therefore, no surprise that the heads and leaders of social movements and protest alliances are often (former) members of political parties, youth parties or trade unions. Although protests and movements often ignite spontaneously, the organisers behind the processes are almost always long-standing cadres of institutionalised organisations. One could even argue that, without training within the traditional working-class organisations, the new social movements would not exist.

The question therefore arises as to whether left-wing parties and their members should play an active part within the social movements, instead of acting in parallel to them. And therefore, in view of the rise of neoliberalism, the climate crisis and the growing threat from the right, is it not time for left-wing parties, trade unions and progressive extra-parliamentary actors to form a common social movement – in other words, a new class movement? Could this be what the left will look like in the future?

### **A Left of the Future**

The left of the future faces the task of solving the crises of the working class. Left parties, trade unions and extra-parliamentary groups need to reach out and organise a fragmented working class. Only a left anchored in its people will be immune to political economic cycles and able to develop the strength to push through transformative reforms.

So let us move on to the first problem: there are currently no broad-based movements in Germany. At present, neither the extra-parliamentary nor the parliamentary left is able to organise such a movement. Despite the large turnouts at protests such as Fridays for Future or *unteilbar*, there is no prospect of actual fundamental change in Germany at the moment.

This does not mean, however, that there are no opportunities to make an impact. In Berlin, the government introduced a rent cap with support from *Die Linke*. As well as freezing rents for five years, the legislation also introduced a reduction in existing rents. Thus, the rent cap directly interferes with the exploitation logic of the real-estate industry. In addition, *Die Linke* in Berlin is supporting the *Deutsche Wohnen & Co. Enteignen* (“Expropriate Deutsche Wohnen & Co.”) initiative, which is currently in its second phase. If enough

signatures are collected by June, a decision on the expropriation of one of Berlin's largest private housing companies could be made in the autumn. The rent cap and the previous success of the *Deutsche Wohnen & Co. Enteignen* initiative were possible thanks to the involvement of an active tenants' movement.

This movement is a good example of what an active and anchored left can achieve. Moreover, Berlin is a city in which many people lean towards left-wing and progressive ideas. Demonstrations, protests and alternative cultural venues are plentiful in Berlin. Furthermore, rent increases in recent decades have reached a level that affects not only the lowest income classes but now also large sections of the middle class. It is therefore not surprising that, according to surveys, the majority of Berliners would welcome expropriations. So, it is not just a case of the organised parts of civil society bringing about change or preserving what already exists – large parts of the unorganised working class must also approve.

But political reforms can also be achieved in cases where the left is not a part of the government. A left-wing movement in opposition – from neighbourhood and citizens' initiatives to NGOs, trade unions and parties – can also fight for change. The introduction of continued pay during sick leave in the mid-1950s, the abolition of tuition fees in Hesse in 2008 and the introduction of the minimum wage in 2015 are examples of this. But here, too, it often depends not only on whether the different actors start acting at the same time, but also at what time. The plan to shut down all nuclear power plants would not have been conceivable had Japan, one of the most technologically advanced countries in the world, not had to endure the accident at the Fukushima nuclear power plant in 2011. During this period, the Greens enjoyed high poll ratings and, two months later, Winfried Kretschmann became the Greens' first minister-president, in the state of Baden-Württemberg.

Whether getting minister-presidents appointed is the goal of left-wing politics is another matter, but what that example shows is that there are certain windows of opportunity that allow for big changes – be it for reform or for major upheavals. If the left can win political confrontations, it wins power and that is what it is all about. But those who hold the levers of power must also be able to use them. The power of bourgeois democracy presents progressive civil society actors with the constant challenge of acting within the system at the same time as wanting to go beyond it.

Parliamentarianism certainly has a special role to play here. On the one hand, parliament is the place of democratic participation and political decision-making and, therefore, a central locus of conflict for left-wing actors in the class struggle. On the other hand, the forces for preserving the capitalist system are particularly strong here. Members of the German *Bundestag* enjoy a lot of privileges, but they also face the constant task of not getting lost in small-scale parliamentary challenges. In addition, MPs are always under pressure to be re-elected, which means that they become increasingly egoistic and self-absorbed in the pursuit of more media coverage, instead of working as a team.

But social change requires teamwork. Instead of cohesion, however, parliamentarianism promotes competition among the members of a given party. It is not only the party itself that is called upon to develop mechanisms to escape the pull of parliamentarianism. Close cooperation between parties and extra-parliamentary groups and organisations can help to keep a close eye on the things that matter and not lose focus. To engage with each other in this way requires trust in both directions. This can only be achieved if parties are prepared to engage in the mechanisms and working methods of extra-parliamentary politics, while at the same time managing their role in relation to the progressive parties. In the tension between party and movement, friction inevitably arises. Not infrequently, left-wing parties face heavy criticism from movement actors. At the same time, it is often the case that members of left-wing parties ignore the criticisms because they do not trust the assessments of those making them.

Yet trust only arises through long-term cooperation and joint organisation in conflict. In recent years, there have been many examples in which such cooperation has been tested. But new challenges and new actors are constantly putting this trust to the test. Whether parties, trade unions and extra-parliamentary organisations will be able to find a common strategy within a new class movement in the coming months and years is uncertain due to the current situation in terms of organisation and debate. In order to achieve this, the actors must first agree on their strategy.

This is the task facing *Die Linke*. In view of the economic crisis accelerated by the coronavirus pandemic, increasing social division and the continuing challenge of the ecological crisis, it must not only develop and implement a strategy for organising the working class, but also – and this is perhaps the

greatest challenge – offer a convincing alternative to administrative capitalism. That would be the most effective weapon against the threat posed by right-wing parties such as Alternative for Germany (*Alternative für Deutschland*, AfD).

The left Green New Deal could be such an alternative, but such a New Deal requires a left-wing party that does not shy away from the question of how this enormous reform project can be implemented. It must also be able to recognise key windows of opportunity and to act at the right time. Without an organised class of workers and without a common strategy encompassing large sections of the trade unions and extra-parliamentary actors, this will hardly be possible – and we in Germany seem a long way from that at the moment. So, it is high time we get started.



### 3.3 Class Politics for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century



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#### I

In 2015, the populist right-wing Danish People's Party (*Dansk Folkeparti*) became a major force in Danish politics after winning 21 percent of the vote in the general election. A year later, the party won a surprising 26 percent of the vote in the election for the European Parliament. For a time, it seemed that the Danish People's Party had unleashed an unstoppable populist right-wing wave, but the moment of success proved ephemeral. At the 2019 general election, the party saw its percentage of the vote more than halved, and a year later its support has shrunk even further according to polls.

A major reason for the collapse of the Danish People's Party at the height of its success has been the ability of the Danish Social Democrats (*Socialdemokratiet*) to attract voters from the right, not least from the Danish People's Party itself. Although the percentage of the Social Democrats' vote shrunk marginally at the 2019 general election, the party pulled enough voters from the right to secure a Social Democrat government with parliamentary support from the left-wing parties and the liberal centrist party.

The strategy of the Social Democrats was a highly calculated set of policies designed to target working-class voters outside the biggest cities, whom the Danish People's Party had won over just four years before, while at the same time shedding affordable metropolitan voters to the parties to its left. This included a simultaneous move to the left on economic and welfare policies and a move to the right on issues of immigration.

The success of this strategy was immediately followed by an intense discussion. Was the shift to the right on immigration policies justifiable in the name of restraining the Danish People's Party? Or was the shift to the left on economic and welfare issues perhaps more important, if not to attract voters,

then at least to keep them from returning to the Danish People's Party? The latter seemed to hit the mark. The Danish People's Party had not been able to carry through any of its promises on welfare issues but had instead backed tax reductions and huge cuts on welfare and public spending. At the same time, in the period up to the 2019 general election, immigration lost its status as the most important issue to voters, giving way instead to issues like climate, health and welfare.

The discussions on the left have mostly concentrated on how to relate to right-wing populism. Should the centre and left refuse any collaboration with the populist right and pursue a strategy of political isolation? Or should it rather cooperate on some, mainly economic, issues and pursue a strategy of inclusion and deflation? Perhaps even by moving to the right on immigration policy and cultural issues, as the Social Democrats did?

These discussions often miss the key question of what kind of project the left itself should build in order to win a majority. Ultimately, the primary reason for the success of right-wing populism must have to do not with a lack of moral condemnation or of inclusion, but with the failure of the left to develop its own convincing project capable of improving the lives of broad layers of the population. Before turning to the possibility and content of such a project, and to understand the current predicament of the left, we must sketch a brief history of the Social Democrats and the left, and the developments that led up to the current situation.

## II

In the interwar period, the Danish Social Democrats (like their Swedish counterpart) were capable of leading stable governments and pushing through social reforms, often with the support of social-liberal and agrarian parties. This included a rights-based expansion of pension and unemployment benefits along with the introduction of paid holidays and universal healthcare insurance. At the local level, municipal branches of the Social Democrats focused especially on providing affordable and better housing to the working class.

Like its European counterparts, the Danish Social Democrats were successful in building an effective counter-power based on mass parties and organisations. They were a mass party with over 100,000 members in 1919 and over 300,000 in the 1940s, organising between a third and half of their



voters. The affiliated trade unions already organised around 50 percent of industrial, craft and transport workers in 1900, and by 1920 their membership totalled around 280,000. Along with the party organisations and trade unions, a wide range of worker cooperatives were established in this period, including consumer cooperatives, cooperative banks and insurance companies, cooperative bakeries and other types of producer cooperatives, and a cooperative housing sector.

To these three branches of the social-democratic workers' movement must be added a fourth, namely the vast network of affiliated social and cultural organisations and institutions forming an alternative social-democratic public sphere, encompassing every aspect of life from workers' sports leagues, radio societies, newspapers, magazines and journals, folk high schools, to the popular workers' educational association. By the 1930s, workers could spend their entire life within the social-democratic labour movement, being confirmed in the civil confirmation society, living in cooperative housing, buying consumer goods in one of the cooperative consumer shops, fighting for better wages in one of the trade unions, spending free time in the workers' sports league or perhaps at one of the workers' folk high schools, and finally being buried through the workers' cremation and funeral society.

The four branches of the workers' movement – the mass party, the trade unions, the cooperatives and the cultural organisations – made the Danish Social Democrats a strong political and social force capable of moulding Danish society and influencing the direction of political and economic development. The social-democratic labour movement formed a genuine counter-power and an alternative workers' public sphere comprising, alongside the mass-based party organisations, a vast array of economic, social and cultural organisations and institutions. In the post-war period, the movement used its political and social power to construct one of the most expansive welfare states in the world, while pursuing an economic policy focused on full, stable and well-paid employment.

The success of the Social Democrats and their hegemonic position within the workers' movement left but little political space for the small though highly active communist party established in 1919. Apart from the short period following the active role of the communists in the resistance to the Nazi occupation forces, the party was never able to challenge the Social Democrats,

not even during the economic crisis of the 1970s and the Social Democrats' shift from an economic policy directed at achieving full employment to one focused on tackling inflation by holding back public spending and wages in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

The 1980s signalled the end of the construction of the welfare state and traditional Keynesian economic policies. Under the Social Democrat-led government in the 1990s, public infrastructure and companies were sold off and reforms modelled on supply-side economics – focusing on tax cuts, deregulation and cutting public allowances to raise the supply of labour – were introduced. These policies were pursued rigorously by governments led by the Social Democrats, most recently during the self-defined “reform craze” of the Helle Thorning-Schmidt governments between 2011 and 2015.

### III

The development of the Social Democrats from the political party of the workers' movement to the facilitator of liberalisation, austerity and cuts in public benefits took place simultaneously with two other changes: first, what the Irish political scientist Peter Mair called the “hollowing of Western democracy”, and second, what the American historian Ellen Meiksins Wood termed the “retreat from class”.

The hollowing of democracy refers to a double process of citizen disengagement from politics on the one hand and the withdrawal of political elites into a “closed world of governing institutions” on the other. This development includes declining party memberships and the end of the mass party, resulting in a strong disconnect between citizens and the world of politics. The demobilisation of the population coincides with growing indifference and scepticism towards conventional political institutions, leading to more volatile political landscapes.

The membership numbers of the Danish Social Democrats have been in decline since the 1960s. In 1960, the party organised around 260,000 members, equivalent to a quarter of its 1 million voters in the 1960 general election. By 1980, the membership was down to 100,000, in 2000 to 50,000 and in 2019 to 36,000, corresponding to 4 percent of its voters in the 2019 election. The Social Democrats are not alone. All other major traditional parties have lost most of their members, and the overall number of party members has declined from

600,000 in 1960 to 135,000 in 2019, or a drop from 13 percent of the population to around 2 percent.

While general reasons like globalisation and the loss of democratic legitimacy of the political institutions can be cited to account for the overall decline of party democracy, we must also look at the specific trajectories of each party. The decline in the Social Democrats' membership no doubt has to do with its withdrawal from the working class, embrace of values like individualism and competition, and economic policies focused on liberalisation, deregulation, and austerity in public spending.

The Social Democrats' withdrawal from and loss of its working-class social base happened in a period of general retreat from the question of class among politicians, the media, and intellectuals alike. For years, political scientists were sure that class was no longer important, if it even existed, that the struggles over economic and distributional issues had been settled by the triumph of capitalism and liberalism, and that voters were now primarily concerned with post-materialist values and cultural issues.

At the same time, the Danish Social Democrats bought into the Blairite third-way narrative that class was no longer a crucial political issue and that the traditional emphasis on the dominant role of the state and public sector in directing the economy towards politically defined goals had to be replaced by a more market-friendly set of policies. The result was a steady rise in inequality and a deterioration of the public sector along with a deregulation of the labour market following larger shifts in the labour force caused by deindustrialisation and globalisation. While Denmark was not as hard hit by these processes as other European countries, they certainly marked a crucial change.

In hindsight, it is hard to understand how the rise of the populist right could have come as a surprise, fuelled as it was by rising inequality and new forms of economic and social insecurity. Without the collective solidarity offered by the now disintegrated labour movement and alternative public sphere, and with class politics relegated to the past by the social democrats, political scientists, and media alike, the right-wing populists had a free hand at waging a cultural war on supposedly left-wing educational elites, experts, and immigrants. In 2001, the Danish People's Party gained 12 percent of the vote after an election campaign in which the issue of immigration overshadowed all

other topics. The Social Democrats suffered heavy losses and the right-wing took over government for the next decade.

In another sense, the parties to the left of the Social Democrats, namely the Socialist People's Party (*Socialistisk Folkeparti*) and the Red-Green Alliance (*Enhedslisten*), also represented a retreat from class compared with the earlier socialist labour movement. The Red-Green Alliance, established in 1989 as a joint project of the former communist party, the minor left socialist party and a minuscule Trotskyist party, focused on creating a grassroots party, bringing together activists especially from the anti-EU movement, the feminist movement, anti-racist, and anti-fascist movements, and the environmental movements. Despite its theoretical commitment to socialist revolution through class struggle, in practice the party never aimed to become a mass workers' party let alone challenge the Social Democrats as the main party of the labour movement in a period of declining membership.

In the same way, the Socialist People's Party dispensed with its former orientation towards class, programmatically as well as in practice. This development in the orientation of the parties to the left of the Social Democrats should be seen in the context of the new social movements of the 1970s and 1980s, and their practical and intellectual critique of the socialist labour movement and its supposedly one-sided focus on reductionist and economic issues of class. While both parties effectively incorporated the critique and demands of the new social movements into their programmes, they were unable to organise the working class in a period when the Social Democrats were clearly abandoning it.

#### IV

The retreat from class of both the Social Democrats and the parties to their left was a general European trend. European social democrats were heavily criticised for abandoning the working class during their third-way period. However, while the left effectively incorporated the demands of the new social movements and their critique of the economic reductionism of the socialist labour movement into its programmes, it was generally unable or unwilling to exploit the space left by the Social Democrats to build mass parties by reorganising the working class. This was a missed opportunity not even half made up for by the successes and failures of left-wing populism in the 2010s.

A sort of left populism was introduced in Denmark when the Socialist People's Party more than doubled its vote in the 2007 general election to 13 percent. It was a strange kind of populism, however, entailing mostly a professionalisation of its communication, dropping its old leftist image, and moving politically closer to the Social Democrats. In 2011, the party went into government with the Social Democrats and the Social-Liberal Party (*Radikale Venstre*), accepting both privatisation of public companies and a reform programme designed to cut public spending and benefits in the name of raising the supply of labour. The party's involvement in these measures almost tore it apart, with members leaving in droves, and by 2015 its moment of success was over and it picked up a mere 4.2 percent of the vote.

The Red-Green Alliance fared only a little better. Throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, the party secured only low-single-digit percentages of the vote in general elections. Furthermore, voters were almost exclusively concentrated in the Copenhagen area and a few of the other largest cities. In the late 2000s, however, the party began a process of modernisation, including making use of voter analysis and focus groups, streamlining communications, updating its political programme, and strengthening its intellectual capacities to formulate detailed reform plans. This paid off in the 2011 general election, when the party jumped from 2.2 to 6.7 percent of the vote, and further in the 2015 general election, when it secured 7.8 percent of the vote, primarily by gaining support outside its Copenhagen stronghold.

The success of the Red-Green Alliance in this period had to do with effectively tapping into the European left-wing populist wave of the 2010s, most markedly represented by Syriza and Podemos. The party strengthened its critique of the "neoliberalism" of the Social Democrat governments and created a narrative of conflict between the "old power parties" on the one hand and the "parties of change" on the other, reflecting the increasing mistrust of voters towards the political establishment. At times, the party even polled above 15 percent of the vote.

The Red-Green Alliance never managed to convert its increased popularity into a more permanent and stable support among protest voters leaving the Social Democrats and the Socialist People's Party. Nor did it manage to challenge the position of the Social Democrats within the trade union movement. In the 2019 election, the party generally lost voters to the Socialist People's Party and Social Democrats almost everywhere outside the two biggest cities.

The party's main problem remains its difficulty in appealing to the working class in general and, in particular, voters outside of the capital region, which accounts for around half of its votes. Most of its voters and members are concentrated in Copenhagen, including a high proportion of students, and they are generally well educated although not in high-paid jobs.

At the same time, the new leadership of the Social Democrats is defined by a generation that is generally critical of the third-way period and has argued for a shift to the left in the party's economic policy. The new project of the Social Democrats, and Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen in particular, has pivoted around a narrative about the need to re-establish the social contract of Danish society, which has been torn apart by rising inequality and insecurity caused by years of liberalisation and unregulated globalisation. The latter has not benefited the least well off and those in lower-paying jobs, especially outside the biggest cities, and the Social Democrats have focused their efforts on effectively appealing to these groups.

## V

Syriza's loss of power following the 2019 general election, the electoral setbacks of Podemos, the loss suffered by Jeremy Corbyn's Labour in the 2019 general election, and the failure of Bernie Sanders to secure a nomination in the 2020 primaries have put a stop to the populist left-wing wave in Europe and beyond. In Denmark, although historically popular, the left seems to have hit an insurmountable barrier and it faces a dilemma which it is currently not able to overcome.

On the one hand, the ability of the Social Democrats to attract working-class voters primarily due to its leftward shift on economic policies brings the left to a position where it is difficult to organise and act as an opposition to the current Social Democrat-led government and thereby lure former social-democratic protest voters.

On the other hand, the left cannot wait for the Social Democrats to return to policies of austerity and liberalisation before being able to challenge them. The Social Democrats will be able to pursue economic policies attractive to working-class voters for some time to come, even as the political consensus on immigration remains to the right and the climate crisis worsens.

The Social Democrats, however, are not willing to challenge the power of capital and economic elites through structural reforms democratising ownership of crucial economic sectors, and there is every chance that the party will, in the long run, disappoint the working class by being unable to secure improvements in their lives. And when that moment arrives, the conditions will be ripe for a resurgence of the populist right.

For these reasons, the discussions on the left should focus on how to create a political project capable of improving the lives of the working-class majority and challenging the dominant position of the Social Democrats. This should entail presenting a realistic and appealing programme centred on how to solve the most significant problems experienced by the working class today. In the following, I present a few general guidelines for building such a project.

## **Six Steps Toward a Stronger Left**

### ***1. Reorient towards working-class politics***

As we have seen, the current parties to the left of the Social Democrats either dropped the orientation towards class or focused on creating grassroots parties bringing together activists from the new social movements. The parties effectively incorporated the critique of the supposed economic reductionism of the socialist labour movement into their programmes and practice. They have, however, been unable to mobilise working-class voters to any significant extent and challenge the Social Democrats even in a period when it withdrew from the working class.

In order to create a political project capable of mobilising a majority and challenge the Social Democrats as the dominant force on the left, the left-wing parties will have to develop a strategy for how to root themselves in working-class communities and the trade unions, both of which should be the main focus. This means reorienting away from the activist party style appealing primarily to the already convinced and mostly metropolitan, young, and well educated, towards a broader form of mass-mobilising organisation.

### ***2. Develop a strategy of mass mobilisation and organisation***

The left should be better at both mobilising voters and organising their support in more permanent structures. Political campaigns should be developed by engaging voters and directly incorporating their concerns into campaign

platforms, rather than simply letting a small circle of leading party activists define them. The party organisation should be geared more towards engaging working-class voters and communities and less towards internal discussions on endless decisions and statements with little or no chance of reaching a wider audience. The left should have as its ambition to create a mass-based workers' party, and in order to do that, the current party culture has to change in order to organise people not already part of a leftist activist culture.

### ***3. Start building a counterculture and alternative public sphere***

Part of a strategy of mass mobilisation and organisation must be the ability to offer people a sense of collective solidarity and community. Building social and cultural institutions enables the left to claim a larger presence in the everyday lives of the working class and create bonds of solidarity, and by building its own media and knowledge institutions, it will be able to better define public debates and draw in the intellectual power necessary to challenge mainstream opinions, be it within economics, political science or the cultural sector. Building a counterculture and alternative public sphere should not be confused with the kind of subcultures that have long characterised leftist and activist milieus, but should have a much broader audience and appeal concentrated on working-class communities.

### ***4. Get out of the largest cities***

Voters and party members on the left wing are mostly concentrated in Copenhagen and the big cities. Both right-wing populists and the Social Democrats have been effective in gaining support broadly across the country in medium-sized towns as well as more rural regions. As rents and house prices have skyrocketed in recent years, parts of the working class have been pushed out of the largest cities, especially the unskilled and those with the lowest-paying jobs. The left should concentrate much of its energy on connecting with these working-class communities outside of the biggest cities and develop a strategy for how to create alliances between different sections of the working class across the country.

### ***5. Develop a realistic programme***

Develop a realistic and appealing programme around working-class demands and structural reforms. The left has often been good at generating a lengthy catalogue of demands on every conceivable topic. We want to end racism, eliminate sexism, solve the climate crisis, end war, create peace, and abolish capitalism, along with a wide range of concrete proposals for improv-



ing welfare. However, often these political platforms want too much at the same time and appear unrealistic with a lack of focus and therefore become unappealing to a large majority of voters.

The left should build a focused programme around concrete and appealing working-class demands like creating jobs, security in work, raising unskilled and low-paid workers into better-paid skilled jobs, better and more equal healthcare, an end to tax havens and fraud, etc. This should be backed by reform plans of a more structural nature designed to democratise ownership and restructure the economy to increase the power of and improve the lives of the majority. While the left has not been good enough at formulating a convincing and focused programme with realistic reform proposals, the problem with the traditional social-democratic strategy was that it never, with a few exceptions, embarked on structural reforms, but remained focused on purely distributional demands, leaving economic power in the hands of the owners of capital. The programme and all structural reforms should be realistic and include detailed plans on how to achieve them.

#### ***6. Focus less on protest and more on achieving concrete improvements***

The grassroots party and activist left have naturally been focused on protesting austerity, cuts in public spending, racism, sexism, and the environmental crisis. Left-wing parties have often positioned themselves, sometimes successfully, as the voice of these protests in opposition to any existing government. While the left should not give up this connection to activists and protest movements, it must take seriously its failure to connect with and organise the working class.

The left-wing parties should recognise that the broad majority of working-class voters do not view them as the main political force capable of furthering their interests. The left cannot expect to gain majority support simply for ideological reasons or because it claims the title as the voice of activist milieus and protest movements. The left will have to prove that it is capable of achieving concrete material improvements for a broad majority of the working class.

#### **Concluding remarks**

The ability of the socialist labour movement to influence the direction in which society was moving was based on four principles: 1) the mass-based workers' party, 2) the trade unions, 3) the affiliated cooperative societies and

associations, and 4) a counterculture and public sphere based on an immense network of social and cultural organisations and institutions capable of reaching the everyday lives of the working class.

If the left wants to break out of its current impasse, it needs to move beyond the left-wing populism of the 2010s and develop a strategy for how to build a similar kind of workers' counter-power for the 21st century.

In this chapter, I have outlined six principles that could guide such a strategy. Most importantly, the left needs a political project that is focused on working-class demands, capable of creating enthusiasm and support among a majority of voters, realistic and at the same time able to push through structural reforms that shift and democratise relations of ownership and economic power in favour of the working-class majority. This is no easy task, but it is all the more necessary if the left wants to build the power required to bring about fundamental social change.

Although it seems as if the right-wing populist challenge has been curbed in Denmark, it is far from defeated and there is every chance that it will come back even harder next time. The best remedy against right-wing populism is a left capable of organising and improving the lives of the working class.

## 4. Conclusions

*By Rasmus Nørlem Sørensen, Editor*

Far-right populism is an integrated part of current politics in Denmark, Sweden, and Germany. The far right in the three countries share several features. They have the ideological trait in common, that they build their politics on anti-sentiments and a logic of “them” and “us”. They mobilise on anti-immigration, anti-Islam, anti-feminism, and anti-establishment slogans. But the chain of equivalence building the “us” and defining “them” can easily add more marginal exclusions such as anti-climate-action, anti-veganism, anti-facemasks, and anti-vaccine sentiments.

The parties of the far-right with representation in politics also share some organisational characteristics. Most prominently the tendency to manage the party in a top-down manner. Especially during the transformation from loosely organised anti-establishment protest party towards a more mainstream party of power. A process where the more radical or extreme members of the party are often excluded and extreme political opinions somewhat stifled.

The exponents of far-right populism furthermore deploy a number of similar tactics in politics and in the broader public discourse. One pervasive tactic in all three countries is to turn almost any political question into a discussion of immigration and integration. Another is the tendency to pick fights with centre-left and left-wing parties over value politics issues that divide the working-class segment of the voters.

The blue-collar workers tend to be swing-voters migrating between social democrat parties and far-right parties in all three countries. The voter base of the far right also shares some cross-border characteristics. These are the well-known background variables: people living outside of the larger cities, people with shorter education, people age 50+, and a higher percentage of men than women.

This voter base characteristics define a political battlefield between centre and mainstream parties on the one hand and far-right parties on the other. This leaves the parties of the left in a struggle with especially the social democrat parties over how much adoption of right-wing and anti-migration

rhetoric and policies that can be tolerated – for example by left-wing parties that function as support parties of a social democrat led minority government in Denmark and Sweden.

### **From Protest to Power Party**

As is evident from the analyses in the first section of the book the far-right parties have moved from being protest parties and towards positions of influence and power.

In Denmark this development seems most advanced with the Danish People's Party was built on the ruins of the libertarian-liberalist and anti-muslim Progress Party (*Fremskridtspartiet*) and has since sought a position as a nostalgic nationalist version of the classic social democratic party. For decades they have had decisive influence as “king makers and king shakers”, as Anita Nissen and Susi Meret puts it. They also point to that fact that although the support for the Danish People's Party has recently steeply declined there is no indication that the support for right-wing politics is waning. The newer party New Right (*Nye Borgerlige*) has usurped the throne in the far-right corner of Danish politics through portraying themselves as the “only genuine champion of stricter immigration and asylum rules”, in the words of Susi Meret and Anita Nissen.

Mathias Våg points to the fact that even though the Sweden Democrats (*Sverigedemokraterna*) have a long history in Sweden (since 1988) their emergence from a “far-right, post-fascist environment”, as he puts it, has contributed to keeping them out of influence for many years. Yet in recent elections they have succeeded in becoming one of the country's largest parties in Sweden and the former cordon sanitaire upheld by the rest of the political parties in the country may be a reality no longer. To a Danish observer there is a sense of déjà vu to the rise of the Sweden Democrats to their present position.

Carina Book paints a portrait of the AfD that to some extent appear to follow the trajectory of the far-right parties of the northern neighbours. But she underscores the alarming undercurrents in Germany stirred by the conspiracy-theory of the “Great Replacement” that is fuelling AfD-supporters and creates a “logic of “kill or be killed” and serves to justify an alleged heroic right of resistance”, as she explains it. The rather sinister agents of this “resistance” are not only to be found in politics but have also been proved to infiltrate police and security forces.

There is no doubt that the continued and reinforced presence of the populist right in parliaments and local elected bodies has affected the political landscape as well as society. The left-wing parties and progressive social movements do, however, make a difference by standing up to bullying and threats of minority groups as well as in the ongoing work of countering far-right influence in academia, trade unions, cultural institutions, media, and education.

### **Head Shake or Hand Shake?**

Judging from the analyses in this book one can cautiously sketch a spectrum of how the left distances itself from far-right actors and representatives. At one end of the spectrum, we find wary pragmatism and carefully picked fights in the dealings with far-right parties. At the other end of the spectrum, we find a severe *cordon sanitaire* approach ranging from top-level politics to personal encounters in the semi-private settings of local politics. The efficiency of the *cordon sanitaire* depends on thematic context, the opponent, and the power-balance in the political arena.

Anika Taschke argues that “a resolutely anti-fascist stance, involving a clear position of not yielding an inch to fascist politics, is a key part of left-wing politics”. In concrete dealings with the AfD she recommends a strict isolation strategy encompassing abstention from everything from of joint political proposals to small talk in personal encounters. Rosa Lund and Håkan Blomqvist agree with the need for a resolute stance but also explore alternatives to the harsh confrontation that can lead to political deadlocks and a counterproductive isolation of the left-wing parties.

Rosa Lund proposes a “keep it real” strategy where the left step down from symbolic battles concerning merely principles and instead put more focus on the real and personally felt effects of political decisions. She argues that “anti-migrant and anti-Muslim fearmongering of the right-wing has had very real consequences that needs to be addressed for them to be undone – but we need to take that up with the people affected, not with the New Right or any of the other populists on the right. This is how I believe that we can turn the tide and fight back against right-wing populism and extremism, both in Denmark and across all of Europe.”

Håkan Blomqvist explores the dilemma of The Left Party (*Vänsterpartiet*) that to gain influence has had to press the social democrats by building alterna-

tive majorities. For the Left Party, “its success in parliament was dependent on calculated support from the Moderate Party, the Christian Democrats and the Sweden Democrats.” At the core of this strategy is the threat to topple the social democratic lead minority government, but if this is to be carried out it would alienate and anger the close allies in the trade unions and it could very well pave the way for a right-wing government in their stead.

The three authors all point to a way out of the mire that involves the left realigning with the workers, with the trade unions, and with the new social movements. Collaboration with like-minded partners has led to and can lead to victories in as diverse areas as improved housing regulation, defence of migrant rights, or securing the survival of local libraries. These collaborations should aim to halt the normalisation of the far-right rhetoric and discourse but also to ensure real and tangible results for ordinary people.

### **Visions of a Future Left**

What kind of left-wing movement would be able to meet the challenges of far-right populism? How can we organise, ideologically ground, and in practice operate a left-wing party of the 21st century? In the final section of the book the three authors present a series of suggestions that are mutually compatible. But they put their emphasis on different building blocks of the future left.

To Aron Etzler there is a pressing need to do away with amateurism: “The best strategy in the world is of no use unless it is well funded and executed. The best policy in the world is completely worthless unless everybody knows about it. So, what would help us most of all is just killing the entire amateur notion that our political direction or moral superiority is enough to win.” From this perspective it is of vital importance, that the left-wing parties decide to learn from the best and do not shy away from professionalising their organisation, training, fundraising, polling, and communication.

Kerstin Wolter points to the connection and affiliation between social movements, single issue protests, and left-wing party politics. She argues that the vitality of a party of the left can only be preserved by linking it to the new social movements: “Die Linke wants to be a “party on the move”. This ambiguous concept sums up the ambition and problem of today’s left-wing parties (...). A solution to this problem can be seen in the “cooperation” between left-wing parties and extra-parliamentary social movements, where these social

movements take on the function of a pressure group that tries to increase the scope for left-wing politics in government, sometimes against the will of the government partners.”

Such links already exists. Leading activists in the new social movements are often also active in the organisation or milieu of left-wing parties. According to Kerstin Wolter there is a lot of synergy to be harvested from exploiting and expanding such links.

Esben Bøgh Sørensen draws on historic events and achievements to propose a perfect left built from four principles: “1) the mass-based workers’ party, 2) the trade unions, 3) the affiliated cooperative societies and associations, and 4) a counterculture and public sphere based on an immense network of social and cultural organisations and institutions capable of reaching the everyday lives of the working class.(...) If the left wants to break out of its current impasse, it needs to move beyond the left-wing populism of the 2010s and develop a strategy for how to build a (...) workers’ counter-power for the 21st century.”

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At times it can feel like society is something external from us, something nature-like, and out of reach of our actions. We may feel like victims of processes that we cannot control. And to a certain extent it is true that local or even national political struggles can feel futile vis-à-vis globalisation, climate change, capitalist economy, divisive ethnicism, or global inequality. But as the examples, analyses, and suggestions in this book suggest: There are very few things in society that cannot be changed by dedicated political action.

Don’t panic – organise!

# Appendix A: Overview of Politics

## GERMANY

Germany is a federal republic with sixteen constituent states called *Länder*, each with their own parliaments, called *Landstag*, and their own head of state, referred to as the *Ministerpräsident*.

The German federal parliament is called the *Bundestag* and has 709 seats currently occupied by six parliamentary groups.

Germany has a president and a chancellor. The current Federal President of the Federal Republic of Germany is Frank-Walter Steinmeier from the SPD.

The title of Chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany has, since 2005, belonged to Angela Merkel from CDU. The next federal election will take place in the autumn of 2021, that will be marked by the exit from politics by chancellor Angela Merkel.

The present majority government is a coalition of CDU/CSU and SPD.

### Political Parties

**The Left Party** (*Die Linke*) was formed in 2007 as a merger between the Party of Democratic Socialism (*Partei des Demokratischen Sozialismus*, PDS) and Labour and Social Justice – the Electoral Alternative (*Arbeit und soziale Gerechtigkeit – Die Wahlalternative*, WASG). The Left Party has, historically, been strongest in the bigger cities and in the regions to the northeast. At the latest national election in 2017, the party suffered a hit and fell to a position as the fifth largest party in the *Bundestag* despite increasing in support on the national level.

**The Socialist Party of Germany** (*Sozialistische Partei Deutschland*, SPD) is the oldest and presently second-largest party in Germany. The SPD has been part of multiple German *Bundestag* governments and is the only other party to hold the chancellorship in Germany, besides CDU, most recently with Helmut Schmidt from 1974-1982.

**The Greens** (*Bündnis 90 / Die Grünen*) is a climate-focused centre party formed in 1990. The party is polling at more than 20 percent ahead of the coming general elections which would place them as the second-largest party in the *Bundestag*.

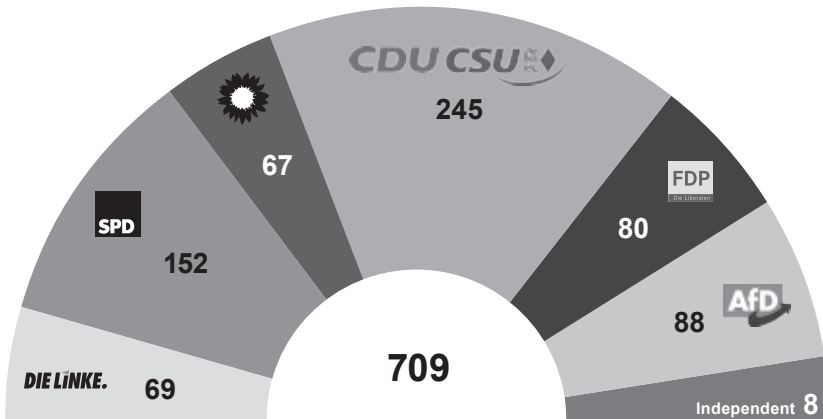
**CDU/CSU** or The Union Parties, consist of the Christian Democratic Union of Germany (*Christlich Demokratische Union Deutschland*, CDU) and the Christian-Social Union of Bayern (*Christlich-Soziale Union in Bayern*, CSU), which currently hold the position as governing parties. CDU was the first government party after 1949 and has formed government for most of the political history of Germany since then, either together or in coalitions with SPD, FDP, and/or CSU.

**The Free Democratic Party** (*Freie Demokratische Partei*, FDP) is Germany's traditional liberal party. It was part of the first governmental coalition together with the CDU and CSU but has had some major setbacks in recent years. The party failed to get elected to the *Bundestag* in the 2013 election but made a comeback in 2017.

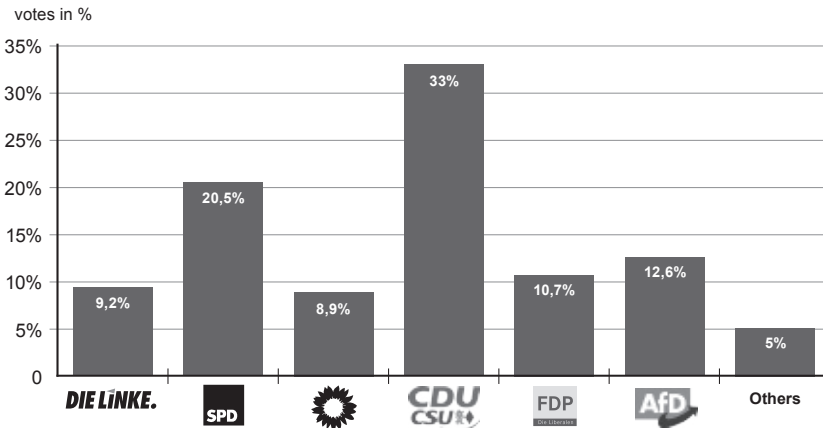
**Alternative for Germany** (*Alternative für Deutschland*, AfD) is a relatively young far-right party. The party was formed in 2013 but did not manage to clear the eligibility barrier for the national parliament before the election in 2017. However, since 2014, the party has gained increasing representation across state parliaments and is now holds seats in almost all the *Landstag* across Germany.



## Representation in the Bundestag



## National Election Results 2017



AfD	2013	2017
Votes	2.056.985	5.878.115
% of votes	4,7	12,6
Seat in parliament	0	94

## SWEDEN

Sweden is formally a monarchy with parliamentary democracy. The Swedish parliament (*Riksdag*) has 349 seats occupied by eight political parties. Elections for the *Riksdag* is held every four years, the latest election being held in 2018.

The Prime minister is Stefan Löfven from the Social Democrats. The minority government coalition includes the Green Party and is supported by the Left Party. This government has held the position since 2014. Prior to 2014, Sweden was governed by a coalition of the four parties the Moderates, the Liberal Party, the Center Party, and the Christian Democrats, referred to as the Alliance.

### Political Parties

**The Left Party** (*Vänsterpartiet*) was founded in 1917 by a group of dissidents from the Social Democrats. It is the most left-leaning party currently represented in the *Riksdag* where they mostly function as support for the government, while still trying to keep the government “in check” and hinder dramatic shifts to the right.

**The Social Democrats** (*Sveriges Socialdemokratiska Arbetarparti*) was founded in 1889 and is the largest political party in Sweden. The party has its roots in the workers’ movements in Sweden. The Social Democrats has had the longest history of governmental reign in Sweden but has since 1976 lost five elections to coalitions between the non-socialist parties.

**The Green Party** (*Miljöpartiet*) has been part of the government in its current form since the election in 2018. The party runs on a green platform focused on climate-related initiatives.

**The Center Party** (*Centerpartiet*) is centrist liberal party was part of the “alliance” together with the Liberal Party and the Moderate Party, that overthrew the Social Democrats government after their long period as sole government party from 1932-1976.

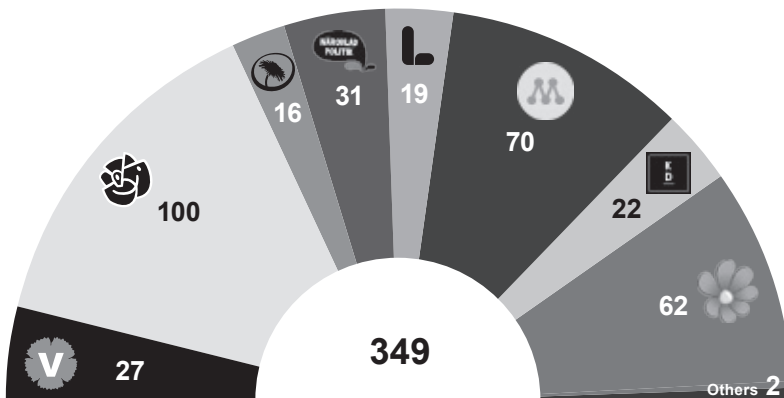
**The Liberal Party** (*Liberalerna*) has existed under its current name since 2015, where it was renamed from the Liberal People’s Party (*Folkepartiet Liberalerna*). The party has one of the longest histories in Sweden, having undergone many internal changes and different names.

**The Moderates** (*Moderata Samlingspartiet*) is the second largest party in Sweden. The party is a centre-right with a value conservative and economic liberal political platform. The party has been part of all government coalitions without the Social Democrats except for a short period in 1979.

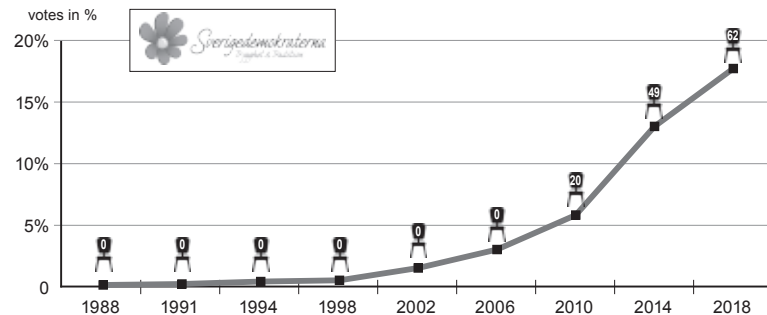
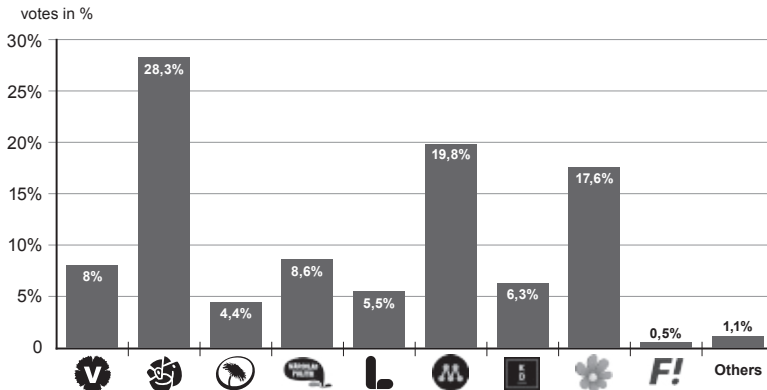
**The Christian Democrats** (*Kristendemokraterna*) was founded in 1964 and has been part of the Alliance since the election in 1991.

**The Sweden Democrats** (*Sverigedemokraterna*) is a far-right party running on a platform of nationalistic values. It is currently the third-largest party in the Swedish parliament, and an independent political force, despite not being part of the official government or the Alliance.

## Representation in the Riksdag



## National Election Results 2019



## DENMARK

Denmark is a monarchy with parliamentary democracy like Sweden. The Danish parliament is called *Folketinget* and has 179 seats. The parliament is poorer in seats, but richer in parties than the German and Swedish counterparts with ten Danish political parties, two Faroese, and two Greenlandic represented.

Since 2019 Mette Frederiksen from the Social Democrats has prime minister of the one-party minority government dependent on support from the two left-wing parties and the Social Liberal Party (*Radikale Venstre*).

### Political Parties

**The Red-Green Alliance** (*Enhedslisten*) was founded in 1989 as a merger between four different socialist and communist parties. It is the only Danish party without an official chairperson, opting instead to have a political spokesperson, who is replaced every four years. First elected in parliament in 1994 with four mandates.

**The Alternative** (*Alternativet*) was founded in 2013 elected in 2015 and runs on a platform of climate-focused policies.

**The Socialist People's Party** (*Socialistisk Folkeparti*) is based on socialist values and popular socialism. The party is traditionally a supporting party for the Social Democrats and joined the government coalition in for the first and until now last time in 2014.

**The Social Democrats** (*Socialdemokratiet*) is currently the largest political party and is in government alone, thus holding all the ministry positions. The party has its roots in the workers' movements and is one of the oldest parties in Denmark.

**The Social-Liberal Party** (*Radikale Venstre*) was founded in 1905 and is among the traditional power parties currently and most often supporting a Social Democrat government.

**The Christian Democrats** (*Kristendemokraterne*) has not cleared the eligibility threshold since 2005, but due to a party-switch they gained a mandate in 2021.

**Liberal Alliance** (*Liberal Alliance*) was founded under the name *Ny Alliance* in 2007 but took its current name and ultra-liberal stance in 2008.

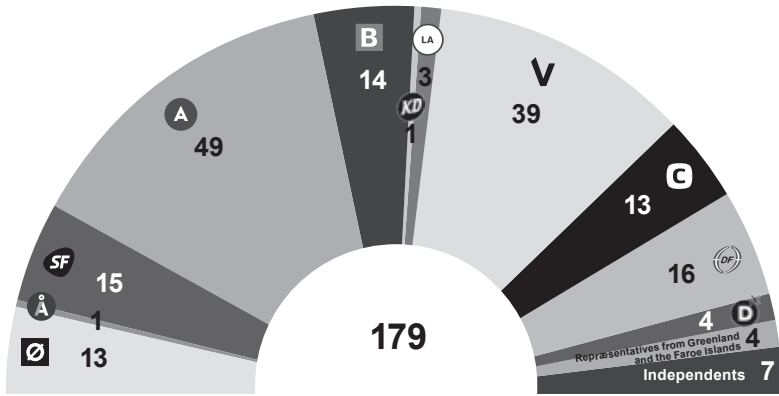
**The Liberal Party** (*Venstre*) is the second-largest party in the Danish parliament. The party is currently in a tumultuous period after the former Prime Minister and head of the party, Lars Løkke Rasmussen, left the party after an internal conflict earlier this year.

**The Conservative People's Party** (*Konservative Folkeparti*) was founded in 1916 but despite its long history, it has only once had a Prime Minister, Poul Schlüter, from 1982-1993. The party has been part of many government coalitions.

**The Danish People's Party** (*Dansk Folkeparti*) was founded on the ruins of The Progress Party in 1992. It has been a support party for governments led by Venstre since 2001. The party experienced a drastic increase in votes in 2015 and then a subsequent decrease in 2019, where the party lost 21 mandates.

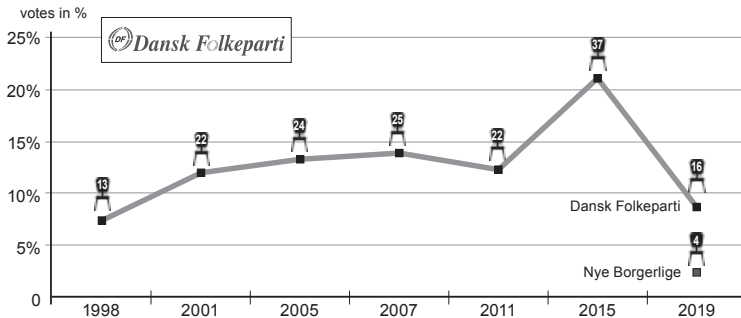
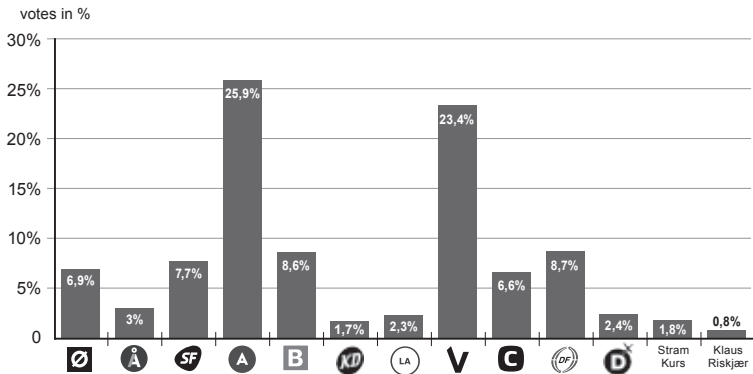
**The New Right** (*Nye Borgerlige*) is the newest party in *Folketinget* and is based on a nationalist, liberalist, and anti-Muslim agenda. The party was founded by former members of the Conservative People's Party.

## Representation in Folketinget



Enhedslisten	Kristendemokraterne	Nye Borgerlige
Alternativet	Liberal Alliance	Representatives from Greenland and the Faroe Islands
Socialistisk Folkeparti	Venstre	Independents
Socialdemokraterne	Konservative Folkeparti	
Radikale Venstre	Dansk Folkeparti	

## National Election Results 2019





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The past ten years have seen a rise and consolidation in the support for right-wing populist movements and parties in Germany, Sweden, and Denmark. This is reflected increasingly in parliaments and governments alike. This poses a series of challenges to the parties of the Left and in broader terms to central values in liberal democracy.

This anthology presents three examinations of the developments in far-right populism, three analyses of the strategies and tactics deployed by the Left to counter far-right influence, and three visions for building a stronger Left.

Contributions from: political scientist Carina Book; associate professor Susi Meret and postdoc Anita Nissen; anti-fascist researcher Mathias Våg; member of the Danish parliament for Enhedslisten Rosa Lund; institute director and doctor Håkan Blomqvist; senior advisor Anika Taschke; party secretary of Vänsterpartiet Aron Etzler; policy advisor in Die Linke Kerstin Wolter; and historian Esben Bøgh Sørensen.

