EUROPE 30.07.2018 | Peter Nedergaard

Limiting immigration, fostering integration

Political scientist Peter Nedergaard on the Danish Social Democrats' new immigration policy

Read this interview in German.

All over Europe, social democratic parties are in decline. According to public opinion polls, this is partly due to their liberal stance on immigration that does not seem to be met with approval by their core voters. How did the situation evolve in Denmark?

With approximately a quarter of the popular vote, the Danish Social Democratic Party is the largest single party in the Danish Parliament. It has been in government for most of the last hundred years. Since the turn of the century, however, the party has only been in government once, from 2011 to 2015. An important reason is the liberal, pro-immigration policy espoused by the party in recent decades. This policy has pushed many traditional social democratic working-class voters into the arms of the Danish People's Party with an immigration policy which is – at least rhetorically – much stricter.

In an attempt to win back voters, the Danish Social Democratic Party has adopted a much stricter immigration policy in 2018. How exactly do Denmark's Social Democrats plan to make immigration 'Just and Realistic', as their recent policy proposal suggests?

The proposal covers three areas of policy concerning: the reduction of the number of immigrants coming to Denmark, how to help many more refugees internationally outside of Europe with the same amount of money that is spent on helping refugees in Denmark today, and a strengthened effort to integrate people from non-Western countries already living in Denmark.

To limit the number of immigrants, the Danish Social Democrats suggest establishing reception centres outside of Europe, for example in North African countries, where applications for asylum will be

handled through Danish and preferably other European authorities. If they are granted asylum, they will be transferred to the UN which will give them protection in either a UN camp or locally in the country where the UN centre is situated.

At the same time, Denmark will receive a number of quota refugees, but only through the United Nations. In addition to that, the policy proposal calls for a limit on non-Western immigrants, strict requirements for family reunification – especially for spouses – and a 'repatriation reform' ensuring that most rejected asylum seekers are sent back. In the case of cash social benefits, the Social Democratic Party wants to apply the principle that immigrants have to contribute before receiving Danish welfare benefits. However, the free and equal access to welfare services such as medical care, schooling and elderly care is to be maintained.

While advocating a limit on immigration to Denmark, the Social Democrats also call for stepping up integration efforts. What does that mean?

Among other things, children should automatically go to kindergartens. Family reunifications to residential areas dominated by non-Westerns must be stopped. There is a need to reduce the number of schools where more than half of the pupils have a foreign background. Lastly, public employees should not stand alone in the struggle to stress that democracy is more important than religious considerations.

In order to meet these goals, immigrants receiving social cash benefits and integration benefits should be obliged to contribute at least 37 working hours a week. Danish Social Democrats committed to investing at least DKK 200 million (EUR 27 million) annually in day care centers and schools in vulnerable residential areas.

Given European social democrat's comparatively liberal stance on immigration, Denmark constitutes an exceptional case. Why did the party opt for this restrictive immigration policy?

The underlying cause of the new policy can be seen both in the excessive welfare system of Denmark as well as in the roots of the party history itself.

Their policy argues that there is an immense challenge from continued immigration from third world countries into Denmark, where relatively few people contribute a lot to society through their work. While the majority of Danes to date supports the country's universalistic welfare model, it is based on the assumption that 'the great majority contributes' (through their work and taxes), 'that we

trust each other' and 'that there is a high degree of safety'. Hence, for the Danish welfare system to work, and it being considered particularly vulnerable to immigration, immigrants have to contribute economically while also accepting Danish values, democracy and gender equality.

Can the policy be considered a reaction to the mainstream position of social democrats in Europe?

Indeed, it is a sign of an incipient revolt against the dominant liberal, pro-immigration discourse in many social democratic parties in Europe. What is new in the plan of the Danish Social Democratic Party is that it offers a justification of a policy U-turn that is seemingly perceived as solid and coherent and in line with the preferences of its potential working class voters. Inside the party, it is not seen as a sell-out to other political ideologies.

Still it is receiving a lot of criticism.

Critics point to the restriction of asylum and the reception centres in North Africa. It is perhaps questionable whether the social democratic plan is in line with international conventions as it may be difficult to guarantee asylum seekers their rights when case handling takes place in a North African country. The party's response has been that the reception in North Africa will and should do the case handling in accordance with international conventions, and that this will be an essential part of the agreement when setting up the centres.

On the other hand, the plan promises to regain control over the number of migrants allowed into the country. It is full of concrete ideas and proposals which will probably – to some extent – be implemented in Denmark. Social Democratic parties all across Europe are in deep trouble, and some have been diminished considerably during recent elections. Their inability to deal with the immigration issue seems to be an important explanatory factor. In that respect, it is important to be open-minded and not to be caught by preconceived ideas about how to set immigration policies. Hence, an option is to take a look at the policy proposals from the Danish Social Democratic Party as a fresh input to the debate within the parties.



Peter Nedergaard
Copenhagen

Peter Nedergaard is Professor of Political Science at the University of Copenhagen. He researches mainly the politics of Scandinavian countries and European integration.

-