

First Essay on Danish Politics and Welfare in Comparative Perspective

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1. Discuss whether the Danish political system can be characterized as a consensus democracy!

Before we start to discuss whether the Danish political system can be characterized as a consensus democracy we have to point out what a consensus democracy actually describes.

The most common definition for a “consensus democracy” was given by Arend Lijphart in his main work “Patterns of Democracy. Government Forms and Performance in Thirty Countries”, where he tries to differentiate between diverse forms of democracies.

A consensus democracy is “a democratic regime that emphasizes consensus instead of opposition, that includes rather than excludes, and that tries to maximize the size of the ruling majority instead of being satisfied with a bare majority” (Lijphart 1999: p. 33). He distinguishes this model from the majoritarian democracy model, which is mainly described as “government by the majority of the people” (Lijphart 1999: p. 31), where the bare majority is governing and the minorities are opposing, which especially in deeply divided societies can lead to “majority dictatorship and civil strife rather than democracy” (Lijphart 1999: p. 33). The majoritarian model “is exclusive, competitive, and adversarial, whereas the consensus model is characterized by inclusiveness, bargaining, and compromise” (Lijphart 1999: p. 2).

To characterize democracies as a majoritarian or a consensus model of democracy, Lijphart uses ten differences in two separate dimensions in the main design of a democracy. His first dimension – the executives-parties dimension – “groups five characteristics of the arrangement of executive power, the party and electoral systems, and interest groups” (Lijphart 1999: p. 3) and is mainly more about the actual political day-by-day routine whilst the second dimension – the federal-unitary dimension – groups five characteristics which “are commonly associated with the contrast between federalism and unitary government” (Lijphart 1999: p. 3) and is more about the system structure of a democracy.

The difference and the scale of those ten differences are very big and both models are just ideal types of democracy and no state could be described as a pure majoritarian or consensus democracy today. Nevertheless, with comparing the Danish political system to the ten differences between the majoritarian and consensus model we might be able to show a tendency towards describing the

Danish political system as a more consensual or a more majoritarian form of democratic government.

The problems of describing the Danish political system as a consensual democracy are already starting with the first of the ten characteristics for the executives-parties dimension: the presence of executive power-sharing in broad coalition cabinets. Only in recent Finland the executive power is shared in broad coalitions (Svensson 2009: p.5), whilst in Denmark usually minority coalitions are governing.

But as just a minority of the parliament is ruling, the opposition is in a very strong position and so the executive-legislative balance – the second feature for a consensual democracy – can be examined in Denmark.

The third characteristic is the presence of a multiparty system. Currently there are 13 parliamentary groups and 2 independent members in the Danish parliament (Folketinget 2010: p. 1), which can be clearly and without considering characterized as a multiparty parliament.

Proportional representation is the fourth key feature of a consensual democracy and is enshrined in the Danish constitution, § 31 II: “to secure equal representation”; and in the Danish election act, § 10 II: “the distribution [of seats] is fixed proportional”. Proportional representation is one of the key elements in the Danish political system – there are even more examples of proportional representation in committees or in electing supervisors in the Danish election act. Compared to other countries the “degree of disproportionality is very low in the Scandinavian countries” (Svensson 2009: p. 11).

The fifth and last characteristic of the executive-parties dimension is how interest groups are interacting with the political-administrative system. All of the Scandinavian countries “have been characterized by corporatism rather than pluralism” (Svensson 2009: p. 14). This feature is usually divided into formal and informal contacts between organized interest groups and the government, for example participation in boards and commission or hearings (formal) or contacts to civil servants (informal). In the last years, the “representation in commissions and boards has ... been replaced by contacts with bureaucrats” (Svensson 2009: p. 15), but are all in all on a higher extent than other western democracies.

The first characteristic of the federal-unitary dimension is a federal and decentralized government which has to be denied for the Danish state. Denmark is divided into 5 regions and nearly 100 municipalities, but only for an administrative purpose.

Denmark once had two chambers, the Folketinget and the Landsting, but in 1953 the bicameral system was disestablished. Since then only the Folketinget is representing the sovereign, which is not what Lijphart expects as the second characteristic of the federal-unitary dimension for a consensual democracy.

The third key feature is a written constitution which is very stable and hard to change. For example one of the oldest democracies – Great Britain – doesn't have a written constitution. Denmark's current constitution from 1953 is very stable and it needs a lot of effort to change it (§ 88 of the constitution).

Judicial Review is the fourth characteristic for the federal-unitary dimension. There is no institutional court like in Germany and the constitution itself doesn't grant any judicial review, so we have to deny this feature for Denmark, even if the Supreme Court was overruling several laws which were passed by the Folketinget.

The last key feature is an independent central bank. The Danish central bank "Danmarks Nationalbank" is based on an act from 1936 and its "monetary policy is determined independently of the Parliament and the government"¹.

In his work Lijphart compared several countries with his ten characteristics and his two dimensions. In the first dimension only Switzerland, Israel and Finland were more "consensual" than Denmark (Schmidt 2000: S. 342), in the second dimension Denmark was situated in the midfield amongst 36 nations.

If we summarize all ten differences between the ideal concept of a majoritarian and a consensual democracy altogether, we can hardly deny that the Danish political system is at least tending to be described as a consensual democracy. There are some distinct features of the Danish political system that are clearly consensual, whilst some fewer points like the absence of broad multi-party governments and the presence of just one chamber are more majoritarian.

2. What are the reasons for and against the claim that democracy was introduced in Denmark in 1849?

The year 1849, especially the 5th of June 1849, was a remarkable step towards democracy for the Danish people. On this date the Danish King Frederik VII signed a new constitution which comprises a number of civic rights. Before that day, the Danish king was ruling as an absolute monarch with all the freedom he could have in

¹ http://www.nationalbanken.dk/DNUK/AboutUs.nsf/side/Legal_basis!OpenDocument

this position: “he could make and change the laws; he could impose taxes; he could appoint and dismiss public servants; he was commander-in-chief; he could declare war and make peace; he could make treaties with other nations etc.” (Svensson 1993: p. 176).

But the “thoughts of the seeds of which were sown in Europe during the 18th century as a reaction against royal absolutism” (Folketing 2008: p. 4) finally reached Denmark and led to some remarkable changes in Danish politics.

Under the pressure of an ongoing war against the rebellious Schleswig-Holsteiners and liberal movements “among the young and well-educated middle classes in Copenhagen” (Svensson 1993: p. 178), King Frederik VII accepted a new Government with ministers from the liberal movement and appointed a Constituent Assembly in 1848 and signed the constitution in 1849.

The new constitution limited the power of King Frederik and gave the people more power in and influence over the Danish politics. Every law had to pass the parliament as a bill and – even more important for the people these days – “no taxes could be imposed, altered or repealed except by law” (Svensson 1993: p. 176). The Parliament consisted of two chambers: The Folketinget and the Landsting, both with different election systems, but as representatives of the people.

A lot of people could argue that this was very democratic in some manners, but all in all this is not how we would understand democracy today. One possible way to determine democracy is the polyarchy model by Robert A. Dahl. It is “defined as a system based on the political authorities’ responsiveness to the preferences of its citizens, considered as political equals” (Svensson 1993: p. 169). The general principles of polyarchy can be summarized in seven institutions:

1. Elected officials – which means, that the government and its decisions is controlled and observed by elected officials
2. Free and fair elections – the elected officials are elected free and fair through the sovereign in recurring elections
3. Inclusive suffrage – the right to vote for almost every adult
4. Right to run for office – the possibility to be eligible for an office
5. Freedom of expression – one of the basic civil rights – people have the right to express themselves especially when it comes to complaining about government, officials, politicians without getting punished for their expression

6. Alternative information – the right to get information from different and independent sources
7. Associational autonomy – the right to form political or interest groups

Looking back to the constitution from 1849 we can say that not every institution was established. People could elect officials and they got “the right to express themselves on political matters without severe punishment” (Svensson 1993: p. 185). Even if there was a suffrage established, only a few people could vote in election. “Less than $\frac{3}{4}$ of the men aged 30 years and above got the right to vote in 1849” (Svensson 1993: p. 186), but the suffrage was extended in later amendments of the constitution. Not everyone got the right to run for office, actually, it was very close connected to the suffrage, which means, that for example the age limit was 30 years. And the most important point is that even the Parliament had more power and influence on bills and taxes, the King still got enough power. The Constitution mainly led to a power-sharing constellation, where the King and the parliament acted together. The King was still commander-in-chief and could declare war and peace at this time.

The constitution from June 5th 1849 did not establish democracy completely in all its manners, but laid the foundation for democratic institutions which were established later in the amendments to this constitution.

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