

# Domestic Politics and Neutrality (Denmark)

By [Niels Finn Christiansen](#)

## Summary

During World War One, Denmark managed to remain neutral. But, as the country was extremely dependent on economic and political relations with both Germany and Great Britain, the war had great consequences for both foreign and domestic politics. Unlike most other European countries, Denmark succeeded in consolidating its democratic institutions and processes, first by adopting a major constitutional reform that enfranchised women. Second, it made the best possible use of the organisational network established in the decades before the war. Like most countries, Denmark went through serious social and political unrest during the last years of the war and in the immediate post-war years, but neither its social fabric nor its political system was seriously threatened.

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## Introduction

By all standards, the history of [Denmark](#) during the Great War was probably the least eventful and dramatic among the European nations. Of course, daily life was in many respects marked by [warfare](#) and the decisions made by the neighbouring great powers, but the national self-image of Denmark as a small state with little or no impact on international politics was emphasised.

## Constitutional Reform

While the safeguarding of [neutrality](#) and securing of supplies for the population and the productive sectors remained the overriding concerns of the Danish political leadership, several other political issues surfaced or resurfaced during the war years. Since 1910, the four major parties had been negotiating a constitutional reform, and an agreement was found in the spring of 1914. Therefore, when the war broke out, the Danish Parliament (*Rigsdagen*) was in session and able to immediately pass a series of laws to regulate the economy. In this extraordinary situation, the political parties accepted a [Burgfrieden](#) and, in spite of the insecurity caused by the war, the parliament decided to conclude the long legislative process regarding the constitutional reform.

In the spring 1915, while thousands of young men were dying in the trenches on the [Western Front](#), both chambers in the parliament passed a new constitution (*Grundlov*), which was confirmed by the king's signature on 5 June. The reformed constitution represented comprehensive democratic improvements. It introduced full universal suffrage by extending the voting rights to all adult women and servants, thereby making Denmark one of the first European countries to [enfranchise women](#). In contrast, welfare recipients were still barred from voting if they had not refunded the money they had received, or if their welfare status had been revoked. In the upper chamber (*Landstinget*), the electoral age remained at 35, while it was lowered to 25 for the lower chamber (*Folketinget*). The role of the upper chamber was to act as a conservative and deliberative body whose members were elected for an eight-year term, with one half being elected every fourth year. The elections were indirect; voters elected local electoral assemblies, who, in their turn, chose their representative.

The key area of conflict had been the electoral procedure for the lower chamber. Hitherto, members had been elected by the principle "first behind the post" in all constituencies. This procedure had favoured the liberal, rural-based party *Venstre* considerably, while the Social Democrats and especially *Højre* (The Conservatives) had suffered almost grotesquely. Now the manner of election was changed into a combination of the old system and proportional representation, which secured approximately equal representation for all parties according to their number of votes. Moreover, the 1915 constitution introduced a new procedure for the change and adoption of future new constitutions, which included the use of a referendum with rather complicated provisions that, as it happened, made change very difficult to achieve.<sup>1</sup>

Denmark's first referendum, however, was arranged in quite another matter. For several centuries, Denmark had been in possession of three small islands in the Caribbean Sea. They had been part of the Danish share of the international slave trade and sugar provision. In the

19<sup>th</sup> century, the islands gradually became an economic burden and a political liability, and in 1902, the government made an attempt to sell the islands to the [United States](#). Faced with a conservative majority in the upper chamber, the government had to give up the plan. Now, worried about German interests in the islands, the United States, in the middle of the war, revived the plan. In January 1916, the two states agreed to a sale of 25 million dollars. Moreover, the agreement included a clause in which the American administration recognised Denmark's supremacy over all of the Greenland territory, which, in the long run, proved to be of great importance for all parties involved. After several internal complications, the Danish government subjected the sale to a referendum in which, for the first time, women and servants were included in the electorate. The referendum, held in December 1916, showed a comfortable majority for the sale, even if many observers found the number of "no" votes surprisingly high. On 31 March, the three islands were transferred to the United States. In order to demonstrate the national unity behind the sale and secure a popular majority, the government and the three opposition parties had agreed to supplement the number of ministers with representatives from the Liberals, the Conservatives and the Social Democrats. The Liberal and Conservative ministers resigned from the government in 1918, while the Social Democrat [Thorvald Stauning \(1913-1942\)](#) remained in office until 1920, thereby emphasising the strong alliance between the Social Liberals and the Social Democrats.<sup>2</sup>

The incorporation in 1920 of Northern Schleswig into Denmark required an amendment to the new constitution, which needed to be confirmed by a referendum. In September 1920, an overwhelming majority of the electorate voted for the amendment. The Danish Kingdom, its territory thereby increased by about 10 percent, welcomed around 160,000 new citizens.

## The Revival of Conservatism

Faced with an aggressive social liberalism and socialism since the 1880s, conservatism had been on the defensive both ideologically and politically. With support from a majority in the upper chamber (*Landstinget*) and the king, the party *Højre* (The Right) had been able to stay in power throughout the last three decades of the 19th century. But in 1901, they had to yield the government to the Liberal Party (*Venstre*), which was backed by a solid majority in the lower chamber (*Folketinget*). Partly due to the electoral system mentioned above, the Right gradually withered away as a significant parliamentary force, even if the party still received a substantial number of votes.

After the adoption of the new constitution and the principle of proportional representation, politicians from the Right agreed on a plan for the reorganisation of the conservative political forces. During the autumn of 1915, various groups came together and in December 1915,

they announced the formation of a new party: The Conservative People's Party (*Det konservative Folkeparti*). Young conservative members argued that the party's traditional appeal to the rural and urban upper classes had to be supplemented by appeals to the rapidly growing middle-class segments, the independent shopkeepers, the master artisans and, in particular, the new groups of civil servants and white-collar employees. Time and again, however, because of this very broad social base, the Conservatives were plagued by deep internal divisions.

What kept them together was a political platform that stressed the importance of strengthening national defence, Christian values and national historical traditions. Moreover, the sought to promote the cause of the independent trades in agriculture and urban businesses. As a novelty in conservative circles, the platform supported gender equality in all social areas. Of course, old internal disagreements could not be totally eradicated, but by accepting the new constitution and accommodating socio-economic developmental trends, the Conservatives succeeded in establishing themselves as a permanent force in Danish politics.<sup>3</sup>

The formation of The Conservative People's Party marked the conclusion of a gradual movement in Danish politics towards a four-party system that dominated the political arena for the next half-century. Furthermore, it cemented a parliamentary situation in which no single party was able to obtain an absolute majority in the lower chamber. All future governments, therefore, had to rest on the support of at least two parties, and it became a characteristic feature in Danish politics that reforms, irrespective of content, were the result of negotiations and compromises. This tendency was evident in other Nordic countries as well, and gradually earned them the term "consensual democracies".

## War Politics and War Economy

The comprehensive regulation of supplies and prices, and the general state intervention in the economy during the war, was enabled and accepted by the public because the government, from the very beginning, involved the big network of socio-economic organisations which had been built up in the decades after 1870. Most of these organisations represented distinct class interests and most of them worked in association with one of the major political parties.

In terms of membership and voter support, the four parties mirrored the Danish class structure as it had developed since the last decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The Liberals (*Venstre*) were spokesmen for the strong, confident class of independent farmers who dominated the agricultural sector. Their power rested upon a cooperative movement built up

since the 1880s. Socio-economic cooperation in both consumption and production had become the foundation for economic prosperity, democracy and cultural dynamics among the major classes in the rural community. The agricultural cooperatives succeeded in integrating mid-sized farmers and small holders into a common economic structure. Moreover, the cooperative movement and organisational network was instrumental in the integration of the Danish economy into the world market.<sup>4</sup>

The power of the rural classes was also based on the universal system of elementary education, supplemented by a superstructure of Folk High Schools which offered a diversified education in both practical knowledge and so-called “education for life”, i.e., history, “bibeltelling”<sup>5</sup> and hymn-singing. Altogether, the rural classes managed to establish a strong, almost hegemonic liberal culture that had a long-lasting impact on the national culture as a whole.

In contrast to many other European countries, Danish small holders managed to establish themselves as an important socio-economic and political force. As mentioned above, the cooperative movement enabled them to become integrated into the national and international economy and, parallel to other classes, they created their own organisations. In 1905, the small holders, together with a large segment of urban intellectual liberals, formed the basis of a new party, The Social-Liberals (*Det radikale Venstre*), which continued the long liberal tradition of anti-militarism and combined it with a detailed program for social and cultural reforms, many of which created a bridge to the Social Democrats.

Before the Great War, the Social Liberals and the Social Democrats had formed an alliance in order to secure democratic, social and cultural reforms. The Social Democrats had built up a power base which rested upon massive support from the urban and, gradually, the rural working classes. From the 1880s on, the party, together with the trade union movement, rapidly gained both members and voters. In 1899, a comprehensive agreement between the employers’ association and the trade union association secured the development of a highly structured labour market which included detailed rules for the regulation of negotiations and conflicts based on a system of national and local collective agreements that covered almost all trades. The precondition was a very high degree of organisation among both workers and employers. Ideologically, Danish Social Democrats positioned themselves on the right wing of the international socialist movement, emphasising parliamentary reforms as the primary road to socialism.

Thus, in the early days of the war, when all political parties endowed Minister of Internal Affairs [Ove Rode \(1868-1933\)](#) with extraordinary power to regulate supplies and prices, they could rely on firm support from a well-structured hinterland. The aim of the intervention was

to secure basic supplies of [raw materials](#) for the agricultural and industrial sectors, and to protect the consumers against the rapidly rising price of their daily consumption. Ove Rode realised that the administrative system necessary for putting these laws into practice was not immediately available. He therefore introduced a series of Government Commissions, headed by The Extraordinary Commission (*Den overordentlige Kommission*). The members of the commissions were hand-picked by the minister with the aim to secure a fair representation of the most important economic and social interest groups, and above all, the agricultural and industrial sectors and the trade union associations. The members of the Extraordinary Commission were to be independent of their political affiliations and were not supposed to act under orders from their respective organisations. In this way, Rode, by exploiting the organisational network built up earlier, created a very effective administrative apparatus that combined expert knowledge with trust from the groups and trades that were affected by the commission's decisions.<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, Rode's practice had the unintended consequence of strengthening and consolidating the power of these organisations, vis-à-vis both society as a whole and their individual members.

## New Politics in the Melting Pot

During the last years of the war and the immediate post-war period, the *Burgfrieden* was gradually eroded. The laws on economic regulation, which at the outbreak of the war had been accepted by all parties, became a battlefield in Parliament and among the general public. In the liberal and conservative parties, more and more voices questioned the wisdom of the detailed regulation of prices and supplies, and attacked both the enormous power of Minister of Internal Affairs Ove Rode and the administrative system he had built up in the wake of the emergency powers act.

Key political players began to reflect on the long-term effects of the war policies. In 1916, Ove Rode, in an address to the *Folketing*, indicated that the state intervention might herald a more general change in the future relationship between the state and the market. He predicted that the lessons from the war economy would guide future politicians and policies. The liberal free-market relations of the pre-war years would never be restored to their full extent.

Of course, the reception of Rode's analysis and predictions varied enormously. As could be expected, the Social Democrats applauded them enthusiastically. They envisioned a strengthened collaboration with the Social Liberals in the fields of economic, social and cultural reform. On the other hand, the Liberals and Conservatives showed broad internal differences. Accepting state intervention as a necessity caused by the war, they argued that the regulations had become far too detailed and should be abolished as soon as the war was



over. Immediately after the German capitulation, they took action to make Denmark return to “normalcy”. The following decade, therefore, was dominated by a conflict between supporters of economic liberalism (Liberals and Conservatives) and those who argued for some degree of state intervention (Social Democrats and Social Liberals).<sup>7</sup>

## Working Class Politics: The Social Democratic Hegemony Challenged

Until the outbreak of World War One, Social Democrats and the trade union movement could count on the support of the overwhelming majority of the working class. Challenges from small syndicalist groups did not shake the strong position of the reformist version of socialism. During the war, membership in trade unions more than doubled. But, as the Social Democrats became more and more integrated into the political system, dissatisfaction with their role as part of the parliamentary majority grew rapidly. In the beginning, criticism was directed against an alleged militarisation of Danish society, in spite of the country’s neutrality. From 1916 onwards, the militant syndicalist opposition turned its attention to growing social inequality, the lack of adequate housing, the explosive growth of food prices, and the rising level of unemployment. From 1917, radical groups found inspiration from the [revolutions](#) in [Russia](#). Small socialist fractions had cultivated contacts with the international anti-war and revolutionary movements. The number of outright Bolsheviks, however, was extremely low. Through a series of spectacular actions, however, syndicalists caught the attention and support of a growing number of workers. The syndicalist critique of the trade unions and the Social Democratic leadership for moderation was shared by ever-larger groups, and a large number of Social Democrats followed the syndicalist initiatives to organise unofficial strikes. One explanation is that the workers had in fact achieved their goals, notably when it came to wage increases and reductions in working hours. The Social Democrats responded by emphasising both their anti-capitalist positions and their unshakeable support for the democratic-reformist road to socialism.<sup>8</sup>

## Consolidation of the Parliamentary Democracy

The last years of the war and the first post-war years witnessed a sharpening of all political parties’ positions and rhetoric, especially when it came to economic and social policy. On top of this surfaced an extremely vociferous [nationalistic](#) movement that aimed to take advantage of the German defeat in order to reunify Schleswig with the Danish Kingdom.

In 1920, the social, political and nationalist conflicts culminated in the so-called Easter Crisis. The right-wing parties exerted constant pressure on [Christian X, King of Denmark \(1870-1947\)](#), urging him to dismiss the centre-left government and install a new prime

minister with the task of calling a general election. In the early days of Holy Week, the king surrendered and did as the Liberals and Conservatives asked. The decision was met with vehement protests, first from the outgoing parties, who characterised the king's intervention as a *coup d'état*. The political protests were accompanied by a furious reaction from trade unionists, who pointed to the German workers' reaction to the Kapp-Putsch a few weeks earlier. The trade union leadership threatened to declare a general strike, and the king was reminded of the fate of his colleagues in the many European countries where the monarchy had been replaced by radical republican regimes.

Behind the scenes, the key figures negotiated a solution to the crisis, and at the end of Holy Week, the king and the leading politicians made an agreement which included the appointment of a transitional government with the sole task of calling a general election. After a bitter campaign, the Liberals and the Conservatives won a majority in the *Folketing*. During the electoral debates, however, all parties assured their voters that they would not deviate from parliamentary democracy, and later on, the king let it be understood that he, too, would comply with both written and unwritten parliamentary procedures.<sup>9</sup> Thus, in the aftermath of the Great War and in the middle of a general European turmoil, Danish parliamentary democracy was stabilised, and was not seriously challenged in the following decades, even when so many other democratic regimes were defeated.

## Conclusion

During World War One, the interrelationship between foreign and domestic affairs became extremely clear to the political establishment and the general public, all of whom also had to realise how vulnerable Denmark was politically and economically when the surrounding great powers went to war. The fate of Belgium in the early days did not go unnoticed. Even a long historical tradition of neutrality was no longer a guarantee of national independence. On the other hand, large elements of the Danish population learned that skilful politicians and clever policies could secure democracy and prosperity.

While the political parties sharpened their platforms and class confrontations became more frequent, none of the major parties or interest groups questioned Denmark's fundamental democratic institutions and practices. Compared to other nations, Denmark remained a stable and relatively prosperous country.

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## Notes

1. Borchorst, Anette / Dahlerup, Drude: Før og efter stemmeretten – køn, demokrati og velfærd [Before and after the right to vote – Gender, democracy and welfare], Copenhagen 2015. ↑
2. Christiansen, Niels Finn: Klassesamfundet organiseres 1900-1925 [The organised class society], Copenhagen 1990, pp. 222-224. ↑
3. Hatting, Jørgen: Fra Piper til Christmas Møller 1915-1929. Det konservative Folkepartis Historie i et halvt Århundrede [From Piper to Christmas Møller. The history of the Conservative People's Party over half a century], Copenhagen 1966. ↑
4. Christiansen, Niels Finn: Denmark's road to modernity. The cooperative way, in: Hilson, Mary / Markkola, Pirjo / Ostman, Ann-Catrin (eds.): Co-operatives and the social question. The co-operative movement in northern and eastern Europe, c. 1880-1950, Cardiff 2012, pp. 25-40. ↑
5. The term "bibeltelling" refers to the Danish Folk High Schools' tradition of principals or other teachers retelling and interpreting stories and parables from the Bible for their students. ↑
6. Jørgensen, Kasper Elmquist: Studier i samspillet mellem stat og erhvervsliv i Danmark under 1. Verdenskrig [Studies in the interaction between government and business interests in Denmark in World War One], Copenhagen 2005. ↑
7. Kaarsted, Tage: Ove Rode som indenrigsminister [Ove Rode: Minister of Internal Affairs], Odense 1985, pp. 143-158. ↑
8. Christensen, Lars K. / Kolstrup, Søren / Hansen, Anette Eklund (eds.): Arbejdernes historie i Danmark [The history of the Danish working class], Copenhagen 2007, pp.121-137. ↑
9. Kaarsted, Tage: Påskekrisen 1920 [The Easter Crisis 1920], Aarhus 1968. ↑

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## External Links

- **[Appel, Hans Hendrik \(in Danish\): Det Danske Demokrati under Krigen \(På kanten af krig - Danmark 1914-18\) \(Article\)](#)**
- **[Danmarks Riges Grundlov af 5. juni 1915 \(in Danish\) \(danmarkshistorien.dk\) \(Primary Source\)](#)**
- **[Den overordentlige Kommission af 8. august 1914: Virksomheden fra 8. August til 7. November 1914. Beretning - Aktstykker \(in Danish\), Copenhagen 1914 \(The Royal](#)**

### [Library\) \(Book\)](#)

- [Maksimalbogen \(in Danish\) \(På kanten af krig - Danmark 1914-18\) \(Primary Source\)](#)
- [Poulsen, Henning \(in Danish\): Fra Systemskifte til Besættelse, 1901-1940 \(danmarkshistorien.dk\) \(Article\)](#)

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