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*Something Rotten:  
The Danish Government's Shift toward  
Restrictive and Xenophobic Policies in the Twenty-First Century*

**ABSTRACT:** *This article explores Denmark's paradoxical reputation as a socially progressive nation amidst the implementation of restrictive and xenophobic laws by its government. Drawing on the insights of Scandinavian political scholars, particularly those who focus on neo-nationalism and populism, the article first delves into the ascent of the conservative Danish People's Party, then evaluates the compromises made by mainstream political parties empowering far-right factions, and finally examines the discourse surrounding Islam and immigration. The author contends that Denmark's shift toward increasingly restrictive policies stems from the Danish People's Party's influence, the centrist parties' willingness to collaborate with the far-right, and the normalization of a political narrative framing Islam and immigration as threats to Danish culture.*

**KEYWORDS:** *modern history; Denmark; demographics; Danish People's Party; right-wing populism; neo-nationalism; multiculturalism; immigration; xenophobia; islamophobia*

*Introduction*

A white lighthouse topped with a red roof sits upon a grassy bluff, turquoise waters lapping against a stony beach. Two cyclists contemplatively gaze at the wide expanse of ocean. In the background, a bridge stretches across the horizon, an invitation to consider where it may lead. Across the picture are superimposed the words, "Once we were brutal Vikings. Now we are one of the world's most peaceful societies. Welcome to Denmark."<sup>1</sup> Visitors to the official website of Denmark are greeted with a seemingly idyllic location—a place of peace and harmony. Scrolling further down, viewers are greeted with pictures of smiling individuals juxtaposed above articles with titles like "Pioneers in Clean Energy" and "Gender Equality – An Incomplete Success." A few clicks will land a person on a page that praises the innate trust Danes have both in their country and in each other, stating: "In Denmark, people leave their children sleeping outside in baby prams, lost wallets are returned with money inside, and a word is a word when doing business."<sup>2</sup> Another article asks why Danish people are so happy: "Is it the tuition-free access to high-quality education, or the no-fee public health care? Is it the relative lack of crime and corruption, or just plain Danish *hygge*?"<sup>3</sup>

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark carefully cultivates each element of the website to project a very particular image: that of a welcoming, progressive country where people truly are just that peaceful, trusting, and happy. However,

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<sup>1</sup> "Welcome to Denmark," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark, [online](#).

<sup>2</sup> "Trust: A Cornerstone of Danish Culture," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark, [online](#).

<sup>3</sup> "Why Are Danish People So Happy?" Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark, [online](#). The meaning of the Danish noun *hygge* is similar that of the German noun *Gemütlichkeit*: being comfortable, enjoying oneself, and having a pleasant time.

this is an incomplete representation that fails to acknowledge the realities of a country in conflict with itself. Since 2000, the Danish Parliament has passed increasingly restrictive and xenophobic legislation that targets non-Western immigrants, particularly Muslims. For instance, in 2018, the Danish government passed a law that bans garments that cover the face in public, essentially outlawing the *burqa* and *niqab*, which are coverings worn by some Muslim women.<sup>4</sup> In the initial proposal, failure to comply with the law would have resulted in a prison sentence; however, this sanction was eventually dropped from the bill in favor of progressive fines based on the number of offenses. Critics of the law saw it as discriminatory – a clear targeting of a specific population within Denmark. Such a law appears antithetical in a country that promotes itself as a socially progressive nation in which civil rights such as freedom of religion are protected. The question thus arises: why has the Danish Parliament adopted such legislation? Ultimately, the Danish government has enacted increasingly restrictive and xenophobic policies due to the influence of the Danish People’s Party (DPP or *Dansk Folkeparti*), the willingness of center-left and center-right political parties to compromise with far-right wing groups, and the normalization of a discourse by politicians that frames Islam and immigration as a danger to Danish culture, which has resonated with Danes.

### *I. Historiography*

Since the 1980s, Europe has witnessed the emergence and growth of populist and nationalist movements across the continent—Denmark being no different. Scholars have sought to understand the underlying causes of this trend, such as economic globalization, cultural anxieties, social inequality, and political disillusionment. Some historians emphasize the impact of economic transformations and the erosion of traditional industries, while others highlight the role of identity politics and cultural backlash. When examining Denmark’s recent political history and its shift in policies, many scholars focus on the intersection of some combination of populism, nationalism, racism, and xenophobia.

In order to understand nationalism, particularly the rise of neo-nationalism, Eirikur Bergmann’s *Neo-nationalism: The Rise of Nativist Populism* (2020) proves particularly useful. As one of the most recent texts on the topic, Bergmann focuses more broadly on three waves of nativist populism in the post-war era, emerging into what he defines as contemporary neo-nationalism.<sup>5</sup> Bergmann does not simply focus on Europe, but he also includes examples from the United States so as to further trace how formerly discredited and marginalized politics have been normalized. By identifying the qualities of neo-nationalism, Bergmann illustrates

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<sup>4</sup> Sasha Ingber, “Denmark Bans the Burqa and Niqab,” *NPR*, May 31, 2018, [online](#).

<sup>5</sup> Eirikur Bergmann, *Neo-Nationalism: The Rise of Nativist Populism* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2020).

how nativist populists create an external threat, point to domestic traitors, and position themselves as true defenders of the nation. Similar sentiments about the rise of populism, nationalism, and xenophobia are echoed in the works of Peter Hervik, Ruth Wodak, and Jens Rydgren.

In *The Annoying Difference: The Emergence of Danish Neonationalism, Neoracism, and Populism in the Post-1989 World* (2014), Peter Hervik examines similar topics to Bergmann while focusing more specifically on Denmark and the emergence of neo-nationalism, neo-racism, and populism.<sup>6</sup> To contextualize politicians' more recent actions, both Bergmann and Hervik take into consideration the rise in right-wing populism that occurred across Europe in the early 1980s. In other articles, he further delves into the intersection of neo-racist, neo-nationalist, and populist political developments that have driven the crisis of multiculturalism within the country, a topic also addressed by political philosopher Nils Holtug.<sup>7</sup> Hervik argues that immigrant cultures have been reduced to stereotypes, and it has become increasingly acceptable to speak about such cultures in crass and uncompromising ways. Ruth Wodak's *The Politics of Fear: What Right-Wing Populist Discourses Mean* (2015) adds further nuance to the discussion of the rise of right-wing populism and the language surrounding it.<sup>8</sup> By examining populist discourses, Wodak offers insight into how parties harness fear as a means of control, which is valuable for analyzing the rhetoric deployed by the Danish People's Party to frame non-Western immigrants, particularly Muslims, as threats to Danish culture and society.

Jens Rydgren has written extensively on radical right-wing populism, focusing particularly on exclusionary policies and practices within Scandinavian countries. His work has been extensively cited by much of the more recent scholarship on populism, nationalism, and racism; Bergmann, Hervik, and Wodak all reference him. Adopting a comparative approach in his article "Radical Right-Wing Populism in Denmark and Sweden: Explaining Party System Change and Stability" (2010), Rydgren juxtaposes the more successful Danish People's Party with Sweden's largely marginalized radical right-wing parties (i.e., the New Democracy and the Sweden Democrats).<sup>9</sup> Harald F. Moore takes a similar approach in his comparison of Denmark and Norway, contrasting how far-right political parties have been viewed and treated by more mainstream

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<sup>6</sup> Peter Hervik, *The Annoying Difference: The Emergence of Danish Neonationalism, Neoracism, and Populism in the Post-1989 World* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2014; originally published in 2011).

<sup>7</sup> Peter Hervik, "Ending Tolerance as a Solution to Incompatibility: The Danish 'Crisis of Multiculturalism,'" *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 15, no. 2 (2012): 211–25; Nils Holtug, "Danish Multiculturalism, Where Art Thou?," in *Challenging Multiculturalism: European Models of Diversity*, ed. Raymond Taras (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), 190–215.

<sup>8</sup> Ruth Wodak, *The Politics of Fear: What Right-Wing Populist Discourses Mean* (London: SAGE Publications, 2015).

<sup>9</sup> Jens Rydgren, "Radical Right-Wing Populism in Denmark and Sweden: Explaining Party System Change and Stability," *The SAIS Review of International Affairs* 30, no. 1 (2010): 57–71.

organizations.<sup>10</sup> While the Scandinavian countries are by no means monolithic, comparing Denmark to the likes of Sweden and Norway allows for a broader understanding of the various contexts and factors influencing the rise of populist and nationalist movements. In examining the rise of right-wing populism and its impact on Danish politics over the last thirty years, much of the scholarship emphasizes the 2001 election as a turning point. For the first time in decades, Denmark had an ostensibly conservative government. In addition to Rydgren, Terri E. Givens (in *Voting Radical Right in Western Europe*) and Daniel Skidmore-Hess (in “The Danish Party System and the Rise of the Right in the 2001 Parliamentary Election”) provide a unique perspective on the causes and factors behind the rise of the right.<sup>11</sup> Written in 2005 and 2003, respectively, both survey the shift in Denmark’s government not long after it occurred, offering insight into the immediate consequences. Anders Widfeldt’s monograph *Extreme Right Parties in Scandinavia* (2015) further elaborates on the rise of the right with the advantage of several decades of separation from the founding of the Progress Party to the rise of the Danish People’s Party.<sup>12</sup>

Taken together, the above-mentioned scholarship creates a nuanced narrative about the various intersections of populism, nationalism, racism, and xenophobia and how countries are impacted socially and politically. Each text lends an additional perspective to the examination of why Denmark has shifted from the open, tolerant, and socially liberal country it was in the wake of World War II to one that has implemented some of the toughest immigration legislation in Western Europe and continues to enact increasingly restrictive and xenophobic policies.

## II. The Rise of Right-Wing Populism: The Influence of the Danish People’s Party

The Danish People’s Party has been a significant political force in Denmark since the late 1990s, consistently advocating for stricter immigration controls, tighter border security, and more assimilation requirements for immigrants. To understand its position of influence throughout the early twenty-first century, it is crucial to know the party’s origin and platform. Founded in 1995, the DPP emerged from the Progress Party, an established right-wing populist party that had gained popularity in the 1970s. Originally created as an anti-tax protest by Mogens Glistrup (1926–2008) in 1972, the Progress Party’s platform centered on “the battle against the income tax, public bureaucracy, and other threats to individual liberty.”<sup>13</sup> Positioning itself as a movement operating against the old parties and the establishment, the Progress Party gained traction and support.

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<sup>10</sup> Harald F. Moore, “Immigration in Denmark and Norway: Protecting Culture or Protecting Rights?” *Scandinavian Studies* 82, no. 3 (2010): 355–364.

<sup>11</sup> Terri E. Givens, *Voting Radical Right in Western Europe* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Daniel Skidmore-Hess, “The Danish Party System and the Rise of the Right in the 2001 Parliamentary Election,” *International Social Science Review* 78, no. 3/4 (2003): 89–110.

<sup>12</sup> Anders Widfeldt, *Extreme Right Parties in Scandinavia* (Milton Park: Routledge, 2015).

<sup>13</sup> Givens, *Voting Radical Right*, 136.

However, despite the Progress Party gaining twenty-eight (of 179) seats in the 1973 election, making it the second largest party in the Danish Parliament, it did not form a part of the ruling coalition because the other parties refused to cooperate with it.<sup>14</sup> Over time, the Progress Party split into two factions: “those who wanted to pursue cooperation with the mainstream parties (the pragmatists) and those who wanted the party to stand on its own (the fundamentalists).”<sup>15</sup> Disenchanted with the unwillingness of the fundamentalists to consider any compromises or agreements with other parties, the pragmatists exited the Progress Party to form the DPP.

Under the leadership of Pia Kjaersgaard (b.1947), the DPP quickly distinguished itself from the Progress Party. The new party prioritized concerns about the negative effects of immigration, including the preservation of Danish culture, social cohesion, and the welfare system. Early on, the party’s leadership made it clear that it “oppose[d] the transformation of Denmark into a multi-ethnic, multicultural society and [had] adopt[ed] an anti-immigration, especially anti-Muslim, stance.”<sup>16</sup> In 1997, Pia Kjaersgaard, then leader of the party, declared that “a multiethnic Denmark would be a national disaster.”<sup>17</sup> Heading into the 1998 elections, the Danish People’s Party “entered the scene with an ideological message of preserving a homogeneous Danish identity in the face of the growing multiculturalism of Danish reality. This appeal captured 7.4% of the vote in the party’s first electoral effort, complicating the political strategies of the established parties in the process.”<sup>18</sup> However, the DPP still lacked direct political influence, in large part due to the perception that its agenda was not acceptable.

Immigration was a central issue in the 2001 election. Capitalizing on public dissatisfaction with previous responses by the government to immigration, the DPP filled a void with its promises of tighter restrictions. In its party program, it declared that “Denmark is not, and has never been a country intended for immigration, and the Danish People’s Party disagrees with the statement that Denmark will develop into a multiethnic society.”<sup>19</sup> By centering its campaign on the failure of the established government to address perceived immigration issues, the DPP tapped into xenophobic attitudes that had long been festering within the country. Its anti-immigrant rhetoric proved highly resonant:

In 2001, 20 percent of the voters mentioned “immigration” when asked which problems of the day they considered to be most important for politicians to address. In 1990, it was only 4 percent. Furthermore, in 1987 only 4 percent mentioned immigration when asked about the most important issue affecting their vote. By 1998 immigration had increased to 25 percent,

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<sup>14</sup> Widfeldt, *Extreme Right Parties*, 130.

<sup>15</sup> Givens, *Voting Radical Right*, 138.

<sup>16</sup> Wodak, *Politics of Fear*, 194.

<sup>17</sup> Wodak, *Politics of Fear*, 194.

<sup>18</sup> Skidmore-Hess, “Danish Party System,” 94.

<sup>19</sup> Givens, *Voting Radical Right*, 139.

making it the single most important issue. At the same time, the proportion of voters sharing xenophobic or anti-immigration attitudes was still at a high level.<sup>20</sup>

The xenophobic and nationalistic message espoused by the party resonated with voters who viewed immigration as a serious threat to the unique national identity of Denmark and Muslims as a danger to Denmark's security. Mobilizing these voters resulted in the DPP emerging from the 2001 election as the third-largest party with twenty-two (of 179) seats.<sup>21</sup> Overall, for the first time in decades, the Danish Parliament had a conservative majority, and "the Danish People's Party was given a pivotal position and gained recognition as the support party for the newly formed Liberal-Conservative coalition government. In fact, the party has functioned as the government's main coalition partner in day-to-day politics ever since."<sup>22</sup> The formation of this coalition has resulted in a dramatic shift toward stricter immigration policies over the last several decades.

The influence of the DPP within the coalition has led to the implementation of numerous policies with a focus on restricting immigration and promoting assimilation. Since its entry into the Danish Parliament, the party has pushed for stricter immigration laws, including reducing family reunification options, increasing residency requirements, and implementing tougher citizenship criteria. Furthermore, the DPP has supported measures to enforce integration requirements for immigrants, such as mandatory Danish language classes, cultural assimilation programs, and employment obligations. Between 2002 and 2011, at least forty-five deals were struck between the DPP and the government concerning immigration.<sup>23</sup> In 2010, "the party proposed a complete halt to all immigration from non-Western countries and justified this on the basis of the party's moral responsibility to 'keep Denmark Danish.'"<sup>24</sup> While the mainstream government did not outright accept such a proposal, other compromises and negotiations were made that brought about stricter regulations.

In 2002, the Danish Parliament introduced one of its most extensive and restrictive immigration policies to date, targeting non-Western immigrants, particularly Muslims. The main priority of the reform proposals was to significantly reduce immigration to Denmark, but it also narrowed the definition of who qualified as a political refugee, increased the required qualifying time for a permanent resident to seven years from its original three, and complicated the process for family reunification.<sup>25</sup> It must be noted that this proposal was not

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<sup>20</sup> Rydgren, "Radical Right-Wing Populism," 65. Although xenophobic attitudes were widespread in Denmark during the 1970s, the politicization of immigration did not occur until the mid-1980s when the Progress Party began to articulate it as part of their platform.

<sup>21</sup> Widfeldt, *Extreme Right Parties*, 135.

<sup>22</sup> Rydgren, "Radical Right-Wing Populism," 58.

<sup>23</sup> Widfeldt, *Extreme Right Parties*, 136.

<sup>24</sup> Wodak, *Politics of Fear*, 194.

<sup>25</sup> Widfeldt, *Extreme Right Parties*, 136.

solely due to the influence of the Danish People's Party. During the 2001 election, other parties pledged to take a harder stance on immigration, and the proposed legislation was a fulfillment of those promises. While the initial proposal was positively received, the DPP still entered into negotiations with the government to tighten restrictions further, which resulted in multiple modifications:

the abolition of the right of asylum seekers to be provided with housing, stricter demands on asylum seekers' Danish language skills, and a rule according to which asylum seekers sentenced to a prison term of six months or more were made subject to a qualifying term of ten years before they could become eligible for permanent residency.<sup>26</sup>

While the DPP was not the only party advocating for tighter immigration policy, it is clear that the party played a significant role in pushing legislation into a more restrictive direction. The influence of the DPP and its nationalistic and xenophobic agenda have significantly altered Danish immigration, asylum, and integration policies.

### *III. The Power of Coalitions: The Willingness of Political Parties to Compromise*

Ultimately, the Danish People's Party would be unable to pass legislation without the willingness of other political parties to compromise and work with it. This is due in large part to the structure of the government; Denmark's unicameral system necessitates coalitions being formed across party lines. Thus, Danish parties have embraced a tradition of cross-party collaboration and negotiation, enabling them to form minority governments and pass legislation through compromises. Over the last five decades, populist parties, particularly radical right-wing parties, have moved from the fringes of Western politics and found a foothold within the established political systems. Denmark has been no different. After decades of marginalization, "mainstream parties...gradually abandon[ed] their adversarial stance against the populists, and in many cases, instead adopted a strategy of accommodation. Formerly discredited and ridiculed parties have not only become accepted but have to a large extent emerged to dominate the political discourse."<sup>27</sup> The Danish political landscape has seen various coalitions and compromises formed between different political parties, including those with differing views on immigration. The willingness of the mainstream center-right to work in conjunction with the DPP has provided the latter with the power needed to influence the enactment of restrictive immigration laws.

While the Danish People's Party is by no means the first right-wing populist party to exist in Denmark, it has wielded a greater amount of influence than its predecessor. In contrast to the Progress Party, the DPP has often held a pivotal position in coalition negotiations due to its significant influence and electoral support. The initial choice of mainstream parties like *Venstre* and the Conservatives to align with the DPP in 2001 had a significant impact as

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<sup>26</sup> Widfeldt, *Extreme Right Parties*, 136.

<sup>27</sup> Bergmann, *Neo-Nationalism*, 13.

such collaboration legitimize[d] the party in the eyes of the voters (which is extremely important for marginalized extremist parties) and [gave] it, through the media attention thus attracted, greater political visibility [...] Similarly, whenever mainstream parties appropriate the policy ideas held by the emerging party or adopt a similar political language, they are also contributing to their legitimization.<sup>28</sup>

When the DPP first won seats in 1998, it was a fringe group with little influence. In fact, in October 1999, the Social Democratic Prime Minister Poul Nyrup Rasmussen (b. 1943) proclaimed during a parliamentary debate that the DPP would never become legitimate; it would never be “house trained.”<sup>29</sup> However, this idea would soon be proven incorrect. When Anders Fogh Rasmussen (b. 1953) formed a *Venstre*-led government together with the Conservative People’s Party with parliamentary support from the Danish People’s Party, it granted the DPP the status Poul Rasmussen had claimed it would never attain.

Many mainstream parties have recognized the electoral strength of the DPP and have been willing to negotiate and form alliances with it to secure the necessary votes for policy initiatives. This is in clear contrast to other Scandinavian countries with right-wing populist parties. In comparison to Denmark, Norway’s political parties have distinctly resisted working with far-right political parties: “Despite the popularity of the far-right and anti-immigrant *Fremskrittsparti* [i.e., Norway’s Progress Party], a definite resistance from both the left- and right-leaning parties to any association with them—be it in joining to promote policy issues, or in forming government coalitions—can be observed.”<sup>30</sup> Meanwhile, in Sweden, the radical right-wing populist “parties have been either too short-lived (New Democracy) or too marginal (Sweden Democrats) to have comparable consequences on the Swedish party system or legislation.”<sup>31</sup> Within the Swedish government, mainstream parties have heavily isolated the far-right wing parties, refusing to compromise on policies. In contrast to its Norwegian and Swedish counterparts, the Danish People’s Party has faced less stigmatization, as seen in its treatment by other political parties. Over time, the DPP has even shifted its focus from purely anti-immigration rhetoric to a broader socio-economic agenda, including concerns about welfare as well as law and order. This policy shift has allowed the DPP to find common ground, particularly with center-right parties who share similar concerns and priorities, making compromise more feasible. However, mainstream parties seeking to form a government or maintain stability have at times made concessions to the DPP’s positions on immigration in order to secure its support.

The emergence of the Danish People’s Party as a coalition partner has significantly impacted the fundamental dynamics within the government. As

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<sup>28</sup> Jens Rydgren, *From Tax Populism to Ethnic Nationalism: Radical Right-Wing Populism in Sweden* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2006), 20.

<sup>29</sup> Widfeldt, *Extreme Right Parties*, 134.

<sup>30</sup> Moore, “Immigration in Denmark and Norway,” 355.

<sup>31</sup> Rydgren, “Radical Right-Wing Populism,” 68.



Swedish sociologist Jens Rydgren explains in his examination of radical right-wing populist parties in Sweden and Denmark,

the intrusion of a new political actor into a party system is likely to have consequences on the dynamics within this system. It may have consequences for agenda setting, by making certain political issues more salient and others less so; it may influence the way political actors talk about certain issues (framing); and it may make mainstream parties change positions in order to win back votes or to prevent future losses (accommodation).<sup>32</sup>

In the case of the Danish government, the presence of the DPP has had a profound effect. In terms of agenda setting, the DPP's breakthrough in the 1998 election brought immigration as a political issue to the forefront. Thus, when the 2001 election took place, many of the mainstream parties (i.e., *Venstre*, the Social Democrats, and the Conservative People's Party) were forced to address the topic and take a position. In turn, these parties had to deliver on the promises made during their campaigns. The framing of the immigration issue was established by the DPP, which designated non-Western immigrants, particularly Muslims, as a threat to national security and Danish identity. Once *Venstre* and the Conservative People's Party – both mainstream center-right parties – formed an alliance with the far-right Danish People's Party, the conservative mainstream had to accommodate the DPP's policy positions in order to maintain its votes and support, which can be seen in the immigration legislation passed in 2002. Consequently, the Danish People's Party was able to influence the government's immigration policies through its support for conservative coalitions.

Without other mainstream conservative parties working with it, the DPP would not have had the power necessary to shift policy into a more restrictive direction. The DPP could have remained marginalized and isolated, as has been seen with radical right-wing parties in Norway and Sweden; however, Denmark's mainstream parties have actively chosen to work with the DPP so as to secure its votes. This is in contrast to the DPP's predecessor, the Progress Party, which was excluded from the mainstream government. By forming coalitions and making policy concessions to gain the DPP's support, mainstream parties have indirectly endorsed or implemented measures advocated by the DPP, thus moving the country toward more restrictive immigration legislation.

#### *IV. A Clash of Cultures: The Normalization of Xenophobic and Racist Discourse*

Denmark is often portrayed positively in international media and lauded as a place of happiness and harmony. It regularly sits at the top of polls and rankings of the world's happiest countries. A featured article on the official website of Denmark that explains the phenomenon states that “[a]ccording to the World Happiness Report, happiness is closely linked to social equality and community spirit – and Denmark does well on both. Denmark has a high level of equality and

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<sup>32</sup> Rydgren, “Radical Right-Wing Populism,” 67.

a strong sense of common responsibility for social welfare.”<sup>33</sup> Denmark has long regarded itself as a liberal and tolerant society, placing a high value on social equality and cohesion. However, as Danish anthropologist Peter Hervik has noted,

[i]f you have lived in Denmark for the last decade, you can hardly fail to have noticed the development of a particularly strong and powerful “us/ them” division in the media and in the popular consciousness. There is much talk about “we,” the Danes, the hosts, who are born and raised in Denmark, represented positively in news articles and interviews, and “the others,” the guests who “do not belong” properly and are described in negative terms and considered a problem simply because they arrive with their importunate differences.<sup>34</sup>

The portrayal of Denmark as a happy country without serious issues is a gross oversimplification that overlooks the xenophobia and racism that have pervaded the country. The high level of equality that the national website claims is present ignores the strict immigration and integration laws. The influence of the Danish People’s Party within the government and the political compromises made by mainstream center-right parties with the far-right are not solely responsible for xenophobic policies in Denmark. The normalization of racist and xenophobic discourse by politicians has shaped public opinion and media rhetoric, which has played a role in shaping policies.

The DPP’s rhetoric and influence have shaped public discourse around immigration and xenophobia in Denmark. While avoiding being openly racist, the DPP has skillfully separated immigrants from ethnic Danes, creating a dichotomy of “others” (immigrants, outsiders, Muslims) and “us” (native Danes).<sup>35</sup> By utilizing identity-based rhetoric, the DPP has framed immigration as a cultural and moral issue. Native Danes are paragons of culture, while “others” are represented as culturally inferior. The “others” endanger and threaten the “pure” culture of Denmark and therefore the national identity. Such rhetoric implies that “people of different cultures are in the ‘wrong place’, [and thus] their culture [is] incompatible with the culture of the new context.”<sup>36</sup> Immigrant cultures and Danish culture are deemed incongruous. One would supplant the other, so stricter immigration policies are necessary to protect Danish culture, identity, and national interests. Political parties across the spectrum have positioned themselves as defenders of Danish culture against the threat of encroaching immigrants, whose customs, values, and traditions are labeled as the enemy. While this is recognizable as xenophobia, politicians have reinforced the idea that xenophobia is a natural reaction to such threats and is not, in fact, racism.<sup>37</sup> Consequently, such political rhetoric has influenced public rhetoric and discourse surrounding immigration.

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<sup>33</sup> “Why Are Danish People So Happy?” Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark, [online](#).

<sup>34</sup> Hervik, *Annoying Difference*, 8.

<sup>35</sup> Bergmann, *Neo-Nationalism*, 148.

<sup>36</sup> Hervik, “Ending Tolerance,” 214.

<sup>37</sup> Hervik, “Ending Tolerance,” 215.

Rhetoric that was once widely condemned and rejected “has gradually crept back into the public debate. In a process of normalization, nationalist, xenophobic and outright racist rhetorics are no longer necessarily treated as taboo, but have instead found wide scale backing.”<sup>38</sup> A lack of public scrutiny of such rhetoric has resulted in cultural racism becoming ingrained in Danish society. As Dr. Karen Wren, a professor at the University of St. Andrews, explains in her examination of cultural racism in Denmark, “[p]ublic racist slurs have become commonplace (and legally tolerated), and political parties across the spectrum have adopted cultural racism as an integral part of their platforms, to the extent that it is no longer necessary to have extreme right-wing parties promoting anti-immigration views.”<sup>39</sup> Such racism has manifested itself in the adoption of discriminatory practices such as housing quotas for ethnic minorities and compulsory refugee dispersal.<sup>40</sup> It can also be seen in the debate over the concept of multiculturalism, which has become particularly fraught. Politicians across the political spectrum have criticized it, emphasizing that an influx of immigrants and refugees with different cultures threatens Danish societal cohesion. Or rather, it endangers the idea of a homogenous Danish culture.

Anti-immigration rhetoric has resonated with a segment of the population that feels uneasy about demographic changes and the subsequent threats to Danish values, and politicians have been taking advantage of such worries. The DPP capitalized on public concerns surrounding immigration, creating a discourse steeped in cultural nationalism to garner support. According to Bergmann, “[t]he cultural nationalism in the Danish People’s Party’s discourse was, for example, found in its emphasis on Christian values and the link between the state and the Evangelic-Lutheran Church. On that ground the party positioned itself as a protector of Danish culture, in a word, of Danishness.”<sup>41</sup> By framing Danish national identity as linked with specific values tied to Christianity, the DPP positioned Islam as an antagonistic force incompatible with Danish culture, once again reinforcing the division of “us” versus “them.”

The DPP has adeptly used media and communication channels to amplify its message and connect with this target audience. It has mastered the art of simplifying complex issues, employing vivid language, and engaging in populist rhetoric, which resonates with many voters. This can be seen in the party’s 2011 video, titled “I Am Denmark.” In the video, a voiceover relays the history of the country as a strong and proud nation, a land of traditions: “I’m a country of literature, poetry, science, and philosophy. I am Denmark. I have fought for equality and equal rights. I have a strong welfare state for the protection of the

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<sup>38</sup> Bergmann, *Neo-Nationalism*, 13.

<sup>39</sup> Karen Wren, “Cultural Racism: Something Rotten in the State of Denmark?,” *Social & Cultural Geography* 2, no. 2 (2001): 146.

<sup>40</sup> Wren, “Cultural Racism,” 146.

<sup>41</sup> Bergmann, *Neo-Nationalism*, 148.

elderly and the infirm. My core values are freedom of speech, democracy, and tolerance. I am Denmark.”<sup>42</sup> Images play across the screen: flags flying in the wind; smiling men, women, and children; and famous, historical Danes. But as the video progresses, the message and tone change from one of celebration to one of condemnation and warning: “But I am a country that will challenge cultures that want to change what I have been fighting for. I will not back down in the face of violence and terror. I will not be forced to accept medieval traditions. I am a country that has the courage to say STOP. I am a country that will stand guard to protect my own culture. Because I am Denmark.”<sup>43</sup> Images of women in *burqas*, Muslims kneeling in prayer, and the burning of the Danish flag now dominate the screen. At one point, a picture of New York’s World Trade Center appears; the 9/11 moments right before and after the second plane struck the South Tower are frozen in time. The video is quintessential nationalism, a display of the constructed Danish cultural identity. And it bolsters the idea that Muslims are the cultural “other,” that their traditions and values are medieval, violent, and barbaric, and therefore run completely counter to Danish culture. Such discourse has fostered discontent among Danes, who have then lent their support to the DPP and conservative coalitions.

The public’s support for stricter political initiatives is a manifestation of cultural racism and xenophobia, which have become components of Danish society. Ultimately, “popular support for restrictive policies has been a necessary condition for their implementation, and many Danes have genuinely been concerned about welfare costs, parallel societies, forced marriages, crime rates, and the educational underachievement of immigrants and their descendants.”<sup>44</sup> With the politicization of immigration, political parties and their representatives, particularly right-wing groups, have normalized a discourse that frames Muslims and non-Western immigrants as a threat to Danish culture and identity. In doing so, they have helped to foster an environment conducive to xenophobia and racism, which in the end has garnered the necessary support for the passage of highly restrictive anti-immigration legislation.

### *Conclusion*

The breakthrough and rise of the Danish People’s Party have had a profound impact on Danish politics. Its electoral success forced mainstream parties to address issues of immigration, integration, and welfare policies more directly. The party’s influence has led to policy changes, particularly with regard to immigration and integration measures, as well as to a shift in Denmark’s overall political discourse. The willingness of mainstream center-left and center-right political parties to compromise with far-right groups like the Danish People’s

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<sup>42</sup> Danish People’s Party, “I Am Denmark,” November 21, 2011, video, 3:03, [online](#).

<sup>43</sup> Danish People’s Party, “I Am Denmark,” [online](#).

<sup>44</sup> Holtug, “Danish Multiculturalism,” 194.

Party has resulted in the passage of increasingly restrictive and xenophobic legislation. However, such political initiatives require a certain level of public support. Politicians, particularly on the right, have framed immigration and Islam as threats to Danish culture, which has resonated with Danes, who have in turn lent their support to stricter immigration policy. Politicians have normalized a racist and xenophobic discourse about immigration within both the political and public spheres through their rhetoric.

The official website of Denmark asks, why are Danish people so happy? The site offers the following answer from Christian Bjørnskov, a professor of economics at Aarhus University, who is researching happiness: “Danes feel empowered to change things in their lives. What is special about Danish society is that it allows people to choose the kind of life they want to live. They rarely get caught in a trap. This means they’re more satisfied with their lives.”<sup>45</sup> While that may be the truth for many within Denmark, such a statement overlooks a percentage of the population that must contend with increasingly restrictive and xenophobic policies that shape their lives. But that fact is not going to appear on any official, perfectly manicured, and curated website any time soon.

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<sup>45</sup> “Why Are Danish People So Happy?” Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark, [online](#).