

THE RESEARCHER COLUMN

Danish EU Membership turns 40 – have the Danes turned their back on the EU?

Marlene Wind examines the Danish attitudes towards the European project over the last 40 years and outlines what implications a two-speed Europe may have for a small open economy.

By Professor Marlene Wind, Department of Political Science, Copenhagen University



The 2nd of October it was 40 years ago Denmark voted in favor of entering into the European Community (as it was then called).

It is well-known that the yes appeared neither out of enthusiasm for the European project nor because our politicians had any great visions of a united Europe. The reasons were much more prosaic and had to do with the Danish farmers continued access to the British market for dairy products. Britain wanted to join and thus Denmark had to go along. This was the message that came across, and illustrates well how the Danish approach to Europe from the outset was mostly practical and focused on economic gains. Political Union on the other hand was never desired and certainly not discussed as a real possibility at the time. On the contrary, in 1986 our then Prime Minister Poul Schlüter even declared the Political Union 'stone dead'. As time has passed Schlüter's prediction has clearly become more and more untrue.

Looking back it was in particular regrettable that it was never explained to the Danish people that as a small open economy Denmark has a strong interest in a legally binding Union. Nor was it explained how the supremacy of EU law over conflicting national law, not only was part of the package but in our fundamental interest. Even today 40 years after it still comes as a surprise – not only to the Danish citizens but even to many politicians – that European rules can set aside national ones if there is a conflict between the two. The alternative to what we have today – i.e. a community based on weak international law – would not, as many still seem to think, mean more independence and ability to decide by ourselves. On the contrary, a more legally fragile Community would quickly end up as a club dominated by the larger member states with an only marginal voice for smaller states.

Despite these rather banal insights a recent opinion pool on the Danish attitudes towards Europe shows that the Danes have become increasingly Eurosceptic. At least

if we look at the Gallup published in Berlingske Tidende on October 8th. Here it was clear that the Danes no longer just want to preserve the 20 year-old opt-out on the Euro but also want to keep the defense- and the justice and home affairs-opt-outs. At the same time a Eurobarometer shows that 8 out of 10 Europeans still want more Europe to cope with the crisis. And even more surprisingly to most Danes: 63% of all Europeans still think that a common currency is a good thing! What does all of this tell us? It tells us that as Europe moves ahead with enhanced collaboration on banking- and fiscal union, Denmark seems to slide in the other direction. A two (or more) speed Union is clearly no longer just a theoretical possibility discussed among political scientists on international conferences. It has become a reality that we have to confront. On the other hand it is quite clear to most observers that a split Europe will not be in the interest of a small member state like Denmark. Denmark will however not be able to veto a development that we contributed to creating with our 'No' to the Maastricht Treaty 20 years ago. With the direction the EU is moving at the moment, Denmark will for the first time face the actual consequences of being an opt-out nation. The fear is of course that the Eurozone countries will create their own smaller version of the EU with the implication that the internal market that most Danes support and cherish will be gradually undermined. Though Denmark is still welcome to join this more exclusive club there is no sign that this will happen, not even in the remote future.

Under these circumstances we have to remind ourselves that we have no one but ourselves to blame for the situation we are now facing. The following months and years will thus be decisive for Denmark's future place in Europe.

Together with the Norwegian Nobel Committee, which finally found an opportunity to hand over its distinguished peace prize to the EU, we should never the less rejoice and appreciate that 17 + countries in Europe still have the courage that is needed in this crucial time of crisis.

The researcher column is written in turn by the researchers at the Centre for European Politics. The column does not represent a common CEP-position.