



# THE PARLIAMENTARY SYSTEM OF DENMARK

INTRODUCTION TO  
DANISH DEMOCRACY





## PREFACE

Denmark received its first free constitution in 1849. The present constitution is from 1953 and lays down the basic values on which the Danish society is built and to which all laws are subject. The constitution specifies that Denmark has a Parliament whose Members are elected on the principle of free and equal suffrage, and a Government that must be accepted by a parliamentary majority at all times.

The constitution specifies the division of powers in society by stipulating the separation of the legislative, executive and judicial branches of power. This safeguards a better balance of power and prevents any one person or body from becoming too powerful.

The constitution also stipulates that all Danish citizens enjoy a range of basic rights, such as freedom of speech, freedom of assembly and freedom of political activity. These rights are essential in a healthy, open democracy.

Open democracy also implies freedom of the press and its right to keep a watchful eye on politicians by reporting on as well as controlling the political system. Therefore, the press has free access to the Danish Parliament, its politicians and relevant documents.

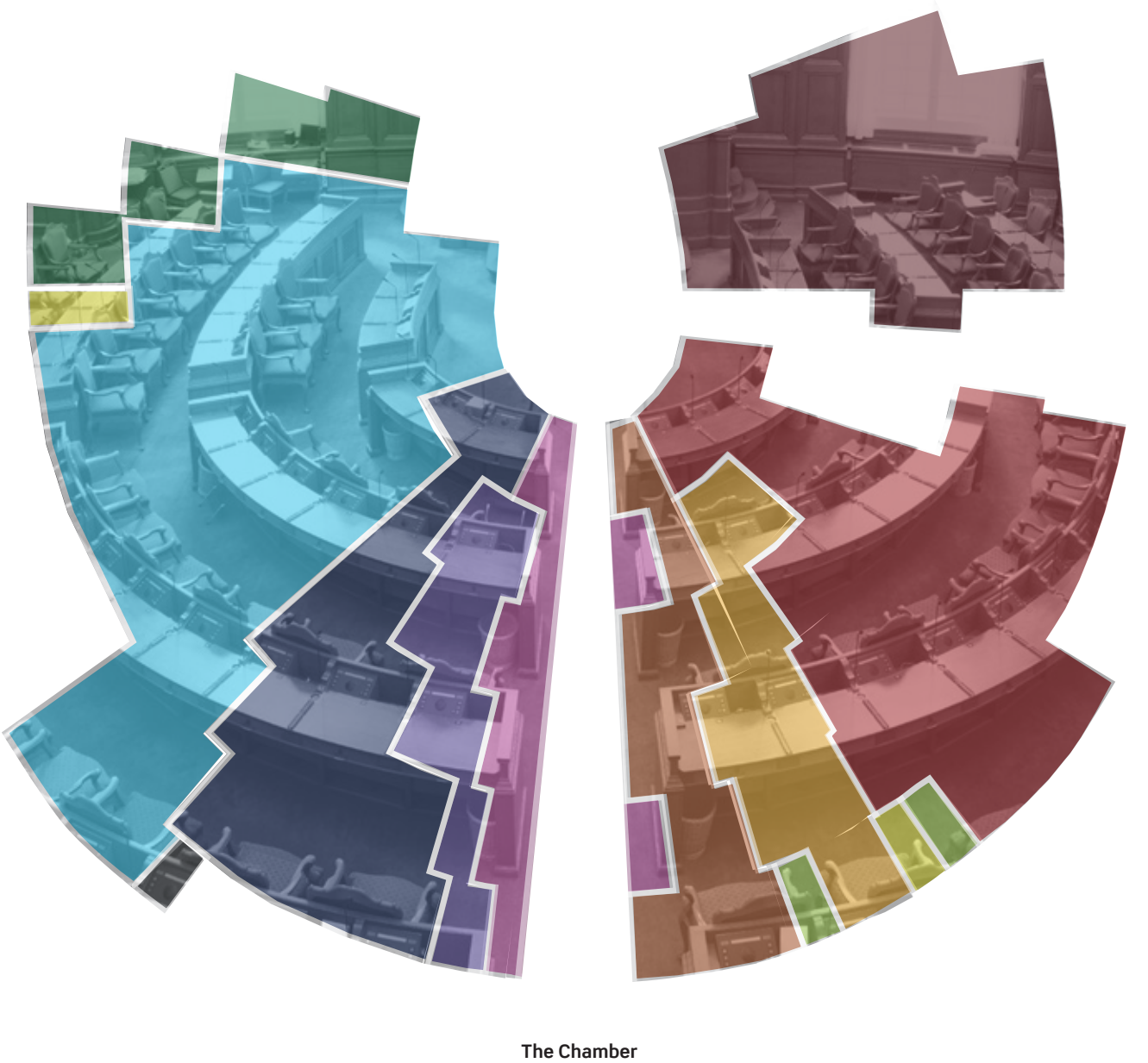
As I am proud of the democratic tradition we have in Denmark, I wish to use this publication to spread the word about our democracy and explain how the Danish Parliament works.

Enjoy your reading!

***Mogens Lykketoft***  
***Speaker of the Danish Parliament***



*Distribution of seats in the Danish Parliament at September 2014*



1) In Greenland, one Member has been elected from Inuit Ataqatigiit and one Member from Siumut. In the Faroe Islands, one Member has been elected from Sambandsflokkurin and one Member from Javnaðarflokkurin



## GENERAL ELECTIONS

### Denmark's electoral system

A central element of Denmark's democracy is the division of legislative, executive and judicial powers. These three powers are independent of one another and at the same time control one another to prevent the abuse of power. Together with the Government, the Danish Parliament exercises legislative power and is the only branch of power authorised to adopt legislation.

Denmark is a representative democracy, which means that Danish citizens elect representatives to sit in the Parliament and make daily political decisions on the organisation of society.

The Danish Parliament comprises 179 Members. Of these, 175 are elected in Denmark, two Members are elected in Greenland and two are elected in the Faroe Islands.

The Prime Minister must see to that parliamentary elections are held at least once every four years. However, elections may be held more often, as the Prime Minister is empowered to call general elections at any time.

All Danish citizens of voting age residing in the Danish realm have the right to vote in general elections, unless they have been declared legally incompetent. The voting age for elections to the Danish Parliament is established by law and is set at 18 years. Any person entitled to vote in a parliamentary election is eligible for the Danish Parliament, unless he or she has been convicted of an offence that, in the public opinion, makes him or her unworthy of being a Member of the Danish Parliament.

Members of the Danish Parliament are elected by means of direct secret ballot. The constitution stipulates that specific rules concerning the exercise of suffrage must be established by law. Therefore, the Act on Danish Parliamentary Elections includes a number of provisions which safeguard equal representation of different opinions among the electorate, and which take

account of factors like population size and density in the distribution of seats. A political party must win at least 2 % of the vote in a general election to secure a seat in the Danish Parliament.

Following a parliamentary election, the newly elected Parliament holds a vote to approve the election. This takes place at the second sitting of Parliament, approximately two weeks after the election. Subsequently, a Speaker and four Deputy Speakers are elected. They jointly constitute the Presidium of the Danish Parliament. The Speaker is elected by a vote, whereas the four Deputy Speakers are appointed by the four largest political parties, excluding, however, the Speaker's party.

Each new Member of Parliament (MP) must sign a statement declaring that he or she will comply with the constitution. New MPs may not become members of committees or take part in parliamentary debates or votes before signing the statement.

### Status of MPs

A Member of the Danish Parliament may not be put on trial in criminal proceedings or imprisoned without the Parliament's consent, unless the MP is caught in a criminal act. This provision aims to ensure the Danish Parliament's independence of criminal prosecution by the Government. However, with the Parliament's permission, an MP may be put on trial or imprisoned in a criminal case. Since the mid-1900s, there have been no instances of the Danish Parliament refusing to consent to criminal prosecution of an MP.

Furthermore, an MP may not be held liable for statements made in the Parliament, e.g. in a libel suit, without the Parliament's consent. Thus, MPs have an extended form of freedom of speech when they speak in Parliament. In practice, the Danish Parliament never consents to holding MPs liable for statements made in the parliamentary Chamber.

## SYSTEM OF GOVERNMENT

### **Minority governments and formation of government**

The Danish system of government is known as negative parliamentarism, which means that the Government may never have a majority against it in the Parliament, but it is not required to have the support of an actual majority. In fact, most Danish governments have been minority governments. Minority governments often consist of several political parties, with one or more parties supporting the Government while not actually forming part of it. In this way, the Government will not have a majority against it in the Parliament.

If the Parliament no longer has confidence in a minister, the minister must resign. If the Parliament loses confidence in the Prime Minister, the whole Government must resign, or the Prime Minister must call a general election. The Parliament expresses its lack of confidence in a minister or the Prime Minister by passing a vote of no confidence.

In principle, the Constitution gives the monarch of Denmark the authority to appoint the Government. Thus, formally, when a new Government is formed, two representatives of each political party meet with the Queen and advise her on whom she should invite to lead negotiations on forming the new Government or who should be the new Prime Minister. The new Government is formally appointed by the Queen following the conclusions of the negotiations between the political parties.

### **Other forms of control of the Government**

The Danish Parliament elects an Ombudsman to monitor the public administration, e.g. by processing complaints from citizens concerning public authorities. The Ombudsman may criticise authorities and recommend that they reprocess a case and possibly change their decision, but the Ombudsman is not authorised to make decisions. The Ombudsman may consider legal matters, but not issues which require other specialist knowledge.

According to the Constitution the Parliament may also set up parliamentary commissions consisting of MPs to investigate important issues. However, this option is rarely used. Instead, when a matter needs to be investigated, the Government and the Parliament frequently set up a commission of inquiry headed by a judge.

**THE DANISH SYSTEM OF GOVERNMENT IS KNOWN AS NEGATIVE PARLIAMENTARISM, WHICH MEANS THAT THE GOVERNMENT MAY NEVER HAVE A MAJORITY AGAINST IT IN THE PARLIAMENT, BUT IT IS NOT REQUIRED TO HAVE THE SUPPORT OF AN ACTUAL MAJORITY**

The Constitution includes no provisions on the formation of a Government. However, the no-confidence provision described above is interpreted to mean that a newly formed Government must not be expected to be met with a vote of no confidence when it presents itself to the newly elected Parliament.

*Prime Minister  
Helle Thorning-Schmidt*











## WORK IN THE CHAMBER

### The course of the year in the Danish Parliament

A parliamentary year always begins on the first Tuesday in October and ends on the same Tuesday of the following year. On this date, the MPs meet at 12 o'clock for the first sitting in the Parliament, and the Prime Minister gives a speech, known as the opening speech, addressing the current situation in Denmark and the Government's plans for the coming year. At the opening of the Parliament, Queen Margrethe and the royal family are present, together with representatives of the courts.

Two days after the opening of Parliament, there is an opening debate where MPs and the Prime Minister debate the content of the Prime Minister's opening speech.

The Danish Parliament meets around 100 times a year. The sittings usually take place from Tuesday to Friday of most weeks, but some weeks during the year there are no sittings in the Chamber. As a rule, activities in the parliamentary Chamber end around 5 June, Denmark's Constitution Day, and start up again at the beginning of the new parliamentary year in October. However, parliamentary work may continue beyond this period, if the need arises.

### Debates in the Chamber

Many different kinds of debates take place in the Chamber, including debates on bills and proposals for parliamentary resolutions. The Parliament may only make decisions by a vote when more than half of the MPs are present and take part in the vote. Most decisions are based on simple majority.

The rules of procedure of the Danish Parliament are laid down by the Parliament itself and include specific provisions on procedures and maintenance of order. These Standing Orders of the Danish Parliament lay down the principles for the work in the Chamber and the parliamentary committees.

The political parties in Parliament enter into so-called pairing agreements. Pairing agreements between the parties aim to allow a number of MPs from each party group to be absent from voting in the Chamber without this affecting which parties have a majority in Parliament. Usually, the group secretary of each parliamentary group coordinates the distribution of pairings and makes sure that the group is able to present the agreed number of MPs at votes in the Chamber.

**MANY DIFFERENT KINDS OF DEBATES TAKE PLACE IN THE CHAMBER, INCLUDING DEBATES ON BILLS AND PROPOSALS FOR PARLIAMENTARY RESOLUTIONS. THE PARLIAMENT MAY ONLY MAKE DECISIONS BY A VOTE WHEN MORE THAN HALF OF THE MPS ARE PRESENT AND TAKE PART IN THE VOTE. MOST DECISIONS ARE BASED ON SIMPLE MAJORITY.**

Debates in the Chamber are filmed and available at the Parliament's website, where they can be followed live or accessed later on. Additionally, Chamber debates are transcribed, and these transcripts are available on the Danish Parliament's website.

### Legislative process

Every Member of the Danish Parliament is entitled to propose bills and proposals for parliamentary resolution. However, the Government introduces most bills.

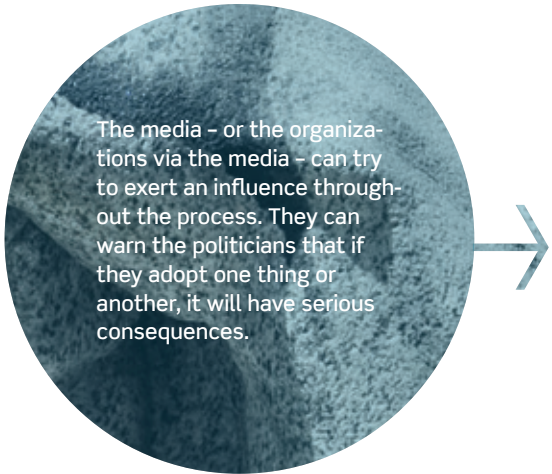
A bill must be read three times in the Parliament before it may become law. At the first reading, the MPs discuss the bill in general terms. At the second reading, MPs discuss any suggested amendments to the bill, proposed by either the Government or MPs. At the third reading, MPs vote on whether to adopt the bill. Votes may be cast for the bill or against the bill – or neither for nor against the bill. Once a bill has been adopted, it needs to be signed by the Queen and the relevant Minister to have force of law.

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## *The Making Of Laws*

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### *Informally*



The media – or the organizations via the media – can try to exert an influence throughout the process. They can warn the politicians that if they adopt one thing or another, it will have serious consequences.

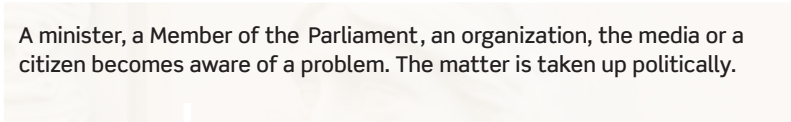


Organizations which have different interests try to obtain the greatest influence possible in the law-preparing committee. The influence becomes greater the sooner it takes place before the bill is introduced.

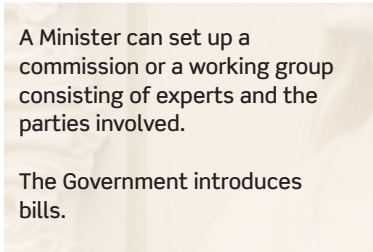


If the organizations wish to try to influence legislation further, they contact the Government, the parties or Members of the Parliament. Representatives of the organizations can, like ordinary citizens, ask for an interview with the Members of the committee dealing with the bill.

### *Formally*

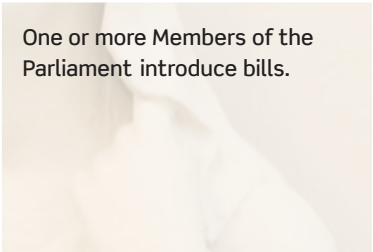


A minister, a Member of the Parliament, an organization, the media or a citizen becomes aware of a problem. The matter is taken up politically.

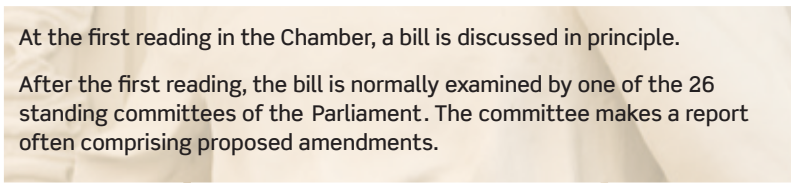


A Minister can set up a commission or a working group consisting of experts and the parties involved.

The Government introduces bills.

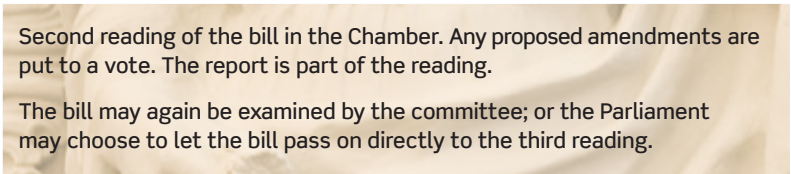


One or more Members of the Parliament introduce bills.



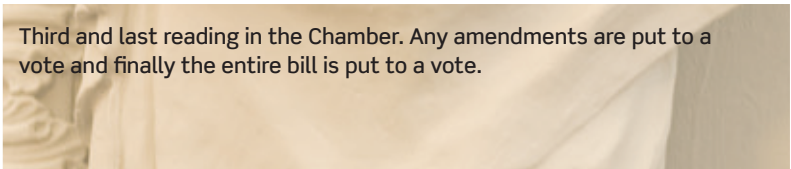
At the first reading in the Chamber, a bill is discussed in principle.

After the first reading, the bill is normally examined by one of the 26 standing committees of the Parliament. The committee makes a report often comprising proposed amendments.

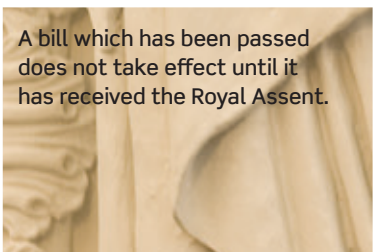


Second reading of the bill in the Chamber. Any proposed amendments are put to a vote. The report is part of the reading.

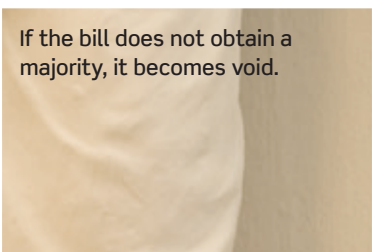
The bill may again be examined by the committee; or the Parliament may choose to let the bill pass on directly to the third reading.



Third and last reading in the Chamber. Any amendments are put to a vote and finally the entire bill is put to a vote.



A bill which has been passed does not take effect until it has received the Royal Assent.



If the bill does not obtain a majority, it becomes void.





Every year, the Danish Parliament passes a Finance Act which is the Government's budget for the coming year. Like any other bill, the Finance Bill must be read three times in the Parliament, but it must be introduced four months prior to the beginning of the following fiscal year at the latest. Debates on the Finance Bill are often longer than debates on normal bills as they often involve many proposals for amendments and lengthy discussions.

#### Other debates in the Chamber

In addition to the work on bills, a range of other activities take place in the parliamentary Chamber primarily aimed at carrying out parliamentary control of the Government.

For instance, MPs may submit questions to Ministers, requiring the Minister to provide information or an explanation concerning a particular area or case. Ministers will usually respond to such questions.

MPs may also ask "section 20" questions of Government Ministers. The name derives from the fact that the rules concerning this type of questions are found in section 20 of the Standing Orders of the Danish Parliament. A "section 20" question may be used by an MP to ask about a Minister's position on a given topic. The question must be submitted in writing, but the response may be either oral or written. If a written response is requested, the Minister must provide this within six working days. Questions requiring an oral response will be answered orally in the parliamentary Chamber by the Minister on the following Wednesday, provided it is submitted no later than Friday of the previous week.



Additionally, approximately every other Tuesday a "questions hour with the Prime Minister" is held, during which party leaders from outside the government coalition may put unprepared oral questions to the Prime Minister.

### IN ADDITION TO THE WORK ON BILLS, A RANGE OF OTHER ACTIVITIES TAKES PLACE IN THE PARLIAMENTARY CHAMBER PRIMARILY AIMED AT CARRYING OUT PARLIAMENTARY CONTROL OF THE GOVERNMENT.

MPs may also introduce proposals for parliamentary resolutions in the Chamber. Often, a proposal for parliamentary resolution is a request to the Government to take action, e.g. introduce rules or prepare a bill with a specific content. Proposals for parliamentary resolutions are in most cases subject to two readings in the Chamber with a committee stage inbetween. At the second reading, MPs vote on the proposal. In some cases a proposal for a parliamentary resolution is referred to a committee immediately after being introduced and only read once in the Parliamentary Chamber after the committee stage. Most proposals for parliamentary resolutions are introduced by the opposition parties, which means that the vast majority of them are not adopted by Parliament.

Ministers may also report in writing, or sometimes orally on a specific topic in the Chamber. Such reports are usually the subject of subsequent debate in the Chamber.

Bills, proposals for parliamentary resolutions, and proposals for parliamentary resolutions etc., lapse at the end of the parliamentary year or when a general election is called.

## THE COMMITTEES: PARLIAMENTARY WORKSHOPS

The Chamber of the Danish Parliament is where MPs debate political issues and vote on bills. But the committees are where these decisions are prepared.

The individual MPs cannot possibly study all bills and proposals for parliamentary resolutions in detail. Therefore, the fundamental work on the many bills and proposals for parliamentary resolutions is organized in 26 standing committees. 'Standing' means that they are permanent.

The committees are first of all engaged in work on bills and proposals for parliamentary resolutions and in monitoring the Government and its administration of laws. In addition, they follow the current development in their spheres of competence. Most committee meetings are closed, but a number of them are open and broadcasted live at both the Parliament's website and on its TV channel.

### One committee for each ministry

Each committee has a political area of responsibility corresponding approximately to the remit of a ministry. For example, bills concerning the environment will be dealt with in the Environment Committee whose area of responsibility corresponds to that of the Ministry of Environment.

### Members

Most committees have 29 members. As a rule, each political party is represented on the committees in proportion to the party's number of seats in the Parliament, but when forming the committees, the parties often join forces in electoral alliances to have as many committee members as possible and then distribute the various seats between them according to political agreements..

### Committee work

After the first reading in the Chamber, most bills and proposals for parliamentary resolutions are referred to one of the standing committees. When dealing with a bill or a proposal for parliamentary resolution, the committee will submit a number of questions to the Minister responsible for the relevant area. The committee may ask the Minister to respond orally, in which case the Minister will be required to attend a consultation in the committee.

The committees also receive visits from various groups of citizens or representatives from organizations, etc., who wish to express their views to the committee in an attempt to influence the committee's work on a bill.

THE COMMITTEES ARE FIRST OF ALL ENGAGED  
IN WORK ON BILLS AND PROPOSALS FOR  
PARLIAMENTARY RESOLUTIONS AND IN  
MONITORING THE GOVERNMENT AND ITS  
ADMINISTRATION OF LAWS

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### *In 2012-13 the committees*

... HELD 720 MEETINGS  
... RECEIVED 377 DEPUTATIONS  
... PROCESSED 231 BILLS  
... PROCESSED 122 PROPOSALS FOR PARLIAMENTARY RESOLUTION  
... SUBMITTED 13.816 WRITTEN QUESTIONS TO MINISTERS  
... HELD 813 CONSULTATIONS WITH MINISTERS

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### **Committee reports – the outcome of the committee's work**

A committee usually concludes its work on a bill or a proposal for parliamentary resolution by writing a report. In this report, committee members from each political party state whether their party supports the bill or proposal for parliamentary resolution. In many cases, committee members propose amendments to the bill or proposal for parliamentary resolution on behalf of their party, and these proposed amendments will be included in the report.

At the second reading of the bill in the Chamber, the committee report forms the basis for the continued debate. In most cases, all the details will have fallen into place during the committee stage, and the bill may proceed to the third reading and become law following final adoption and Royal Assent. In other cases, additional questions will have to be clarified, and the bill will be referred back to the committee at the end of the second reading. The committee will then conduct further work on the bill and write a supplementary report.

### **The committees' parliamentary control of the Government**

Most committee work concerns dealing with bills and proposals for parliamentary resolutions. However, committees are also involved in monitoring the Government and its administration of laws. In

addition to questions posed by committees during their work on bills and proposals for parliamentary resolutions, committees may also put questions to Ministers concerning their administration of existing laws. Committee questions may contain requests for factual information as well as information on the minister's position. A written or oral response may be requested. A session where a minister replies orally to a committee question is known as a consultation.

### **The Finance Committee and the European Affairs Committee**

Two standing committees are particularly influential: the Finance Committee and the European Affairs Committee. The main task of the Finance Committee is to deal with Finance Bills and Supplementary Appropriation Bills and to consider requests for supplementary appropriations from the individual Ministers in the course of the year.

The European Affairs Committee handles issues relating to the EU and authorizes Ministers to negotiate at EU level. Thus, a Minister may not approve a decision in the EU if a majority of the members in the European Affairs Committee are against it. The European Affairs Committee may also hold open meetings with the Danish Members of the European Parliament and others.

## *The Danish Parliament's standing committees:*

1. THE EMPLOYMENT COMMITTEE
2. THE HOUSING AND URBAN AFFAIRS COMMITTEE
3. THE CHILDREN'S AND EDUCATION COMMITTEE
4. THE BUSINESS, GROWTH AND EXPORT COMMITTEE
5. THE EUROPEAN AFFAIRS COMMITTEE
6. THE FINANCE COMMITTEE
7. THE DEFENCE COMMITTEE
8. THE NATURALIZATION COMMITTEE
9. THE ECCLESIASTICAL AFFAIRS COMMITTEE
10. THE CLIMATE, ENERGY AND BUILDING COMMITTEE
11. THE MUNICIPAL AFFAIRS COMMITTEE
12. THE CULTURAL AFFAIRS COMMITTEE
13. THE GENDER EQUALITY COMMITTEE
14. THE ENVIRONMENT COMMITTEE
15. THE LEGAL AFFAIRS COMMITTEE
16. THE FISCAL AFFAIRS COMMITTEE
17. THE SOCIAL AFFAIRS COMMITTEE
18. THE HEALTH AND PREVENTION COMMITTEE
19. THE TRANSPORT COMMITTEE
20. THE FOREIGN AFFAIRS COMMITTEE
21. THE FURTHER EDUCATION AND RESEARCH COMMITTEE
22. THE STANDING ORDERS COMMITTEE
23. THE FOOD, AGRICULTURE AND FISHERIES COMMITTEE
24. THE RURAL DISTRICTS AND ISLANDS COMMITTEE
25. THE IMMIGRATION AND INTEGRATION AFFAIRS COMMITTEE
26. THE SCRUTINEERS' COMMITTEE

## POLITICAL PARTIES

### Parties in the Danish Parliament

Denmark has a multi-party system with a relatively large number of political parties represented in the Parliament. Eight parties have been represented in the Parliament since the 2011 election. The Constitutional Act of Denmark makes no mention of political parties, because when the Act was introduced in 1849, these had not been formed. MPs are bound solely by their convictions, and not by what their parties or constituents say. Consequently, voters cannot revoke an MP's seat; it belongs to the MP personally, and not to his or her political party. Usually, however, MPs toe the party line. An MP may also become an independent or switch to another party.


### Remuneration of MPs

All MPs receive remuneration for their work, as well as compensation for many of the expenses incurred in connection with carrying out political work at the Parliament in Copenhagen, Christiansborg, and around the country. For instance, the Parliament offers apartment housing to MPs whose permanent residence is outside Zealand. Alternatively, in some cases, such MPs may receive a housing allowance instead. According to the Parliamentary Election Act of Denmark, MPs are obliged to receive the basic remuneration and expense allowance, and thus they cannot refuse to accept remuneration for their work. The Parliamentary Election Act also lays down the remuneration amounts.

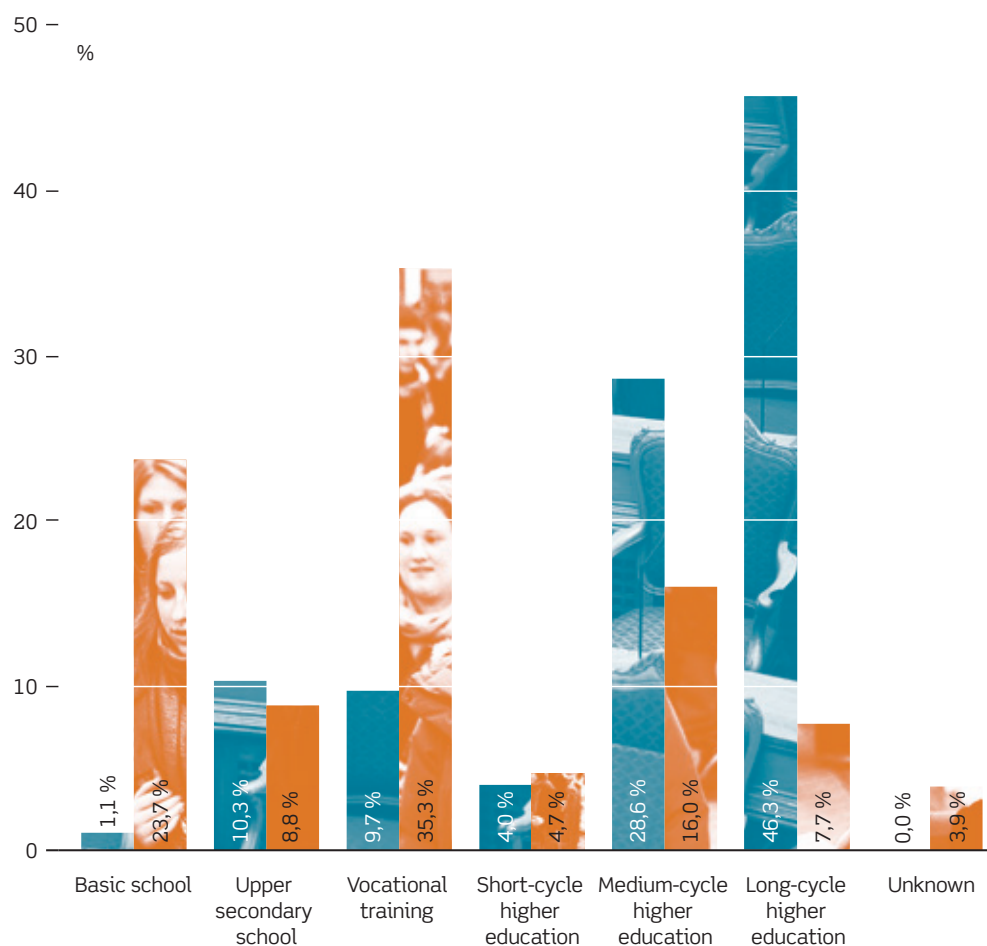
### The election in numbers

#### Education

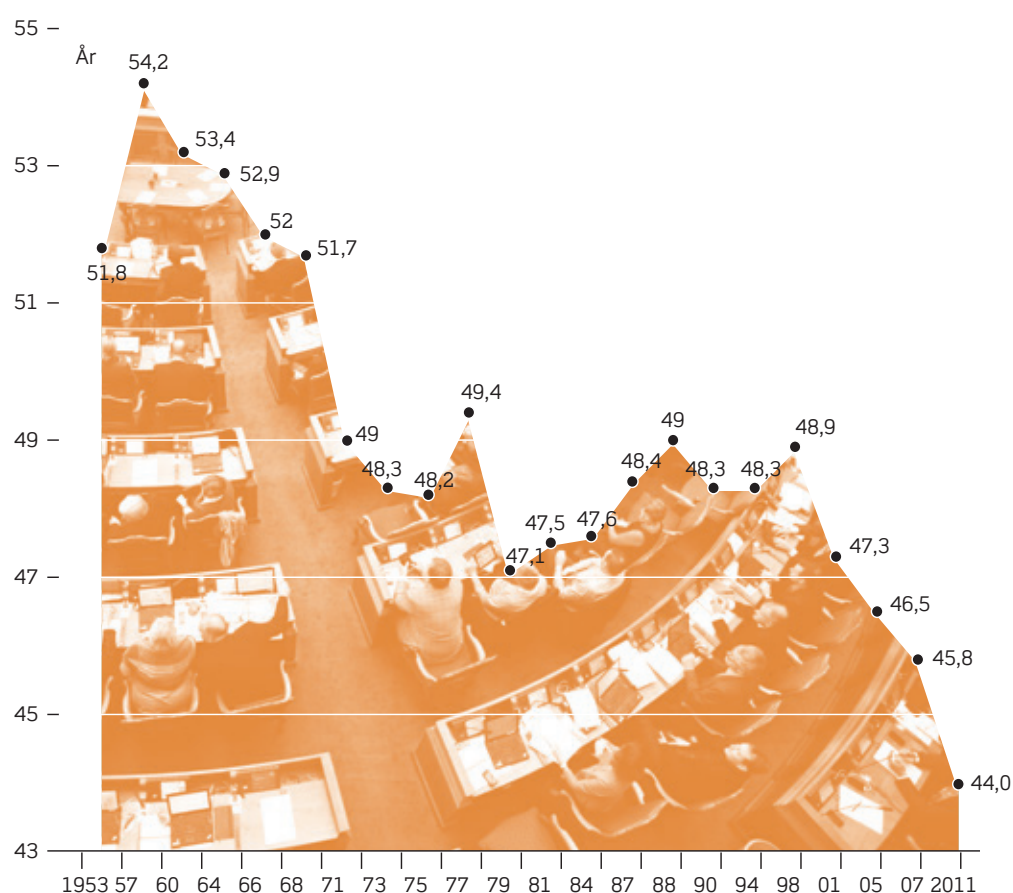
Members of the Danish Parliament after the general election on 15 September 2011 distributed by educational attainment relative to the population (20-69 years, excluding Greenland and the Faroe Islands). Population numbers as at 1 January 2011.

 The Danish Parliament: (excluding two Members elected in Greenland and two Members elected in the Faroe Islands).

 Population (20-69 years).







### *The election in numbers*

#### **Average age**

Average age of Members of the Danish Parliament following each election since the most recent amendment of the Constitutional Act in 1953. The age is stated as at the election day (excluding two Members elected in Greenland and two Members elected in the Faroe Islands).

The remuneration is composed of an annual basic remuneration of approximately DKK 600,000 and a cost allowance in the amount of DKK 60-90,000, depending on where they live.

#### **Funding for parliamentary party groups**

Each parliamentary party group receives funding, referred to as "party group grants". This funding primarily covers the groups' salary costs for MPs' staff. The funding for parliamentary party groups consists of a basic amount per group of slightly more than DKK 285,000. In addition, the funding includes an amount per MP in the parliamentary party group of approximately DKK 45,000. The basic amount is the same for all parliamentary party groups of four or more MPs. Parliamentary party groups comprising less than four MPs receive only one fourth of the basic amount per MP. The amount per MP is the same for all ordinary MPs. For MPs who are also Ministers or the Speaker of the Danish Parliament, the party group receives one-third of the amount per MP. MPs who are not associated with a parliamentary party group (independents) also receive funding. The amount corresponds to the amount per MP.

## **DENMARK HAS A MULTI-PARTY SYSTEM WITH A RELATIVELY LARGE NUMBER OF POLITICAL PARTIES REPRESENTED IN THE PARLIAMENT**

#### **The Administration**

In addition to the 179 MPs and their staff, the Danish Parliament has a non-political administration whose primary task is to ensure that the politicians are able to focus on their political work. The administration employs approximately 430 staff members engaged in a wide range of activities: from cleaning, maintenance and security to parliamentary advisory services, IT support and information on the Parliament's work.

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THE PRESENT EDITION OF  
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OUTLINE OF DANISH DEMO-  
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## **The Parliamentary System Of Denmark**

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