



FOLKETINGET – THE DANISH PARLIAMENT

DANISH DEMOCRACY,
CHRISTIANSBORG PALACE



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DANISH DEMOCRACY

The Constitutional Act comprises a number of civic rights. The Constitutional Act has been amended in 1866, in 1915 and in 1953. It was only in 1915 that women and servants got the vote.

Danish democracy is founded on thoughts the seeds of which were sown in Europe during the 18th century as a reaction against royal absolutism which infringed the freedom of the citizens. The power in society should not be imposed upon the people from above. All men are born free and equal and are therefore entitled to take part in elections in the legislative assemblies at various levels: the Parliament, the regional councils and the town councils.

Universal suffrage is the foundation of democracy. This principle was laid down in the Constitutional Act of June 1849, the main principles of which are still to be found in the present Constitutional Act of the Kingdom of Denmark, which dates from June 5th 1953.

Democracy is safeguarded not only by the Constitutional Act but also by the Parliamentary Election Act of Denmark. The electoral system based upon proportional representation guarantees that representatives of all parts of the country and exponents of any point of view - organized in large minority groups or grassroots movements - obtain seats according to the number of votes cast. The remuneration which the popularly elected receive makes it economically possible for anyone to run for election irrespective of income.





KING FREDERIK VII SIGNED THE FIRST CONSTITUTIONAL ACT OF THE KINGDOM OF DENMARK ON JUNE 5TH 1849. THIS IS THE REASON WHY CONSTITUTION DAY IS CELEBRATED EVERY YEAR ON JUNE 5TH BY POLITICIANS MAKING SPEECHES IN MANY DIFFERENT PLACES IN THE COUNTRY.

Rights and duties

It is characteristic of Danish democracy that the administration of the State is based on a voluntary agreement between the constitutional monarchy and the citizens of the country. The citizens have no direct influence on the administration of the State but exert their influence indirectly by voting. Referenda open up the possibility of gaining a direct popular influence. At the same time, citizens acknowledge the principle that it is up to the majority to make decisions and that one is in duty bound to observe the laws, to pay taxes, to do one's military service etc. In return for this, the Constitutional Act gives the citizens some important rights and liberties so that they may feel free to act as they think fit in relation to their elected representatives. If a majority of citizens decide to exert their influence by means of their right to vote, they may remove politicians whom they find unsuited to wield power. And in accordance with the last part of the Constitutional Act (Sections 71-85), all citizens are guaranteed their personal liberties and are protected against infringements e.g. by the universal freedom of speech, the freedom of assembly, the safeguarding of private property, equal employment opportunities and the right to benefit from social services.

In Denmark, Cabinet responsibility means that a Government must step down or call for a general election if it is confronted with a vote of no confidence or finds itself in a minority in the Folketing.

Separation of powers

In order to ensure a stable democracy and to prevent misuse of power, the supreme power in Denmark is, like in most other Western democracies, divided into three independent organs which control one another i.e. the legislative, the executive and the judicial powers. The Parliament is the sole organ empowered to legislate. However, the Acts only take effect after receiving the Royal Assent. In practice, the Monarch is beyond the tripartite system but Her Majesty The Queen – or His Majesty The King – formally exerts authority e.g. when appointing or dismissing Ministers.

The legislative and the executive powers are balanced against each other in the sense that a majority among the 179 Members of the Parliament can overthrow a Cabinet or a Minister by introducing an order paper which contains a vote of no confidence. On the other hand, the Prime Minister can dissolve the Parliament, at any time, in the hope of obtaining a more stable majority.

The Ministers' responsibility is a central point in democracy. They have extensive competences but are still under the control of the parliament and its 26 standing committees.

In special cases, Ministers may be impeached.







Politics in the public interest

One of the main characteristics of democracy is that it is open and transparent to the general public. The entire political system from top to bottom is controlled and criticized by voters via the press and the other media.

Likewise, the principle of transparency has been carried through in the public administration in the sense that all citizens have the right of access to documents and can complain to the Ombudsman or to the courts of justice if they feel that they are being treated unfairly.

Political parties and organizations have the last say when candidates wish to stand for Parliament, as they draw up the lists for who shall represent them in the general election. Electoral rules date back to a time when a major part of the population was organized in political parties. These rules are

still valid even though the number of people who belong to political parties has decreased considerably in recent decades to less than four percent of the population. However eighty or ninety percent of Danes tend to vote in general elections.

Danish democracy has been functioning well within the framework of the Constitutional Act for more than 160 years even though the population has increased considerably during that period and despite the fact that the political awareness of citizens has increased. The political battle is not only a battle of points of view but also of economic interests. In certain periods, this has given rise to violent fluctuations in political life and to a feeling of distance between the voters and the candidates elected. But obviously, democracy is firmly rooted in Denmark as compared to other democracies.

The Danish Parliament, The Folketing, is composed of 179 MPs. 175 MPs are elected in Denmark proper, 2 in Greenland and 2 in the Faroe Islands. Parliament passes laws and exerts control over the Government.





A DEVASTATING FIRE PUT AN END TO THE FIRST CHRISTIANSBORG PALACE IN 1794, ONLY 50 YEARS AFTER ITS COMPLETION. HOWEVER, THE RIDING GROUND AND THE COURT THEATRE SURVIVED THE FLAMES AND ARE TO THIS DAY PART OF THE PALACE.

THE CENTRE OF THE REALM FOR 800 YEARS

Christiansborg Palace with its high copper-roofed towers topped by three royal crowns can be seen at a long distance - the big complex of buildings towers above the houses of the City centre. The Palace occupies a prominent position in the City of Copenhagen. Being the framework of Danish democracy, the Palace is, indeed, the centre of the whole country.

The grand Palace

Christiansborg Palace is very spacious. It was erected in the 18th century in order to set the frame for the Court of the Danish absolute monarchs. At the time, the Kingdom of Denmark covered a vast area. The absolute monarchs also ruled Norway and the rich Duchies of Slesvig and Holstein. In order to show off to foreign visitors and to accommodate a Court which has, during some periods, been composed of more than 1.000 persons, Christian VI made the first Christiansborg Palace spacious. Indeed, it became so big that to this very day, it still houses the most important organs of democracy. In addition to the Folketing, the Palace accommodates: the Royal Reception Rooms, the Prime Minister's Office and the Supreme Court.

Absalon's Castle and the Castle of Copenhagen

Christiansborg Palace is situated on the island of Slotsholmen. At present, the island is surrounded by narrow canals but in the Middle Ages, it was situated at some distance from the mainland and from the small fishing hamlet of Havn. Absalon, bishop of Roskilde, took an interest in the spot seeing in it a link with the archiepiscopal see of Lund. Therefore, in the 1160s, he erected a castle at Slotsholmen. It took the form of a big tower surrounded by a wall which was to serve as protection against the Vikings. The Castle survived for a good two hundred years. But in 1370, the Danish King, Valdemar Atterdag, was defeated by the Hanseatic towns in Northern Germany. The tearing down of the Castle was part of the peace terms. In the centuries which followed, the Danish Kings built a Palace at Slotsholmen, where they now took up residence - Copenhagen became the capital of the Realm.

The first Christiansborg, a beautiful rococo Palace, burned down in 1794. The bridge and the buildings surrounding the courtyard remain, and are still in use.





The first Christiansborg Palace

In 1660, Denmark became an absolute monarchy which meant that the Kings now found the Castle of Copenhagen too small for their powerful position. In 1736, it was torn down, and as mentioned Christian VI built the magnificent first Christiansborg Palace - a four-winged rococo Palace with a riding ground, a Court Theatre - which still stands - and a Palace Church, which was erected in the same place as the present one. For almost 50 years, a grand Court life unfolded here. But in 1794, the main wing caught fire, and the Palace and Palace Church burnt down.

The second Christiansborg Palace

The Second Christiansborg Palace was erected between 1806 and 1828 in the classical style of the era. The severity and modesty of that style were suited to the poverty which marked the country after the Napoleonic Wars. It was this Palace which became the centre of events when the country passed from absolute monarchy to democracy. A mass procession gathered in front of the Palace in March 1848. The result was that Denmark got her first democratic Constitution. Later the King handed over some of his rooms to the Rigsdag (Parliament) which literally sat down to work in January 1850 in the same wing of Christiansborg Palace as the one which today houses the Chamber. The life of this Palace was limited to some 50 years. In October 1884, the second Christiansborg Palace was burnt down in the midst of the most serious crisis in Danish politics. It was not possible to reach an agreement about the reconstruction. Therefore, the Palace was in ruins for twenty years before the reconstruction could begin.



IN OCTOBER 1884, THE SECOND CHRISTIANSBORG PALACE WAS BURNT DOWN IN THE MIDST OF THE MOST SERIOUS CRISIS IN DANISH POLITICS. IT WAS NOT POSSIBLE TO REACH AN AGREEMENT ABOUT THE RECONSTRUCTION. THEREFORE, THE PALACE WAS IN RUINS FOR TWENTY YEARS BEFORE THE RECONSTRUCTION COULD BEGIN.



The third Christiansborg Palace

The erection of the present - and third - Christiansborg Palace began in 1906 using the same walls that had been used for the two previous Palaces. The style was neobaroque. The heaviness and solidity of the building were meant to underline the importance of the Palace as political centre of the Realm. The façades were decorated with symbols signifying the importance of the Palace: The base facing the Grand Square was carved in stones of granite donated by the individual local authorities of the country. The decorations in sand stone above the windows show all the city and county arms of the country as well as the faces of famous Danish politicians.

At present, the main part of the Palace is used by the Parliament. The focal point is the Chamber

with its impressive rostrum encompassing the Speaker's and the spokesman's table and the highly decorated stucco ceiling with all the national symbols. Behind the Chamber is the Lobby, which - like a main thoroughfare - runs right across the building, typical of its era with its simple art nouveau frieze, beautiful vaults and solid panels.

In order to provide reasonable working conditions for the 179 Members of the Parliament, the rooms above the stables of one of the Riding Ground wings as well as Christian IV's old warehouse, dating back to 1603, have been incorporated as office facilities.

On session days, the various rooms of the Parliament house about 1.200 persons.

The present Palace of Christiansborg was inaugurated in May 1918. The major part of the Palace houses Parliament. The other wings are occupied by the Prime Minister's Office, the Supreme Court and the Royal Reception Rooms.



COMMITTEES – WORKSHOPS OF THE PARLIAMENT

Major debates take place in the Chamber and formal decisions are made here. All plenary meetings are sent live on the parliament's own nationwide television channel. But the decisions are prepared in the committees of the Parliament. Therefore, one is right in saying that the committees are the workshops of the Folketing. The work of the committees is primarily linked to the reading of Bills and proposals for parliamentary resolution. The committees also follow the current development within their spheres of competence. As a main rule, committee meetings take place behind closed doors. However, the committees may also hold open meetings many of which are televised.

Committees

The Parliament has 26 standing committees. Except for the Standing Orders Committee, which is composed of 21 Members, each of the committees is composed of 29 Members. The working sphere of a committee largely corresponds to that of a Ministry. Two of the standing committees are particularly influential i.e. the Finance Committee and the European Affairs Committee. The main task of the Finance Committee is to read finance Bills and supplementary appropriation Bills as well as to take a stand on documents relating to

supplementary appropriations required by the individual Ministers over the year.

The European Affairs Committee deals with questions related to the European Union (the EU). It is this Committee which gives the Ministers their mandates for negotiation. This means that a Minister cannot endorse decisions in the EU if the majority of the Members of the European Affairs Committee do not support it. In order to ensure transparency in European Affairs and as an exception to the general rule, a majority of the meetings of the European Affairs Committee are held in public and are also televised.

The Folketing can also set up special committees to deal with individual matters or special subjects.

At the opening of each parliamentary year or after holding a general election, the Parliament appoints Members to sit on the committees. Generally, the individual parties are represented on the committees according to the number of seats which the parties have obtained in the Chamber. But when Members are elected to sit on committees, some of the parties will often join other political parties in electoral pacts in order to obtain the maximum number of seats on a given committee.

Subsequent to the first reading in the Chamber the committees deal with the Bills in question and elaborate a report. Such a report will often contain amendments made by the parties. There are 26 standing committees consisting of 29 Members each. The largest parties make out the majority of the committee Members.







EACH COMMITTEE HAS ITS OWN MEETING ROOM AND IS CONVENED AT A SPECIFIC TIME EVERY WEEK. THE MEMBERS OF THE HEALTH COMMITTEE FOR INSTANCE MEET AT 2.00 P.M. ON WEDNESDAYS. IN RECENT YEARS, MOST COMMITTEES HAVE SEEN AN INCREASE IN THE NUMBER OF MEETINGS WHICH ARE OPEN TO MEMBERS OF THE PRESS.

Bills and Proposals for Parliamentary Resolution

After the first reading of a Bill in the Chamber, the Bill is referred to a committee. The 26 standing committees read approximately 250 Bills and 200 proposals for parliamentary resolution each year. Members of the committee in question examine the proposal and put questions to the Minister within whose sphere of competence the proposal comes. The questions are put in writing and therefore require a written reply. The committee may also ask a Minister to appear in the committee in order to answer questions orally in a consultation. Approximately 10.000 questions are put every year and approximately 15.000 committee papers are distributed every year.

Reports and accounts

When a committee has finished dealing with a Bill, it submits a report. The report can comprise the following items:

- Recommendations of the parties
- Amendments to the Bill concerned
- Statements by the parties explaining their attitude to the Bill and to the amendments
- A description of the committee's work on the Bill
- A list of enquiries about the Bill.

If committee material exists which is of special interest, the committee may have it printed in the form of annexes to the report. Instead of submitting a report, the committee can submit an account on the Bill, in case there is no wish to deal further with the Bill in the Chamber. A Bill becomes void if the Folketing has not finished dealing with it before the parliamentary year comes to an end.

When the committee has submitted a report, the Bill is subjected to its second reading in the Chamber. Subsequently, the amendments are put to the vote. Then the Bill either passes on directly to the third reading or if a Member requests it, it is once more referred to the committee. The committee can then submit a supplementary report on the Bill or a so-called oral recommendation in the Chamber.



When a Minister has introduced a Bill, the individual parliamentary groups appoint a spokesman. Subsequently, the spokesman in question acts as spokesman in the Chamber and in the committee dealing with the Bill.

Other tasks or activities

In addition to reading Bills and proposals for parliamentary resolution, the committees may also consider other questions within the area which is normally referred to as the "ordinary part" of the committee work. The committee often puts questions to the Minister in order to follow the development within the area in question. The committee can also submit a report on a subject of particular political interest. It is also possible for the committee to hold a public seminar on main subjects within the working sphere of the committee. Likewise, the committee may institute hearings. On such occasions, experts and others

can make committee Members share their knowledge about a subject which is of interest to the committee. The committee may invite people from outside Parliament to attend hearings.

Enquiries

Citizens and organizations make enquiries addressed to the committees. They have the possibility of either writing to the committees or of stating their points of view orally. During such "interviews", committee Members may put questions to those appearing in the committees but the latter cannot put questions to committee Members.







METH LOGH SCAL LAND BYGGIES



FROM IDEA TO LAW

"The country shall be founded on laws". The words are those introducing the Jutland Act of 1241 and are meant to imply that in a well ordered society certain common guidelines are needed. Without them one would find oneself "beyond the laws of the country". A law is therefore in all ways a political matter.

"Now the Folketing must intervene"

We all know this remark. One may come across it in an interview on the radio and on television, it may be the final sentence in a letter to the editor of a newspaper, or it may play a trump card to a remark made over coffee in a private home. It is, however, up to the Members of the Government and the Parliament to decide how a problem should be resolved.

The input to a law may thus come from outside and be taken up by the Government. But often it is the politicians themselves who start the process. Any Member of the Folketing can introduce Bills, but most Bills are, nevertheless, introduced by the Government. The attention of a Minister may e.g. be drawn to problems and shortages in existing Acts by his civil servants. And this may lead to existing rules being changed or to adopting new ones. A majority in the Parliament may also, outside the Government, demand that the Government introduce a Bill on a special subject.

A Minister may set up a committee or a commission to look into the need for legislation within a specific area. The work results in a report which does eventually include a draft Bill. By allowing

The parliamentary year begins on the first Tuesday in October and ends on 5 June. During normal weeks there are meetings in the plenary hall from Tuesday to Friday.



experts as well as representatives of interest groups to take part in the meetings of the committee in question, one makes sure that all problems are taken into consideration in the Bill. Furthermore, a number of EU directives are to be implemented by law.

From introduction to adoption

Section 41 in the Constitutional Act of the Kingdom of Denmark states that a Bill shall be read three times in the Parliament before it can be adopted.

There must be time for careful consideration so that a Bill is not carried due to a sudden whipped up atmosphere. The thoroughness of legislation is safeguarded by the committee work which comes between the first and second readings in the Chamber as well as by the introduction of a rule stating that readings of Bills shall not be concluded until 30 days have passed.

On page 27 you will find a description of the individual steps in the process leading from Bills to current legislation. As the legislative process progresses through the various readings - the individual acts are scrutinized in greater detail. The first reading is a reading in principle. The details are examined by the committees and during the second reading the individual sections are discussed and amendments are often moved before eventually adopting the entire Bill at the third reading. Not all Bills obtain a majority. On an average, about 250 Bills are introduced every year. And the major part of these Bills end up as Acts.

There are, of course, numerous laws. But as the Jutland Act goes on “- if no one went beyond doing what is his right and left everyone else to do the same, no laws would be needed”.

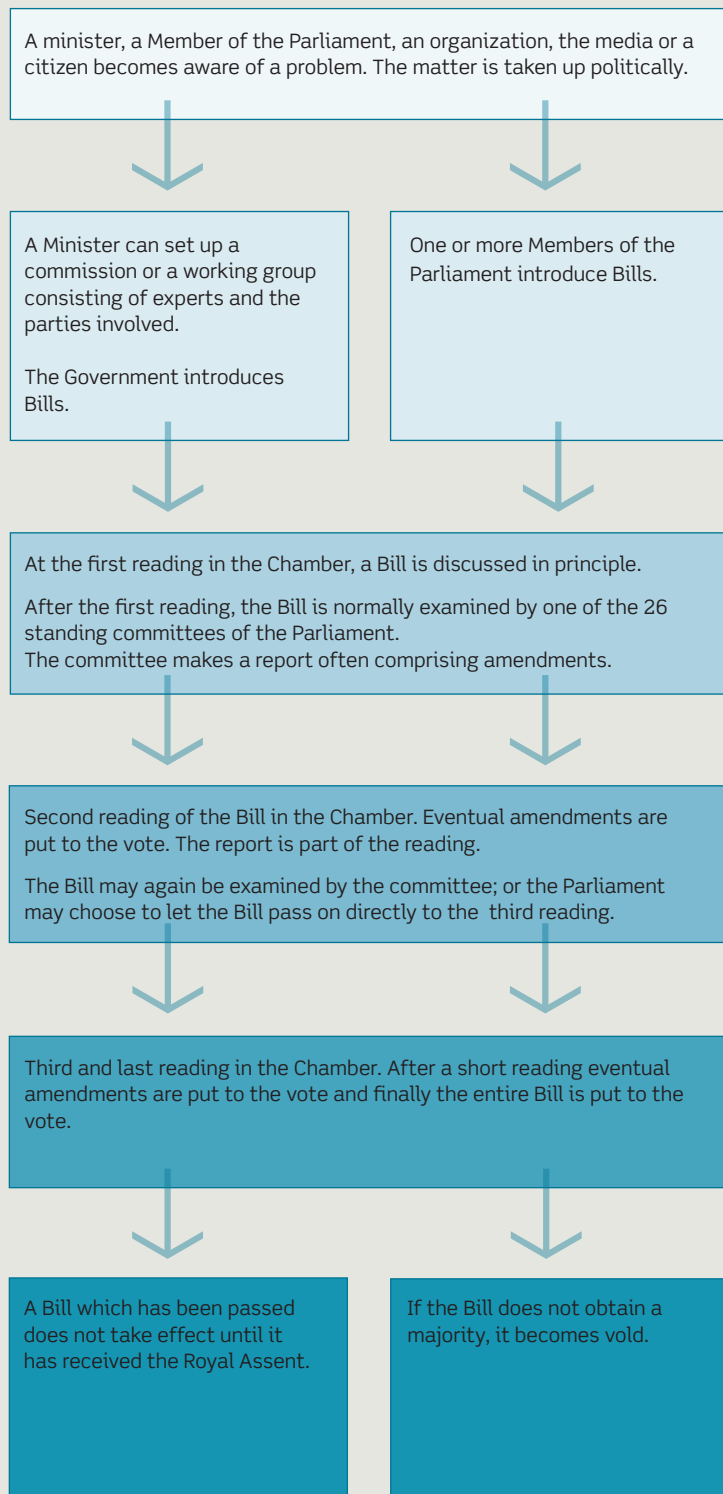


THE MAKING OF LAWS

INFORMALLY



FORMALLY



This leaflet provides you with an introduction to Danish democracy as exerted at Christiansborg Palace. It is one of a series of fact sheets dealing with general elections, MPs, parliamentary work and tasks; Christiansborg Palace and the political parties. The fact sheets may be downloaded separately on folketinget.dk or you may order a free folder containing all the fact sheets at the Information Centre, telephone no.: +45 33 37 33 38 or e-mail: fo@ft.dk

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