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The National question

Danish Parliament discusses Catalonian independence

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On May 18 a huge majority of the Danish Parliament voted for a statement saying that "the question of Catalanian independence is a matter for peaceful and democratic dialogue between Catalonia and the Spanish government in Madrid". All political parties - except the right wing xenophobic Danish Peoples' Party – voted for the statement after a one hour long debate that took place May 12, while voting were postponed until Tuesday the 18th.

The right to selfdetermination

The debate was called by MP Nikolaj Villumsen of Enhedslisten/the Red-Green Alliance, a broad anticapitalist party that was established more than 25 years ago. Enhedslisten has been represented in Danish parliament since 1994. At the moment it has 12 out of 179 seats.

Nikolaj Villumsen had called on the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Martin Lidegaard, to explain: "How will the government support, that the peoples' right to selfdetermination is respected in a situation where a large majority of the Catalanian parliament, the Catalanian society and the Catalanian government want to have a referendum on independence?"

Martin Lidegaard is a member of the center-liberal party, De Radikale, which is junior partner in a coalition government with the Social Democratic Party.

Borders determined by wars

Motivating the question and the debate, Nikolaj Villumsen took the floor as the first in the debate. Referring to the Scottish referendum and other examples, he said:

"Discussions on independence, selfdetermination and referenda are an important part of our development as democratic states. The borders of the past are often determined as the outcome of wars and power struggles, not democratic decisions."

He also said:

"In Catalonia, the people has its own language, Catalan, and a long history of suppression, especially during the Franco regime. The discussion on independence also has a long history. Recently the Catalan parliament decided to have a referendum. They approached the Spanish government and asked permission for a referendum, but the Spanish parliament refused and declared the referendum illegal."

Minister: No right to independence

In a longer statement, the Minister, gave his version of international law in relation to independence. He then went on to the history of Catalonia and its present situation in the Spanish state, saying:

“The Spanish regions have a very extensive level of autonomy, including health and education. Some regions, like the Basque country, Navarra and Catalonia have even more autonomy. For example Catalonia has its own police. Catalan is the main language, used in public institutions, radio, TV and public education.”

The minister concluded by saying:

“In Catalonia there is not such a situation of severe suppression of the internal right to selfdetermination that independence from the mother country must be accepted according to international law. It is, thus, the attitude of the government that it is neither necessary, nor desirable for the Danish government to interfere in the debate about a possible Catalan independence. This question is a matter for Catalonia and the Spanish government in Madrid.

A matter for Danish parliament?

After this statement, Nikolaj Villumsen presented the proposal for a parliamentary statement, quoted above. It had already been negotiated between the parties before the debate, and it was thus a proposal by all parties except the Danish Peoples' Party.

Then a spokesperson for each party had an intervention in the debate. Of course, they all argued for the proposed statement, but at the same time some of them questioned the need for a Danish parliamentary debate on this issue.

The representative of the main opposition party, Venstre – a liberal party – only said two sentences, formally endorsing the proposal.

Jacob Lund of the Social Democratic Party had a more comprehensive intervention. In conclusion, he said: “I think that we – from Denmark – can contribute to a constructive debate by giving it attention, but not by governmental intervention.”

Søren Espersen of the Danish People's Party used his intervention to argue against having the debate at all.

Homage to Catalonia

The reformist Socialist People's Party was part of the governmental coalition until a year ago. Its spokesperson, Holger K. Nielsen acknowledged the special role of Catalonia, quoting “Homage to Catalonia” by George Orwell. He said:

“It is beyond doubt that in the fight against the Franco regime the Catalan people were in the forefront of the resistance, and they played a most important role.” He also talked about his fascination of Catalan culture, including but not only FC Barcelona.

The representative of the extreme liberalist party, Mette Bock, envisaged a future with not only national states but regions, related directly to EU. But she drew no clear conclusions from this.

Inspiration to other parliaments

After the debate and the vote, I asked Nikolaj Villumsen why he worded the statement proposal so “soft” on independence. He said:

“Most important to me was to raise the debate. Had Enhedslisten been in majority, we would have stated a much more clear support for selfdetermination.

Still, I think that it is positive that we had a broad majority for democratic dialogue in a situation where the Spanish government has refused it.

This was the first debate on the issue in a parliament outside Spain. I hope this can inspire debates in other countries as well. I also hope that progressive forces can use it in their struggle for Catalanian independence,” Nikolaj Villumsen said.