

The Importance and Limits of Party Government: Problems of Governance in Denmark*

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Introduction

Any sound theory of democracy must address the problem of reconciling two basic considerations. On the one hand, terms like participation, representation, and interest articulation point to the need for open input channels. On the other, decision-making, governance, leadership, and steering refer to the need for instruments of political control. Without widespread participation of some sort there can be no democracy. Without some kind of governance, there can be no democratic rule.

The tension between the two aspects of democratic systems is found in a variety of forms and contexts. According to Richard Rose, for example, 'Politics is about the representation of conflicting demands; government is about resolving these conflicts authoritatively and to a nation's benefit' (Rose 1980, 284). He adds that, in principle, the two activities should be complementary, but in practice they often conflict. Similarly, J. Roland Pennock's theoretical analysis points to the tension between participation and leadership (Pennock 1979, ch. XI, XII). Lawrence B. Joseph's review of recent liberal-

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Introduction

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democratic literature is partially centered on a 'horizontal' participation dimension versus a 'vertical leadership' dimension (Joseph 1981). In what is probably the most penetrating analysis to date, Robert A. Dahl focuses upon 'autonomy' versus 'control'. The fundamental problem of pluralist democracy is that while organizations should possess some autonomy, they should also be controlled. The problem is: How much autonomy and how much control to which actors and with respect to what issues?

In Dahl's analysis, the most important organizations are labeled governmental (executives, bureaucracies, parliaments, judiciaries), political (parties, interest groups), and economic (business firms, trade unions). In pluralist democracies none of these organizations are completely autonomous or completely dominated by other organizations, nor should they be so on normative grounds. Dahl takes a very broad view of existing and possible institutional arrangements in a democratic order, but he insists that the people (the 'demos', or in large-scale democracies its representatives) should retain final control over the public agenda. It should not be alienated to, say, interest organizations, bureaucracies, or business corporations.

In modern times, the people's representatives usually are members of political parties in parliament and Government. Hence, the importance of parties is emphasized in different ways. Most electoral behaviour research would, indeed, be irrelevant if parties did not matter. Numerous studies explicitly argue that parties are essential.¹ But Anthony King's question: 'How crucial are parties to the performance of certain important political functions?' (King 1969) still has not been answered satisfactorily. In Scandinavia there seems to be scholarly consensus on the view that the 'parliamentary chain of government' (Olsen 1978, Hernes 1978) no longer gives an adequate account of political participation and decision-making. There is a search for better models, for, as Johan P. Olsen remarks: 'The institutions have problems, but sometimes the problems are in our models rather than in our institutions' (Olsen 1983, 10). At the European level scholars are also concerned with 'the future of party government' as illustrated by a research project at the European University Institute in Florence (e.g., Schmitt 1983).

A political system is characterized by party government to the extent that parties control political input and output processes. Accordingly, the most favourable conditions for 'pure' party government are found in one-party systems (LaPalombara 1974, 551f) or, to use a perhaps more revealing term 'party-state systems' (Sartori 1976, 42-47). To the high degree of party control in such systems correspond narrow restrictions on citizen participation and organizational activity. Pluralist democracies, on the other hand, assure rights of participation in numerous ways. By doing this, they also create 'problems of governance' because channels of participation and access are used to further

contradicting interests as well as demands that cannot be fulfilled simultaneously with the resources available.

In pluralist democracies, the tension between interest representation and governance is a problem for political parties in particular. The next section further argues that the problem has become more serious in recent years, at least in the Danish case. In the following two sections, questionnaire survey data throw light on the strengths and weaknesses of parliamentary parties vis-à-vis interest organizations and bureaucrats. The findings suggest that interest groups and bureaucrats indeed pose problems for party government. While some institutional changes might lighten the tasks of parties, there is no way to avoid the basic democratic tension.

Pluralism, Parties, and Governance

Four points can be made to show that parties in particular are affected by the democratic problem of interest representation and governance. First, elections and parties are not the only channels for political participation. While 85-90 per cent of the electorate vote at general elections, only about 10 per cent are members of political parties. Furthermore, the levels of political participation in terms of interest group activity, single-issue actions, and contacts to public authorities are higher than activities within parties. Parties are clearly not monopolizing the processes of interest articulation and representation (Damgaard & Kristensen 1982, 35-39).

Second, decision-making is not a monopoly of political parties. Party representatives in parliament and Government are formally empowered to make binding decisions, but other actors, such as interest organizations and bureaucrats, influence the decisions as well. Studies of perceptions of power relations in Denmark show that voters, MPs, interest group representatives and bureaucrats agree that parties in Government and parliament are powerful, but other actors (organizations, bureaucrats, business firms) also play a role. If nothing else, this indicates support for the reigning ideology according to which parliament and Government exercise legitimate power (Damgaard 1983).

Third, parties experience internal tensions. They are rarely completely homogeneous in ideological terms or with respect to the concrete interests that should be protected. Thus, the ideological purity of party activists may pose problems for the inter-party cooperation at the parliamentary level (Damgaard & Kristensen 1982, 39-47; Kristensen 1980, 51-55).

Finally, parties are not isolated from other actors. On the contrary, they have regular contacts with various organizations and groups reflecting the interests that each party primarily wants to promote. In a way, it does not make sense to think about parties 'versus' organizations. The point is that certain parties are closely allied with certain interest groups (Damgaard 1982, 1982a). Such links

to organizations benefit parties in various ways, but they also restrict their room for manoeuvre whenever the interests of relevant organizations are affected and thus limit the possibilities for inter-party compromising without which no decision can be made.

To these points should be added that parties ultimately are held responsible for decisions made or not made. This does not follow only from the reigning ideology of parliamentary democracy but also from voter reactions on election day. The problems of parties have not arisen in recent years, of course, but there are reasons to believe that they have become more serious than they used to be. Two main arguments may be advanced to support this claim. The first concerns change in the party system, the second changes in the conditions for party government.

Mogens N. Pedersen's analysis of the Danish party system since the 1973 'earthquake' election (Pedersen 1981, 1983) includes an assessment of the performance of the current party system versus the old (that is pre-1973) one in terms of Anthony King's functional categories (structuring the vote, integration of the mass public, recruitment of political leaders, organization of government, formation of public policy, aggregation of interests). In short, Pedersen finds no evidence for important changes except that parties have lost some of the earlier capacity to integrate, activate, and mobilize the voters. The evidence for declining performance in this respect is decreasing membership in party organizations, new forms of political participation, new parties giving less emphasis to the building of supportive mass organizations, and the disappearance of a genuine party press. For the present purpose, the upshot of Pedersen's analysis therefore is that party control of political input processes has decreased. This conclusion seems justified although it should not be overestimated (cf. Sainsbury 1983).

In addition, the case can be made that the parties — over the last several decades — gradually have lost some control over policy outputs. Two long-term institutional trends thus adversely affect the conditions for party government. The first is the development of strong, nationwide interest organizations penetrating the policy-making machinery (Buksti & Johansen 1979, Buksti 1980, Damgaard & Eliassen 1979). Data on membership of interest organizations (Johansen 1980) clearly suggest that the attachments of Danish citizens to interest organizations outstrip attachments to party organizations.

Second, the expansion of the public sector, including the central administrative bureaucracy, affects the degree to which parties in parliament and Government can control policy-making. At the turn of the century a few hundred civil servants held positions in the central administration, today they number more than 6,000. The increasing number of bureaucrats, and their inclination to guard and promote institutional interests, have disadvantaged politicians in parliament and Government. Certainly, the reforms of parliament (Damgaard

Table 1. Attitudes of MPs toward Possible *Advantages* and *Disadvantages* of Contacts with Interest Organizations. Percentage Answering 'Very Important' or 'Rather Important' to the Statements Listed, by Party* Affiliation

	LW	SD	CP	L	C	PP	Total
<i>Advantages</i>							
In a democratic society, it is necessary to listen to affected interests	90	100	94	93	91	75	93
Yields information which otherwise would be difficult to obtain	100	97	90	86	92	82	92
Saves time and labour with respect to preparations, inquiries, etc.	67	81	83	71	100	67	79
Assures that decisions made can be implemented	78	86	44	43	75	33	65
Assures good relations to the groups affected by decisions, prevents criticism	100	97	83	71	83	36	83
<i>Disadvantages</i>							
Undermines the sovereignty of parliament	0	27	56	79	50	67	47
Yields too much influence to special interests	25	41	72	93	82	67	59
Yields short-term solutions, impedes reform and renewal	40	30	71	100	55	67	55
One becomes too dependent on information from organizations	20	18	61	69	27	64	39
Favours strongly organized and disfavors unorganized people	50	44	83	93	73	75	65
(N = 100 per cent)	(9-10)	(36-37)	(17-18)	(13-14)	(11-12)	(11-12)	(100-104)

* LW = Left Wing parties (Socialist People's Party, Left Socialists).

SD = Social Democrats

CP = Center Parties (Radical Liberals, Justice Party, Center Democrats, Christian People's Party).

L = Liberals (*Venstre*).

C = Conservative People's Party.

PP = Progress Party.

1977) and administrative reorganizations (Politiske ledelsesforhold 1979) have not counterveiled the bureaucratic expansion.

A crucial question therefore is how the current relations among MPs, interest groups and bureaucrats are perceived by the actors involved. The following sections provide some answers.²

Parties and Interest Organizations

MPs engage in regular contacts with various interest groups, and the expectation would be that such contacts imply advantages as well as disadvantages from a party point of view. A number of possible advantages and disadvantages were listed in a questionnaire returned by Danish MPs (cf. Damgaard 1982).

That MPs must listen to affected interests seems indeed to be a deep-seated democratic norm widely supported across the political spectrum. But Table 1 also suggests a number of more specific gains from contacts with interest groups. Thus, contacts may entail access to information which would otherwise be hard to come by and some saving of time and resources. Contacts may also facilitate implementation of decisions eventually made, and assure good relationships to groups affected.

The first part of Table 1 indicates fairly widespread and positive attitudes toward organizations among MPs. But the reverse of the coin is costs or disadvantages. With the partial exception of left-wing parties and Social Democrats, MPs tend to acknowledge some less fortunate aspects of organizational contacts. Thus, contacts tend to favour highly organized groups at the expense of unorganized people, to yield too much influence to special interests, and to produce short-term solutions.

Through a similar questionnaire to representatives of interest organizations (described in Buksti, forthcoming) it is possible to get some idea of how interest groups evaluate contacts with MPs. The findings are somewhat surprising.

First, only about 70 per cent of the respondents indicating contacts to MPs have answered questions about advantages and disadvantages. Second, some questions³ about possible advantages are hardly answered at all by interest group representatives. The reason could be that they were regarded as pretty irrelevant. The only item generating unequivocal positive evaluations is access to valuable information, cf. Table 2.

That contacts between MPs and organizations can provide useful information to both parties thus seems to be confirmed. Generally speaking, however, MPs appear to give a higher rating to this exchange of information than do organizations. Presumably, organizations often have alternative, and more effective, channels of information and influence. This is presumably implied by the answers to questions probing into possible disadvantages of their contacts with MPs. Interest group representatives generally agree that decisions are actually made in government departments. Hence, contacts with MPs at a later stage of the process are less useful. The two remaining questions probably reflect the feeling that politicians do not pay sufficient attention to one's own organization.

The view that decisions really are made in government departments is

Table 2. Attitudes of Organizational Representatives toward Possible *Advantages* and *Disadvantages* of Contacts with Parliament. Percentage Answering 'Very Important' or 'Rather Important' to the Statements Listed, by Type of Organization

	Labour Org.	White Collar Org.	Employer Trade Org.	Non- Economic Org.	Local Gov. Org.	Total
<i>Advantages</i>						
Yields information which otherwise would be difficult to obtain	81	46	58	64	32	62
<i>Disadvantages</i>						
Decisions are actually made in government department	70	77	72	76	73	73
Too much attention paid to other organizations	42	62	48	41	27	45
There is no room for organizations in party-political compromising	62	65	58	50	50	59
(N = 100 per cent)	(65-80)	(21-26)	(123-138)	(20-25)	(19-22)	(253-291)

expressed strongly by representatives of all types of interest organizations, and fits well with a number of other findings indicating that organizations in general attach primary importance to their relationships with bureaucrats in the central administration (Buksti, forthcoming). Parties and parliament are definitely of secondary importance to most interest groups.

Therefore, it is hardly surprising that most MPs have mixed feelings about the close connections between interest groups and the bureaucracy. They often tend to feel excluded by coalitions of groups and bureaucrats, and in particular, that interest organizations are privileged with respect to advance information from the Government and the ministries. Such sceptical views are less pronounced among MPs of the (then governing) Social Democratic party, however.

MPs and organizational representatives obviously differ in their evaluations of the proper role of interest groups in policy-making. The divergence was expected to manifest itself in different views on the proper way of consulting interest groups in the preparatory stages of the law-making process. Therefore, MPs and group representatives were asked what they thought about the following idea: 'The Government should seek a compromise with the organizations before it introduces important proposals in parliament'. In parliament only the (then governing) Social Democrats favoured such a procedure, while all other parties were strongly against. This sharp division of opinions might be

explained, at least partially, by the Government/opposition position of the respective parties. However, it is also likely that Social Democrats, in theory and practice, attach more importance and legitimacy to big interest groups and social movements than do other parties (cf. Isberg 1982, 90-92, who argues in a similar way about the Swedish Social Democrats vs. the bourgeois parties).

Interest group representatives, on the other hand, do *not* disagree on this issue. They are all very much in favour of a procedure assuring a compromise between Government and organizations before a bill is sent to parliamentary processing.

Parties and Bureaucrats

MPs regard the central bureaucracy as quite a formidable power and think that it limits their own political influence. They feel that the expansion of the public sector has made it difficult to control the bureaucracy, that MPs have to work under strong time-pressure compared to bureaucrats, and that delegated legislation increases the power of the bureaucracy (as well as of interest groups) (Damgaard 1982, 42-46). Although they are rarely denied the information asked for, most MPs (with the Government party as an exception) would welcome the opportunity to request information directly from bureaucrats, i.e. not having to pass the responsible minister.

MPs' contacts with the bureaucracy are to a large extent channelled through the parliamentary committee system. A major issue in this respect is whether committee members 'interfere' too much with administrative matters or whether such 'interference' perhaps is needed to assure parliamentary influence in an era characterized by executive and bureaucratic power. In principle, MPs and bureaucrats agree that there are, and should be, close connections between committees and their bureaucratic counterparts in government departments. However, MPs and bureaucrats presumably have somewhat different interests to guard in this interplay. MPs probably want as much influence as possible in relation to the bureaucracy while bureaucrats presumably would prefer minimal interference. To test this hypothesis, MPs and bureaucrats⁴ were asked to choose between two statements: (A) Committees interfere far too much with specific administrative matters, (B) In order to represent the people and to control the administration MPs have to interfere with specific administrative matters at least as much as presently.

As expected, MPs overwhelmingly think that they have to deal with specific administrative matters (Table 3). In fact, this is the majority view in all parties. The bureaucrats are more divided on the issue, but a small majority reveals — contrary to expectation — a rather open-minded attitude toward political interference. On the other hand, a very sizeable minority of bureaucrats think

Table 3. MPs' and Bureaucrats' Responses to Statements on the Way Parliamentary Committees Deal with Administrative Matters. Percentages

	MPs	Bureaucrats
(A) Committees interfere too much	29	45
(B) Interference needed for political representation and control	71	55
Pct. B — pct. A	42	10
(N = 100 pct.)	(100)	(961)

that the committees interfere too much. An interesting question is how these divergent bureaucratic views can be explained.

All MPs know from personal experience what the issue is about. This is not the case for all bureaucrats, however. One might therefore conjecture that those bureaucrats who in their daily work are in close contact with committees are more negative towards interference than those who are not. Furthermore, the type of ministry in which the bureaucrats is employed may make a difference. Interference often occurs in matters involving political controversies which bureaucrats want to eschew, and some policy areas are more conflict-loaded than others. Thus, ministries producing and distributing public services (e.g., social welfare, education, culture) probably encounter more conflict than those in charge of coordinating governmental work (e.g., ministry of finance). Table 4 investigates the possible effects of the two factors on bureaucratic attitudes.

The first row of Table 4 shows the total percentage difference of Table 3 broken down according to type of ministry (as suggested by Christensen 1980, 311-319). The second row reports the corresponding numbers for those bureaucrats who provided information on the importance of committees for their own work. The expected effect is clearly seen in comparing the two bottom rows: The majority of those bureaucrats who are not really affected by committees are relatively open-minded with respect to political interference while the majority of those who are affected by committees display a rather negative attitude.

Table 4 also confirms that there are variations across type of ministry. In all rows bureaucrats in ministries regulating the private production sector of society appear as the most tolerant group with respect to political interference while bureaucrats employed in public service ministries are least tolerant. This means that the attitudes of bureaucrats to some extent are shaped by closeness to parliamentary committee work as well as type of ministry. However, in no case does the level of tolerance exceed the percentage reported for MPs.

These findings should be compared to the fact that bureaucrats evaluate their interest group contacts very positively. In short, bureaucrats who have

Table 4. Bureaucrats' Evaluations of Administrative Interference by Parliamentary Committees. Percentage Difference: B — A = Interference Necessary — Too Much Interference, by Type of Ministry

	Type of Ministry									
	General Societal Regulation		Private Production Sector Regulation		Public Service Production and Distribution		Cross Ministerial Coordination and Control		Total	
	Pct.	(N)	Pct.	(N)	Pct.	(N)	Pct.	(N)	Pct.	(N)
<i>I All Respondents</i>	4	(168)	26	(234)	1	(394)	14	(165)	10	(961)
<i>II Respondents giving information on importance of committee work:</i>										
— 'Very' or 'Rather' Important	4	(147)	18	(175)	—6	(337)	2	(122)	2	(781)
— 'Rather Unimportant' or 'No Importance'	—4	(88)	4	(109)	—12	(217)	—10	(62)	—6	(476)
	19	(59)	40	(66)	6	(120)	14	(60)	16	(305)

contacts with interest organizations within their own field of work think that the advantages of such contacts clearly outweigh the disadvantages. Furthermore, the intensity of contacts with interest groups correlates positively with the degree to which advantages outweigh disadvantages (Christensen 1933, 19-24). As indicated in the previous section, such positive evaluations are matched by the importance that interest groups attach to contacts with bureaucrats.

Discussion

The arguments and data presented depict a political system characterized by relatively weak, or weakened, politicians versus rather strong interest groups and bureaucrats. The limits of party government are clearly visible.

But, as previously indicated, it may be misleading to talk about parties as a single category of actors confronting organizations and bureaucrats. *If* the interests or policies of certain parties are identical with those of certain organizations and ministries it does not necessarily make sense to conclude that the latter have been strengthened at the expense of the former. Parties do interact with different groups and institutional interests to achieve certain shared goals. MPs specialize to a considerable extent and thereby often participate

in sectoral policy-making with organizations, bureaucrats and other 'interested' partners (Damgaard 1977, 1981). Bureaucrats usually want increased funds for their own area and can often count on support from interested MPs, organizations, and clients (Kristensen 1982, Damgaard 1982a). To the extent that policy-making in certain areas is controlled by 'interest communities' of different types of actors it may not make much sense to differentiate the degree of influence of the actors because the policy outcome affects them in the same way. In such cases the crucial question is rather whether some interest communities (sectors, segments) are doing better than others in the struggle for special advantages and shares of scarce societal resources.

However, this line of reasoning does not eliminate the problem of party government. On the contrary, it points to the need for overall decisions about allocation of resources to the various sectors, and to the need for coordinated rule-making to avoid unintended collisions of regulatory systems. It is hard to see how such needs can be satisfied in a democratic order without the active participation of parties in parliament and Government. On the one hand, parties interact with a number of organizations and groups in concrete decision-making processes, on the other they are (held) responsible for the overall outcome of these processes. Aside from 'pure opposition' parties, no party can afford to engage in relationships with organizations, groups, or institutions that totally restrict their freedom of action. Parties wanting influence have to realize that demands are insatiable while resources are scarce. According to coalition theory, parties forming a winning cabinet coalition receive some 'payoff' at the expense of losing parties (see, e.g., Browne & Dreijmanis 1982). It is often forgotten, however, that the payoff is reduced by the costs associated with the unpopular decisions dictated by economic necessity (Damgaard 1973, 52-63).

Against this background it is not surprising that organizations are only rarely invited to participate in the preparation of legislation increasing government revenue. When they participate with respect to other types of legislation the level of conflict in parliament (which is very high in the case of taxation) is reduced (Damgaard & Eliassen 1978, 1980). Organizations and institutions often influence outcomes in matters by which they are affected, but parties remain responsible for at least the unpopular parts of economic policies. The need for governance thus sets limits for representation of interests, the alternative being chaos or anarchy. Conversely, the principles of pluralist democracy restrict the scope of governance unlike the principles of 'party-state systems' which allow oppression of even majority demands.

In this fundamental sense problems of governance are bound to exist in all pluralist democracies. In most, if not all, pluralist democracies, political parties are ultimately responsible for balancing the needs for interest representation and governance. In Denmark this has to be done through bargaining

among several parties, and the difficulty is that the parties represent different views on how burdens and benefits should be distributed in society. This is not a novel observation. But the argument of this paper is that the political parties are less in command than previously. There is more interest representation and less government than there used to be in Danish politics.

Today political parties are less capable of integrating and mobilizing voters than they were some twenty years ago. 'Rival structures' (Sainsbury 1983) such as action groups and interest organizations have assumed increasing importance on the input side of politics although they have certainly not replaced political parties. Furthermore, interest organizations and bureaucrats play a larger role in policy-making than in the past. The empirical analyses suggest that interactions between interested organizations and bureaucrats are crucial in policy-making and implementation. Both types of actors evaluate these contacts very positively while they are less enthusiastic about MPs. MPs, on the other hand, display somewhat mixed feelings about the organizational-bureaucratic nexus.

The governance potential of Danish parties is also negatively affected by the political instability of the last decade. The parliamentary bases of Danish (minority) Governments have generally been rather weak and unstable. The average life-time of Governments in the period of 1973-1982 is only 26 months, and elections have been held every second year. Such instability is bound to create difficulties for party government.

A final question is this: Can more party government be brought about (assuming it is desirable)? If so, a change in one or several respects is required. Such changes may not appear to be likely but they are certainly not unthinkable. First, while parties have lost members in the last two decades there is also evidence showing that a reversed trend cannot be precluded in the future (Kristensen 1980). Second, surveys show that voters are more sympathetic toward political parties than toward interest organizations. There seems to be a reservoir of goodwill which might allow parties to make decisions against the will of organization leaders without a loss of voter support (cf. Nielsen 1982, 1983). Third, approaching changes in Danish mass communication may have effects on the possibility for interest articulation. With the introduction of a second Danish TV-channel, the present strongly centralized, nationalized, and monopolized news service will be weakened. In the future, TV may therefore turn out to be less effective as a national interest articulation channel for countless professions, organizations, and institutions. Fourth, the Danish party system is still in flux (as the recent election of January 1984 demonstrates), but there are fewer 'protest' votes (as the very low support for the Progress party shows) than ever since the 1973-election, and new patterns of cabinet coalition formation have developed even if a permanent majority coalition has not so far emerged. Finally, there is still a need for making ministers

more effective vis-à-vis bureaucrats in government departments (cf. Christensen 1983a). Party government presupposes that ministers are effectively controlling their departments, and it is hard to see how that assumption can be retained when, as is the case in Denmark, ministers have no political assistants at their disposal.

NOTES

1. For example, Schattschneider 1942, Duverger 1951, Neumann 1956, Downs 1957, Epstein 1967, Sjöblom 1968, Sartori 1976, von Beyme 1982, Anckar et al. 1982, Daalder & Mair, 1983.
2. The data are from the research project 'The Political Process. Participation and Decision-Making' (cf. Damgaard 1982a, note 1).
3. 'Parliament is the last opportunity for the organization to be heard'. 'Assures that public measures are not taken against the wishes and goals of the organization'. 'Assures direct contact with those who at the end make decisions'.
4. See Christensen (1983) for some information on the survey of bureaucrats.

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