

Danish Elections

COPENHAGEN — Denmark has elected its first female prime minister, Helle Thorning-Schmidt, ousting the right-wing government from power after 10 years of pro-market reforms and ever-stricter controls on immigration. Outgoing Prime Minister Lars Loekke Rasmussen said he would present his Cabinet's resignation to Queen Margrethe, Denmark's figurehead monarch.

The result means Denmark will get a new government that could roll back some of the austerity measures introduced by Loekke Rasmussen amid Europe's debt crisis. A power shift isn't likely to yield major changes in consensus-oriented Denmark, where there is broad agreement on the need for a robust welfare system financed by high taxes. But the two sides differ on the depth of austerity measures needed



Denmark's new Prime Minister, Helle Thorning-Schmidt

to keep Denmark's finances intact amid the uncertainty of the global economy.

Loekke Rasmussen took credit for steering Denmark through the financial crisis in better shape than many other European countries. However, the rebound has been slower than in neighboring Nordic nations.

The economy emerged as the top election theme, to the chagrin of the Danish People's Party, which has used its kingmaker role in previous elections to push through immigration laws that are among Europe's toughest.

Thorning-Schmidt isn't likely to make any major changes to those laws, but she's promised to overhaul a system of beefed-up customs controls at borders with Germany and Sweden which critics say violates the spirit of EU agreements on the free movement of people and goods.

She advocates increased government spending, along with an unusual plan to make everyone work 12 minutes more per day, Reuters news agency reports, which adds up to an extra hour of productivity each week. The Social Democrats argue this would help kick-start growth.

Personal Notes: The 44 year-old Helle Thorning-Schmidt has a Master's in Political Science from the University of Copenhagen, and is a former MEP (member of the European Parliament). She has led Denmark's Social Democrats since 2005, has a reputation for being tough, and is credited with reuniting her party. In the past, some nicknamed her "Gucci Helle" for her taste in designer clothes. And she has two children with husband Stephen Kinnock, son of British Labour Party politicians Neil and Glenys Kinnock.

—http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/09/15/denmark-female-prime-minister-thorning-schmidt_n_965191.html

—<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-14928312>

Why do Finland's schools get the best results?

By Tom Burrige
BBC World News America, Helsinki

In 2009 more than 100 foreign delegations and governments visited Helsinki, hoping to learn the secret of their schools' success.

In 2006, Finland's pupils scored the highest average results in science and reading in the whole of the developed world. In the OECD's exams for 15 year-olds, known as PISA, they also came second in maths, beaten only by teenagers in South Korea.

This isn't a one-off: in previous PISA tests Finland also came out (on) top.

The Finnish philosophy with education is that everyone has something to contribute and those who struggle in certain subjects should not be left behind.

A tactic used in virtually every lesson is the provision of an additional teacher who helps those who struggle in a particular subject. But the pupils are all kept in the same classroom, regardless of their ability in that particular subject.

Finland's Education Minister, Henna Virkkunen is proud of her country's record but her next goal is to target the brightest pupils.

"The Finnish system supports very much those pupils who have learning difficulties but we have to pay more attention also to those pupils who are very talented. Now we have started a pilot project about how to support those pupils who are very gifted in certain areas."

According to the OECD, Finnish children spend the fewest number of hours in the classroom in the developed world.

This reflects another important theme

of Finnish education.

Primary and secondary schooling is combined, so the pupils don't have to change schools at age 13. They avoid a potentially disruptive transition from one school to another.

Teacher Marjaana Arovaara-Heikkinen believes keeping the same pupils in her classroom for several years also makes her job a lot easier.

"I'm like growing up with my children, I see the problems they have when they are small. And now after five years, I still see and know what has happened in their youth, what are the best things they can do. I tell them I'm like their school mother."

Children in Finland only start main school at age seven. The idea is that before then they learn best when they're playing and by the time they finally get to school they are keen to start learning.

Finnish parents obviously claim some credit for the impressive school results. There is a culture of reading with the kids at home and families have regular contact with their children's teachers.

Teaching is a prestigious career in Finland. Teachers are highly valued and teaching standards are high.

The educational system's success in Finland seems to be part cultural. Pupils study in a relaxed and informal atmosphere.

Finland also has low levels of immigration. So when pupils start school the majority have Finnish as their native language, eliminating an obstacle that other societies often face.

The system's success is built on the idea of less can be more. There is an emphasis on relaxed schools, free from political prescriptions. This combination, they believe, means that no child is left behind.

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/8601207.stm>
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"Nations like Finland and Japan seek out the best college graduates for teaching positions, prepare them well, pay them well and treat them with respect. They make sure that all their students study the arts, history, literature, geography, civics, foreign languages, the sciences and other subjects. They do this because this is the way to ensure good education. We're on the wrong track," says Diane Ravitch, who originally supported No Child Left Behind, but now rails against the policy. She was Assistant Secretary of Education and Counselor to Secretary of Education under George H.W. Bush. She is now Research Professor of Education at New York University and a historian of education, and author of "The Death and Life of the Great American School System: How Testing and Choice Are Undermining Education" (2010).

—quote from <http://www.apt11d.com/2010/03/diane-ravitchs-switcheroo.html>
—credentials from www.dianeravitch.com

Film on Finland's Winning Education Model

WASHINGTON— Former Memphis, TN, resident Robert A. Compton, who produced the education documentary "Two Million Minutes" comparing the typical American high school experience to Indian and Chinese models, has unveiled another film on the subject.

"The Finland Phenomenon" looks at the education system in Finland, which it claims is the world's best using a regimen nearly opposite the American model.

In a trailer, the film makes the claim that, under the Finnish system, students get a three-month summer break, spend less time in classrooms, seldom have homework and are rarely tested, and teachers are respected professionals, quickly receive tenure, and have a "strong union." It nonetheless "leaves no child behind."

The 60-minute film will received its premiere at the National Press Club on March 24, 2011, followed by a panel discussion led by New York Times columnist Thomas Friedman and John Wilson, executive director of the National Education Association, among others.

Mr. Compton, a venture capitalist, came to Memphis as president of Sofamor Danek. He now resides in the Washington, D.C., area.

By Bartholomew Sullivan
March 7, 2011

—from a website devoted to the news of Memphis, Tennessee:
<http://www.commercialappeal.com/news/2011/mar/07/former-memphian-produces-film-finlands-successful/>