

# LESSONS FROM ABROAD: THERE IS ALWAYS AN ALTERNATIVE

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**L**et us put it bluntly: the political establishment is failing to such a degree that democracy itself is under threat. This is true for the United Kingdom, but you are not alone. We have a similar situation in Denmark, and movements such as Podemos in Spain, Syriza in Greece and others are born as a reaction to the same syndrome. But, out of the depths of political despair, we have created a movement in Denmark that has caught the imagination of the people, and there's no reason it can't be replicated across the developed world.

The background to our story will be depressingly familiar. Inequality is on the rise throughout Europe, reaching heights we thought were reserved for the USA. It is rising even in a country as proud of its welfare system as Denmark. From 2001 to 2011, we could blame it on our centre-right libertarian government, but even after a centre-left government made up of the Social Democrats

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(Socialdemokraterne), Social Liberals (Det Radikale Venstre) and Socialist People's Party (Socialistisk Folkeparti) took over in 2011, nothing happened to stem the rising inequality – in fact, trends continued. People without money were left behind, while people with money continued to stride further ahead.

Like the rest of the Western world, we have also seen a rise of the nationalist right, which places the bulk of the blame for rising inequality on refugees and migrants. I see this particular development as the recurrence of a threat we have faced many times before: when people feel insecure and afraid they take comfort in the most straightforward answers, often resulting in a 'them and us' rhetoric that leads to scapegoating. Despite the European Union's success at keeping the peace for the past sixty years, we still seem unable to consign such nationalism and scapegoating to the dustbin of history.

As we have seen throughout history, the blame game will get us nowhere. The analysis is simply wrong. The problem is not refugees and migrants, so the answer is not nationalism. The heart of the problem is a political and financial establishment so inept at evolving and integrating new answers that no one in their right mind still trusts that they will. The problem is a political and financial establishment unable to solve the global challenges we face. Both in Denmark and across the world, we have a serious lack of political courage and creativity, and the result is that the political establishments seem satisfied with just maintaining what historical ambitions have afforded them. Politicians, many of whom undoubtedly have dreams and aspirations, have let these dreams and aspirations become submerged in the battle to keep their status and power. As a result, politics has become a competition about who is the best administrator of the current system, and political

ambitions have been reduced to a desperate effort to maintain society just as we know it today for as long as possible.

### ‘DEAD MAN WALKING’ MAKES A COMEBACK

In Denmark, a voice is rising that dares to challenge politics to mean something. It started with a question I posed to myself a few years ago: why do so many people seem convinced that what we have today is as good as it gets? Why blindly fight to maintain the status quo, instead of looking for something that could serve society better?

I will never find satisfaction in an ambition to maintain what we already have. Rather, I would venture to suggest that now is the time to dare to be creative, to think outside the box, to seek that something that is better. To me, it is clear that we have to begin devising ways to revitalise democracy and our political systems. In a Danish context, this means a move from the representative democracy to a far more engaging and involving democracy.

Had I written this contribution three years ago, it might have been my epitaph – that I felt there was something better, but I was never able to unleash the brave and creative forces needed to realise it. Fortunately, I’m writing this essay in early 2016, and we have already made considerable progress. Not that this seemed likely in early 2013, when political colleagues, pundits and journalists dubbed me ‘the dead man walking of Danish politics’.

Before I came to be the ‘dead man walking’, I was a city councillor in Aarhus, the second largest city in Denmark. I had served as the CEO of the World Outgames, and I had founded the Kaospilot International School of New Business Design and Social

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Innovation, of which I was the principal for fifteen years. Before this, I was one of the initiators of Frontløberne, a business environment for cultural entrepreneurs. I had built a career by founding and nurturing creative, entrepreneurial and successful institutions and environments.

In 2011, I was elected to the Danish Parliament. I ran for the Danish Social Liberal Party (De Radikale), of which I had been a member for most of my adult life. Our ‘side’ won the election and, together with the Social Democrats and the Socialist Party (Socialistisk Folkeparti), we formed the first left-wing government since 2001. I served as Minister of Culture in the government of Helle Thorning-Schmidt, until I resigned in December 2012, having become disillusioned about how much national politics had become stripped of its ideals, left as little more than a game – or, should I say, a war – of power. It was after I resigned that the ‘dead man walking’ tag followed. But, in reality, I felt free again. Free to be creative, to think outside the box, and to dream big.

Being the old anarchist that I am, I have always liked a good challenge. So, drawing on my entrepreneurial background and my experiences with politics-as-usual, I began preparing for a risk-it-all comeback. I knew how the political system worked, and how it malfunctions too. I knew too well how the media shapes and misshapes the democratic discussions and the decision processes, and I knew their immense power. I had a personal ambition of proving that even a political system so set in its ways can be changed, and I knew it could only be achieved by building participation, social innovation and enterprise. With a handful of good people around me who were as tired of politics-as-usual as I was, we began designing an alternative – in every way we could imagine. And that became our name: The Alternative.

First of all, we set out with an ambition to come up with answers to three crises we identified as the most serious of our time: the environmental crisis, the empathy crisis, and the crisis of our systems – be it the political system, the institutional system or the system of management.

We decided that all of our politics should be measured on how well it creates a surplus on the financial, the social, and the environmental bottom line. The days when we ran huge deficits on the social and the environmental bottom line to secure a surplus on the financial should be well behind us.

In our view, these challenges are so daunting that traditional politics cannot solve them. Politics-as-usual involves pitching ideas that are constricted by more or less preset ideologies into a dirty, no-holds-barred contest with similarly constricted ideas from the other side. This simply reinforces the old and the outdated: ‘socialism versus liberalism’, ‘capitalism versus communism’, ‘class war’, ‘businesses versus the public sector’, ‘left versus right’, etc. These divisions of thought restrict action in ways that are no longer helpful or even meaningful. The challenges we face are new, and thus the old political divisions should be rendered obsolete.

Some issues that could and should gather broad political support have been taken hostage by one or the other of these old political factions. The collection of problems we face – for example, rising inequality, climate change and the political crisis – must be a uniting issue in the future. We can disagree on how, but not on if. The ambition of creating a sustainable society is not a threat to individual freedom or the free market. It is an ambition of a society in movement, not lacking in dynamics. At least that was our analysis, and we decided to give ourselves the freedom to use what works best without having to consider if it was ‘proper socialism’

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or ‘proper libertarianism’, without having to confer with some sort of ideological ‘bible’.

### A ONE-PAGE MANIFESTO AND NO POLITICAL PROGRAMME

Instead, we identified six core, guiding values that characterise our internal and external working processes as well as our politics and political proposals. The values are courage, generosity, transparency, humility, humour and empathy.

Courage to confront the problems we face head on. Generosity to share everything that can be shared with anyone who is interested. Transparency in the way we work so that everybody can monitor what we’re doing – on good days and on bad days. Humility about the task we have given ourselves and humility towards those whose shoulders we stand on and to those who will follow us. Humour because it is the prerequisite for creativity that leads to good ideas. And, finally, empathy, to allow us to put ourselves in other people’s shoes and see the world from their point of view and create win-win solutions for everyone.

These goals and measures became a one-page political manifesto accompanied by the following headlines:

The Alternative is a political idea  
The Alternative is a wake-up call  
The Alternative is a positive countermeasure  
The Alternative is curiosity  
The Alternative is collaboration  
The Alternative is openness

The Alternative is courage  
The Alternative is already a reality  
The Alternative is for you

That was it! Our analysis, our six core values and our manifesto was all we had when, at a press conference on 27 November 2013, we launched The Alternative as a political platform consisting of a movement and a political party. We didn't even have a political programme. We dared to say – as we still do – that we do not have answers to everything, that we do not know everything, and that we never will. Instead, we had put dreaming into a formula by creating an arena where it is easier, encouraged, and appreciated when you dream out loud with your eyes and ears open. We call that space 'political laboratories', and we presented a plan to launch a series of these where everyone – irrespective of age, background, political persuasions and party membership – was invited, invited to dream out loud, to help form a new political vision, to take part in creating our political programme.

The same day, an in-depth feature on The Alternative was released by the Danish media *Zetland* (*Zetland* is an entirely new and so far very successful media platform offering in-depth features of around fifteen to twenty pages at a cost of a couple of pounds a month). The journalist had had full access to meetings and all internal emails leading up to the announcement of the movement. We put all our cards on the table, and, although the article didn't really pass judgement on our possibilities, it gave us credit for our openness.

According to media pundits, we had no future and no chance whatsoever to be elected to the Danish Parliament. The general judgement seemed to be that we were a political joke thought up



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by idealistic amateurs. That didn't surprise us; in fact we took it as another sign of how internalised the idea of politics-as-usual had become.

In 2014, we presented what – to the best of our knowledge – is the first 100 per cent crowd-sourced political programme: sixty pages, all dreamed up by those who had shown a willingness to partake. Our political programme is also 100 per cent dynamic in the sense that we have hosted and will continue to host political laboratories. The political laboratories are both a means and an end. They are a means to creating an ever-evolving political programme, and an end towards revitalising democracy by making politics engaging and inclusive.

A key part of our political programme is the chapter on changing the political culture. The fact is that trust towards politicians has for too long been dwindling and is now at an all-time low; politicians are at the bottom of the list – below even used-car sellers and journalists. Neglecting the role of journalism in the matter would be wrong, and thus we do not, but instead of fighting the media, we have chosen to change the 'game' from within – by showing the alternative to spin, catchy and aggressive one-liners, and lobbying that benefits special interests.

In all our communications, we have thus pledged to uphold six basic tenets:

1. We have pledged to draw attention to both the advantages and disadvantages of what we suggest;
2. We have pledged to listen more than we talk and to meet our political opponents where they are;
3. We have pledged to highlight the values that lie behind our arguments;



4. We have pledged to openly admit when we cannot answer and admit if we have been wrong;
5. We have pledged to be curious towards those with whom we debate;
6. We have pledged to openly and impartially argue how our vision can be achieved.

Upholding these six tenets is as hard as it is revolutionary in the political culture in Denmark today. Most of the time we succeed, but to ensure we do not start slipping, we have formed our own Ombudsman Council, which has the task of looking over our shoulders and formulating any criticisms in a thorough report twice a year.

## REACTIONS TO THE ALTERNATIVE

So, how did my erstwhile political colleagues, Danish political pundits and journalists react to all this? With ridicule. Although we were no longer without a political programme, the framing of The Alternative as a naive project run by amateurs with no flair for politics persisted. In a now-famous news show in January 2015, five of Denmark's most experienced political pundits rated the chances of The Alternative breaking through the 2 per cent threshold of votes necessary to be represented in Parliament. The comment that stands out came from the pundit Jarl Cordua: '0.1 per cent chance of them getting in [to Parliament]. They are not getting in. It is an amateur project.'

Nothing had changed predictions when, only four short months later, in May 2015, Helle Thorning-Schmidt called an election.

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However, during the three-week election campaign something did change. To everyone's astonishment – and surpassing even our own expectations of breaking the 2 per cent barrier – we began to surge in the opinion polls. Each one was better than the last, and pundits and media alike were scrambling to make their predictions come true by continually framing us as naive amateurs. On this, entire books could be written.

In the end, though, our ideas and our radically different approach to politics resonated with the public. The Alternative got 4.8 per cent of the popular vote and won nine of the 179 seats in Parliament.

Not in any way to diminish the accomplishment of being elected to Parliament and the great opportunities afforded us through the political system, I believe that change can happen more rapidly through broad movements than through politics as it is practised today. While mainstream politics continues to avoid it, we continue to insist that a sustainable transition is an absolute imperative. We have a saying: 'When the system is not responding, we the people have to rise up to pave a way forward.' Ours is a loving revolution in which everyone takes their authority and capacity to act seriously. We – meaning each and every one of us – *will* find a way!

In that regard, I am optimistic. After only ten months in Parliament, the number of paid-up members of The Alternative had quintupled. Around 40 per cent of our members have never been active in politics before. We have also made good on our ambition to be an international movement. In January 2016, we welcomed our first sister party, The Alternative Norway, founded by like-minded Norwegians who felt that our manifesto and values resonated in Norway. They now aim to do what we have done in Denmark. I hope they surpass us.

We now have MPs, and though this essay has been written in the offices of Christiansborg Palace, the Danish Parliament, it is

important to stress that The Alternative is not based in Parliament: it is a political platform for the whole of Denmark on which we have built the political party and the movement. We plan to build many other entities on the same platform; entities that should be sustainable and can still succeed, even if others do not. It could be publishers, solar panel projects, educational programmes, think tanks, creative design, shops, etc. Everything is possible as long as any new entity is based on our values and manifesto.

In fact, from the beginning The Alternative was conceptualised as a fourth-sector corporation. Fourth-sector corporations are not-for-profit initiatives that take the best from the three traditional sectors: the private (business) sector, the public (government) sector, and the social (non-profit) sector and combine them into one. From the private sector, they draw on their experience creating and distributing goods and services that enhance our quality of life, promote growth, and generate prosperity. From the public sector, fourth-sector corporations draw on their protection of public interest while at the same time ensuring a level playing field of opportunity, and the protection and expansion of democratic freedom for both individuals and communities. From the social sector, they draw on their efforts to build and protect human values, share wealth and resources equitably, and ensure all people have access to adequate necessities of life, including clean air, water, food and shelter. Fourth-sector enterprises also have a strong environmental element, working to sustain and support, not systemically alter, degrade or destroy the earth, its diversity of life or the ecological systems that support life, and to promote the idea that the many species that share this planet must work together for the benefit of the entire world.

Fourth-sector corporations draw on all these experiences and dedicate more resources to delivering social and environmental benefits.

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Many of them operate with a triple bottom line in the sense that they have to run a surplus on the financial, the social and the environmental. Indeed, The Alternative has adapted the thought of the triple bottom line and strives to make it a defining factor of all we do.

I am certain that fourth-sector corporations will be a driving element of the next societal leap forward. From all corners of the world, we are beginning to see the contours of something almost revolutionary: more and more people are choosing to work in jobs that are meaningful to them. Not just jobs that pay the most money. This demand for meaning as something more than just a monthly pay cheque will be a defining feature of the future. Adding to that, it is becoming more and more obvious that the world as a whole is facing problems of such a magnitude that neither the private sector nor the public sector can solve them by themselves. The problems we are facing are calling for an entirely new way of organising our efforts, and I believe this is to be found in the fourth sector.

We have another saying in The Alternative: that we are striving not for Denmark to be the best country in the world, but the best country *for* the world. One tangent of this ambition is to launch the next wave of political and societal innovation, to take control of the future, and in doing so – hopefully – be the inspiration to the rest of the world we once were. I am certain we can deliver on this ambition, because, after all, we have done it before – we did it with the cooperative movement.

## CROSS-POLLINATION OF THE NEW POLITICS

Just as The Alternative has been inspired by social movements and political ideas from around the world, I hope that our ideas will be

used in the rest of the world. I hope our ideas will cross-pollinate. In recent years we have seen many progressives who think and do politics differently making great strides around the world.

One of these, and one that bears many resemblances to *The Alternative*, is Podemos of Spain. The party was officially launched on 16 January 2014, and is headed by a professor of political science turned television presenter, Pablo Iglesias. Like *The Alternative*, Podemos is strongly anti-establishment, and its main objectives are to end rampant corruption and inequality, and to reform the European Union from within – ending the EU’s adherence to the politics of austerity. Podemos’s political programme is the result of a collaborative effort and includes the introduction of a basic income for everyone, lobbying controls and punitive measures for tax avoidance by large corporations. The programme also includes an ambitious set of initiatives regarding climate change, such as reducing fossil fuel consumption, promoting public transport and renewable energy initiatives, reducing industrial crop agriculture, and instead stimulating local food production by smaller corporations. All political aspirations we agree wholly with.

The parallels between *The Alternative* and Podemos are indeed many, but perhaps one of the most important is Pablo Iglesias’s thoughts on political ideologies. He has argued that leftist organisations need to ‘put away old flags’, and that the dichotomy of left and right is not always useful. I would call Podemos’s political aspirations entirely progressive (as I would our own), and I find them aspirations that are becoming increasingly difficult to reject. Someone has yet to argue that a fossil-fuel-based society is better than one based on renewable energy. Some forcefully argue that the green revolution will be difficult, but few, very few, argue that a green society based on clean, renewable energy sources is not a

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better society. The case is the same for equality – evidence continues to mount showing that equal societies are better societies. Such ambitions should be shared by everyone, but for some reason they are not at the moment. And in my view, progressives must reflect upon their own role in taking ownership of these issues. If the goal is a better world, as it is for me, we must share ownership of the progressive political agenda.

Syriza of Greece, the Five Star Movement of Italy, the Pirate Party in Iceland, and Bernie Sanders in the US presidential election are other examples of progressive thinkers, parties and movements with ambitions of shedding the shackles of strict adherence to any one old ideology. They aim for a radically different future and to change the path we are on. All of these have gained much more support and recognition than The Alternative. That is great to see, because they are challenging the political establishment and politics-as-usual, and thus are an open challenge to the rise of an extreme right seen in so many countries in Europe and the US. All of them are an inspiration to start doing things differently, creating a much more involved and inclusive democracy, bridging the widening gap between the electorate and the political elite. By their mere existence, they are changing the political landscape for the better.

What we also share with these parties is the fact that our rise and current existence is based on an electoral system able to accommodate new political parties and thus the innovation they bring. The Danish voting system is based on proportional representation, meaning that our number of seats in Parliament almost exactly reflects the share of citizens who voted for us: 4.8 per cent voted for us and we hold 4.8 per cent of the 179 seats in Parliament. Thus our electoral system welcomes challenges to the existing politics-as-usual rather than the opposite, and this is very different from

the British system, which – in my opinion – has an undemocratic built-in flaw in the Westminster model, popularly called first-past-the-post. A good example of why I think the Westminster model is undemocratic was the 2005 election where Tony Blair won a majority of sixty-four seats in Parliament with only 35 per cent of the popular vote. Another example was the most recent election, in which the Green Party of England and Wales received 3.8 per cent of the vote but was awarded only one of the 650 seats in Parliament – equivalent to 0.15 per cent of the parliamentary representation. The system favours strong one-party rule while very effectively deterring and impairing challenges by free-thinking, progressive movements. Thus, progressive British movements face a tough first challenge: changing the electoral system. However difficult, I believe this can be achieved by formulating a serious, progressive agenda able to mobilise the public – perhaps centred on progressive initiatives and movements such as Compass, the Green Party, and Scotland's independence movement.

I believe it is key for all progressive initiatives in Europe to stand together, learn from each other and collaborate on formulating a political agenda based on the premise that we cannot solve the crises facing us by perpetuating what created the crises in the first place. When national politics fails to provide the results the world so desperately calls for, others have to step up. We have to find another way, and we have to do it together to build a critical mass that demands an end to politics-as-usual.

When national Parliaments fail to act, there is hope in the many progressive solutions that come from local communities, municipalities and cities. Some great examples stem from the UK. From initiatives like Transition Towns, across local currencies like the Lewes and Brixton pounds, communities across the UK have shown



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that positive action does not have to wait for top-down politics. This is mirrored across the globe, and it is an essential counterweight to the slow-moving, often conservative national Parliaments. In the face of politics-as-usual, I believe it is the responsibility of all progressives to pave the way for these. We should all strive to connect these progressive dots and support cooperation across local and national borders, so best practices can pave a way forward for all of us.

The recent mayoral election in London also testifies that there is hope in local politics. Not least thanks to the participatory model of London's citizens, that stands as an admirable testament to the fantastic power and creativity that can be unleashed when you give the democratic authority back to the citizens themselves.

I am hopeful because, just like the examples above, The Alternative and I are living proof that it can be done. But it is also true that, however fast we may be growing, The Alternative is still a small political platform in a small country, so we need others to dream up new futures as well. At least here in Denmark, The Alternative has been able to break out of the hypnosis that allowed us to forget that there is always an alternative. I will continue to do my utmost to ensure that we never forget it again.

UFFE ELBÆK is the political leader of The Alternative, Denmark. As well as his political work, he has been a social worker, an author, an entrepreneur and a trainer of entrepreneurs. He was also chief executive of the World Outgames, a global sporting and cultural festival sanctioned by the Gay and Lesbian International Sports Association.

*The Alternative's political programme can be found at: <http://en.alternativet.dk/political-program/>*