



George Blecher

Politics dressed up as principle

Why the "Jyllands-Posten" affair did not come out of the blue

To observers of Danish political developments, the *Jyllands-Posten* affair did not come out of the blue. The increasingly conservative and anti-immigrant stance taken by Fogh Rasmussen's centre-right government and its coalition partner, the Dansk Folkeparti, along with Fogh Rasmussen's closeness to George W. Bush, have created a political climate in which the cartoons could be published. To subsequently denounce critics of the cartoons as enemies of free expression is disingenuous, says George Blecher.

Now that the furore over the Danish cartoons has given way to even worse violence in the Middle East, it may be time to take a closer look at recent revelations in the Danish press, and to ponder why Danish Prime Minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen has adopted an international stance disturbingly similar to that of his mentor, George W. Bush.

Facts emerging in the Danish press in recent weeks have made it clear that the publication of twelve cartoons of Mohammed by the provincial newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* had more to do with politics than principles. According to the independent daily *Information*, *Jyllands-Posten's* request for cartoons was inspired by a speech by Culture Minister Brian Mikkelsen at a September meeting of the Conservative Party, in which he called for "a new offensive in the Culture Wars". Specifically directing his remarks against immigrants from Muslim countries who will not "recognize Danish culture and European norms", Mikkelsen maintained that they have developed a "parallel society" within Denmark, with "medieval standards and undemocratic ways of thinking." *Information* goes on to say that:

Among [Mikkelsen's] points and examples was that "freedom of expression" was threatened, because a comedian "doesn't dare piss on the Koran", and illustrators don't dare put their names on illustrations that show Mohammed's face.¹

According to *Information*, the subsequent defence of the cartoons by *Jyllands-Posten* used arguments and examples directly appropriated from Mikkelsen's speech.

An article in the liberal daily *Politiken* suggests that the whole issue of whether illustrators were afraid to illustrate a children's book about the life of Mohammed may have been a red herring in the first place. According to *Politiken*, the author of the book, Kaare Bluitgen, never documented his claim that a number of illustrators refused to work with him, and on 30 September, the day that *Jyllands-Posten* printed the cartoons, the newspaper actually ran a disclaimer of sorts:

At any rate [the refusal of illustrators to work on his book] has turned out to be very practical for Kaare Bluitgen. It creates a buzz around his soon-to-be-published children's book that it otherwise would not have gotten, and this can only boost sales.²

Much of what happened in the weeks after the publication of the cartoons has been covered extensively in the international press. Danish Muslim groups appealed to Culture Minister Mikkelsen, only to be rebuffed. Ambassadors from eleven Muslim countries asked to meet with the Prime Minister, not only about the cartoons but also about a series of inflammatory remarks from members of Parliament, and were also rejected. Whether or not the rejection stemmed, as Fogh Rasmussen maintains, from a mistranslation of a legal phrase in English that the ambassadors used in their letter — they asked that "all responsible should be taken to task under the law of the land" — is still being debated in Danish political circles. Evidently, though, neither the editor of *Jyllands-Posten* nor the Culture Minister nor Prime Minister Fogh Rasmussen felt any need for a more tempered response. The rest, of course, is history.

The naivety — some might even call it belligerence — on the part of Fogh Rasmussen and his Culture Minister isn't totally surprising. Fogh Rasmussen's centre-right "Left" party came into power five years ago after an almost unbroken string of left-liberal governments in Denmark; though his Foreign Minister is an experienced diplomat, Fogh Rasmussen himself has little experience in the international arena. Furthermore, Fogh Rasmussen's main ally in the present coalition government, the Dansk Folkeparti, has built its reputation on an aggressive anti-immigrant policy, and Fogh Rasmussen is dependent on them to help push through his reforms. His defiance of the Muslim ambassadors certainly didn't hurt his standing among supporters of the DF.

But apart from these factors, what's most interesting in the Prime Minister's truculent stance is that it signals a departure from traditional Scandinavian consensus politics, and introduces an adversarial style reminiscent of that used by George Bush in dealing with nay-sayers. From the beginning, Fogh Rasmussen has been a staunch supporter of the US in Afghanistan and Iraq. With only a few-vote majority, his government has committed troops to the coalition in both places, and up till now he has successfully kept both his political opponents and the press at bay. Indeed, the only time that the Prime Minister seemed unsure of himself was when the US issued statements mildly critical of the Danish position. After what appeared to be a series of frantic phone calls — and an escalation of riots in the Middle East — the US modified its critique. The *New York Times* quoted the Prime Minister as saying, "I never doubted that Bush would stand behind Denmark. He values faithfulness and loyalty. I was not surprised that he decided to call me and express support."³

Since then, Fogh Rasmussen has been as unwavering as his mentor. In a recent interview in the Conservative *Berlingske Tidende*, he said that, "When I run the film backwards and look at the steps taken in this matter, I cannot see anything that the government should have done differently." "Writers and others who live on freedom of expression," he asserted, "have gone back on their principles [...] Because of an almost hate relationship [to the Dansk Folkeparti, *Jyllands-Posten*, and the government], they can't stand up and defend freedom of expression."⁴ To anyone familiar with George Bush's response to his critics,

the rhetoric is distressingly familiar: Deny, deny, keep denying. Blame the blamers. Deny some more.

There are signs that the fallout from Fogh Rasmussen's adversarial politics already resembles the aftermath of the American invasion of Iraq — uncertainty about how to deal with the international situation that he has created, and increased divisions within his own country. Whatever international fences Denmark is or should be trying to mend are not being discussed at all in the Danish press; indeed, UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan recently criticized Denmark in a speech in Qatar for being "unsure of how to treat its significant Muslim population", and there is talk of a UN resolution against Denmark. On the home front, traditional business interests and intellectuals are finally starting to protest Fogh Rasmussen's "I'm the only one who's right" attitude, and polls indicate a movement of Danish voters to the right and left, leaving the middle ominously empty. An investigation into "Mohammed-gate" being called for by centre and left parties will probably not come to pass — not as long as Fogh Rasmussen's party and the Dansk Folkeparti remain in power.

¹ "Det er vel Brian Mikkelsens skyld?", *Information*, 15 February 2006.

² "Ikke ligefrem en genistreg", *Politiken*, 15 February 2006.

³ "Dane Sees Greed and Politics in the Crisis", *New York Times*, 10 February 2006.

⁴ "Fogh anklager forfattere, erhverliv og medier", *Berlingske Tidende*, 26 February 2006.

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