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The Voice of Business in Denmark's Neoliberal Turn

By Julian Lamberty and Jeppe Nevers

Abstract:

Many historians have argued that the Nordic welfare societies underwent a major transformation in the later decades of the 20th century, and neoliberalism has been identified as a key driver of this transformation. This article contributes to this field of contemporary history as it addresses the rhetoric and role of organized business in Denmark's neoliberal turn, focusing especially on the Confederation of Danish Industry. Using conceptual history methodology, the article identifies a rhetoric of competitiveness in the communication of organized business and traces how this rhetoric changed from the 1970s until the 2010s. This leads to identification of two discontinuities. First, the article shows how the 1980s saw a transformation in which the industrialists increasingly called for state engagement to further competitiveness in the private sector, especially in relation to research and innovation. Second, the article shows how the 2010s saw a transformation in which the rhetoric of competitiveness adopted ideas about sustainability. What emerges from this analysis is a rather pragmatic version of neoliberalism that was born out of the business interest and which since the late 1980s was developed as an integrated part of a consensus in the Danish policy elite.

It has become a commonplace to argue that the Nordic societies underwent a major transformation in the later decades of the 20th century, and some scholars have used neoliberalism as the label and context for this transformation of the Nordic welfare states into something different.¹ Neoliberalism is, of course, already widely accepted as an umbrella-term for the increased belief in market mechanisms that spread throughout the world in the late 20th century.² There is a large and growing field of scholarship which has traced the roots of neoliberalism to earlier periods and also theorized the term in different ways;³ but it remains a common pattern in most of this literature that there was a breakthrough of neoliberalism in the late 20th century. According to Jamie Peck and Adam Tickell, the 1980s saw a "roll back" of regulation, after which the 1990s saw a broader "roll out" of neoliberal doctrines.⁴

Most of this literature has dealt with the Anglophone world as well as international organizations, but scholars have also addressed how neoliberal ideas changed the Nordic countries. This question was first

addressed by social scientists looking at policy areas, and it is now increasingly addressed by historians who have so far preferred to look at various agents and their thinking and role.⁵

This article contributes to this growing field of contemporary history as it addresses the rhetoric and role of the major business organization in Denmark in this period: The Confederation of Danish Industry (Dansk Industri: DI). It remained throughout this period the largest and most influential business interest organization in the country, and the organization also offers institutional continuity across the period (until 1992 as Industrirådet). To provide nuances, the article has supplementary observations on other business interest organizations, not least The Danish Chamber of Commerce (DE), which was created in 2007, and its predecessor organizations.

Research on neoliberalism has emphasized the importance of business actors for the spread of neoliberal ideas,⁶ and the importance of business interest organizations has also been addressed by historians working on the political history of the Nordic countries. It has, for instance, been stressed how business interest organizations in Sweden were crucial for the construction of an ideological alternative to social democratic ideas of economic planning in the post war period,⁷ and a similar role has been ascribed to some key persons in the Danish business community of that same period.⁸ But what was the role of the business interest organizations in the later period, from the 1970s until the early 21st century, when there was a broader “roll out” of neoliberal ideas? How did the Confederation of Danish Industry in this context position and legitimize the business interest?

Methodologically, the article tracks the rhetoric of these business actors – the voice of business – as it appears in published materials from these organizations, mostly pamphlets, books, reports, and analyses. Especially, the article focuses on the concepts of competition and competitiveness. We know from existing research that competition is a key concept in neoliberal ideology, and that different versions of neoliberalism developed different conceptions of competition that broke with arguments in classical liberalism.⁹ Most importantly, William Davies has argued that neoliberal ideology, as it has developed since the 1930s, rests on a “logic of competition” in which an inherent idea of fairness is crucial for the legitimation of the subsequent inequalities, as this logic “involves contestants being *formally equal at the outset and empirically unequal at the conclusion*”.¹⁰ Davies has also argued that the spread of the concept of competitiveness is a result of the victory of this logic.¹¹

This article does not directly deploy such a theory of competition, but instead tracks how competition and competitiveness was conceptualized by the Danish industrialists, and how they contributed into making these concepts a part of the Danish elite consensus in the late 20th century. In other words, the method of the article is inspired by conceptual history as it traces the use of these concepts in the language and

agency of a key actor, with an emphasis on how experiences and expectations of different periods entered the discourse.¹² In addition, the article draws on theory of ideological morphology, as it also addresses how related concepts such as education, research, and industrial policy was changed in this process.¹³ The analysis shows that competitiveness emerged in the 1970s as a core concept in the rhetoric of the Danish industrialists, and that this rhetoric early on developed into an imperative discourse, as the industrialists identified a lack of competitiveness which called for business-friendly policies. By tracking how different concepts were integrated into this rhetoric it is possible to track the development of this specific version or aspect of neoliberal ideology.

Instead of deploying a fixed chronology of the period, the article tracks changes over time, focusing on one decade at a time, from the 1970s until the 2010s. This approach leads to an identification of two phases of discontinuities. First, the article shows how the 1980s saw a transformation from a period in which the rhetoric of competitiveness was viewed in opposition to the growing public sector to a period in which the industrialists were calling for increased state engagement, especially in the fields of education and research. The interests of the Confederation of Danish Industry were now presented as overlapping with those of the state, and the organization became an important agent in policy formation, with continuity across different governments. Second, the article shows how the 2010s saw a new transformation in which this rhetoric adopted ideas about sustainability, but without morphing into a different ideology.

The identification of a rhetoric of competitiveness as a key element in reforms of the Nordic welfare states is not new. Most prominently, the Finnish political scientist Pauli Kettunen has stressed the importance of consensual competitiveness and the making of the “competitive us” in the most recent history of the Nordic welfare states;¹⁴ and for the Danish case the main contribution is the theory of “the competition state” as it was developed by the political economist Ove Kaj Pedersen in a book of that title from 2011. The central argument in Pedersen’s book was that the *raison d’être* of the Danish state changed fundamentally in the period between the 1970s and the early 1990s, with the years around 1990 as the breakthrough for a fully-fledged competition state which had the competitiveness of the private sector as the guiding principle across all policy areas. Preceding this period, the purpose of the welfare state was to protect, serve, and shape its citizens into well-rounded human beings.¹⁵ Thus, “the competition state” describes a form of neoliberalism in which the state apparatus plays an essential role in promoting the conditions for its private sector to succeed in an increasingly global market economy. This article contributes to this framework as it tracks the rhetoric of competitiveness as it was promoted by organized business. How did this contribute to the spread of the logic of competition?

Competitiveness as Absence of Economic Burdens

Danish historiography on the second half of the 20th century has generally followed a mainstream pattern in identifying the first oil crisis of 1973 as the end of the era of steady economic growth that the western societies experienced in the 1950s and the 1960s.¹⁶ In contrast to these golden years, in Danish historiography typically related to the development of the classical welfare state,¹⁷ the following decade came to be characterized by economic instability and the novel phenomenon of stagflation to which the paradigm of Keynesian economics offered no remedy. As it is well-known, this challenge came to be an important backdrop for the breakthrough of neoliberal economics in a range of countries, not least in the UK and the US. The Danish historian Niklas Olsen has shown how ideas of neoliberals such as Milton Friedman and Friedrich August von Hayek also entered Danish political thought in this period through a new generation of politicians in the Liberal Party (Venstre).¹⁸ However, for most of the 1970s, the Danish governments were led by Social Democrats under the leadership of Anker Jørgensen, so the ideas of the young liberals did not in any significant way influence the policies until a shift in political power in 1982 when the Social Democratic government was succeeded by a government headed by the Conservative Party and its leader Poul Schlüter.¹⁹ This brought some of the liberal ideologues of the 1970s, for instance Bertel Haarder and Henning Christophersen, to power, and thus the early 1980s saw several reforms with inspirations from the ideological debates of the previous decade.

The young liberals were not alone as critics of the growing public sector in the 1970s. As the deep-seated problems and imbalances of the Danish economy became more and more apparent, Danish business interest organizations also began to develop extensive policy agendas, and from the beginning their rhetoric was about restoring the Danish economy through an increased focus on the competitiveness of Danish businesses. One example could be DI's *Fra nul-vækst til ny fremgang? (From Zero-Growth to New Progress?)* from 1978, which presented the organization's views on the causes to the problems in the Danish economy. According to the pamphlet, the unfavourable conditions for Danish businesses arose out of several parallel developments that all had their origins in 1960s, but only became problematic in the 1970s. One was the country's rapidly rising foreign debt, which had risen from virtually zero to more than 50 billion DKK between 1960 and 1977. Another was the rapid expansion of the public sector as the number of employees had more than doubled, from c. 250.000 to more than 650.000, in the same period. Third, these developments had led to sharp increases of taxes. Thus, the average share of income going to taxes rose from under 30% in 1960 to c. 50% in 1977. These developments had also led to increases of interest rates and wages, and these issues made it, according to DI, difficult for Danish businesses to be competitive in increasingly international markets.²⁰

While the pamphlet was clear in its diagnosis of the problems, the agenda for solutions was presented in rather general terms. However, there was a clear rejection of any centralized industrial policy. Such positions were in clear continuation of the traditional thinking of the organization, going all the way back to the establishment of DI as a modern interest organization in the 1910s and the 1920s, and the basic contours of these ideas, founded around a staunch defence of the private enterprise system, survived all the way into the 1970s. DI was throughout this period ideologically affiliated with the right side of the political spectrum, much along the same lines as Rikard Westerberg has shown for Swedish industrialists.²¹ In other words, the rhetoric against centralized planning was rooted in previous periods in which there had been an only gradual and hesitant accommodation to the idea of a more organized economy, with the 1930s and the post war period as the main periods of adaptation.²²

Hence in the 1970s, the organization did not reject all types of government regulation, as they would have done in the 1920s and even more so before the First World War, nor the idea of having a welfare state – in fact, it praised some of the benefits that the welfare state had brought about.²³ Nevertheless, the pamphlet contained a clear rejection of state interference in the private sector,²⁴ just as there was a rejection of excessive regulation of society in general. They wanted a different way forward and called for a reduction of economic burdens on Danish businesses as well as general political restraint. It was their basic position that this would aid Danish industry to a bettering of its competitiveness, which would lower unemployment and boost exports. This was according to DI the only way of restoring the economy and reducing foreign debt.²⁵ The core of these positions is not surprising, but it is important to note that competitiveness was a key concept, and that competitiveness simply was about lowering economic burdens on Danish firms. There was no explicit theory of competition or competitiveness, the idea was basically that support of this pure business interest would be to the benefit of the country more broadly.

Competitiveness and the Promises of Innovation

During the 1980s, the Confederation of Danish Industry continued their critique of the state of the Danish economy. The 1983-publication *Vilje til vækst: Industripolitik i 80'erne* [Will to Growth: Industrial Policy in the 80s] clarified the organization's ideas about how these problems should be addressed via concrete policy initiatives.²⁶ It made clear that the problems of the Danish economy had worsened since the late 1970s, and that it was time to initiate a new era of industrialization which would lead to growth and to a way out of the problems of rising foreign debt, high unemployment, and deficits in government finances.²⁷ The main objective was still to bring about: "The creation of a favourable industrial climate, which by the most general means available – income policy and interest rate policy – secures competitive conditions for

Danish companies, which measures up to conditions abroad.”²⁸ However, while this passage indicates continuity from the ideas and the policy approaches of the 1970s, it was now supplemented with a number of more specific policy proposals. This development was strongest in relation to research and innovation as well as education, just as the voice of business was now calling for policies to support internationalization of Danish firms. In other words, more competitive firms demanded a more active state.

In regard to these issues, DI pointed to the need for increased investments, for better infrastructure, and for increased cooperation between companies and public research institutions,²⁹ as well as a need for an increased focus on promotion of educations of relevance for the private sector.³⁰ While research and education had, of course, always played a role for the improvement of competitiveness in the private sector, the 1980s marks a point where the focus on these policies intensified. This led to a complete transformation of Danish research policy during the 1980s which was driven by a belief in the importance of state-funded research and innovation for the purpose of improving the competitiveness of Danish firms.³¹ In this decade it was a general interpretation in European elites, that European companies were lagging behind American and Japanese companies in regard to innovation, which was also an important background for the EEC Framework Programme for Research and Technological Development in 1984.³² The aim of this program was explicitly to further innovation in European companies.³³ Such developments made DI and other Danish actors aware of the importance of research and innovation, and several Danish companies in research intensive sectors were also calling for an active approach.³⁴ The Ministry of Industry and Trade also published several reports with conclusions along these lines.³⁵

This intensified focus on the importance of research, innovation, and education was closely connected to another novel trend in the outlook of the organization, namely the idea that there was an irreversible trend towards increased internationalization of markets, societies, and companies. This orientation towards increased internationalization had many precursors, for instance the country’s admission into the EEC in 1973, just as the creation of a national business fund in 1960 was rooted in the idea of increasingly internationalized markets.³⁶ However, it was only in the 1980s that the idea of internationalization as an unstoppable trend came to the front in the rhetoric of DI, and publications from this period mapped, for instance, the increased internationalization of Danish businesses,³⁷ or presented the organization’s view on EEC-policies as well as their impact on Danish industry.³⁸

Again, this led to calls for the state to play a more active role in furthering research, innovation, and relevant education, with the goal of increasing the competitiveness of Danish firms. DI remained a critic of targeted subsidies, as they held the view that subsidies would only uphold companies that were not competitive, and that market mechanisms were better suited for allocation of resources.³⁹ Along the same

line, DI was also critical of EEC agrarian policies and they called for the EEC to play a more active role in regulating the use of state funds in the industrial policy of its member states.⁴⁰ Nevertheless, in this period, DI also began envisioning an active role for the Danish government and for the EEC regarding investments, particularly in relation to research and innovation.⁴¹

It is noteworthy that these calls for a more active state in specific areas are parallel to the direction of the actual policies of the period, as the 1980s saw several public programs aimed at supporting research and innovation in Danish companies as well as increased cooperation between public research institutions and private firms. These programs included a program for use of advanced technology in Danish businesses, which ran from 1984 until 1989, and in which most large Danish companies participated (with great benefit according to later evaluations). There was also an important program for support of Danish companies' internationalization, which ran from 1986 until 1989, and which led to improved international strategies in numerous companies. There were also programs for increased cooperation with public research institutions, for instance a program for increased cooperation in relation to biotechnology, a program which ran from 1987 till 1990. In all such cases, these programs poured hundreds of millions into research and innovation and into public-private cooperations, very much in line with the wish of DI.⁴²

Research and innovation were also part of Danish industrial policy prior to this period, but the second half of the 1980s certainly saw an intensification of this pattern, and this intensification was legitimized in a language of competitiveness, just as it was the case with the policies in relation to the European single market. In a pamphlet published by the Ministry of Industry and Trade it was stated that "it is the intention with the single market that the competitiveness of European industry shall be strengthened."⁴³

In other words, there was an overlap in the rhetoric of the government and of organized rhetoric, and thus the late 1980s was an important phase for the formation of an elite consensus on these issues, a consensus that in several respects drew on the traditional positions on the business side. Importantly, this was before the Social Democrats aligned with these positions during the 1990s.

Hence, the impetus for this transition did not come from Third Way Social Democrats, but rather from a mixture of European inspiration, government officials, and a strengthened position for the business voice. So, if this line of thought is identified as neoliberalism, it is important to note that the rhetoric was not rooted in neoliberal theory. It was rather rooted in a mixture of business interests and an idea about securing the economic foundation of the existing society with a certain pro-business formula of how to do that, and with competitiveness as a key concept.

Full Policy Integration in the Competition State

In the 1990s, DI carried on viewing internationalization and free trade crucial for both Danish businesses and for the Danish economy as a whole: "The purpose of DI's trade policy is to ensure the access of Danish industry to foreign markets and effectively remove barriers to trade. The backbone of the Danish economy is export-oriented industry. Therefore, DI is a proponent of free trade."⁴⁴ As the Danish market due to its size offered limited growth opportunities for Danish companies, access to foreign markets was of great importance. DI's agenda was therefore in favour of policies that aimed at eliminating or reducing barriers to trade, like tariffs and other regulatory barriers.⁴⁵ The communication of the organization was generally dressed up in a rhetoric of competition, and they stated that more international competition would also push the politicians and the Danish government into a situation of competition, namely the competition between countries of who would be most competitive. This was, for instance, stated in *Vejen til et konkurrencedygtigt Danmark* [The Road to a Competitive Denmark] from 1991: "It is not only the companies that are subject to international competition. Politicians are as well. Danish politicians must compete with politicians of other countries in creating a business climate which can retain and attract businesses and qualified labour. The Danish business climate does not have to be just as good as in other places in the EC. It must be better if we are to attract new activity."⁴⁶

DI also stated that increased competition led to a need of more harmonization of international standards and a need for developing new ones in areas where such did not yet exist. Thus, DI called for further international standards in areas such as property rights, patents, trademarks, and design protection.⁴⁷ Furthermore, DI demanded that EU regulations for public procurement procedures needed to be implemented homogenously to create more efficient markets,⁴⁸ and they were critical of the slow pace of harmonisation processes in the EU: "It has been a problem, that the European standardisation-organisations have lacked the required capacity to implement the necessary standards."⁴⁹ In line with this push for standardisation, DI was also critical of Denmark's opt-outs to parts of the regulations stipulated in the Maastricht treaty as it gave uncertainty about the country's position in the EU.⁵⁰

However, there were also areas where DI resisted state interference along more classical lines, especially in relation to questions of competition law and labour market policies. The politics of competition law is of particular interest since it exemplifies that the voice of business could also easily be against market principles if those went against the economic interests of most of the members, or in other words, that the ideology of the organization was a rather pragmatic and flexible kind of neoliberalism.

Since the interwar period, Danish competition law was in the liberal end of the spectrum in an international comparison. Since the 1930s, Danish competition law had been governed with the so-called control

principle, which stated that any kind of competition-limiting agreement was legal if it was not explicitly forbidden by the authorities.⁵¹ Thus, in practice, companies could agree on prices if this was not deemed harming to the economy by the government. This principle was not left in the 1970s or the 1980s, normally identified as the breakthrough period for market ideology, on the contrary, there was consensus on the existing system which in many sectors limited competition significantly. Thus, the changing of the system in the following years was not due to internal Danish pressure, but to international pressure, as most other countries in this period adopted the so-called prohibition principle, which was based on the maxim that competition-limiting agreements should be prohibited unless something else is explicitly stated by the authorities. This pressure to revise competition law had been building since the 1980s when the Danish government set up a commission to write a report on the issue. Although the work of the commission led to a revision in 1989-90, the control principle was still upheld as the governing principle, and thus the policy tradition was not changed.⁵² However, international pressure continued to grow during the early 1990s, primarily because the control principle was at odds with EU law. Furthermore, the OECD published a report that was critical of the Danish system.⁵³ In response to this pressure, the Danish government set up a new so-called “competition law commission” in 1993, which after many deliberations published a report in 1995 that advocated for a law based on a combination of the two principles.⁵⁴

It goes beyond the scope of this article to sketch the process that resulted in a new competition law in 1998, which fully substituted the control principle for the prohibition principle. What is interesting here, is that several business interest organizations – particularly those representing large corporations – were fiercely against the new principle.⁵⁵ This was also the case for DI, who favoured the compromise suggested by the commission.⁵⁶ In practice, many member firms feared they would suffer losses. DI therefore attempted to put pressure on the Danish parliament by stating that: “DI finds it disappointing that there has not yet materialized political support for either the continuation of the current competition law or for the enactment of the outline for a competition law drafted by the competition law commission...”⁵⁷ However, as support for the new system grew, DI finally came along; but their initial position was that of opposition, based on a pure interest in less regulation, and certainly not a principled defence of the market principle.

The policy areas of education and research also gained further importance in the agendas of Danish business interest organizations during the 1990s, and in the middle of the decade, DI published two pamphlets addressing the challenges connected to the rise of the knowledge society, one dealing with the education system, the other with R&D.⁵⁸ These publications show that the discourse of “the knowledge society” clearly influenced the organization’s view on not only education and R&D, but also on how

competitiveness was to be defined. In regard to education, DI outlined a far-reaching agenda which advocated for more testing of school children and students, better quality assurance systems, a greater focus on math and sciences, more focus on vocational education and engineering and on getting students to enrol in these subjects.⁵⁹ In the area of research and development, the focus was on more resources to R&D, improving the ability to use new scientific knowledge in development of new industrial products, improving the transfer of knowledge between different sectors of society as well as a general improvement of the ability to generate new knowledge.⁶⁰

One of the interesting tendencies in these publications is that a more diverse range of policy areas were perceived as interconnected and crucial for the overall purpose of competitiveness: “Many policy areas have influence on the conditions which are to make research, development, and production more attractive in Denmark. This is for example the case for research-, technology-, business-, telecommunication-, education-, labour market – and tax policy.”⁶¹ Again, an almost similar language is found in governmental programs, testifying to the idea that a consensus on such positions emerged in this heyday for the competition state.⁶²

Competing Conceptions of Competitiveness

The rise of the idea of the knowledge society also led to diverging notions of competitiveness among different business interest organizations, and it was a clear pattern that different conceptions of competitiveness were linked to different business interests. For instance, at the dawn of the new millennium, an interest organization for companies in service and commerce, published *Danmark til serviceeftersyn – nye vilkår i videnøkonomien*, in which the organization argued that a conceptual revision of competitiveness was needed due to the overall social transition from an industrial society to a knowledge society: “... our industrial/commercial development and the competitive conditions of society are still based on concepts established in the industrial production economy. These concepts are quite ill-suited for a society based on a global knowledge economy, on which international competitiveness must be measured.”⁶³ The organization argued that the knowledge and service sectors had become the most important parts of the economy and therefore the country had to move away from industrial policies aimed at improving conditions for manufacturing and instead prioritize the knowledge and service sectors. For that purpose, they presented a catalogue of 101 policies aimed at implementing this transition. It goes beyond the scope of this article to go into detail about these policies, but it must be mentioned that they covered a very broad range of topics such as internationalization, public-private cooperation, outsourcing,

creating a skilled workforce, knowledge and qualifications development, the tax system, the capital market etc.⁶⁴ It was basically about transferring the rhetoric from one part of the economy to another.

While DI acknowledged the rise of the knowledge society and its impact on the Danish economy,⁶⁵ they maintained that the economic foundation of the knowledge society still rested on manufacturing industry, and this should be reflected in industrial policy. In *Industrien og velfærdssamfundet* [The Industry and the Welfare Society] from 1996, DI argued: "The majority of the private service sector does not make its living by providing services for consumption or export. The commercial sector and most of the transport sector makes its living by distributing industrial- and agricultural goods."⁶⁶ Therefore, the question of national competitiveness should still be based on manufacturing industry: "The more competitive and expanding the manufacturing sector becomes, the better the opportunities to also increase the consumption of both goods and services will be."⁶⁷

In the early 2000s, the Danish debate on industrial policy continued to build on these trends from the 1990s, while they also intensified. Thus, knowledge, innovation, and growth as well as the links between these phenomena and their importance for competitiveness continued to be a central theme in the rhetoric of the industrialists. This focus was supported by major policy initiatives on both the national and the international level, with the concept of competitiveness even more central than before. On the international level, for instance, the EU set forth the Lisbon strategy in 2000 which aimed at making the EU "the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion" by 2010,⁶⁸ thereby signalling the need for further investments in research and innovation to heighten European competitiveness. This resulted in the Barcelona-objectives which stipulated that each member state should spend 3% of GDP on research and development by 2010.⁶⁹ In Denmark, this led, among many other initiatives, to the establishment of a globalization council which advised the government on what the country should do to become a leading growth, knowledge, and entrepreneurial society, again with competitiveness as a guiding concept.⁷⁰

Given this over-all consensus on the primacy of competitiveness, the 2000s also saw a widening of the differences in between the different business interest organizations. For instance, the predecessor organization to The Danish Chamber of Commerce (DE) was very dissatisfied with the structure of the existing research and innovation policies, because the organization believed they operated on a notion of innovation that was too narrowly focused on innovation revolving around universities and technology, while user-driven innovation was neglected, although research indicated that the latter was of more importance for the Danish economy.⁷¹ This meant that resources were not, in their view, allocated the

most efficient way, as only 11% of research funds were targeted towards businesses in the service industry.⁷² Furthermore, they argued that innovation, and especially user-driven innovation, did not only occur in research departments, but along all parts of the value chains of rapidly internationalizing companies.⁷³ Their critique of the existing innovation policies seems to imply a more sweeping critique of how the Danish policy elite imagined the foundation of a globally competitive Danish economy, as the latter seemed to focus too much on academic knowledge creation and too little on furthering innovation in the companies themselves.⁷⁴

Entrepreneurship was another topic which gained tailwind in the 2000s. Entrepreneurship was not a new theme in Danish politics, as “iværksætter” had been a topic of government initiatives since the late 1980s, but the importance of this field grew significantly during the 2000s, and again the business interest organisations were among the drivers. The argument was: “It is they [the entrepreneurs], who start the economic development and create dynamism and change in our society. We need to constantly develop and better our society, if we are to keep up with global competition.”⁷⁵ With the continued intensification of global competition during this period, it followed almost naturally that a more active policy approach towards entrepreneurship was needed if the Danish economy was to be competitive. The approach that business interest organisations took towards entrepreneurship policy were rooted in two goals. The first was of a broad and cultural nature, as both DI and DE wished to bring about a cultural change in the labour market in which the wage-earner culture should be substituted with a more entrepreneurship-oriented culture. This was to be achieved via educational reforms which introduced entrepreneurship in all branches of the education system.⁷⁶ The other goal was to further the number of so-called growth entrepreneurs (“vækstiværksættere”) who were defined as growth-oriented start-up companies that met certain targets. Thus, the concept of entrepreneurship became more closely linked to the language of competitiveness than in previous decades.

A further theme that was of increasing importance to the business interest organization in the 2000s was reforms of the public sector. In particular, they talked about the need of increasing the efficiency and the quality of services in the public sector.⁷⁷ This agenda was especially strong after 2006 when the liberal Prime Minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen established a committee with the task of drafting a strategy for increased quality in the public sector.⁷⁸ Again, the overlaps between the wishes of the business interest organizations and the rhetoric of the government are noteworthy, as there was close collaboration between government and organized business. DE was particularly active in this field, and they also published a series of pamphlets on the topic. One of the central tenets of their agenda was to make users of public service a primary concern for the public sector:

Increasing quality without increasing expenditures demands innovative thinking. The key is innovation which takes its point of departure in the individual user. Quality begins with the user, be it citizens or businesses. If the quality of public sector welfare is to be increased significantly, it is required, that one [the public sector] is much more open to user-driven innovation.⁷⁹

According to DE, the way to make users the centre of public sector activities was to give them more free choice when using public services, thereby creating a more competitive and fair market for public services.⁸⁰ This idea of introducing market mechanisms into the public sector was certainly not new, but DE called for a very comprehensive approach in which “the public sector takes its point of departure in the reality of the individual and not in the system logic of the public sector.”⁸¹ What DE was calling for was that the public sector should adopt a private sector mindset of putting the customer experience at the centre. This widening of user-choice raised the need to create more competition in the market for public services, and DE therefore called for introduction and expansion of competitive outsourcing mechanisms in public service areas such as education, childcare, accounting, and healthcare.⁸² Furthermore, DE called for a fairer outsourcing process that standardised accounting methods across the public as well as the private sector in order to heighten price comparability, and for the creation of new rules that eliminated the hitherto existing possibility that public sector institutions could take on double-roles as ordering party, service provider and supervisor in the outsourcing processes.⁸³ Lastly, DE called for the creation of a more comprehensive quality assurance system in the public sector based on clearer quality objectives, better measuring tools, and better follow-ups, in order to provide information on the basis of which users could make more informed choices and on which politicians and public servants could manage the public sector in a more efficient way.⁸⁴

This all demonstrates that Danish business interest organisations during the 2000s became even more adamant proponents of a distinctly neoliberal approach to the public sector, as ideas about customer choices, competition, and market mechanisms were seen as ideal principles – but again, it is noteworthy that this agenda was pushed by an organization representing companies that would benefit from new markets in these fields. In other words, during the 2000s, the business interest organizations began to advocate more overtly for policies that incorporated neoliberal thinking, but overall, the agenda and rhetoric of the organizations continued to build on the basis developed in the late 1980s. The state and other international governmental bodies were still viewed as crucial to promotion of competitiveness, and there was a gradual expansion and intensification which makes the 2000s a zenith or climax for the rhetoric of competitiveness.

The Late Arrival of the Green Dimension

If “the long 1990s”, the period from the late 1980s until the Financial Crisis of the late 2000s, is identified as a period of high globalization in which the concept of competitiveness was increasingly linked to expansion of free trade, knowledge creation, market mechanisms, and an active governmental approach to industrial policy making, then what happened to this trend and language after the Financial Crisis?

The financial crisis of course affected Danish businesses, and DI’s agenda for navigating the aftermath was outlined in its 2020- and 2025-plans, published in 2012 and 2015.⁸⁵ The 2020-plan began with the observation that the Danish economy faced many challenges. Some of these challenges were that the expenditures of the businesses had risen more than those of their foreign competitors, thereby hurting their competitiveness in international markets, that the public sector had grown too much in order for the private sector to finance it sustainably, and that foreign investment into Denmark was growing at much slower pace than Danish investments abroad.⁸⁶ To counter these challenges, the 2020-plan identified five goals that were to be achieved through policies. The policies were: 1) a more competitive level of expenditure for the Danish business sector, achieved through lowering of taxes and levies; 2) a better balance of public sector finances by creating a smaller and more efficient public sector; 3) promotion of a more highly skilled workforce; 4) heightening of productivity and innovation in Danish companies; and 5) increased foreign investments, both in and out of the country. These goals and the proposed solutions, which focused on taxation, education, innovation, and labour market policy,⁸⁷ clearly echoed the rhetoric of competitiveness that had developed since the 1980s.

When the 2025-plan was published in 2015, the Danish economy had for the most parts overcome the effects of the financial crisis, and DI observed that due to a number of reforms since the publication of the 2020-plan, Danish businesses were now better equipped to remain competitive in international markets than before the financial crisis.⁸⁸ More specifically, DI pointed to several growth policies passed in 2013 and 2014⁸⁹ and to a tax reform adopted in 2012.⁹⁰ DI furthermore found that progress had been made towards most of the goals identified in the 2020-plan, stating that the most pressing issue remaining was how to provide business access to high-skilled labour.⁹¹ In other words, the financial crisis had no significant impact on the rhetoric of organized business.

There were, however, also new features indicating that the 2010s at other levels marks the beginning a shift in the understanding of the competitiveness, especially during the second half of the decade. As mentioned, the 2025-plan aimed towards achieving the same overall goals as the 2020-plan and can therefore be viewed as a continuation of the same agenda. It was, however, much more ambitious regarding sustainability and natural resources than its predecessor.⁹² This transformation can be observed

in DI's 2030-plan which exists in two versions, published in 2019 and 2020.⁹³ Thus, the 2030-plan had a much more ambitious green agenda than its predecessors: "DI's 2030-plan has a particular focus on the green transition, as climate change is one of the largest challenges that the world faces [...] If we cannot manage to lower future emissions of greenhouse gasses significantly, the consequences will be immeasurable."⁹⁴ The plan identified the climate crisis as the most severe crisis facing the world, and the incorporation of radical environmental policies was therefore no longer regarded as an option, but as an imperative.⁹⁵ The environmental issue had been on the rise since the 1970s, both in both the political agendas of organized business⁹⁶ and in the political sphere, which enacted Denmark's first comprehensive environmental protection act in 1973.⁹⁷ However, the rhetoric of organized business remained for a long time that environmentalism and competitiveness were opposites, and DI typically warned against taking the lead on environmental issues. In 1983, they stated: "The consequence will be, that Denmark enacts initiatives in isolation, which will harm competitiveness and employment of Danish companies."⁹⁸ This scepticism to a large extent disappeared in the 2010s. Although DI's 2030-plan acknowledged that the green transition would be expensive,⁹⁹ there was no longer a fundamental conflict between environmentalism and competitiveness, on the contrary, green policies were now identified as crucial to competitiveness and growth:

Denmark and Danish businesses are already well underway [with the development of green solutions]. Vi reduce the emission of greenhouse gasses at home and export renewable energy and energy efficient solutions to the entire world, which creates growth and jobs in the entire country. The Paris Accords only enhances demand for these solutions. Climate politics is therefore also industrial and growth politics – and vice versa.¹⁰⁰

Because Danish businesses were highly competitive in the market for climate friendly products, the green agenda was no longer perceived as a challenge for the Danish business sector, but as an opportunity. While the idea that Danish businesses could profit from selling green goods and services was not new, it became more central during the 2010s, as the perceived importance of this idea for the competitiveness of the Danish business sector grew. It is therefore not surprising that large Danish companies with interests in energy production and energy efficiency were among the proponents of this agenda, as they were in this period developing ambitious new strategies for these markets. Dong Energy/Ørsted, Vestas, Grundfos, Danfoss, Velux, and Siemens Denmark were some of the very active promoters of the rhetoric of the green agenda in the public debate.¹⁰¹

However, while the green or environmental agenda marks a new dimension in the political agenda of the business interest organizations in the latter half of the 2010s, it is important that the defining features of

the programs of the previous phases did not disappear with this change, as the central features of competitiveness and a focus on the importance of government support through various policy areas remained prominent in the plans.¹⁰² The continued support for the EU and regulated free market trade was explicitly highlighted in the 2030-plan, as DI observed that recent US trade policy along with other events such as Brexit and the corona health crisis had weakened support for these neoliberal principles.¹⁰³ The green agenda, therefore, did not replace existing ideas relating to the understanding of what constituted competitiveness, but instead layered itself on top of them. The green dimension should therefore not be interpreted as a radical break with neither the concept of competitiveness itself, nor with previous notions of competitiveness, but as a new influence on the understanding of competitiveness and its associated concepts. In other words, while the 2010s were characterized by the most wide-ranging transformation of capitalist rhetoric since the 1980s, this did not lessen the support of Danish business interest organizations for the existing ideas associated with competitiveness and the logic of competition.

Conclusions

In retrospect, we can conclude that the concept of competitiveness has been a key concept in the rhetoric of Danish business interest organizations in the whole period since the late 1970s, and that organized business played an important role in the breakthrough of this concept and related policies from the mid-1980s. At the same time, it also emerges as a conclusion that there have been substantial changes in this rhetoric of competitiveness. Gradual changes can be detected for the entire period, and more profound discontinuities were, first, the integration of a call for a more powerful state in the 1980s, not least in relation to investments in research, innovation, and education, and second, the turn towards the green transition in the 2010s. In both cases, the changes tightly followed discursive changes in the surrounding society, just as they can be interpreted as aligned with business interests of specific companies who would benefit from these developments. The analysis also shows that the conceptual morphology of the discourse changed considerably over time and that it easily adopted new concepts from the contemporary political debate. While the 1980s saw concepts such as research and innovation moving into the core of the rhetoric, later periods led to other restructurings that were closely related to contemporary topics. Reflections on the knowledge society in the 1990s and the interest in reform of public sector services in the 2000s are just two examples.

Thus, in a bigger picture it seems fair to conclude that the voice of business was an important factor in the wider introduction of neoliberal ideas in Denmark. The business interest organizations certainly supported policies that are commonly understood as important elements of this turn, and they were also important

actors in the construction of an elite consensus around many of these positions as they supported and promoted the language of competitiveness before this consensus was fully achieved across the left/right divide in the early 1990s. Their rhetoric was not, however, developed as a coherent ideology, and there were no clear connections to the international circles typically identified with neoliberalism. On the contrary, their ideas and agendas were born out of practical concerns about growth and prosperity, and the direct interests of their members, which helps to explain why organizations for companies in different sectors developed different notions of competitiveness. The rhetoric of organized business constituted a rather flexible version of neoliberalism that could easily change and adopt to business interests. Such observations recall the observation that neoliberalism in continental Europe might have taken a different route than in the Anglophone world. The German historian Paul Nolte has, for instance, stated that “the German version of neoliberalism may be described as “soft,” “governmental,” and “ecological” (or, “sustainable”).”¹⁰⁴ Aside from the important difference that the green dimension had a late arrival in Denmark, something similar might be stated about that form of neoliberalism which is found in the rhetoric of Danish business interest organizations from the 1980s until to the 2010s.

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¹ E. g. Inset, *Markedsvendingen*, for Norway, and Kolstrup, *Forandringens årti*, for Denmark.

² For a recent interpretation along those lines see Gerstle, *The Rise and Fall*. For an early contribution see Harvey, *A Brief History*, 4-6. For a brief overview of neoliberalism research see Rodgers, "The Uses and Abuses."

³ Some recent key contributions are Biebricher, *The Political Theory of Neoliberalism*; Burgin, *The Great Persuasion*; Mirowski & Plehwe, *The Road from Mont Pélerin*; and Slobodian, *Globalists*.

⁴ Peck & Tickell, *Neoliberalizing Space*.

⁵ E. g. Kärrylä, "The Young Finns Party;" Køber, "Henning Fonsmark;" Olsen, "Velfærdsstatens krise;" Olsen, "Jørn Henrik Petersen;" Rudberg, "Doing Business in the Schools."

⁶ E. g. Phillips-Fein, "Business Conservatives."

⁷ Westerberg, *Socialists at the Gate*.

⁸ Olsen, "A Second-Hand Dealer."

⁹ Gane, "Competition."

¹⁰ Davies, *The Limits of Neoliberalism*, 41.

¹¹ Davies, *The Limits of Neoliberalism*, 63-69.

¹² Koselleck, *Vergangene Zukunft*, 107-129.

¹³ Freedon, *Ideologies and Political Theory*.

¹⁴ Kettunen, "The Nordic Model and the Making of the Competitive Us;" Kettunen, "The Nordic Model and Consensual Competitiveness;" Kettunen, "The transnational construction."

¹⁵ Pedersen, *Konkurrencestaten*, 13-15, 59-60, 71.

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- ¹⁶ E. g. Villaume, *Gyldendal og Politikens Danmarkshistorie*, 32.
- ¹⁷ Petersen, Petersen & Christiansen, *Dansk velfærdshistorie*.
- ¹⁸ Olsen, "Velfærdsstatens krise."
- ¹⁹ Villaume, *Gyldendal og Politikens Danmarkshistorie*, 306.
- ²⁰ Industrirådet, *Fra nul-vækst*.
- ²¹ Westerberg, *Socialists at the Gate*.
- ²² Nevers, "Capitalism in Times of Crisis." For the post-war period see Larsen, *Produktivitet, vækst og velfærd*.
- ²³ Industrirådet, *Fra nul-vækst*, 3-4.
- ²⁴ Industrirådet, *Fra nul-vækst*, 19-20.
- ²⁵ Industrirådet, *Fra nul-vækst*, 26-31.
- ²⁶ Industrirådet, *Vilje til vækst*.
- ²⁷ Industrirådet, *Vilje til vækst*, 5, 9.
- ²⁸ Industrirådet, *Vilje til vækst*, 37.
- ²⁹ Industrirådet, *Vilje til vækst*, 21-24.
- ³⁰ Industrirådet, *Vilje til vækst*, 17-27.
- ³¹ Christiansen & Sidenius, "Forsknings- og teknologipolitik i Danmark."
- ³² Guzzetti, "High Technology."
- ³³ Guzzetti, "High Technology," 83.
- ³⁴ E. g. Kjærgaard, "Forskningen og Dansk Industri."
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- ³⁷ Industrirådet, *Over alle grænser*.
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- ³⁹ Industrirådet, *Vilje til vækst*, 24-27.
- ⁴⁰ Industrirådet, *Industrien og EF*, 8, 26.
- ⁴¹ E. g. Industrirådet, *Industrien og EF*, 22.
- ⁴² Nevers, "Fra fabrikker til innovationsklynger."
- ⁴³ Industriministeriet, *Danmark i Det indre marked*, 13.
- ⁴⁴ E. g. Bundgaard and Frederiksen, *Verdenshandel uden hindringer*, 31.
- ⁴⁵ Bundgaard and Frederiksen, *Verdenshandel uden hindringer*, 31.
- ⁴⁶ Industrirådet, *Vejen til et konkurrencedygtigt*, 2.
- ⁴⁷ Dansk Industri, *Danmarks EF-formandskab*, 32.
- ⁴⁸ Dansk Industri, *Industriens ønsker*, 15.
- ⁴⁹ Dansk Industri, *Danmarks EF-formandskab*, 6.
- ⁵⁰ Dansk Industri, *Industriens Internationale Udfordring*, 6.
- ⁵¹ Boje and Kallestrup, *Marked, erhvervsliv og stat*, 240.
- ⁵² Boje and Kallestrup, *Marked, erhvervsliv og stat*, 231-237.
- ⁵³ OECD, *OECD Economic Surveys*, 90-96.
- ⁵⁴ Boje and Kallestrup, *Marked, erhvervsliv og stat*, 240-246. See also: Konkurrencelovsudvalget, "Konkurrenceloven i Danmark."
- ⁵⁵ Boje and Kallestrup, *Marked, erhvervsliv og stat*, 246-248.
- ⁵⁶ Dansk Industri, *Industriens politiske anbefalinger*, 24.
- ⁵⁷ Dansk Industri, *Industriens politiske anbefalinger*, 24.
- ⁵⁸ Dansk Industri, *Vidensamfundet*.
- ⁵⁹ Dansk Industri, *Vidensamfundet*, 7-13.
- ⁶⁰ Dansk Industri, *Vidensamfundet II*, 7-9.
- ⁶¹ Dansk Industri, *Vidensamfundet II*, 10.
- ⁶² Nevers, "Fra fabrikker til innovationsklynger."
- ⁶³ Dansk Handel & Service, *Danmark til serviceeftersyn*, 3.
- ⁶⁴ Dansk Handel & Service, *Danmark til serviceeftersyn*, 12-13.
- ⁶⁵ Dansk Industri, *Industrien og velfærdssamfundet*, 14.
- ⁶⁶ Dansk Industri, *Industrien og velfærdssamfundet*, 19.

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- ⁷⁰ Regeringen, *Fremgang, fornyelse og tryghed*, 5.
- ⁷¹ Dansk Handel & Service, *Viden og vækst*, 7-8.
- ⁷² Dansk Handel & Service, *Viden og vækst*, 5, 27.
- ⁷³ Dansk Handel & Service, *Viden og vækst*, 5. Similar points were presented in: Dansk Handel og Service, *Forsknings i verdensklasse*.
- ⁷⁴ Faye and Pedersen, "Videnssamfundets dilemmaer," 11-32.
- ⁷⁵ Dansk Industri, *Danmark skal sprudle*, 1.
- ⁷⁶ Dansk Industri, *Iværksættere i vækst*, 5-9; Dansk Handel & Service, *Vejen til vækst*, 16.
- ⁷⁷ Dansk Industri, *Danmark i vækst*, 100-108; Dansk Industri, *Kvalitet til tiden*; Dansk Erhverv, *Effektiv Velfærd*; Dansk Erhverv, *Helstøbt Velfærd*; Dansk Erhverv, *Synlig Velfærd*; Dansk Erhverv, *Brugerdreven velfærd*.
- ⁷⁸ Regeringen, *På vej mod en kvalitetsreform*, 25.
- ⁷⁹ Dansk Erhverv, *Brugerdreven velfærd*, 4.
- ⁸⁰ Dansk Erhverv, *Brugerdreven velfærd*, 12-15.
- ⁸¹ Dansk Erhverv, *Helstøbt velfærd*, 3.
- ⁸² Dansk Erhverv, *Brugerdreven velfærd*, 19.
- ⁸³ Dansk Erhverv, *Brugerdreven velfærd*, 14.
- ⁸⁴ Dansk Erhverv, *Synlig velfærd*.
- ⁸⁵ Dansk Industri, *En 2020-plan med ambitioner*; Dansk Industri, *DI's 2025-plan*.
- ⁸⁶ Dansk Industri, *En 2020-plan med ambitioner*, 1.
- ⁸⁷ Dansk Industri, *En 2020-plan med ambitioner*, 60-61.
- ⁸⁸ Dansk Industri, *DI's 2025-plan*, 1.
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- ⁹⁰ Skatteministeriet, "Aftale om skattereform."
- ⁹¹ Dansk Industri, *DI's 2025-plan*, 6-7.
- ⁹² Dansk Industri, *DI's 2025-plan*, 76-78.
- ⁹³ Dansk Industri, *DI's 2030-plan*; Dansk Industri, *Danmark tilbage til fremtiden*.
- ⁹⁴ Dansk Industri, *DI's 2030-plan*, 6.
- ⁹⁵ Dansk Industri, *Danmark tilbage til fremtiden*, 20.
- ⁹⁶ Industrirådet, *Sæt pris på miljøet*.
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- ⁹⁸ Industrirådet, *Vilje til vækst*, 20.
- ⁹⁹ Dansk Industri, *DI's 2030-plan*, 6-7.
- ¹⁰⁰ Dansk Industri, *DI's 2030-plan*, 1.
- ¹⁰¹ See for example Poulsen et. al: "Danmarks grønnes succes skal fortsætte," *Jyllands-Posten*, April 10, 2018, signed by Henrik Poulsen (CEO, Dong Energy), Anders Runevad (CEO, Vestas Wind Systems), Jukka Pertola (CEO, Siemens Danmark), Jørgen Tang-Jensen (CEO, Velux), and Jesper Hjulmand (CEO, Seas-NVE), "Vi er et succesfuldt foregangsland," *Børsen*, March 3, 2015; Tine Roed (DI), Kim Faussing (CEO, Danfoss), Mads Nipper (CEO, Grundfos), Claus Møller (direktør, Siemens), Michael Simmelsgaard (landechef, Vattenfall), Peter Bang (Group Executive Director, Velux), Morten Dyrholm (Direktør for marketing, kommunikation og public affairs, Vestas), Jens Birgeron (CEO, ROCKWOOL), and Preben Sunke (CFO, Danish Crown).
- ¹⁰² The central role played by the notion of competitiveness, is particularly prominent in chapter 6 with the title: "We must be able to compete." Dansk Industri, *Danmark tilbage til fremtiden*, 88-111.
- ¹⁰³ Dansk Industri, *Danmark tilbage til fremtiden*, 32.
- ¹⁰⁴ Nolte, "A Different Sort," 11.