Exporting Nordic Parliamentary Oversight to the European Union

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In 1986 Jacques Delors, the then President of the European Commission said that “the EEC [European Economic Community] has 13 members, the 12 Member States and the Danish EEC Committee” (Damgaard and Jensen 2005, 401). Compromises reached after lengthy negotiations within the European Council had to be first given approval by the Folketing’s European Affairs Committee (Europaudvalget, then called Markedsudvalget) in order for Danish ministers to be authorized to sign a decision. A widely held opinion among politicians at the time was that the Danish parliamentary control was a hindrance to the cabinet ministers, who must find support and receive a binding mandate before the negotiations in the Council. This made the parliament of Denmark an impediment to further European integration because of the control and veto power over its government.

However, by the beginning of the 2000s the Danish parliament was regarded not as an obstacle to European integration, but as its solution. The strong involvement of national parliaments, and the beginning of more transparent negotiations within the formerly secretive Council, was one of the recommendations to resolve the democratic deficit of the European Union (EU). Variations of a ‘Nordic model’ of parliamentary oversight that the Danish parliament promoted were welcomed by a majority of the new member states of 2004. Metaphorically speaking, the ugly duckling had turned into the white swan of the European ballet.

The puzzle in this chapter is to account for how this transformation came about. We shall see that the Danish parliament spent considerable effort trying to influence how other parliaments organized their EU oversight. Although national parliaments operating in international organizations are expected to share experiences, the Danish parliament went beyond that: Through its standing committee on EU affairs it waged an active campaign. Financial and human resources were invested and specific strategies elaborated to persuade countries of the benefits of a so-called Nordic model of EU scrutiny.

The Danish parliament constructed a Nordic model of a European Affairs Committee that supervises its national government. The three Nordic EU member states had stressed that EU policies are matters for the entire
parliament to consider. Both Finland and Sweden had an eye on the Danish model, but despite their similarities in parliamentary structures and party-systems, developed their own models (Ahlbäck and Jungar 2009; Raunio and Wiberg 1997). The Danish or ‘Nordic’ model stressed a specific way of democratic inclusion, involvement, and access to information: “Sweden, Finland and Denmark all give high priority to openness in the decision making process. Openness enables the public including the media to follow EU-affairs” (Eduskunta, Folketinget, and Sveriges Riksdag 2002, 14).

The process of European integration transfers legislative power from national parliaments to the EU and from national parliaments to the executives. Popular assemblies that have been democratically elected are often bypassed in EU decision making. The current European financial and budget crises is believed to have strengthened the trend of de-parliamentarization as financial and budgetary policies have increasingly come under the influence of actors within the EU legal framework and other international organizations (Benz 2012; Auel and Höing 2014). The national parliaments have not been equally involved in the EU crisis management: Institutionally strong national parliaments were able to assert or strengthen their position, whereas the weaker national parliaments remained marginalized (Auel and Höing 2014, 13). Hence, the organization of national parliaments is vital for the democratic influence and control of EU-policy making, and particularly so when the EU institutions develop and assume new competencies beyond the EU legal framework. This has been the case in the post-2008 EU development.

In examining policy activism in supranational and transnational settings we first consider theories of policy entrepreneurship. The Danish parliament spread their norms and model although its control of European affairs had previously been conceived of as a problem.

Strong National Parliaments as a Solution to the EU Democratic Deficit

National parliaments have delegated power to the EU, enabling the Union to pass decisions that are binding for the member states. Since governments negotiate and decide policies within the Council of Ministers or the European Council representing the member states, all parliaments of member states have developed oversight procedures for influencing and controlling the government activities in the EU (Maurer and Wessels 2001; Norton 1996). The role of national parliaments in the overall EU policy making gained momentum in debates in the late 1990s. In the Laeken Declaration of 2000 that listed the