

## TITLE:

Politicians should treat the climate crisis as seriously as Covid-19

## SUBTITLE:

The Covid-19 pandemic has shown that Danish politicians have the tools to deal effectively with a crisis posing great risks for its citizens. Simultaneously, the same politicians treat the climate crisis as if its risks are far less significant. Denmark's people are entitled to know why. Therefore, we ask the government to explain why it hesitates to use all of the means available to limit the crisis of climate change.

## BODY:

In May 2018, 301 researchers made a public call for more ambitious goals and accelerated action concerning climate policies. Since then, a historic drought over the summer of 2018 and a subsequent activist pressure from students and climate demonstrations led to an almost unanimous parliament decision and passing of a climate law with the goal of a 70% reduction in emissions in 2030 relative to 1990. There is still no clear plan by the current government for the means to achieve these goals, although the Danish "Climate Citizens' Parliament", many companies and a growing number of civil society initiatives want faster and more effective action.

We have been set back in the fight against climate change and we need accelerated action. Here, the Covid-19 crisis has provided insight into what is politically possible and feasible in a wicked situation where Denmark's population is exposed to great risks and dangers, and where there are many unknown factors.

The extensive Danish intervention in society in response to Covid-19 was a conscious political decision that explicitly took a position on the risks that had been communicated by the WHO and experts nationally and internationally. On March 14, 2020, the Prime Minister's Head of Department, Per Okkels, instructed Søren Brostrøm, director of the National Board of Health, how to frame his assessment of options for action: "Before you respond, you must leave the responsibility for proportionality in recognition of an extreme precautionary principle."

Of course, this has given rise to a range of dilemmas and tough discussions about which perspectives to prioritize and which to set aside for the benefit of acting on the health risks caused by Covid-19. Despite differences in dealing with a pandemic, we have learned something very basic about dealing with global risks: It is now clear that Danish politicians can take far-reaching measures based on a precautionary principle, and put other considerations, including business and employment, in the backseat if necessary to avoid irreparable damage.

On the surface, Danish decision-makers seem to have responded to the climate challenge with the Climate Act's goal of a 70% reduction in emissions by 2030. But the political reactions to two key issues give cause for concern. What should we expect from new technologies to achieve the climate goals? Furthermore, how much should GDP growth be prioritized in relation to long-term environmental and climate considerations?

Addressing the Danish Chamber of Commerce on September 13, 2020, Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen stated that the fulfillment of the Climate Act “can only be done if we dare to believe that technology helps to find the answers for us. If we do not do that, it will only be higher taxes. And that is not the answer. That is not the answer today, and it is not the answer in five years or ten years' time.” Although the statement was addressed to a specific group of stakeholders, it is a significant message about the government's future plans. Taxes are considered harmful by the government for the international competitiveness of Danish companies, which in turn is considered important for Danish economic growth. The Prime Minister's statement also reflects a broader approach to how research and technology are expected to achieve the majority of reductions just before 2030, where the 70% target must be reached. This is what the government has called the “hockey stick-shaped” line of development.

However, the ‘hockey stick’ for reductions is in direct conflict with recommendations from the Danish Climate Council and the UNFCCC. They prioritize rapid reductions now, in order to save the world from our extremely dangerous situation, where we are heading for 3-4 degrees of global warming and risk triggering so-called tipping points, which can lead to even higher and irreversible warming. In addition, there is the more practical argument that if we in Denmark are to reach 70% in 2030, then we must get started now. It is urgent to create transparency and security for citizens and businesses about the future framework and conditions and to give the political initiatives time to have an effect.

When Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen rejects taxes as a way forward, it is an expression of maintaining the position that a narrow focus on economic growth and Danish companies' international competitiveness has higher priority than steering Denmark and the world away from a potentially devastating climate catastrophe. It is also an implicit expression of a worldview, in which competition between countries will continue to prevail over global cooperation; the latter is considered the only possible way away from the climate catastrophe.

The researchers' call from 2018 stated that “the consideration of economic growth must now clearly [be] subordinated to considerations of sustainability, health, pollution and climate.” In a 2020 interdisciplinary report, the Scientific Advisory Council of the European Academies (EASAC) has proposed a shift away from the “pattern of GDP growth, production and consumption” that “creates the risk of irreversible damage” to both ecosystems and societies.

The Covid-19 crisis showed that when it comes to national public health, considerations of economic growth and competitiveness can be temporarily put on hold or even set aside. Thus, Denmark chose a strategy that was different from, e.g., Sweden and the United Kingdom, where the Covid-19 restrictions in the spring of 2020 were adapted to a higher degree to alleviate risks of economic losses. The Danish strategy was effective in that there have so far been clear differences in the numbers of infected and lost life years, with Denmark's numbers at the lower end of European countries.

The Covid-19 shutdown in the spring of 2020 had positive side effects that illustrate the potential benefits from accelerated climate action. Lower particulate pollution was observed in a number of major cities, and several researchers estimate that many thousands of lives were saved by the temporary improvements in air quality. In turn, the Covid-19 shutdown was socially and psychologically challenging for many. Were Danish climate policy to follow a precautionary principle, there would be good opportunities to avoid the negative consequences of following the principle that were seen during the Covid-19 shutdown.

There is an important difference between mitigating Covid-19 and alleviating climate change: We can immediately start with alternatives that will provide societal benefits. We have many tried and tested solutions that can provide reductions here and now. Climate-friendly solutions in areas such as passenger transport and heating will reduce air pollution. Danish researchers have estimated that reducing air pollution alone can save the Danish society between 10 and 20 billion DKK per year. A shift towards the goal of more plant-based agricultural production and a more plant-based diet in Denmark will bring about immediate gains for public health, biodiversity and the aquatic environment, as well as for potentially shaping international norms. Studies indicate that there will be health benefits from lower meat consumption in Denmark. Spending now on a concerted effort is also an investment in the reduction of much larger expenditures in the future that will be needed for last-minute reduction efforts and repairing the devastation associated with escalating climate change.

Some might argue that the number of people infected and killed by Covid-19 makes the pandemic incomparable to the climate crisis. Many politicians have listened carefully to the WHO's recommendations for dealing with Covid-19, while the very WHO's reports of 150,000 annual climate-related deaths over the past 10 years are taken far less seriously. The WHO expects the number to rise to 250,000 deaths a year between 2030 and 2050, while the *Lancet* points out that in 2018 alone, nearly 300,000 people died caused by record-breaking heat waves. In 2013, the UN estimated that almost a quarter of all deaths globally could be attributed to various environmental risks, and health researchers have pointed out that the risk of epidemics such as Covid-19 increases with deforestation and other environmental changes.

Climate scientists have long struggled with arguments that the great uncertainties surrounding our knowledge of climate change constitute a legitimate reason to delay political action. The Covid-19 crisis showed that even with extreme uncertainties about both deaths and infection rates, leaders in Denmark and other countries were ready to react to disease risks. In the field of climate, we have very extensive research across disciplines that unanimously warns of potentially unmanageable consequences of inaction. Similarly, IPCC continuously disseminates important and actionable knowledge to all political levels. Nevertheless, real action evades us. This must end now when we know that the current government is able to act immediately and follow a precautionary principle when it has the political wish to do so.

Were the Prime Minister to follow the precautionary logic of the Covid-19 crisis, the Ministry would demand from all relevant ministries to give the public an honest assessment of the risks and uncertainties of the climate crisis, but also of the many

positive spin-offs for health, nature and the environment that can be achieved by actively mitigating climate change. As under Covid-19, the assessment would be continuously updated with knowledge of the global climate situation - both in terms of threats to ecosystems and lack of international climate action.

We are convinced that such honest and fair communication about the real risks, uncertainties and opportunities for Danish action on the climate crisis will spur even broader popular support for a much faster and more ambitious change process.

Thus, we ask the government to answer the question: Why does it hesitate to use all available tools to avert the enormous risk to the Danish population that the climate crisis poses?