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Helle rides into Brussels

Former Danish prime minister casts a sly eye on the big EU openings next year.

[Ryan Heath](#) - 6/15/18



The EU's de facto capital is preparing to change sets and turn over its top roles to a new cast of characters in 2019.

While many expect the changeover to be a coronation for the chosen candidates of the center-right European People's Party, there are plenty of understudies ready to pounce if voters scatter so widely across Europe's political spectrum that no party is the real winner in the European Parliament election set for May 2019.

Enter Helle Thorning-Schmidt, the former Danish prime minister, Brussels insider and [elite globetrotter](#). As close to Socialist royalty as they come, Thorning-Schmidt's CV is either perfect for an EU presidency post, or annoying as hell, depending on where you stand.

Starting with a degree from the College of Europe in Bruges — a purpose-built EU feeder school where she met her husband Stephen Kinnock, a British MP who's the son of former U.K. Labour leader and European Commission Vice President Neil Kinnock, and formed a posse of close friends who also went on to top jobs in Brussels — Thorning-Schmidt worked at the Commission, advised trade unions and served as a member of the European Parliament. At the age of 38, she broke through a glass ceiling to become the first female leader of the Danish Social Democrats before becoming prime minister from 2011-15.

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Even defeat looks good on the famously stylish Thorning-Schmidt. She increased her party's vote share while seeking reelection in 2015, only to fall victim to Denmark's fractious coalition politics. What happened next? She took over a global NGO brand, of course: Save the Children International.

With that trajectory, it's no wonder Thorning-Schmidt left a series of political doors open as she passed through Brussels this week. Officially, her visit was to celebrate the 25-year reunion of her Bruges class. But her political intentions were barely concealed in this return visit to what she called a "second home."

The message: She is ready to serve the EU as needed.

Speaking to [POLITICO's EU Confidential podcast](#), the 51-year-old Danish politician said it's time for both more women and for a "truly European" Scandinavian at the top of the EU.

Not only that, the “Nordic model” is a proven system for shaving off the “rough edges” of globalization. A model that, if adopted more widely, she says, would leave more Europeans feeling in control of their destiny.

Jockeying on left

If a Thorning-Schmidt candidacy for an EU top job sounds like a long shot, so does every Socialist campaign these days. The party is in free fall in opinion polling across the EU27. In addition to the U.K. Labour Party leaving the European Parliament after Brexit — taking one in every nine Socialist MEPs with it — the party faces wipeout or disaster in Germany, France, Italy, Poland, and most of Central and Eastern Europe.

Other potential Socialist candidates to run the European Commission or Council face domestic hurdles. [Federica Mogherini](#) (Italy), [Frans Timmermans](#) (Netherlands) and [Pierre Moscovici](#) (France) are commissioners with big ambitions but little support from their national governments. Commission Vice President [Maroš Šefčovič](#) (Slovakia) has the backing of his government. It's his government that doesn't have much backing in Brussels.

Thorning-Schmidt, at least, has served as a national leader, as have four consecutive Commission presidents — and both the current and former Council president. She's one of The Club.

As she set out a muscular vision for Europe in a speech at the Brussels Press Club, it was hard not to notice Thorning-Schmidt's effort to burnish her cross-party credentials.

Many in the audience had little doubt they'd just heard the first stump speech of a Thorning-Schmidt candidacy for European Council president. It's a job she nearly won in 2014 before her peers handed it to Poland's Donald Tusk.

Though of course, when asked directly about which job she was gunning for, she brushed it off (won't give you “much of an answer,” she said) and quickly pivoted back to her future of Europe patter.

Thorning-Schmidt called her commitment to the EU a deep “emotional” one before identifying Italy’s Eurosceptic government “going rogue” on the euro as the Union’s biggest threat.

“I don’t think the euro can once again cope with the crisis we had to deal with” in 2011 and 2015, said Thorning-Schmidt, recalling her seat at all-night EU summits called to rescue Greece “where we thought it [Europe] would be collapsing in a second.”

‘In tune’

Her favorite topic was tougher EU border control.

Immigration is “not a crisis, it’s a permanent issue,” Thorning-Schmidt said in her speech. She called to “end the direct connection between arriving in Europe as an immigrant or an asylum seeker and staying in Europe,” via a stronger policy of returning failed asylum seekers to their home countries. Coupled with that, she wants a David Cameron-style reshaping of the EU’s cherished free movement of labor system.

To beat the populists, Thorning-Schmidt advocates listening to the people who vote for them: “That’s not being populist, that’s being in tune with your own people.”

Urging realism from political centrists, she said: “We have to stop talking as if those people who voted for [France’s] National Front or others in my own country [the Danish People’s Party] are different people. They’re the same people who in other years would have voted for my own party.”

Having quoted Mike Tyson (“Everyone has a plan until they get punched in the face”) and thrown a few punches of her own, Thorning-Schmidt eventually offered some red meat for her left-wing base.



Thorning-Schmidt with European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker in 2015 | Emmanuel Dunand/AFP via Getty Images

Tech giants such as Facebook lack a “proper regulatory framework,” she said, and it is the EU’s job — as the “avant garde” of market regulators — to give it to them.

“Step into the vacuum,” Thorning-Schmidt repeatedly coached her Brussels audience. “A little less conversation, a little more action,” she said, channelling Elvis Presley.

It would be almost hypocritical for Thorning-Schmidt not to run for an EU presidency after that.