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AN ESSAY ON THE REFORMATION OF AN OLD INSTITUTION TO A NEW REALITY

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The year is 1849. The king Frederik the 7th of Denmark signs the new Danish constitution on a mild summer day in June. It is a remarkable document that abolishes the absolute monarchy and the privileges of the nobility. The Danish democracy is born. But the birth is not easy and the generation-long conflict with the German Confederation threatens the integrity of this very young Nordic democracy. The southern archrival is a constant threat to the stability and unification of the nation. And, thus, it makes sense that the foreign policy and military capacities in Denmark are designed to overcome German aggression, a strategy that is prevalent until the cold war. Young men of all classes are an active part of the conflict as they serve in the military – most of them involuntarily as part of the conscription codified in the new constitution.

Today, 168 years have passed since the signing of the constitution. Since the mild summer day in June when the ink of the signature of Frederik the 7th dried, the foreign threats to Denmark have changed dramatically. The largest changes in the foreign policy in the thousands year long history of Denmark have occurred. Foreign invasions by Germany, Sweden or England are no longer the threats considered. New allies have emerged and new technologies have changed the threats to the small Scandinavian democracy forever.

Although foreign invasions are no longer an immediate threat, Denmark is not safe from attacks today. Every hour and perhaps every minute, public institutions and critical infrastructure are being attacked in the digital sphere. Foreign states and autonomous groups try to compromise the safety in our digital systems and too often they succeed in doing so with severe consequences. Today, the Danish Defence Intelligence Service proclaims that digital attacks are the largest threat to Denmark, even larger than terrorist attacks. A large part of the public institutions and the Danish defence system are, however, not equipped with the expertise to tackle the reality of new and sophisticated cyber attacks.

Meanwhile, thousands of young men and women join the Danish military every year through conscription, where they learn the discipline of military service. They learn to defend the country with armed weapons in a way that is not substantially different from the way young men were taught to handle muzzleloaders in a time when our closest neighbour threatened the borders of our state. For too many citizens, the conscription is nowadays a survival from the past and a tradition that has survived because of its place in the constitution – not because of its relevance in the light of new threats to the state and its institutions.

This calls for a reformation of the Danish military conscription. No longer shall the threats of yesterday dictate our defence capabilities of tomorrow. The Danish society is among the most digitalized in the world and this makes its public institutions very vulnerable to attacks through cyberspace from everywhere. Very sensible data is at risk of being exploited by malicious groups and states who can also do much harm to vital infrastructure through cyber attacks. Thus, the conscription should be reformed to include a cybersecurity division so young men and women, the citizens of tomorrow, can be prepared for the new and omnipresent threat in the digital world. The reformation of the military conscription should also change the tests that must be passed in order to join the military. In an everyday attack where computational power is more important than physical abilities people should not be rejected because they do not pass physical requirements of the 19th century.

A reformation of the military conscription will have spill-over effects that will strengthen every part of the digital society as thousands of citizens will be well-equipped to stand against cyber attacks. In every organisation, community and firm, people with a strong knowledge on cyber threats will be able to make a significant difference. They will be able to set up preventive measurements to avoid weaknesses in digital systems and they will know how to respond effectively in cases of attacks.

Cyberwarfare is real and it is everywhere. China has reportedly employed more than 100.000 cyber experts to tackle the threats of tomorrow and Denmark should follow. In a society where every part is being affected by digitalization and the vulnerabilities that follow, one of our oldest public institutions will benefit from a reform. A reform, that will strengthen our democracy and make an important part of our constitution relevant for our generation and the next to come.