

## Book review

***The Labour Party in Britain and Norway: Elections and the Pursuit of Power Between the Wars* by David Redvaldsen, I.B. Taurus: London, 2011; xxiv + 206pp., 7 illus.; 9781848855403, £56.50 (hbk.).**

Accepted version published in *Twentieth Century British History*, 24/1 (2010), pp. 153–55

As David Redvaldsen makes abundantly clear in the introduction to his impressive – if at times overly narrative – book, the field of comparative labour history is by no means a large one. Given the demands of such studies, it is perhaps understandable why. Comparison places restraints on the historian in terms of time and expense. It often becomes necessary to acquire additional language skills, come to terms with unfamiliar social and historical contexts, and spend precious hours trawling through a whole new set of national literature. If comparisons are rare, ones incorporating smaller states are even rarer. Research on the European periphery is, unfortunately, all too often noticeable by its absence, especially studies in English that discuss Scandinavia. Immediately, therefore, Redvaldsen's offering stands out as an important contribution to the field.

The book adopts a comparative methodology to examine the electoral campaigns of the Labour Party in Britain and its Norwegian counterpart, the Norwegian Labour Party (*Det norske Arbeiderparti*, DNA) between 1929 and 1936. This lends itself neatly to the overarching question of the study: why were some labour parties more electorally successful in these years than others? By way of answer, the body of the book is divided into three main chapters structured chronologically, each examining national elections and the factors that influenced the parties' successes in those contests. Special interest is given to comparing a set of heuristic questions: the nature of the campaigns pursued by the parties; the centralisation of tactics by their central offices; the funding at their disposals; the success in mobilising and strengthening the labour movements more broadly; and the success in enfranchising the British and Norwegian publics at large.

The first of the main chapters is concerned with the British parliamentary election of 1929 and the Norwegian election the following year. The DNA, Redvaldsen suggests, was far less concerned about winning the 1930 contest than Labour had been the year earlier. The

possibility of forming a weak administration or remaining the largest single party at the expense of coherent support for a socialist programme was felt to make such a victory 'hollow' (p. 19). Despite this, and Labour's considerably higher spending on its own campaign, the electoral outcome varied little. In short, the party of Ramsay MacDonald was far from a cohesive organisation at this stage and was still reeling from the effects of the 1927 Trade Union and Trade Disputes Act.

The next votes in 1931 and 1933 in Britain and Norway respectively, the subject of the second main chapter, took place in an altogether different atmosphere. The Great Depression was, according to Redvaldsen and in common with several other authors, a turning point for the parties, a point at which both groups recognised their future success lay in the contests immediately ahead. In the event, the DNA made more of the opportunity. Redvaldsen makes clear the contexts were different: Labour suffered from a lack of fixed-term parliaments, the electoral system, the continued legacy of the Trade Disputes Act and, of course, immense internal political turmoil. That said, the DNA was more effective in the period leading to the election, more efficient in how and where it spent its money, and better at rallying the trade unions. It was this which, Redvaldsen claims (p. 54), sealed the electoral fate of both groups throughout the decade. By the time of the British vote of 1935 and the Norwegian election of 1936 – the last to take place before World War II and the focus of the third and final main chapter – the question was how both parties could consolidate their successes and negate problems of old. Each made improvements, whether in terms of membership figures or wider electoral appeal. While issues remained, financing for one and support from the rural class another, both Labour and the DNA could finally be called true people's parties.

This suggests how informative and detailed Redvaldsen's study of such a fascinating and complex period is. The argument sustained throughout and more intimately compared in the concluding chapter – that the DNA was ultimately more successful and had a greater societal impact than its British counterpart – is well taken and clearly brought out in the preceding chapters. One flaw of those chapters, however, is the narrative style of much of the writing. At times the book becomes somewhat tedious to read and lacks the linguistic flare that could have made it all the more enjoyable to finish. The book's title is also misleading. What is billed as a study of elections and pursuing power in the interwar years is effectively a study of the 1930s. While this itself is no mean feat, too little reference is made to the elections from 1918. This point becomes more pertinent when considering the book's potential role as an introduction to Norwegian history for the uninformed observer. These

criticisms are, however, minor. Redvaldsen is absolutely correct in his analysis that the 'DNA deserves to be more well-known among comparative scholars of Socialism' (p. 146) and this book, ground as it is in a considerable array of both British and Norwegian archival sources, goes a significant way to meeting such a call. Indeed, through a combination of its comparative methodology and its willingness to examine labour movements from smaller European states, Redvaldsen's work deserves a place on the bookshelves of scholars or students from a number of disciplines.