

Business Interest Organizations and Political Parties in Scandinavia 1930-1970

Paper proposal for the International Symposium – LARHRA –
Lyon – Fr., June, 20th – 21st 2013.

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Abstract

The suggested paper aims to trace the relation between the business interest organisations and the political parties in Denmark, Norway and Sweden. The structure of the business interest organisations and the structure of the political parties in the three Scandinavian countries are remarkably similar. This can be explained by a relatively parallel political history and also by similar labour market relations within the three countries as well as by a high degree of interaction between the elites of the three countries.

In all three countries political parties were formed around the turn of the century 1900. A Conservative, a liberal and an agrarian party formed the non-socialist alliance and – on the other half of the political spectrum – a dominant Social Democratic party dwarfed its communist cousin. In the 1930's the Social Democrats ascended to power, an event which in all three countries established a social democratic regime which more or less coincided with the welfare state epoch. Moreover, in all three countries business interests formed one employer's association and one federation of industries. These associations organized more or less all companies in their respective country and were instrumental in the build-up and management the corporatist welfare states. It has been argued that important labour market relations were settled in roughly the same way at roughly the same time in Sweden and Denmark in the 1930's.¹

Previous research has shown that strong informal ties were formed between business interest organizations and the non-socialist political parties in Sweden during the 1930's and 40's. These ties were maintained at least up until the end of the 1960's when public funding of political parties was introduced.² Although, very little is known about business-politics relations, preliminary observations points to that this was the case also in Denmark and Norway.³

How did the relations between the business interest organisations and the political parties develop in the Scandinavian countries from the 1920's up until the late 1960's? The article focuses on the relations between the two major business interest organisations in each Scandinavian country, i.e. the employer's association and the federation of industries and each country's conservative and liberal party. (It can be assumed that such relations with agrarian and socialist/communist parties were insignificant.) Even if there may not officially have been

1 Bengt Schüllerqvist, *Från kosackval till kohandel. SAP:s väg till makten* (Tiden 1992).

2 Niklas Stenlås, *Den inre kretsen. Den svenska ekonomiska elitens inflytande över partipolitik och opinionsbildning 1940-1949* (Arkiv 1998).

3 Niklas Stenlås, 'The Rise of Political Activism in Scandinavian Big Business 1900-1950' in Byrkjeflot, Myklebust, Myrvang & Sejersted (eds), *The Democratic Challenge to Capitalism. Management and Democracy in the Nordic Countries* (Fagbokforlaget: 2001).

any business – party relations at all, the business associations were the corporatist agents of the industries of their respective country. As such they did affect or even coordinate the patterns of political funding. Before the introduction of public funding in the mid-1960's the non-socialist political parties were wholly dependent on funds from industry. Moreover, there were certainly overlaps or networks between the leaderships of the parties and the business organisations. What did such overlaps mean and to what extent were they important to the party or to the business organization?

Research questions will be: 1) did the similarities in political party structure and the existence of similar business interest organisations in the three countries also mean that similar practices of political funding were developed? 2) What role did the business interest organisations play in the funding of the political parties in the different countries? 3) How did the business organisations respond to the fact that political party organisations grew and became increasingly more costly over the period? 4) To what extent did the overlaps of leadership or networks between political leaders and business leaders exist and what role did such networks play in the relations between business associations and political parties.