

Henning Grelle: *Thorvald Stauning. Demokrati eller kaos. En biografi*. København: Jyllands-Postens Forlag 2008, 575 S.

Thorvald Stauning is one of the strongest early 20th century symbolic representatives of “Danishness” connected to the early development of the welfare state, of social progress and of democratic culture. He was chairman of the social democratic party from 1910 to 1939 and Prime Minister 1924–25 and 1929–42. He embodies the period where the Danish social democratic party became the largest political party and obtained government responsibility and where trade union movement and working class organizations reached their highpoint. The social democrats largely represented the urban working class but at the same time deliberately identified themselves with and sought a broader basis as a *folkeparti*, a people’s party.

Several of the social democratic leaders of secondary importance have had their biographies written in recent years, while Stauning has only been portrayed in contemporary hagiographic biographies and the Stauning biography by Hans Lyngby Jepsens (1979), which concentrated on his personal life. Henning Grelle’s biography focuses on Stauning’s political results and gives a thorough assessment of his political development and importance.

The author is an insider on his topic. He is head of *Arbejderbevægelsens Bibliotek og Arkiv* in Copenhagen, which has received significant trade union and social democratic backing. Grelle’s previous works include aspects of social democratic and trade union development, but the Stauning biography is clearly his most ambitious work. It has not been an easy book to write. Firstly, the amount of personal sources left in Stauning’s personal archive and in other archives is limited. He did not write a diary and not many personal letters have survived. Secondly, Stauning was so influential for such a long time and participated in such a broad range of important decisions that his biography tend to be the history of the social democratic party, the political history of the governments he was heading and to some degree also a political history from the years before the First World War till the middle of the Second World War.

The subtitle ”Democracy or chaos“ is a reformulation of the main social democratic election slogan from 1935: ”Stauning or chaos“. It placed Stauning as a reassuring symbol of stability in the tide of upheaval caused by the economic crises, mass un-

employment, and the challenges of Nazism and Communism. The reformulation points to Grelle's main conclusion, that Stauning's political work was embedded in his democratic understanding. He was neither a visionary socialist, nor a great agitator, but a clever organizer, industrious, ambitious and a diligent networker and compromise maker. Obviously he was very influential in Danish politics over a long period of time. This does not in itself account for his outstanding position in the social democratic and national collective memory. An explanation could be offered through the fact that the political and social challenges during the period in which he was party leader and Prime Minister were so serious, and the overall results of tackling the challenges so comparatively successful, that he became identified with these results.

Stauning was pragmatic throughout his career. Among social democrats the first years of the new century was dominated by discussions on whether social democrats could take government responsibility without having a majority. Stauning advocated immediate government participation and in 1916 he became the first social democratic government minister in a war time coalition government. Henning Grelle gives a thorough account of Stauning's attempt as a peacemaker during the First World War. He invested considerable effort, but without much

chance of success. Stauning's close contact to the SPD and especially to Friedrich Ebert meant that his effort was seen as a German covered mediation attempt. It was received with distrust not only in England but also in several neutral countries.

In 1929 Stauning became Prime Minister in a social democratic and social liberal coalition government, which was the basis for Stauning's political effort until 1940. Until 1936 his government depended on compromises with one of the bourgeois parties in the second chamber of Parliament (*landstinget*), and he succeeded in getting a majority for several important parts of legislation. His most renowned legislative result in this period was the crisis reform packet named *kanslergade-forliget*. It was passed with the votes of the Liberal party (*Venstre*) with mainly an agrarian membership. In Danish history it has often been seen as the ultimate compromise between workers and farmers and therefore as a step towards the national welfare state and a national and social reconciliation between workers and farmers. Because the agreement was reached on January 30, 1933 it has been deliberately compared with the political development in Germany placing the Danish political development as a compromise-based democratic political culture on the road towards a welfare state. Grelle does not follow this interpretation. More modestly he

places *kanslergadeforliget* as an ambitious crisis compromise which was made possible because both urban workers and farmers were equally hard hit by the depression.

Stauning's role as a Prime Minister until his death in May 1942 during the occupation of Denmark has been disputed. Like many other Danish political leaders, he expected a German victory and Denmark placed under long term German direct influence. Stauning spoke on March 8, 1941 at the Student Club in Copenhagen with press coverage of the speech. He commented on the vague German plans for a New Europe and showed considerable willingness to both political and economic adaptation. It can be seen as Stauning's last attempt to save his party, save the living standard of the working class and at least some parts of national sovereignty. Both contemporary public opinion and later historians have explained the speech with his ill health and shaken psychological condition due to the occupation. This is not convincing and could be seen as an attempt to acquit him for his most blatant expression of adaptation staining his long term political results. Henning Grelle tries to uphold Stauning's political soundness in 1941 by reading his speech as a non-committal speech, but this is not really convincing either. Compared with attitudes among most of the Danish population, Stauning's expectations of the future for Danish democracy and support for a

policy of immediate adaptation was not blatantly different from the majority. But Stauning went further than most others by his general acceptance of more binding arrangements.

Henning Grelle's biography is an optimistic history of social democratic progress and a history of national and democratic consensus. Stauning is placed prominently within this story. It is well-argued and well-documented, and a Stauning biography of this quality has been missing for a long time. It has been convincingly demonstrated that most of his policy was rather successful seen from a democratic point of view and in many areas it was integrating the working class in a broader national community.

Stauning was the dominant Danish political leader during "the age of catastrophes". This denotation does not really cover very well when Denmark is seen in a European context. The development from the turn of the century till 1942 was generally peaceful and few Danes were hit by catastrophes. Henning Grelle has convincingly placed Stauning with a significant responsibility for this.

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