

Haakon Lie, Denis Healey and Anglo-Norwegian Labour party relations in the immediate post-war period

By Tony Insall

In his valedictory despatch to the Foreign Office, sent before his departure from Oslo in November 1950, Sir Laurence Collier, the retiring British ambassador to Oslo, wrote that in 1945 it had "scarcely seemed possible that Anglo-Norwegian relations, then at the crest of a wave, should not subsequently suffer some diminution in cordiality".



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He went on to explain why no such deterioration had occurred, despite differences over issues such as the provision of Norwegian troops for the occupation of Germany and later, fisheries policy, as well as concerns about the Norwegian foreign policy of bridgebuilding. He gave due credit to Foreign Minister Halvard Lange – and also to the way in which "members of the Norwegian Government have discovered, during and since the war, the affinity of their political and social ideas with those of the British Labour movement". The relationships, formed as a result of this affinity, played a significant role in the strengthening of bilateral links; a role which until recently has been very largely overlooked.

It was not always so. After the First War, when the Norwegian Labour party (DNA) was affiliated to the Comintern between 1919 and 1923, a number of Norwegians, including Aksel Zachariassen, were arrested in Britain for providing support to the Bolsheviks. The suspicions which their activities caused were slow to disappear and the British party kept their Norwegian counterparts at arms length during the interwar period: LO chairman Konrad Nordahl famously observed that when Norwegian trade unionists visited the UK in the 1930s, their British counterparts were not prepared to treat them to so much as a cup of tea.

The war made the difference, providing a basis for wide-ranging collaboration and bringing many Norwegian socialists to London, where they formed relationships which they subsequently maintained after their return to Oslo. The key link was between Haakon Lie (secretary of DNA) and Denis Healey (international secretary of the Labour Party), both appointed in the autumn of 1945. Each had authority and

influence which went beyond their party positions: Lie was chairman of the international committee of DNA which reported to the central committee chaired by Gerhardsen, while Healey had the ear of Ernest Bevin, the Foreign Secretary, who instructed that he should be given regular confidential briefings by the Foreign Office – an arrangement which has never been replicated.

Lie and Healey corresponded frequently and met often at international socialist conferences. Their collaboration, and that of their parties, was facilitated by Collier, who wrote to Bevin in March 1946 to encourage the development of closer relations between the two labour movements as a tool to facilitate closer bilateral relations. He was assisted by staff such as Rowland Kenney (the first editor of the *Daily Herald*, married to a Norwegian), his son Kit, and an active labour attaché, John Inman. It was Kit who arranged for Healey to visit Oslo in October 1947 to address several DNA meetings, a measure intended to counteract the impact of a visit by the outspoken leftwing MP Konni Zilliacus. Such blurring of diplomatic and party political boundaries (by both diplomats and senior party officials) occurred quite frequently in Norway during this period.

There were a few similar links in London. Olav Bratteli, the Norwegian labour attaché, often represented DNA interests to Healey. And Healey gave weekly briefings to Anders Buraas, the *Arbeiderbladet* London correspondent (and later, when Buraas was Foreign Editor, began to write a series of weekly articles for the paper, contributing over 700 in all).

There are many examples of the effectiveness of the party links (and Collier's involvement)

during this period. Two may suffice here. Healey and Lie co-operated closely on international socialist issues, helping both to win widespread acceptance of the Marshall Plan, and in time also to rebuild the International. And in January 1948, Lie asked Healey for an explanation of the thinking behind Bevin's Western Union speech, a significant step in the process which led to the creation of NATO 15 months later. Healey replied that he could not do this directly – though he provided a copy of a classified briefing document prepared for Bevin – but would arrange for a briefing in Oslo, which was provided by Inman (whom Lie described to the author as "so close as to be a member of the family").

However, the area where party collaboration provided the greatest practical value was in assisting the work of the secretive Information Research Department (IRD), set up by the Foreign Office in January 1948 to counter Soviet propaganda. The Labour Party (and especially Healey) was much involved in facilitating its work, particularly by nominating suitable contacts in socialist parties, such as Lie, who might be suitable recipients for IRD material and who might give it wide circulation. Lie rewrote and published in *Arbeiderbladet* in April 1948 an article entitled "The Real Conditions in Soviet Russia", based on the first IRD report. IRD produced many such reports which were similarly used by Lie, as well as material which he and his colleagues exploited for other purposes, including election propaganda.

These party links, established during the war and steadily developed thereafter, helped to create a climate of mutual understanding and confidence on both sides which made an important difference to both ministers and policy makers. Relations became so close that in August 1951, four senior British ministers including the Prime Minister, Attlee (who scarcely ever holidayed abroad) and the Foreign Secretary, Morrison, visited Norway on holidays which both Attlee and Morrison combined with party and official talks in Oslo.

Was this relationship unique? It is difficult to think of any other period when two parties could have simultaneously enjoyed so much power and authority, and have co-operated so closely across such a wide range of practical and political issues. Healey wrote in his autobiography in 1989 that "the period of the Attlee government marked the high point of the Labour Party's role in Europe". Both Britain and Norway benefited from the advantages which this brought.



Authority. Denis Healey on the campaign trail with Harold Wilson in 1974, decades after his work as international secretary of the Labour Party contributed to a particular link with the Scandinavian left.