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Power and Politics in Labor Legislation, by Alan K. McAdams

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POWER AND POLITICS IN LABOR LEGISLATION. By Alan K. McAdams. New York: Columbia University Press. 1964. Pp. 346. \$7.50.

In 1949, the publication of Stephen K. Bailey's *Congress Makes a Law*,¹ a study of the passage of a full employment statute, was recognized by political scientists and other students of the legislative processes to be a piece of frontier research. Bailey made no pretentious claims for his study. He had set himself the task of exploring a decision while it was in the process of being made. He provided us with a single case, explored in depth and interpreted with insight. The reader of Bailey's volume obtained a "feel" for legislative and interest group politics which most of us, cut off from the daily experience of life in the halls of power, lacked, however sophisticated our intellectual awareness of the processes of decision-making might have been. After Bailey's study was published, a number of other case studies of legislative decision-making supplemented the description which he provided for us. Alan K. McAdams' *Power and Politics in Labor Legislation* adds another brick to the edifice of case studies.

The title of Professor McAdams' study leads the reader to expect more of the volume than can be found in it. It is concerned with a particular, though very complex, legislative decision—the passage of the Labor-Management Reporting and Disclosure Act of 1959. It is written, in McAdams' words, for "the general public, or more accurately . . . that anonymous but hopefully large group of readers, the 'intelligent laymen'."² It was written "to inform the reader about the processes of his government and, in turn, the impact of the government on certain aspects of the economy, using as a vehicle a law which aroused passions

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1. BAILEY, CONGRESS MAKES A LAW (1949).

2. P. vii.

on all sides, the Landrum-Griffin Act.”³ The study’s major thesis “is that the public, in ways which were sometimes direct and sometimes indirect, decided the outcome of the battle over labor reform legislation in 1959.”⁴

McAdams has provided us with a straight forward history of the passage of a complex piece of legislation. He has disentangled the web of events from the original maneuvering by Senator John F. Kennedy, then an aspirant for the Democratic nomination for President, throughout the often bitter conflict in the Conference Committee, to the final defeat of the “liberals” and the adoption of what was basically the “conservative” version of the bill produced by the House of Representatives. In the process of doing this, McAdams has explored the relative “ineptness” of labor’s Washington lobby, the passionate conscience of Senator McClellan, the quiet maneuvering of Lyndon Johnson, then the Majority Leader in the Senate, and the role of “grass-roots” public opinion in the passage of the bill. No one who reads this volume is likely to think that legislative processes are simple, nor that the motivations and actions which enter into congressional decision-making are easily understood.

Congressional consideration of this particular issue touched two major segments of the American economy—organized labor and management. McAdams’ analysis of the role of these two groups highlights the relative incompetence of the labor leaders in the congressional fight, extending even to faulty perceptions of the content of the bill at various stages. Those who fear the political power of American labor might well read McAdams’ pages if they desire psychological relief from their insecurities for, at least in this particular case, the labor leaders showed a startling lack of elementary political skills. Representatives of industry, on the other hand, while initially caught short by the original presentation of Senator Kennedy’s “liberal” bill, quickly recouped and brought sustained and effective pressure to bear upon congressmen and brought the pressure to bear at the right times. Few persons have proved to be worse prophets than Arthur Summerfield, then Postmaster General, who read the election returns of 1958, and said, “‘America teeters on the precipice of a labor-bossed Congress. . . .’”⁵

Those readers more interested in the politics of personality can find occasional incidents to satisfy their craving, as can those who are more concerned with the relationship of personal ambitions, party affiliation, and commitments towards the bill. Three major presidential hopefuls

3. *Ibid.*

4. *Ibid.*

5. P. 3.

were involved in the deliberations of the Senate. Senator John F. Kennedy, who hoped to cement labor's support behind him in the 1960 nominating convention by pushing through a bill which would satisfy the leaders of labor, bore the brunt of the first "liberal" effort to write a bill. Lyndon B. Johnson, as Majority Leader in the Senate, found himself in the position of either running the risk of antagonizing labor or advancing the cause of his principal opponent for the presidential nomination. And Richard Nixon, already the visible Republican candidate for President, presided over the deliberations of the Senate. The interrelationships between these three men are explored with considerable care by McAdams who himself wonders a bit what might have happened if Johnson had fully committed himself to support a bill sponsored by Kennedy. The political ambitions of Kennedy also probably affected the behavior of the Republican members of the Senate. "It is doubtful," writes McAdams, "if the Senate Republicans would have closed ranks so solidly in favor of the McClellan bill of rights if there had been no Democratic presidential candidate to be embarrassed by their actions. It is probable that the Majority Leader in the Senate would have given greater support to the bill on the Senate floor if such actions would not have given direct support to a rival for the presidency. But the attraction of a personality who might one day be President of the United States in need of a Cabinet, skilled advisors, and trusted supporters is a great advantage—a bonus for the backers of a bill. On balance, however, it would appear that the interference worked to the disadvantage of the liberal side."⁶

In general, McAdams has made a valuable contribution to the case literature on legislative decision-making. He has diligently dug out the relevant facts. He has talked with senators, representatives, aides, and a multiplicity of other persons who have given him personalized but valuable insights into the making of this particular decision. If he has failed to establish his point that public opinion played a predominant role in the final decision of the Congress, this may be no more than a reflection of the fact that the kind of data he would need to show the reader to establish the hard truth of his assertion is not available. He does report upon the perceptions of public opinion held by individual Congressmen, and infers that the quoted statements of these individual Congressmen reflected a public reality in the external world. He may be correct in this assertion, but it is possible that he is wrong. It would require other techniques, particularly the use of survey research, before

6. Pp. 278-79.

it could be decided that his conclusion on the role of the public is acceptable.

It must be added that valuable as this volume is as a piece of case literature on decision-making, there is reason to question the continued multiplication of such studies. Was the passage of the Landrum-Griffin Bill a "typical" case of legislative decision-making? Was it a "typical" case of legislative decision-making in the area of labor policy? The individual case alone cannot provide us with answers to these questions. It is frequently argued that case studies are valuable because they suggest hypotheses which may be tested at some future time on more generalized levels. To date, James Robinson, in his *Congress and Foreign Policy-Making*⁷ has provided us with the only careful, systematic effort to reach some general conclusions about legislative decision-making. It is time now for others to join in this kind of enterprise.

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7. ROBINSON, CONGRESS AND FOREIGN POLICY-MAKING (1962).

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