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The Populist Radical Right in Poland: the Patriots

Rafal Pankowski

Routledge, 272pp, £80

The hate figures on the far right – Jean-Marie Le Pen, the late Jörg Haider, Geert Wilders – are all from western Europe. The controversy over the British Conservative Party’s new European partners in Poland, however, has thrown a spotlight on the rise of racist extremism in the east. Poland is in mourning following the catastrophic air crash in Russia that killed its president, Lech Kaczynski, and many of the nation’s political, civic and military elite. The events of 10 April should not, however, prevent us from asking tough questions about the alliances forged by David Cameron’s Conservatives in Europe.

Rafal Pankowski’s book deals with allegations about the extremist past of Michal Kaminski. Questions about the Polish leader of the new right-wing grouping in the European Parliament co-created by Cameron were first raised by the *New Statesman* in July 2009. They include Kaminski’s dismissal of Polish responsibility for a massacre of Jews in the town of Jedwabne during the Second World War, the

use of a swastika-style symbol by his former party, the National Revival of Poland, and Kaminski’s identification with the slogan “Poland for the Polish”.

Pankowski looks into Kaminski’s earlier involvement in a neo-Nazi skinhead movement, but his real focus is the extremism of Kaminski’s current party, Law and Justice (also the party of the late president, Kaczynski). According to Pankowski, Law and Justice displayed “authoritarian tendencies” during its brief period in government in Poland between 2005 and 2007. He claims it used the secret services to quash intellectual opposition, took complete control of state broadcasting, and engaged in the “systematic” recruitment of right-wing extremists and former members of “skinhead groups” to top government positions.

It is suggested that party members were responsible for the illegal phone-tapping and arbitrary arrest of political opponents. The suicide in 2007 of Barbara Blida, a politician from Labour’s Polish sister party who was threatened with trumped-up corruption charges, stands as an epitaph to Law and Justice’s anti-democratic manipulation of state controls.

Readers may have seen allegations that the party is homophobic; Pankowski investigates claims that it excluded gay people from its membership, introduced an internet filter to censor any reference to homosexuality on all school computers and even called for the re-criminalisation of homosexuality. The Tories should be concerned with this last policy, as with calls for the reintroduction of the death

penalty, which are absolutely contrary to Poland’s membership of the European Union.

In Polish schools, “unpatriotic” authors, and books by Goethe, Kafka and Dostoevsky, have been removed from children’s reading lists as part of an attempt at the “purification of Polish culture”. Science lessons have taught that Darwinism is “a literary fiction”. Another crude fantasy propagated by Law and Justice – that the Solidarity leader Lech Walesa conspired with rather than helped defeat communism in Poland – demonstrates how little truth matters to its leaders.

Pankowski shows how Kaminski’s well-publicised visit to a Friends of Israel event at last year’s Conservative party conference mirrors previous attempts by Law and Justice to change its image by making overtures to Israel. These did not prevent it from alleging that Israel was responsible for the Iraq war and that the attacks of 11 September 2001 were part of a Jewish conspiracy.

This book’s credibility comes not simply from the author’s success in unearthing previously hidden material, but in its serious analysis of the historical, economic and cultural factors behind the emergence of Law and Justice, which is examined in the context of its links to other far-right parties and movements in Poland. Pankowski argues convincingly that Polish conservatives made a grave mistake in ending the “cordon sanitaire” against the extreme right, allowing it to break out of political isolation. It is chilling that Britain’s Conservatives are doing exactly the same.

Tellingly, the book makes a distinction between right-wing parties in Poland that promote the politics of “love”, such as the governing centre-right Civic Platform, and those, such as Law and Justice, that promote the politics of “hate”. Cameron should ask himself: why have Britain’s Tories chosen the latter? ●

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