

Norwegian Labour Party, Conservatives and Progress Party oust Bondevik Government

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The Christian Democrat-led coalition government of Norway collapsed on March 9, after the government lost a no-confidence vote instigated jointly by the Labour, Conservative and extreme right-wing Progress Party. The minority government, led by Christian Democrat Kjell Bondevik, had held power since 1997 and incorporated the Liberal and Centre parties. Together they held only 42 of 165 seats in the Storting, the Norwegian parliament.

The trigger for the government's defeat was the decision by the opposition parties to insist on the construction of new natural gas-burning power stations. These will be built with existing power station technology and so break Norway's commitment to reducing atmospheric carbon dioxide (CO₂) emissions. CO₂ is the principal "greenhouse" gas contributing to global warming.

In a uniquely energy-rich country, Norwegian governments have been able to present an environmentalist image because Norway could generate power for its 4.5 million people through non-polluting hydroelectric schemes. At the same time, the country exports large quantities of oil and gas.

However, recent expansions in energy demand have forced a debate on whether to build gas-fired power stations, which produce large amounts of CO₂, or wait until development is completed on new technologies that would allow CO₂ emissions to be greatly reduced. There are schemes to pump CO₂ back into the North Sea's emptying oil fields to extend their life, or simply to pipe it to the bottom of the sea where it would be absorbed with little environmental impact.

In uniting against the government on such an issue, the opposition parties are reflecting the interests of the energy-related businesses that dominate the Norwegian economy. Six months ago the same parties combined to

force through a reduction of the carbon tax on the oil industry—a move the Bondevik government accepted.

As a weak minority government, Bondevik's administration stayed in office through cooperation with the opposition parties, particularly Labour—the largest parliamentary group with 65 seats. Bondevik only attempted to form a government in 1997 after Labour leader Thorbjørn Jagland insisted he would refuse to form a coalition if his party's electoral vote fell below 36.9 percent of the electorate.

The Bondevik government survived to this point only because it either adapted itself to Labour's demands, had no differences with Labour in the first place, or was able to find acceptable compromise solutions allowing it to manoeuvre between the various parliamentary factions.

On this occasion, however, the government's insistence on non-polluting power stations, which reflects the prominence that environmental issues have assumed in Norwegian politics since the 1970s, was too much for Labour and its industrial backers. Although Labour will have difficulty forming a viable coalition, their hope is that a stronger government can be prepared in the run-up to the 2001 elections, around Labour's new prime ministerial candidate Jens Stoltenberg.

There are no apparent programmatic differences between Stoltenberg and his immediate predecessor, Jagland, but Jagland was unpopular with the electorate and perceived as quixotic and discredited following his refusal to attempt to form a coalition in 1997. Stoltenberg, on the other hand, is younger, more flamboyant, and presented as Norway's Tony Blair. He proposes breaking any connections between Labour and the LO, Norway's leading trade union federation.

Stoltenberg appears to have set out to unseat the

government at the first opportunity. Despite the fact that, as leader of the Labour Youth League, Stoltenberg had opposed the polluting power plants and had confirmed this on several recent occasions, the vote presented a swift route to power. This was also in defiance of much of the electorate and the Labour Party membership, for whom non-polluting power stations and general environmental issues are important.

Labour's accession to power was made possible only with the aid of the Conservatives and the virulently anti-immigrant Progress Party. The Progress Party has 25 seats in the Storting and is the second largest party, along with the Christian Democrats. It was formed in 1973 as "Anders Lange's Party for a Drastic Reduction in Taxes, Rates and State Intervention". Anders Lange was an ex-Conservative who promoted his views through a dog breeders' association. His party won 5 percent of the vote in 1973, after Lange appeared in a TV debate sporting a sword.

Renamed the Progress Party after Lange's death, leadership fell to Carl Hagen in 1977. Subsequently, the party has developed as an anti-welfare party and is right-wing on all issues, particularly targeting immigrants. By 1989 its vote has increased to 12.8 percent and in 1997 it polled 15.3 percent. As with Jorge Haidar's Austrian Freedom Party, with which it is comparable, Progress is very much a personal fiefdom of its leader, Hagen. The party routinely sets the agenda for new attacks on welfare and immigrants, to which the other parties adapt while holding up their hands in mock horror.

Labour has frequently sought temporary alliances with the Progress Party, as have all the other parliamentary groupings. Hagen is presently exploring possible coalition combinations with the Conservatives. Should Labour be unsuccessful in putting together a viable government, Progress could enter the government.

However, it is likely that Stoltenberg will lead the next government and the principal issue they will confront is Norway's attitude to the European Union. Norway has rejected EU membership in referenda in 1972 and 1994, both by narrow margins. Nevertheless entry into the EU and adoption of the euro single currency is imperative for the business elite. Since the last referendum, foreign investment has increased by 27.4 percent and trade with the EU has increased by

13.4 percent.

As an oil rich country, Norway has prodigious wealth, and this gives it a certain degree of economic leeway. But the country is in danger of becoming politically isolated. Neighbouring Sweden, Finland and Denmark are all EU members. All joined the EU in the last decade. Finland is in the euro-zone and Sweden and Denmark are preparing to join—Sweden's ruling Social Democrats recently decided to join the currency. Their counterparts in Denmark are presently preparing a bill for the Danish parliament on euro membership.

Germany has promoted Norway's candidature for the UN Security Council next year. There has also been discussion in the Norwegian press on the implications of the drive for a European military capacity. Last July, ex-Labour Chairman Reiulf Steen warned, "We must choose Europe over the USA. As long as we are not members of the EU, Norway will be thrown back and forth between Congress and the White House."

In a speech to Norway's European Movement, he added, "The EU is the only power able to curb US dominance in the world. The USA's interests as a superpower do not always harmonise with European interests or with our own national interests."

Norway, a long-time NATO member with a Russian border, views with concern the possibility of being excluded from whatever European military formation emerges.

The Bondevik government was perceived as being anti-EU, although in its last months it shadowed the EU in all economic and political matters. But the government's weakness was an obstacle to the sort of political struggle that will be necessary to push through a reorientation towards the EU in the Norwegian population, amongst whom anti-EU sentiment is widespread—particularly in the agricultural and fishing regions, where entry could mean ruin for small producers.



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