

# Progress Party overtakes Labour in Norwegian opinion polls

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Six months after the Norwegian Labour Party assumed power following the collapse of the previous Christian Democrat coalition, it has been overtaken by the far right Progress Party (PP) in opinion polls. While such polls are never without a wide margin of error as estimates of real voting intentions, and are subject to easy manipulation, the result of August's Din Mening/Norsk Statistik poll is nevertheless very significant. Labour has been Norway's largest political party since 1927 and between 1940 and 1970 they commanded almost half the vote (45.5 percent).

The primary tendency revealed by the latest polls is not a sudden surge to the PP, but the collapse of support for Labour as its policies alienate ever larger sections of the working class. In the 1997 elections, Labour won 65 seats in the Storting (the Norwegian parliament) based on 35.1 percent of the vote. It was able to maintain this level of support during its first months in office, but this has fallen in the last month to an estimated 22.1 percent support. The Progress Party already has 25 seats in the Storting based on the 15.3 per cent vote it received in 1997, but opinion polls estimate its support has now grown to 24.8 percent. In another poll, PP gained 4 percent between June and August.

At the same time programmatic differences between Labour and the PP have largely disappeared. Both are intent on enriching Norwegian business and the upper middle class through Statoil (the Norwegian state oil company) and service privatisation, attacking the Norwegian welfare system, and scapegoating immigrant workers. The Progress Party has effectively supplemented Labour's role in government with a combination of praise and chivvying, designed to push the government further to the right. As a result, while Labour's working class support is evaporating, the PP

has gained respectability and is attracting a confused, but growing protest vote.

Labour came to power in March this year following the ousting of the Christian Democrat-led coalition. The crisis saw Labour, Conservatives and the PP unite in orchestrating a no-confidence vote, following previous collaboration between the parties over energy and Information Technology schemes.

Presented in the media as reflecting serious policy differences over building environmentally friendly power stations, the more fundamental issues separating the Bondevik coalition from Jens Stoltenberg's new Labour government is over Norway's orientation towards the European Union and economic restructuring. The latter includes privatisation of Statoil and "reforms" in health and social care aimed at cutting public spending.

Labour has made clear its intention to take Norway into EU membership as soon as possible. Progress Party leader Carl I Hagen recently declared he was "uninterested" in the debate over European accession, which effectively means that the PP is not going to oppose Labour on the issue.

On welfare, the new Labour government has launched a series of policy initiatives designed to open up Norwegian welfare spending to private profit. Its draft programme, due to be debated this September, calls for health and care services to be put out to tender. In line with this, all the country's hospitals are to be brought under direct central government control, rather than, as at present, run by county administrations.

Stoltenberg defended the health reforms by proclaiming that, "We've got traditions going back decades regarding private involvement in public care services, including care for the elderly." In the same speech, he pointed to private charity's long peripheral

involvement in care.

In June, the cabinet also discussed draft legislation to introduce a contribution related pension scheme. The Commissioner for Children, Trond Waage, has proposed lowering the age of criminal responsibility and introducing forced labour for children as penance for street crime. The same draft programme for 2001 proposes massive cuts in the civil service. Up to half the state offices, agencies and directorates are to be abolished and entire layer of regional administration removed.

Hagen, whose party has long called for welfare privatisation, welcomed Labour's health proposals, claiming that if they are carried through the ideological dividing line between Labour and PP would have disappeared.

*Nationen* newspaper summed up Progress's new respectability in an August 1 editorial:

“The truth is that Labour, the Conservatives and the political centre are increasingly treating the Progress Party as an accepted member of the political establishment. Considering the changes which have taken place in the party in recent years, as well as the fact that it brings up, with customary adroitness, issues which ordinary people are concerned about, the ratings reported in the recent poll are not surprising. For the foreseeable future, the Progress Party will be an important factor in Norwegian politics. It is no longer isolated, and taking the one fact with the other, its potential for exerting influence is indisputable.”

The changes referred to are entirely cosmetic. Hagen has attempted to somewhat reign in the most overt racists in the party's ranks. For years, PP has led a xenophobic assault on immigrant workers, using its “customary adroitness” to blame the most exploited sections of the working class for unemployment, crime, and other social ills, while presenting immigrants as a threat to ethnic Norwegians.

Last December the party trumpeted that one sixth of the Norwegian population were immigrants and called for new immigration controls. This June, PP threatened to launch a vote of “no confidence” in Labour's Justice Minister Hanne Harlem, who allowed a family of refugees from Afghanistan to stay in Norway. Immigration officials had already deported the family once to Pakistan.

Two months later, the Labour Ministry of Justice, led

by the same Hanne Harlem upheld an Immigration Directorate decision that the first 50 of 6,000 Kosovan refugees should be deported.

Stoltenberg's embrace of the right wing policy framework by Britain's Tony Blair has provoked alarm within some areas of the Norwegian Labour Party and the trade union bureaucracy.

Thorbjørn Berntsen, a long standing Labour figure, echoed warnings made by social democrats elsewhere in Europe such as Oscar Lafontaine in Germany and Roy Hattersley in Britain. The “Labour Party is marketing policies I have combated for an entire generation, and this is hard to watch. Labour will lose if we cannot convince people that we are cutting down in some places in order to expand elsewhere,” Berntsen said.

Arguing for a subtler political garb to the measures, he went on, “We must put down the view that modernisation means privatisation. The party must make itself clearer. We need new forms of expression in many ways. We cannot have Labour politicians sounding like Conservatives.”

Reflecting similar concerns the *Vårt Land* newspaper commented in August, “Wealth has traditionally been limited to few people in Norway, and these few spent their money discreetly. But the rich have multiplied; the *nouveau riche* have become more ostentatious and their spending habits seem to be contagious. Consumption has reached staggering heights in Norway, and parallels are now being drawn to the yuppie era of the 1980s.... Once again we see that the poor must pay for the unbridled spending of the rich.”



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