

New Norwegian government relies on far right Progress Party

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On October 16, Progress Party leader Carl I. Hagen announced on Norwegian television that he would support a Christian Democrat, Conservative and Liberal coalition government led by former Prime minister Kjell Bondevik. Hagen's announcement was preceded by a phone call to the sitting Prime Minister Jens Stoltenberg, triggering his resignation.

The Norwegian far-right, although not formally in government, is far closer to the seat of power than at any point since the collapse of the fascist government of Vidkun Quisling's *Nasjonal Samling* (National Unity) in 1945, a regime installed and maintained by the armies of Adolf Hitler.

The Progress Party has emerged as a power broker during a month of horse-trading after the September 10 Norwegian general election, which saw the ruling Norwegian Labour Party's share of the vote collapse to 24 percent. This result gave Labour just 43 seats, representing its lowest figure since 1927. In an election that showed a sharp political polarisation, the principal beneficiary of Labour's decline was not the Progress Party. On the right, the Conservative Party won 38 seats, up 15, while the Socialist Left won 23 seats, an increase of 14. The Progress Party gained just 26 seats, up one. The Christian Democrats held 22 seats, down 3, while former coalition partners, the Centre Party took 10 seats, down one.

The Progress Party did little more than maintain their position. Prior to the election, the party was torn apart by a series of sex scandals, rape allegations and internal feuds, which set Hagen and his supporters against the party's most overtly fascist elements and ended with the latter's expulsion. The party is virtually a one-man band, with Hagen enjoying dictatorial powers over a membership that appears to consist largely of petty local operators and chisellers. During coalition

negotiations, for example, Progress deputy Jan Simenson was exposed as pulling local strings to gain a restaurateur friend a liquor licence. Yet, despite the disarray, the recent exposure of the party's vile internal relations, and the dubious characters who constitute its active membership, Progress has found itself in a position where it can dictate terms to the new coalition.

This is not due to any internal strength of the far right itself, but is largely a result of the rapid adoption by all the traditional parties, including Labour, of the Progress Party's anti-welfare, anti-immigrant agenda. Progress has carved a position for itself by openly advocating reactionary views considered outside mainstream politics. But Hagen's role in the new government signifies that what was once considered beyond the pale is now acceptable to the Norwegian ruling elite.

Labour's electoral debacle is a product of its turn to the right and the alienation of much of its traditional working class base. Since Labour nudged aside the minority coalition administration of Kjell Bondevik to assume power in 2000, the party has pushed ahead with the privatisation of state-owned assets, presided over a continued decline in social welfare, and is generally perceived as untrustworthy. Prior to the elections, the Norwegian trade union federation, the LO, announced that it would support the Socialist Left with an equal financial contribution to that given to Labour.

After the elections, both Labour and the Centre Party refused to enter into coalition negotiations with the radicals and former Stalinists who largely comprise the Socialist Left. Neither was Labour willing to come to any effective arrangement with the other parties. Since World War Two, Labour has been the dominant party in Norwegian politics, usually facing an opposition coalition of the Centre Party, Christian Democrats, and Liberals. The minority coalition government under

Christian Democrat Kjell Bondevik only survived between 1997-2000 given the tacit support of the Labour Party, which brought it down after deciding to push for a closer orientation to the European Union.

This time around, a number of alternative coalitions were possible, which would have avoided handing the balance of power to the Progress Party. Instead, the new centre-right coalition, mustering a mere 62 seats in the 165-seat *Storting* (parliament), immediately sought an accommodation with the Progress Party, while Labour prepared for a period of loyal opposition.

Having settled a squabble between the Christian Democrats and the Conservatives over whether Bondevik or Conservative leader Jan Petersen would be Prime Minister, on October 8 the coalition announced that its policy would be to carry through tax cuts worth 25 billion Norwegian kronor (\$2.8 billion) over its four-year term, step up privatisation, while licensing the building of new, controversial, gas-fired power stations. Hagen announced his support for this policy and issued a list of 54 further demands as the terms of a lasting agreement. These centred on the Progress party being given the chairmanship of important *Storting* committees, as well as promises to increase military spending. Aware that the far right party was still too unstable and unpopular to immediately enter government, the coalition nevertheless agreed to Progress party deputy chair Siv Jensen chairing the Finance Committee, which deals with the national budget, while John Alvheim will chair the Social Affairs committee, concerned with social welfare and health. This puts the Progress Party in highly influential positions in two key areas of state policy directly concerned with the living standards of the Norwegian working class.

Commenting on Hagen's role, the Norwegian press was uniformly favourable to the new arrangements. "Almost 30 years of wandering in the political wilderness is now over for Carl I. Hagen. The first Conservative/Christian Democrat/Liberal government in the history of Norway has brought Mr Hagen and the Progress Party in from the cold," wrote *Dagsavisen*.

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Dagbladet noted, "The transition from political pariah to necessary facilitator in the formation of a new centre-right coalition has been remarkably swift for

Progress Party chairman Carl I. Hagen."

If anything, the press was more critical of former Labour Foreign Minister Thorbjorn Jagland's appointment as chair of the foreign affairs committee. This was hardly controversial, as the government is not expected to adopt a different foreign policy to Labour. Jagland, himself a former Prime Minister, is aggressively in favour of the continued bombing of Afghanistan.

It was left to Odd Roger Enoksen, leader of the sidelined anti-EU Centre Party, formerly the Agrarian Party, to complain, "People who claim that the coalition's political platform represents centrist policies are mistaken. Policies which lead to a widening of the income gap, a reduction in public services... are not centrist".

On October 26, Hagen sought to emphasise the Progresses Party's newfound political influence by calling for a vote of confidence in the new government, announcing that they might consider attempting to replace ministers in the future. Since then, press commentary has focused on the likelihood of more Progress Party ministers being levered into position over the next period.

Considerable nervousness remains over giving too much power to the fascists. Hagen himself was rejected for the role of *Storting* chairman, a position he personally prized, on the grounds that it would prove too divisive. Part of the thinking behind Bondevik being chosen as Prime Minister is his public persona as a kindly, Christian negotiator and compromiser, who can act as an acceptable front-man for the frothing xenophobes propping up his administration.



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