Norway's Labour Party mounts political whitewash of establishment in mass shootings

Jordan Shilton
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In the aftermath of Anders Behring Breivik's terrorist attacks in Norway on July 22 that killed 76, a concerted campaign is underway to promote a message of national unity. It is being spearheaded by the governing Labour Party and its leader Jens Stoltenberg, with the aim of obscuring the role that the political establishment as a whole, and Labour in particular, played in creating the fetid political atmosphere from which Breivik's murderous assault emerged.

Stoltenberg has been presented as a national figurehead. A characteristic comment came from the editor of leading daily *Aftenposten*, who proclaimed, "Stoltenberg has been a fantastic leader under exceptional circumstances, humane and yet firm at the same time. He has never been so impressive."

The rest of the press weighed in, with opinion polls giving Stoltenberg approval ratings of over 90 percent for his handling of the tragedy.

Stoltenberg has emphasised the unity of all Norwegians in his public statements. Immediately after the attacks he told a press conference, "Norway is a tight-knit, small country and when this kind of catastrophe hits us this strengthens our country and that is something that will help us through this difficult time."

At a memorial service on August 21 he said, "Today time stops in order to remember those who died. We do it as one nation."

A recent blog posting by Stoltenberg on the *Huffington Post* web site continued along similar lines. "It is now that we must show that we are a nation that cares about each other. A nation where everyone is seen. Remember, too, that those who have no visible wounds are also suffering. They need our collective support."

These statements stand in stark contrast to the actual role of the Labour Party over the past period. Rather than creating an egalitarian society focusing on collective support and "togetherness", Stoltenberg's party has led attacks on Norway's welfare state provisions while seizing every opportunity to stir up anti-immigrant chauvinism.

During his first period in power between 2000 and 2001, Stoltenberg led an orientation within Labour towards policies associated with Tony Blair and New Labour in Britain involving tax reductions and the cutting of social spending.

Labour also began to impose anti-immigrant measures, such as reductions in benefits meant to help migrants find work. A sign of what was being prepared came in 2000, when Labour struck a parliamentary agreement with the far-right anti-immigrant Progress Party to bring down the Conservative-Christian Democrat coalition.

Breivik was at the time a member of Progress and its youth section. His membership covered the years 1997-2007 and he was deputy chairman of a branch in Oslo.

The first Stoltenberg government enforced a 1999 high court decision that gave permission to landlords to discriminate on the basis of nationality when providing accommodation. Labour continued to collaborate with Progress when in opposition after 2001, although not formally. Progress representatives were also invited to address the national congress of the Norwegian Confederation of Trade Unions, an organisation closely tied to Labour.

Progress has been cultivated by ruling circles to aid in the implementation of such measures. It has whipped up anti-immigrant sentiment in its election campaigns, claiming that migrants were responsible for the increasing social problems in the country. If

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immigration were sharply reduced, it argued, increased spending on social services for “native” Norwegians could be implemented.

Progress has continued its promotion of nationalism and anti-immigrant chauvinism in the aftermath of Breivik’s attacks. Former Progress leader and founder of the party, Carl I. Hagan, who is running for the mayor of Oslo next month, stated that most Muslims were terrorists and described immigrants living in Norway as “perpetrators”.

After returning to office in 2005, Stoltenberg dramatically tightened government policy towards immigrants, mirroring many initiatives that were first proposed by Progress. The number of asylum-seekers and refugees that Norway now deports has risen dramatically.

In January this year, Russian immigrant Maria Amelie was deported after living for nine years in the country without having been granted asylum. The campaign for her deportation was led by Stoltenberg and Labour and abetted by the Socialist Left, its coalition partners. When Stoltenberg made it clear that Amelie would be deported, the Socialist Left dropped any pretence of opposition and fell into line with Labour.

Stoltenberg’s determination to deport Amelie, who had obtained a masters degree and published a book while living in Norway, reflected his party’s desire to bolster an immigration system that has become one of the strictest in Europe.

Stoltenberg and Labour want to obscure this record, which would result in awkward questions about Labour’s role in fostering far-right forces like Breivik.

To this end, the prime minister has overseen plans for an inquiry into the events of July 22 that will be conducted predominantly by the police and intelligence services and will focus on proposing stricter security measures. As Stoltenberg commented, the aim of the commission would be to “try to do whatever we can to avoid something similar in the future, and then part of that evaluation will be also to go through how we organise our security, security measures, security services.”

This decision was taken as concerns continue to deepen about the role of the police and intelligence services in the lead up to and during the events on July 22. With the police taking over an hour to reach Utoya, the island where Breivik conducted the largest massacre, their response has been described as “beyond belief” by one Norwegian MP.

Reports in recent days have also suggested that Breivik made repeated calls to the police even as he was engaged in his shooting spree. Breivik’s lawyer Geir Lippestad stated that Breivik had made 10 calls to the Oslo police prior to his arrest.

These issues cast further doubt over the official claims that Breivik was a relative unknown to the authorities prior to his attacks, despite reports that his name was flagged on a number of occasions.

Even the announcement of a limited investigation into Breivik’s attacks was too much for Progress to accept, which fears its own intimate connections with Breivik being put under scrutiny. Hagan denounced the inquiry for wasting police time and resources needed to tackle other crimes.

Well aware of the direct role played by his party in encouraging Breivik, he sought to draw a line under the attacks by stating, “He [Breivik] killed 69 people [sic], whether he turned left or right and began shooting this young girl or that young boy. Why should 100 police officers be working on this for several months? There is a confession and everything has been revealed. It’s an open and shut case.”

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