

Left parties in government:

The Norwegian case*

Asbjørn Wahl **

In Norway we are currently experiencing what it means to have a left party in government in an era of neo-liberalism. The parliamentary election in the autumn of 2005 gave us a new, centre-left, majority coalition government for the first time ever. The previous centre-right coalition experienced a serious defeat. The traditional Conservative Party, in particular, lost about one third of its votes (down from 21 to 14 per cent).

The new coalition consists of three political parties: the Labour Party (AP), the Centre Party (SP)¹ and the Socialist Left Party (SV). The last mentioned party joined a government for the first time. In a European context, SV can be compared to the parties in the GUE/NGL group of the European parliament. Since the experiences of having the left in government have not been very exciting in Europe since neo-liberalism conquered the world in the 1980s, there is great interest on the left in what is going to happen.

The background

There are at least three important reasons why the centre-left coalition won the parliamentary election in Norway last autumn. Firstly, many people were fed up with the policies of the previous government. It had pursued neo-liberal policies across the board – including privatisation of public services, cuts in public funding, increased inequality and poverty and serious attacks on labour market legislation. This was not in breach with previous governments. On the contrary, all governments, whether right wing, centre or social democrat, have more or less followed a neo-liberal agenda over the last 20+ years. However, the centre-right government proved to be more extreme in its market fundamentalist approach than the previous ones.

Secondly, the trade union movement and other social movements pushed strongly for the establishment of a centre-left coalition. Up until a couple of years before the last election, the leadership of the social democratic party refused to even discuss the possibility of forming a government coalition with the Socialist Left Party in particular. In the first years after World War II the Norwegian Labour Party had a parliamentary majority alone, and after that got lost (in 1961), the party had preferred minority governments with passive support from other parties, rather than joining coalitions. It was the trade union movement that insisted on the establishment of a centre-left coalition. The traditionally very social democratic Norwegian Confederation of Trade Unions (LO) started to invite also the SV-leader to their congresses, and the biggest trade union started to hold meeting with all the three parties in question. These pressures, including pressure from the rank and file in its own party, finally made the

¹ The Centre Party is traditionally a peasants' or a rural party, which has been radicalised by being one of the leading forces in the successful campaigns against Norwegian membership of the European Union (in 1972 and 1994). The anti-EU sentiments in Norway have always been left-leaning, contrary to the situation in for example the UK, where the so-called eurosceptics are right-wingers. In some areas, e.g. welfare policies and democratic, public control, it has taken up many positions to the left of the social democratic party, while it is rather conservative in other areas (private ownership, traditions, moral). Under a different name, it was also this party that helped the first ever labour government to power in Norway, in 1935.

leadership of the Labour Party cave in and go for a coalition. This created new energy and optimism on the broad left.

Thirdly, the social democratic party moved politically to the left after it was punished heavily by the voters in the 2001 election. The party lost about 1/3 of their votes, and ended up with 24 per cent, which was the worst result since the beginning of the 1920s. Partial privatisation of the state oil company, Statoil, and the state telecom company, Telenor², was unpopular, in addition to a market oriented reform of the hospital sector and a soft, neo-liberal agenda in general. It was again the trade union movement that made the difference. The Labour Party was set under hard pressure to abandon its policy of privatisation, to strengthen public services and to reverse the destructive labour law reforms of the centre-right government.

Decisive for this political development in the social democratic party was a new tendency which developed in the trade union movement. This tendency could particularly be witnessed in the local elections in 2003, most strongly in Trondheim, the third biggest city in Norway.

Traditionally, the Norwegian trade union movement has been closely linked to and dominated by the Labour Party. In elections the trade union movement has campaigned in favour of this party and its policies. After long time frustration with the social democratic party's political move to the right, some local trade union branches started to become more politicised themselves. A coalition of trade union organisations in Trondheim thus developed its own political programme for the 2003 election, consisting of 19 concrete demands. These were sent to all the political parties with the following message: we are going to campaign for those parties that support our demands.

This had great educational effect, particularly on the Labour Party, which, together with some other parties on the centre-left, came out in favour of most of the demands. The trade union alliance run an effective campaign, contributed to a more polarised election campaign, something which proved successful, and secured victory for the coalition of friendly parties, while the governing conservative party became the big loser. Thus, a new local government was formed, one which not only stopped the privatisation policy of the previous majority, but which also started to bring back to public sector services which had already been privatised.

This tendency of increased independence from the political parties among trade unions and other popular movements is probably the most important and successful development on the left in Norway over the last few years. It represents a political innovation which will be important to follow up and develop further in the future whatever the experience will be with the current centre-left government. In this way trade unions and other popular movements have increasingly become political actors themselves.

Even the biggest national trade union (Norwegian Union of Municipal and General Employees), which historically has been very closely linked to the Labour Party, followed this path before the 2003 local elections. It sent its own demands to the parties, received support from four of them (the three in the current coalitions government plus the Red Electoral Alliance) and issued a leaflet urging its members to vote for one of these four. The same trade union initiated in 1999 a broad coalition of trade unions and other organisations, the Campaign for the Welfare State³, to fight against privatisation and neo-liberal policies. This

² Both Telenor and Statoil were partially privatised by a Labour government in 2000 and 2001 respectively. Today the state owns 70.9 per cent of Statoil and 54 per cent of Telenor.

³ You can find more information on this alliance on its web site: <http://www.velferdsstaten.no/english/>

alliance played an important role in informing and educating its members and in changing public opinion regarding privatisation and neo-liberal “modernisation” of public services.

In last year’s parliamentary election a number of organisations, including trade unions, Attac Norway, Campaign for the Welfare State, solidarity organisations and others formed an alliance in Oslo, focusing not on political parties, but on the need for a new political direction. “25 years of neo-liberalism is enough!”, was one of the slogans. In effect, this worked as a support for the centre-left coalition, but by focusing on politics rather than on political parties, the loyalties were clearly signalled. In other words, no parties should take any support for granted.

The political change

The political platform of the new government surprised quite a few of us. It was already clarified before the election that the Socialist Left Party would have to accept the Norwegian membership of NATO as well as of the European Economic Area (EEA)⁴, so this was no surprise. Neither was it a surprise that the new government quickly made a full reversal of the labour law which had been seriously undermined by the previous government, since this was an important promise during the election campaign. The same goes for the anti-privatisation policies that became part of the political platform. It simply says no to privatisation and competitive tendering of core public welfare services (education, health, caring of old people).

In some other areas, however, the platform was even better than expected. It signalled a much more active use of public ownership in core companies and market intervention policies. Public ownership in companies like the previously mentioned Statoil and Telenor would not be further reduced. Public control of strategically important hydroelectric energy resources would be secured. The public postal services would not be privatised. Poverty should be abolished. Holiday pay for people on unemployment benefit should be improved (or reintroduced, since it had been removed by the previous government).

Also in foreign policy, the political platform introduced important changes. Norwegian soldiers were withdrawn from Iraq⁵, and the government would “not renew Norwegian participation in Operation Enduring Freedom when the mandate period for these forces expires”⁶. On the other hand, it would “strengthen Norwegian participation in ISAF in Afghanistan”, something which was met with dissatisfaction by most of the peace movement.

Regarding development policies, the government said that it would “work to ensure that the multilateral aid is increasingly switched from the World Bank to development programmes and emergency aid measures under the auspices of UN agencies. Norwegian aid should not go to programmes that contain requirements for liberalisation and privatisation”. The new government would further “review and reassess all requirements that Norway has made for developing countries regarding liberalisation of the services sector in the GATS negotiations”, as well as “work to ensure that Norway supports the developing countries’ demands for a

⁴ The EEA is an agreement between the EU and Norway, Iceland and Liechtenstein which makes these countries part of the Single Market – with some limitations regarding agriculture, fisheries and foreign policy. The agreement was carried into effect as from 1 January 1994.

⁵ The previous right-wing Norwegian government did not support the attack on and occupation of Iraq in 2003, not least because of resistance from the opposition and huge mobilisation in the streets. After the occupation was accepted by the UN, however, some Norwegian soldiers were sent to Iraq.

⁶ All quotations in this and the next paragraph are taken from the English version of chapter 2 of the government declaration, <http://odin.dep.no/smk/english/government/government/001001-990363/dok-bn.html>

renegotiation of the Agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (the TRIPS Agreement)’’.

As soon as the government took power, it started to introduce its promises from the election campaign. A comprehensive privatisation of the railways, which had been prepared, but only just started, by the previous government, was immediately stopped. A newly adopted law which opened for extensive privatisation of schools was withdrawn. All Norwegian GATS requests to Least Developed Countries, as well as requests in education and in water and energy distribution to all developing countries, were withdrawn. No radical change of the state budget for 2006 was expected, since this had been prepared by the previous government, and the new government only had a couple of weeks to make some few amendments. However, it did find room for a strengthening of public welfare services by increased funding of the municipals. On the other hand, it also introduced tax relief for some rich people, something which met heavy criticism from the Norwegian LO.

As far as I can see, apart from the mentioned tax relief, the current Norwegian government is the only one in Europe which has done anything like this during the last 20-25 years in terms of anti-neo-liberal policies. So, what is the problem?

The problems

Well, there are lots of problems. The government did deliver the core package of election promises, as mentioned above (the “morning gift” from the government to its electorate). As time has passed, however, the centre-left government seems to have run out of energy only some few months after it took power. None of the political parties in the government are consciously using the best and most radical parts of the political platform in their campaigning. One should maybe have expected that at least the Socialist Left Party would have done so, but also this party has, on the contrary, contributed to weaken some of the best parts of the platform.

One good example is the answer given by the Minister of Finance (SV) to a parliamentary question recently raised by a conservative MP regarding Norwegian policies towards the IMF and the World Bank. Included in her answer was the following statement: “The Government is against ideologically based requests for liberalisation and privatisation. The Government will oppose demands for liberalisation and privatisation in IMF programmes *if they are not oriented towards development and poverty reduction or part of the work against corruption.*” The part of the statement which I have emphasized here is a modification which is not mentioned in the government’s political platform itself and represents in reality an adoption of IMF/World Bank language.

In other ministries the situation is even worse. The Minister of Labour and Social Inclusion (AP), who is a close ally of the social democratic Prime Minister, has hardly made any change of the previous right wing immigration and social policies. The “welfare-to-work” policy⁷ which is being pursued by the centre-left government does not represent a support of the poor and the unemployed, but an attack on them.

The Minister of Trade and Industry (also AP) has, at least not so far, made any convincing attempt at intervening in the markets or more actively using public ownership in companies to achieve political goals. The Minister of Foreign Affairs (AP) is pursuing the same biased, US-

⁷ In Norwegian called “arbeidslinja”. This policy was initiated in the USA during the presidency of Ronald Reagan in the 1980s and was later exported to Europe as part of the neo-liberal offensive.

friendly policies towards the Israel/Palestinian conflict as the previous government. Even the withdrawal of the GATS requests to developing countries proved to be an exception, a one-off concession to the radical left, as it seems to be more or less business as usual again in the on-going WTO negotiations.

The Minister of International Development (SV) is undermining the World Bank-critical position of the government's own political platform. Maybe we are explained why in a contribution made in the Parliament recently, when he summarised "what a country needs to overcome poverty: it needs peace; it needs a strong, well functioning state that ensures equitable distribution of wealth; *it needs an open, market-based economy*; it needs to focus on education; and it needs resources to be mobilised through investments and development assistance"⁸ (my italics).

What we experience is that the Socialist Left Party does obviously not have a strategy on how to use its participation in the government to strengthen socialist positions and shift the balance of power in the long run. Neither does it try to form strong connections with the trade union movement or other social movements outside the parliament in order to push for more radical political solutions. The party does not even seem able to use and defend the best parts of the government's own political platform. What is even more serious, this does not represent isolated political "mistakes" – it represents the actual political level of the Socialist Left Party in government.

No part of the centre-left government in Norway seems to realise the specific challenges posed by being in government in an era of neo-liberalism. What has taken place in Norway, as well as internationally, over the last 20+ years, is a comprehensive transfer of power from democratically elected bodies to the market. Thus, governments have lost power. Any government that intends to pursue a radical welfare policy under such circumstances will therefore need a strong social movement outside the parliament to challenge the increased structural power of capital. There is, unfortunately, no social movement with such power in Norway today, and, what is more, there is no consciousness in the current government of the need for such a movement. On the contrary, we are being told by official representatives of the actual political parties to stay calm, to be patient and to give the government more time rather than to "create problems for them" by criticising them or mobilising for more radical solutions.

Some of the decisions which the government made immediately after it took power (the "morning gift") were very important indeed, no doubt about that. However, they do not go far enough, and are not followed up in a way which can create enthusiasm among workers and people in general. The optimism and the energy that was produced by the anti-privatisation and pro-public service election campaign and the promises of a new political direction in the government's political platform, therefore seem to have vanished. After the election, it is therefore the right wing populist party (the Progress Party) which has profited the most. It today stands at about 30-35 percent in current opinion polls – up from 22 in the last election.

The lack of understanding of this political phenomenon is probably the most important weakness of the centre-left government coalition and on the left in general. The current discontent among workers and people in general seems to be very difficult to interpret. Social

⁸ International Development Minister Erik Solheim's statement to the Storting, 16 May 2006, http://odin.dep.no/ud/english/news/speeches/minister_b/032171-090600/dok-bn.html

democrats often state that “the more people gets, the more dissatisfied they become” – as a sort of decadence or an effect of an over-affluent society. Nothing can be more mistaken.

The social and economic basis for the discontent among people is deeply embedded in the neo-liberalist economy – in the unregulated capitalism which increases the exploitation of workers, reduces their influence at the workplace, alienates them in relation to the work process as well as to society in general (remember Margaret Thatcher: “there is no such thing as society”) and makes life more socially and economically insecure. The “brutalisation of work” is the term we have given this phenomenon in Norway, and it is probably the main cause for the growing discontent, which in turn is cynically and successfully being exploited by right wing populist parties.

Of course, the success of the right wing populist parties to exploit this situation is to a high degree made possible by a lack of political parties on the left which understand the situation, take people’s discontent seriously and are able to politicise it and channel it into an organised struggle against alienation and exploitation – for a social, just and solidary society.

With the left party in a centre-left coalition government, this problem can actually become more serious, since there is hardly any opposition on the left that can pick up and politicise the messages of the discontents (even though I am not sure of the Norwegian Socialist Left Party’s ability to play such a role even outside the government). The right wing populists then become the only anti-establishment, system-critical alternative, while the centre-left government is administrating and defending the existing order. The on-going weakening and undermining of the Nordic welfare states are hardly recognised or understood by the centre-left parties in Norway, not even by the Socialist Left Party⁹.

The enormous shift in the balance of power which has taken place over the last 20+ years and the current hegemonic neo-liberal order is not going to be changed considerably in Norway alone by the new government. The new power relations in the labour market in particular will therefore continue to create powerlessness and discontent among workers. This development can only be turned if the left is able to create a situation in which workers and people in general experience that they are being part of a real emancipatory struggle, a struggle which the centre-left government in Norway obviously has no intension or ability to launch.

Conclusions

First of all, there is no doubt that the current centre-left coalition in Norway should be supported in the election campaign by the non-sectarian left, tactically or whatever, as the only realistic alternative to the previous conservative/neo-liberal government. There is no doubt, either, that the achievements which we have gained (the “morning gift” referred to above) are of great value. They are mainly of a defensive character, but important for the development of the balance of power – not least in the labour market.

⁹ The Minister of Finance (SV) actually tried to make the current “successful” Nordic welfare state model an export article at an OECD meeting in Paris recently (reported in the daily newspaper *Nationen*, 23 May 2006, <http://www.nationen.no/Utenriks/article2114201.ece>), obviously unaware of the fact that the welfare state is disintegrating around her, because the post-World War II power relations which formed the basis for the development of our welfare states (the social pact, or the historic compromise between labour and capital), are no longer there. A more thorough analysis of this development can be found in Wahl, Asbjørn, The ideological legacy of the social pact, in *Monthly Review* No. 1/2004.

However, the problem addressed in this discussion goes further – to the question on whether or not left parties should join coalition governments of this kind, or what the preconditions should be for making such a political move. The problem is whether this will serve a long-term socialist strategy, and this is a completely different, and obviously more difficult, question.

In this context we should have in mind that the formation of the new centre-left political coalition in Norway was decisive for the injection of new optimism and energy in the broad left. This was the situation even though the three parties did not campaign on a joint political platform, but limited themselves to a statement of intent to form a coalition government. A statement of intent, however, is not the same as a decision to join a government. This is dependent on the contents of the political platform which has to be negotiated between the parties involved.

My consideration is that the concrete political gains that we have experienced so far under the new government most probably also could have been achieved if the Socialist Left Party had stayed outside the government. For a left party, passive, but critical support of a centre-left government – as “the better of two alternatives” – could often be a better alternative than to join the government. It gives much more room for manoeuvre, and the possibility to pursue primary positions and more radical solutions than the often watered-down compromises reached in the government. However, with the many surprisingly radical points in the negotiated government platform in Norway in the autumn of 2005, it would have been difficult for the Socialist Left Party to explain and defend a political break with the coalition.

Seen from a socialist point of view, nor has it been the government platform which has posed the main problem since the government was formed, but the inability of the Socialist Left Party to defend and use the best parts of the platform, to let its own participation in the government be guided by a more long-term socialist strategy and to seek support from the trade union movement and other social movements. The serious political weaknesses of this party were clearly exposed already during the election campaign, when many of us with astonishment could witness the party modifying its own political programme in area after area as it was attacked by its political opponents and mainstream media.

Of course, socialist left parties should seek alliances with other parties, also in government, if this can contribute to shifting the balance of power in society. However, certain preconditions must be in place for the establishment of such coalition governments. Only concrete negotiations with other parties can in the end reveal whether or not the political preconditions are satisfactory. Based on the experiences so far with the Socialist Left Party in the Norwegian government, as well as with other experiences with left parties in centre-left government coalitions in Europe over the last 20+ years, I will conclude with the following four minimum conditions:

- 1) A socialist left party should of course not at all join a coalition government if this government is not opposed to a policy of privatisation – at the national level as well as internationally. Another minimum requirement is that such a government should defend, not attack, trade union and labour rights. Neither should it take part in imperialist wars.
- 2) The party must let its participation in the government be guided by long-term socialist visions and strategies. It must also be able continuously to assess whether or not its participation serves these long-term goals and be able to break out if this is not the case.

3) Under current circumstances, there is no possibility to carry out consistent anti-neo-liberal policies from a government position without the existence of strong popular movements (including trade unions) outside the parliament. This is of course determined by having parties in the government which both understand the necessity of such movements and are able to join forces with them.

4) The government platform and actions must address the problems, the insecurities, the concerns and the anxieties of ordinary people. Their discontent with current developments must be taken seriously. This includes a programme which challenges existing power structures, limits the power of capital, redistributes wealth and extends democracy. Only a government which, through concrete economic and social reforms, is able to create enthusiasm among workers and ordinary people can have any chance to contain right wing populism. The indications from experiences so far are that only in a situation in which workers and people in general experience that they are being part of a real emancipatory struggle, can the left in government succeed.

Of these four conditions, only the first one is more or less met in the Norwegian context. The situation is therefore far from promising. The most decisive and successful experience in the current situation is the increasing independence which trade unions and social movements have developed as regards political parties. The most important task for the radical left in Norway today is therefore to build alliances of social movements and NGOs to demand and mobilise for more radical policies from the government. Such alliances should not, of course, be hampered by mistaken party-political loyalties.

It does not make any sense to moralize over the behaviour of a left party in government if we think it is undermining socialist positions. There are deeply rooted reasons why a political party behave the way it does, based on its origin, its history and traditions, its social basis as well as the level of social struggle in the society in which it operates. Rather than to moralize and to try to tell the party in question what it should have done differently, we should therefore try to analyse and to understand why it behaves the way it does, and then criticise their faults and use the experience and knowledge to judge whether or not the actual left party in government is the party we need if a socialist society is still our aim.

It is still too early to draw the final conclusions of the experience with a left party in government in Norway. However, it is highly possible that the “success” of the centre-left coalition could, as a worst case scenario, end as a political disaster at the next parliamentary election, with a right wing populist/neo-liberal government, and the most left oriented party as the biggest loser. The scenery is already all too familiar. A centre-left government in the era of neo-liberalism is truly no tea party. Time is ripe for more radical, non-sectarian alternatives.

 * Contribution made at a seminar organised by the Rosa Luxembourg Foundation and the Initiatives Pour un Autre Monde at the European Social Forum in Athens on 5 May 2006.

** Since the subject in question is very sensitive regarding party political loyalties, I find it correct to make clear that I am not a member of any of the political parties in the Norwegian government coalition (nor of any other political party). I have mainly been working in the trade union movement for the last 25 years and consider myself to be a socialist. I did campaign for the current Norwegian government coalition, both in order to have the previous, neo-liberal government replaced with a better alternative and in order to try to build a movement strong enough to continue to exercise a pressure on the new centre-left government.