NORWAY: THE COOPERATION OF FOUR PARTIES

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Though not quite. After the 1961 election, the Labour Party returned to the government with an uneasy, narrow majority based on the support of the Socialist People's Party *(Sosialistisk Folkeparti)*. In a dramatic turn of events in Norwegian parliamentary history, the two Socialist People's Party representatives voted against the Labour government in mid-1963, and helped bring about a four week non-socialist coalition government.

It was considered then partly as an interesting footnote to the Einar Gerhardsen regime, partly as an event signalling the end of single party majority rule for some time to come.

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The Norwegian parliamentary history knows majority party and minority party government but *not* coalitions. From 1920 to 1935 Norway had minority single party governments spanning from the Conservative Party *(Höire)* to the far left. They did not live long — the record for the period was set by one government formed by the Liberal Party *(Venstre)* with three years and three months. The most shortlived fell after only 18 days in power in 1928.

The non-existence of coalition governments is first of all explained by the Liberal party's attitude. The party has always turned down coalition suggestions from the Conservatives. The Liberal party represents a rather heterogenous part of the electorate, and has a traditional preference for looking to the parties on its left for cooperation rather than to its right.

The uneasy, changeable parliamentary life of the 1920s and 1930s came to an end in 1935, when the Labour Party led by energetic Johan Nygaardsvold assumed power. In the postwar elections — 1945, 1949, 1953 and 1957 — the party got more than half of the 150 seats in the *Storting* — 76, 85, 77 and 78, respectively. In 1961 the Labour Party returned to power with 74 mandates. The new left-wing outcrop of the Labour Party, the Socialist People's Party, held the important two seats which added up to a fragile socialist majority.

New Notion of Non-Socialist Co-operation

The 1965 election is of particular interest because this is the first time in Norwegian parliamentary history, which dates back to 1884, when four parties — non-socialist, at that — pooled their talents and resources before the election with the explicit aim of wresting the government position from the socialists. Long before electioneering gained momentum in July/August that year, the Conservative Party, the Liberal Party, the Center (agrarian) Party and the Christian People's Party agreed to present themselves as an alternative to the socialist rule.

[1] Cf. Stein Rokkan and Torstein Hjellum, "Norway: The Storting Election of September 1965", in *Scandinavian Political Studies*, Volume I/1966, pp. 237—246.

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What brought this about? Certainly not precedence. In every election after 1945 the non-socialist parties stayed away from everything more than a technical election cooperation on a local level. Party "blocs" have never been popular in Norway.

During the election campaigns up to and including 1961, the non-socialist parties agreed to general, unbinding terms about the importance of ousting their common enemy. They also always made a point of the real or imagined dividing lines between themselves. The idea of a non-socialist "people's front"- attitude and a more formalized coordination of tactics and efforts has always been voiced *outside* the influential levels of the four non-socialist parties.

The Labour Party, fighting an uphill battle to regain what was lost in 1961, elaborated on what it described as the inherent dangers and weaknesses of any coalition government as well as on the particular impossibility of effective government with the four non-socialist parties. The Labour Party's own program aside, this was the main theme of its speakers and the socialist press during the whole campaign.

But what really brought about this important change in 1965? As usual in political events several factors combine to offer a valid explanation. The most important seem to me to be (1) the realization that this was the only way to offer a realistic alternative to the socialist rule, (2) the 1961 election results, (3) the four weeks in 1963 with their taste of power, and (4) the electoral system.

The first three points prepared the ground for a more battleready *attitude* among non-socialist politicians and voters, a climate ripe with optimism.[2] But the importance of the fourth element — the electoral system — can hardly be exaggerated. It is partly responsible for the long, uncontested Labour Party rule as well as the dramatic swing in the distribution of Storting seats to the non-socialist camp.[3]

The Sainte-Laguë formula was designed to prevent out-of-proportion domination by any one party.[4] But the structure of the party system can make nothing of these intentions, and the principle at work in Norway proves it. Opposition to the Labour Party has not been made up of a single party but several rather small ones. Among themselves, these parties invariably lose a lot of votes which together might account for valuable gains. These "wasted" votes — not enough in each constituency to reach up to the next seat — have helped the Labour Party maintain its impressive dominance on the legislative process. Labour support has varied only from 45.7 in 1945 to 48.3 % in 1957. In the 1961-election these effects favored the non-socialist parties for exactly the same reason. Now there were three rivailling socialist parties compared to only two earlier — the third being the negligible Communist Party *(Kommunistpartiet)* which faded away from the political scene at *Storting* level in the 1961 elections. The new, aggressive, articulate Socialist People's Party based its support mainly on discontent with Norway's foreign policy and sapped away the Labour Party's marginal strength just when Labour needed it most.

In the 1961 election Socialist People's Party participated in only three districts and gained two representatives with 2.40 % of the votes. In 1965 the party entered

[2] The trend in regular Gallup opinion polls during 1965 reflected this new attitude and gave the opposition to the socialist camp new strength. The trend was clearly against the Labour Party, and its popularity dropped to the lowest post-war figure of 42.9 % in mid-summer 1965.

[3] Rokkan—Hjellum, op. cit., pp. 237—240.

[4] The electoral system has also been designed to give the districts far away from Oslo, the capital, a greater share of the seats. Based on population, Oslo itself would be entitled to 20 seats, but has 13. Two counties near Oslo, Östfold and Akershus, together would be entitled to 39 representatives, but have 28. Behind every seat won in Oslo are 26,824 votes — about twice as many as behind every representative from seven other counties.

all 20 constituencies and increased its support polling 6 % of the total votes. But it became a victim of electoral system: it still got only two representatives. But the marginal loss in votes proved fatal to the Labour Party which lost *six* seats.[5] The non-socialist parties certainly gained popular support in 1965. But the electoral system helped dramatize their victory or victories.

Government Formation

The drama did not end with vote counting. The scene changed, but the drama continued for several weeks with a drawn-out government-forming process, mostly behind closed doors.

On the morning of September 14 the electorate knew the composition of the new *Storting* and the names of the representatives. But several important questions remained unanswered for more than ten days: (1) the name of the prime minister, (2) to which party he (or she) would belong, (3) the relative party strength in the cabinet and (4) consequently, which party would get which departments. There were 13 vacancies to fill.

Added to that was the uncertainty as to exactly *what* the new government would do. The parties had pooled their ideas and talents during the campaign, but their own programs were intact. They had not committed themselves to any particular pieces of legislation. They had no joint, binding program.

The time between election day and the day the new cabinet was more or less complete — some ten days — is by no means a record in Norwegian parliamentary history. But that the name of the prime minister and an outline of his cabinet were not *immediately* clear added to the feeling of entering the unknown. For a population accustomed to the almost automatic changes of government since 1945 — Mr. Gerhardsen going and Mr. Gerhardsen returning — this was new experience.

The four important questions were to be answered behind closed doors at parliamentary and top party levels. The voters had had their say. Now the professionals went to work with the aim of hammering out a coalition government.

During the election campaign the question of forming a non-socialist "shadow cabinet" more or less on the British model had been raised in the press, though not *by* the press. All political parties were uninterested, and the press — which in Norway is involved in party affairs and policies in several ways — probably only reflected this attitude.

As for prime minister, two names were obvious possibilities: The leader of the short-lived non-socialist government in 1963, the Conservative Party leader in the Storting, *John Lyng*, and his Liberal equivalent on the floor, *Bent Röiseland*. Mentioned much less frequently was the chairman of the Center (agrarian) Party — and its parliamentary leader in the Storting as well — *Per Borten*.

Almost to the last day before the choice of the four parties was made public, Bent Röiseland was considered the leading contender. He belonged to the larger of the two least "extreme" parties (the other being the Center Party), and he was an experienced and popular politician and orator, better known nationally than probably any one from the Center Party. John Lyng was also a logical and natural choice because he was floor leader of the largest of the four parties, was widely respected and had been prime minister. But it was also well known that he personally preferred foreign affairs and wished to end up in the Foreign Office.

[5] The distribution of seats in 1965 (and in 1961) follows: Labour Party 68 (74), Socialist People's Party 2 (2), Communists — (—), Conservative Party 31 (29), Liberal Party 18 (14), Center (agrarian) Party 18 (16), and Christian People's Party 13 (15).

Bent Röiseland, then, was the man. This "foregone conclusion" was prevalent to the last day of secrecy.[6] As it turned out on September 25, neither Mr. Lyng nor Mr. Röiseland had been chosen. It was Per Borten who on October 11 went to see the King to get the formal "go-ahead". Soon it became clear that Mr. Röiseland would not even become a member of the government.

It is generally assumed — and where facts are scarce one is left with assumptions[7] — that the most decisive elements in this process were the parliamentary fractions of the four parties and the party councils. Each of the four parties' parliamentary groups established a small delegation of four which were authorized to take care of the detailed, day-to-day negotiations. These delegations *(forhandlingsutvalg)* always included the parties' parliamentary leaders and their national chairmen. Their nominal mandate was to negotiate, *not* to decide. The party councils, the party leaders in the *Storting* and the leaders of the party organizations were gathered in Oslo during this important period. Both intra-party and inter-party discussions took place.

From the few known facts, such as the participation and frequency of these meetings, it seems that the party councils and prominent party figures played an increasingly important part, while the larger and more cumbersome parliamentary groups lost any initiative they may have had at an early stage. As usual, efficiency demanded that authority be left with a relatively small but presumably competent group. The party delegations consisted of party leaders. In the course of the negotiations they were the few men with *all* available information — which certainly strengthened their influence and authority.

The work probably proceeded along the following pattern: First the inter-party sharing of government posts was completed. The second stage was to pick the men for the jobs within the agreed-upon pattern. The last part of this work was to agree on the prime minister.

Why did parties agree on the least likely candidate? There is the yet-unchallenged theory that Bent Röiseland was considered the forthcoming prime minister throughout leading party circles. But somewhere during negotiations, interests between the Liberal Party's prime minister hopes collided either with the Conservatives, with the other "extreme" party, the Christian People's Party — or both. The acquisition of several "key ministries" by conservatives indicate a compromise between the Conservative Party and probably the Liberal Party.[8] The background of the compromise was the unwillingness of the Liberal Party to accept a prime minister from the Center Party and *vice versa*. They both had, however, one overruling dislike in common: neither wanted a Conservative prime minister. The nature of the compromise was to let the conservatives have their choice outside their own party. Obviously that would have to be a choice between the Liberal and the Center party.

[6] Only the day before Per Borten was announced as the four parties' choice, the Norsk Telegrambyrå (Norwegian News Agency) summed up developments in these words: "In political circles the majority now supports the view that the final discussions concerning the composition of the government will end in the announcing of the Liberal Party's parliamentary leader, Mr. Bent Röiseland, as Norways new prime minister. Both *Arbeiderbladet* (the Labour party's main organ) as well as *Morgenposten* (independent Oslo daily with a conservative leaning) today point to Röiseland as the most likely candidate to the post" (NTB item i. 5, Sept. 24, 1965).

[7] It is still too early to get a close look at the confidential forming of the government, a "strictly-between-us" affair.

[8] The Conservative Party got six ministries — foreign office, defence, trade and shipping, industry, and justice. The first four are considered "key" ministries. The Center Party got the prime minister (with no ministry) and two ministries — prices and wages, and fisheries. The Liberal Party also got two: finance and local government, the former also considered "key" ministry. The Christian People's Party got the ministries of education, family affairs, and social affairs.

Performance during the First 13 Months

The four parties had claimed they were capable of forming a cabinet and working effectively together. After 13 months, this writer is inclined to characterize its performance in the words he believes characterize its election campaign: There is at least as much "passive cooperation" (i.e. agreement not to forward issues on which the four parties do not agree) as "active cooperation" (i.e. to go ahead on points where there is full agreement).

During the election campaign, the coalition parties were not eager to commit themselves to clear-cut pieces of legislative proposals with one obvious exeption, the social insurance scheme. They were careful not to commit themselves *en bloc* to specific proposals about such issues as rising prices, high taxes, and housing shortage.

After 13 months the new government has not put forward legislative proposals which amount to a new course in any particular sphere of the nation's life again with the exception of the social insurance scheme. What it has done is to shelve some pieces of legislation which a new Labour government probably would have laid before the assembly, thus discontinuing the slow but consistent process of socialism.

There have been some fractional adjustments in taxation toward a less exacting burden, some changes in social benefits, and some serious efforts toward fulfilling the Liberal party's promise of more housing. But the fight for a stable *krone* has clearly not been won, and the new government's insistence on maintaining the bank rate established at 3 1/2 % by the Labour government indicates a policy of continuation rather than change. A pertinent illustration of this tendency was the parliamentary debate in November on the financial situation of the stateowned Mo i Rana iron works. The four government parties agreed on a bill to finance the iron works and defend it with almost the same uncompromising optimism which until 1965 characterized the Labour government's defense of similar bills. The new government not only had inherited old problems but also, to some extent, the same way of looking at them.

The new government got to work by passing — and using — a budget for 1966 which was almost ready for print when the change of government came about. Indeed, the detailed budget proposal was presented to the *Storting* on October 11 — the day before Per Borten's cabinet was sworn in.

With some minor changes the budget was passed, and the new government was bound by it for its first 12 months in office. Did the government find this a welcome opportunity to reconsider its policies or did it resent putting into effect a budget prepared by socialist government?

In the autumn of 1966 the non-socialist parties presented their first "own" budget. It continued the trend towards easier taxation. It also seems to confirm the change in modus, in degree, rather than in direction. The modern welfare state is firmly established and accepted.

The coalition government has been aided in this respect by the fact that no major issue has been forced upon it. This may change with the question of Britain making new efforts toward Common Market membership. Until the French president vetoed the British application in 1963, opinions as to the question of a Norwegian membership application differed widely in the non-socialist camp, from support of full membership among the Conservatives to rejection in the Center Party. When the matter was debated in the *Storting* in 1962, the Center Party advocated associated status but opposed full membership when the choice was to be made for or against this alternative. A leader of this party now heads a government which may have to take a stand on this issue.

Labour Party's crushing defeat at the polls inevitably invited self-scrutinizing and self-criticism. The preliminary analysis of the election suggests that the party failed

to attract the younger generation and thus may have lost it for the future. Also it had not been able to win over lower middle classes. In addition, there is the belated realization that the platform concerning dangers of a non-socialist government preparing the ground for the social end economic conditions of the thirties had lost its appeal.

In the *Storting* and outside, the Labour Party for the first 12–13 months worked in the shadow of a dilemma which seriously hampered its freedom of action. On the one hand, it wished to *oppose*, to take the particular kind of initiative which is the trademark of any effective opposition in a parliamentary system. On the other hand, it found it extremely difficult to criticize measures and policies a Labour government had advocated and even prepared in detail.

The coalition government's "haste-makes-waste" policy has been matched by the Labour party opposition's "wait-and-see" attitude. The first 13 months of the new coalition government have been strikingly calm and uneventful.

No Return

When governmental power suddenly was thrust upon the four non-socialist arties, they acted in 1965 like old comrades-in-arms now forcefully stressing that the advantages of co-operation far outweighed the disadvantages, that the difficulties are more imaginary than real.

After August, 1963, it was impossible for the non-socialist parties to return to their former positions of clearly defined and separate entities in the political *milieu* with only a superficial resemblance in aims and methods. After the coalition experiment in August 1963 and the victory at the polls in 1965 it will be very difficult indeed for the non-socialist parties to try to convince the electorate of the validity of this "political apartheid". Since 1965 the emphasis has been placed heavily on cooperation and common interests, in words and actions.

This amounts to a totally new element in Norwegian politics. In their first 13 months in coalition, they have agreed on one thing: To stay together and to stay in power. This is the yardstick coalition parties use themselves: Does it or does it not strengthen our common position?

The new situation in the long run will perhaps lead to an assimilation of attitudes and policies and slow disintegration of structural differences between the coalition parties. Or pressure will build up in one or more of the four parties for a more individual policy. Coalitions are usually a transitional phenomenon.

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