

## The Norwegian Coalition System

During the parliamentary period 1965–1969 the Storting has witnessed the functioning of the first ordinary coalition government in Norway's recent history, undisturbed by any dramatic interruptions or any considerable changes in personnel.

It may reasonably be asked whether this co-operative form of government has produced changes, whether formal or real, in any of the more general political forms of co-existence at the parliamentary level. What work pattern has the government followed internally as well as externally, especially in relation to the Storting? Have new elements been introduced into Norwegian national government which derive from the structure of the coalition, or has the traditional work pattern for a government generally been followed, as was the case during the period 1945–1961, when the Labor Party had an absolute majority in the Storting and thereby exercised the right to govern.

One of the reasons for raising such questions is that the Borten coalition government, 1965–1969, has consisted of four different independent parties, the Conservative, the Christian Peoples, the Centre, and the Liberal, which have never before co-operated in any joint government if one excludes the Lyng coalition government, which functioned for only four weeks in the summer of 1963. In the period between the two world wars minority governments were in office – consisting of only *one* party. Some of the parties compete to some extent for the same section of the electorate, and a few years ago some of them were at daggers drawn as a result of old schisms and antagonisms.

In this survey it will not be necessary to go too deeply into the details or actual controversies of this period of government. I shall aim at an analysis and a more general description of the work patterns and the structure adopted by the government. Since it is the case that no comprehensive material is available, one must necessarily resort to conjectures and imprecise conclusions.

The composition and leadership of the government took its final shape at the negotiations between the four parties after the election on 13 September 1965. Nearly two weeks elapsed between the choosing of the Prime Minister and the final ministerial appointment. In order that the coalition government should appear to be orientated towards the centre the majority was in favor of having a prime minister come from one of the intermediate parties, and the balloting and consultations within the four parties showed that the Centre Party's parliamentary leader and chairman, Per Borten, had greater support than the Liberal Party's parliamentary leader, Bent Røiseland. None of the three intermediate parties (the Christian Peoples, the Centre, and the Liberal) had in any convincing way proved itself to be the strongest. The number of seats held by each party after the election was as follows: Conservative 31, Liberal 18, Centre 18 and Christian Peoples's Party 13.

The number of seats held was to some extent the basis on which the distribution of ministries between the parties was made, the result here being 6,3,3,3 respectively. Only if it did *not* prove possible to agree on a candidate from the intermediate parties, could the Conservative Party provide the prime minister. Such agreement was not at first obtained and in fact the prime minister was chosen by voting in party groups and totalling the votes cast. The Centre Party's candidate, Per Borten, obtained a clear majority in the largest party group, the Conservative, which turned the tide in his favor. Since the office of prime minister went to the Centre Party, the latter was allotted two departments that are comparatively unimportant when regarded in the widest political context: the Ministry of Fisheries and the Prices and Incomes Ministry.

After lengthy negotiations the parties completed the distribution of the remaining ministries – and in these negotiations tactical and personal considerations played a great role. Under the circumstances the Conservative Party was bound to get the Foreign Ministry, which stands next in prestige to the prime ministership, and it was taken over by the party's former parliamentary leader, John Lyng, who had been head of the brief coalition govern-

ment in the summer of 1963 after the King's Bay crisis. The alternative was the Finance Ministry, but in that case it was unlikely that Lyng would have joined the government. The Liberal Party got the Finance Ministry as its most important office, but since the party had taken so strong a line in the election on housing, it also obtained sway over the Ministry of Local Government and Labor.

The political dispensation of the Ministry of the Church and Education aroused the greatest controversy. It was against considerable disapproval, especially within the Liberal Party, that the Christian People's Party took sway over this Ministry.

The party political earmarking of the various positions in the cabinet that took place on the formation of the government has been maintained throughout the duration of this parliament. There has hardly been any serious discussion at a responsible level within the coalition regarding a re-distribution of the ministries between the parties before the parliamentary election in September 1969. Nor did the result of the municipal elections in 1967 provide the occasion for any such discussion. Most of the suggestions in the press regarding changes in the government and in the allocation of ministries have nearly always been related to the future, as to what should happen in the next parliamentary period from 1969-1973 if the coalition parties continue to have a majority in the Storting.

After the prime minister was chosen, he became gradually acquainted with the composition of his government through his participation in the negotiations on behalf of his own party. The prime minister's role during the formation of the government was therefore considerably more passive than during the formation of an ordinary one-party government. It is too strong to say that he was deprived of jurisdiction, but he had little influence outside the councils of his own party. But even as leader of the government the prime minister in a coalition administration of four parties has extremely limited possibilities of bringing about dismissals from or exchanges in the cabinet without causing severe repercussions on government co-operation as a whole. Indeed, his actual ability to take any initiative in replacing a cabinet minister who does not belong to his own party must certainly be said to be small.

A communication from the prime minister to one of the coalition parties to the effect that a cabinet minister is, for example, no longer *politically* suited to be the head of his ministry would indeed in most cases be interpreted as an open challenge to that party and consequently to one and all of its cabinet ministers in the coalition government. We must always bear in mind that the prime minister himself has obtained his position on the basis of negotiations between four independent parties.

The Borten coalition government can point to a rare stability in its composition throughout the life of this parliament, a stability without parallel in Norwegian post-war politics. In the course of four years the head of only one Ministry - the Ministry of Fisheries - has been replaced.

Oddmund Myklebust, the Minister of Fisheries, was granted sick leave on 22 March 1968, and Einar Moxnes was appointed a cabinet minister the same day, both being members of the Centre Party. When Myklebust was allowed to resign on 8 November 1968, Moxnes was finally named as Minister of Fisheries. Both persons concerned in this matter belong to the prime minister's party. The question was primarily dealt with in the Centre Party and did not affect the coalition as a whole.

It is impossible to say definitely whether the stability of the government's personnel is a direct consequence of its party structure and the way it was composed. There is nevertheless reason to assume that some connection or other can be found, and this matter may be amplified by future coalition governments. Even though four parties really have a hand in the composition, a dismissal arising from political or functional questions can easily be interpreted as weakness. The parties can, in such a situation, have no difficulty in retaining a cabinet minister in order to mark their independence and their political line, while the prime minister's power of disposition in this field is severely limited. Other factors have certainly played an important role as regards the stability of the personnel, as will be shown later.

We have already assumed that the prime minister's position in a coalition government like the Norwegian is somewhat weakened compared with what it would have been in an ordinary one-party government. Has this factor, together with the "partywise earmaking" of the individual ministries, strengthened the individual cabinet minister's power and independence in real terms?

It is difficult to give a clear yes or no answer to such a question, but I raise it because of, *inter alia*, the public discussion taking place in Norway, in which one can find assertions in some articles to the effect that N. N. is the most powerful cabinet minister in the country's post-war history, etc.

It has clearly been the line and wish of the governing parties to put themselves forward as members of a good and efficient co-operative team, especially because only in this way can they be a credible alternative government in the view of the electorate, in the future as well. If the co-operation should break down, they would immediately be compromised in this view of the electorate. The need to pull together was obviously a guiding star for each and every party within the coalition throughout the life of this parliament. But such a need almost automatically comes into conflict with another that each and every party has also emphasized externally for the last few years: the parties are autonomous and independent. Each has its own image and its own policy to expound – in order to attract more votes and strengthen its power base even at the expense of the other co-operating parties. In the field of tension between solidarity and independence the work of government has been something of a balancing act in which it has only too often been difficult to reconcile both requirements without ruptures and conflicts arising. In this field of tension one must examine the individual cabinet minister's methods of procedure, and, *inter alia*, evaluate their power.

Conflicts arising from this balancing act between solidarity and the independent image will, for example, be able to find expression in votes of confidence and dissents on the part of cabinet ministers.

In the life of this parliament only one vote of confidence was put to the Storting. The Minister of the Church and Education, Kjell Bondevik, did this on 18 September 1969 in a case relating to support for private schools which have parallels in the public sector. He could not accept a proposal from Olaf Kortner (Liberal) which deviated somewhat from the government's white paper and the line previously taken by the government. While the matter was being dealt with in the Storting the minister also indicated how far he was willing to go out of his way in this field, where the Christian People's Party, of all the government parties, is to the fore as a policy maker.

Kjell Bondevik was the first cabinet minister who publicly made it clear that he was prepared to stand or fall on a definite proposal. His case can scarcely be exceptional. There is every reason to reckon that several cabinet ministers have made it clear or hinted, behind the scenes in parliamentary lobbies or government conferences, that if their proposal or line of action was not followed by the coalition, they would take their departure.

The threat of a vote of confidence from an individual cabinet minister has far greater effect under a coalition administration than in a one-party government with a clear majority. In the latter case one can without any considerable difficulty let a cabinet minister go comparatively quietly if it appears, partly from enquiries made behind the scenes, that the majority of the governing party or of the Storting do not share his view. The pattern is far more complicated in a government of Borten's type. Generally the whole of his party will support the cabinet minister concerned, especially if he is firmly rooted in his party's policy in the field in question. A cabinet minister who resigns can easily take his whole party with him and thereby one is confronted with a total and not a partial government crisis.

As yet little definite can be said as to how this affected Borten's coalition government. But the thought that agreement was an important pre-condition for continuing to wield political power must in this context have given rise to a sort of "blackmail system", which has conferred on some cabinet ministers greater support, and indeed power, than was polit-

ically warranted in the case in question. The awareness of the parliamentary groups that a vote against a cabinet minister in an important matter, even though opinion in the government itself was divided, could imperil the whole coalition and co-operation has clearly been a significant source of power for the government over the said groups, and for individual ministers over elements of opposition within the other government parties.

There have therefore been considerable possibilities of a minor party's being able to "force" the whole government and the coalition parties to accept its special point of view without, for example, having any majority support in the Storting. The parties within the government have had a sort of "veto system" at their disposal. The chairman of one of the government parties, Gunnar Garbo (Liberal), commented on the situation as it appeared to his party in an address at the party's national rally on 2 May 1969: "The Liberal Party constitutes the radical wing of the coalition government. It is not at all probable that the opposition will support a right-wing cause. But when the Liberal Party fights for its own point of view, the situation will, on the other hand, often be that the opposition is wholly or partly in agreement with us. In such cases we, in other words, represent a majority in the Storting. If we fail in our cause, it can be the case that the decision that is taken is in reality only supported by a minority."

In order to improve their party image and to indicate their independence there has been a clear tendency for the parties, and first and foremost their organs of publicity, to focus attention on their respective cabinet ministers in the government. We are faced with a system under which the parties will extract all the benefits they can out of co-operation while at the same time giving the most unilateral party political slant possible to such benefits. The whole thing can be characterized as "ministerial one-man bands".

In the early years of the government's function it was, for example, not at all uncommon for individual cabinet ministers to state publicly that "the Ministry will propose to the government" to do this or that. Such an expression is uncommon under a one-party government. In both cases the government and the individual ministries are to be considered a unit, a body with collective responsibility.

There is a third field in which one is able to register the tense relationship between solidarity and independence. It concerns formal dissents to the government's propositions and reports to the Storting and other decisions taken in the cabinet.

It is still a little early to make a complete survey of the number of formal dissents during the life of this parliament, but it is clear that there are more of them and that they concern more important matters than, for example, during a four-year period under a Labor Government. Dissents are often registered in questions in which there is no open threat to the government's existence or in more peripheral questions affecting general policy. It can be mentioned that the Christian People's Party's cabinet ministers on two occasions dissented as regards family planning in developing countries, because of the party's strong religious background. The Conservative cabinet ministers have, for example, dissented to a government announcement concerning the language question and to state support to the press. In a number of cases in which appointments have been made, dissents have been registered. The most startling dissent occurred in connection with the appointment of Dean Per Lønning, a former Conservative member of the Storting, to the bishopric in Borg, when the majority of the government had a different opinion from the Prime Minister and the cabinet minister concerned, without this having the slightest consequences for the government. On the other hand, there was not a single dissent in relation to the government's most important measure in this parliamentary period, the alteration of the Norwegian income tax and sales tax system. There is every reason to believe that dissents are often registered after a carefully weighed tactical evaluation of the parliamentary consequences and thereby the character of the measure.

The tense relationship we are concerned with can also have a fourth result: a dearth of clearly defined views in the government's proposals to the Storting.

For a number of years a considerable section of the press and the press organizations have, with support from some of the parties, worked for state support to newspapers. The government appointed a committee of its own to elucidate the question and to put forward concrete proposals. In the course of the government's proceedings it became manifest that there was considerable disagreement, and especially the Conservative cabinet ministers were strongly against the arrangements proposed. The Finance Ministry was also opposed in principle to the State's undertaking the burden of supporting the Norwegian press by means of, *inter alia*, paper subsidies. In its report to the Storting, the government as a collective body took up no definite standpoint. On the other hand the Ministry of Prices and Incomes, which was responsible for issuing the report, came out clearly in favor of State support. The government avoided an open conflict. They left it to the Storting to take up the conclusive standpoint. A certain dearth of clearly defined views also made itself felt in the notorious Borregaard affair, which occupied the attention of the Storting and the government from spring 1968 to 1 January 1969. It was a question of a State guarantee against the political risks involved in connection with the Borregaard concern's industrial investments in Brazil. Disagreement and uncertainty within the government, together with differing opinions within the coalition groups in the Storting, resulted in the government's requesting the Storting to give its views before the final government decision.

A dearth of definite views cannot be said to be a special characteristic of the government during the period 1965-69, but the manifestations that appeared have a close connection with the party and government structure. Otherwise we must take it into account that the government has had a tendency in minor issues to leave it to the parliamentary groups to hammer out the final compromises necessary for political co-operation. The government has often given its consent to a compromise that has had to be put forward by committees. In its practical work plan the Borten government has followed the normal pattern of work for a Norwegian government. There is no reason to go into such details here.

Nevertheless, in following the practical working plan, have organs and forms of work been introduced with the express intention of solving problems of co-operation, suppressing conflicts, and hammering out a policy that has as its driving force the demonstration of solidarity and unity? The picture is far from unambiguous.

The political leadership in every ministry has been "one-track". In contrast to what has been the case with coalition governments in other countries, there has been no attempt at creating any sort of political balance by, for example, nominating a deputy minister of a different party allegiance to the cabinet minister's. Every cabinet minister has been quite free as regards choosing his nearest political colleague. Indeed, the head of one ministry, Kjell Bondevik, the Minister of the Church and Education, went to rather great lengths as regards building up a "political secretariat", something which is not common in Norwegian central administration.

By leaving complete control of each ministry to each individual cabinet minister any systematic surveillance of each other's activity within the government itself has been avoided. The general impression is that each individual ministry has been quite free to run its own affairs without any special requirement as regards communicating with or giving information to the prime minister's office beyond what has otherwise been the practice.

Because four parties have participated in the coalition, and the political discords therefore could be great, government conferences have been held rather more frequently than has otherwise been the practice, and they have also to some extent been of longer duration. This can, however, easily be explained by, for instance, the method by which the prime minister possibly wishes to conduct such conferences or simply by personal characteristics. Indeed, one is left with the impression that capable cabinet ministers, who do not wish to ride their parties' hobbyhorses constantly in all sorts of questions, attached comparatively little importance to government conferences but preferred to be left undisturbed in the working of their respective ministries.

With four competing parties in the government no real cabinet "esprit de corps" could be expected. A certain caution and a more reserved approach in putting forward problems before the rest of the collective body have marked the conferences when dealing with difficult questions. Under such a coalition government one easily acquires a work milieu and an attitude to negotiations that can remind one of a parliamentary committee's way of proceeding, in which one first cautiously feels one's way in order to register where the different standpoints and divisions are to be found. A great number of the heads of ministries are former members of the Storting and have undoubtedly taken with them some of their working habits from the Storting.

Immediately after its formation the coalition government appointed a number of deputy ministers. Most of them were recruited on what was plainly a party political basis. There is every indication that this group has been accorded greater influence than formerly in the decision-making process. A number of permanent and ad hoc committees have been formed to include deputy ministers who have dealt with questions of great importance. The government has not had anything that can be called an inner cabinet. On the other hand we can consider some of the deputy ministerial committees as second and third echelons of government.

In order to show the breadth of the system it can be mentioned that there have been four permanent deputy ministerial committees:

1. for public nominations and appointments,
2. for local political committees,
3. a planning committee (for the speech from the throne and the government's half yearly accounts of its general activity),
4. an advisory committee for long-term planning and budget proposals.

The last-named committee has probably been the most important. In addition the government has appointed ad hoc committees that have, *inter alia*, dealt with such important matters as the new hospital legislation, the report on structure problems in Norwegian industry, and the proposals for the setting up of the most comprehensive tax reforms in Norway since 1911.

Complicated and controversial matters, in which open party conflicts have been latent, have proved difficult to resolve by means of lengthy discussions in the cabinet itself. It has therefore been the case that the deputy ministerial committees, in which each and every party has been represented, have had the main task of hammering out the basic compromise for the government's decision. The deputy ministerial system has in many ways succeeded in solving some of the problems of co-operation with which a coalition government of the Borten type is faced.

Some of the deputy ministers, on whom political and constitutional responsibility does not rest, have nevertheless been largely responsible for the political guidance and initiative in important political questions. In this set-up a very special position has been occupied by the deputy minister in the prime minister's office, Emil Vindselmo. He has in fact been in charge of most of the negotiations, at home and abroad, regarding Norway's position in a wider Nordic co-operation, and was also at the time responsible for the delegations connected with Norway's application for membership in EEC.

In relation to the different party groups in the Storting and to the Storting as a whole, certain new features are to be discerned, even though the main impression is nevertheless that the same work pattern and some of the same means of reaching a decision as before 1965 have been retained.

After the prime ministership was allotted to the Centre Party, the parliamentary leader of the Liberal Party, Bent Røiseland, was given the task of being "the joint parliamentary leader". The position has been quite informal, with its work and responsibilities undefined. Røiseland simultaneously held the posts of president of the Lagting, parliamentary leader



of the Liberal Party, and in addition chairman of the Storting's foreign and constitutional committee.

The position as joint parliamentary leader has had few formal manifestations. The most notable was that Røiseland was the coalition's first spokesman in the great political debate undertaken in every autumn session, relating to the speech from the throne, in which, according to tradition, it should have been the leader of the largest government party, the Conservative Party leader, Svenn Stray.

Røiseland has been regarded as chairman of the body of group leaders within the coalition, but it is primarily an informal institution that has not worked in accordance with any definite meeting schedule but which seeks to make contact in special cases in which one or more of the group leaders finds it serviceable or necessary for co-ordinating policy or clarifying certain conflicting situations. In relation to the government it has been the case that Røiseland has been the one who perhaps has stood in closest contact with the government leadership, but normally the group leaders have together met the government or the individual cabinet ministers when there have been important matters to be dealt with. The informal and more fortuitous pattern of communication set the tone generally for all connections in this field.

The co-ordination of the government policy in the Storting takes place, in the first instance, through the permanent committees of the national assembly. After the changes of government in 1965 it became even more common for the government parties to hold sectional meetings in common when dealing with important and controversial questions. In dealing with the national budget there eventually arose the clear practice that members of the opposition on the permanent finance committee generally discussed the budget and its presentation by themselves, while the government parties attempted to put forward their adjustments and comments through the medium of its sectional co-operation. The handling of the budget has in the course of this period led to a far more marked confrontation between the government side and the opposition than formerly, while at the same time only a minimum of changes is accepted in the government's presentation of the budget.

The regular group meetings of the coalition parties every Wednesday have continued as before. There has never been any question of holding group meetings in common in order to discuss the problems. In this way each party stresses its own independence and autonomy. Throughout this parliamentary period only one joint group meeting was held, summoned and presided over by Bent Røiseland, albeit at the request of the Prime Minister. It occurred on 8 January 1969, two days before the government presented to the cabinet its comprehensive proposals for new income tax and sales tax systems. At the meeting the finance minister put members into the picture regarding the reforms and answered questions while members were permitted to make general comments. No resolution was passed. The whole thing must, *inter alia*, have been an attempt to sound opinion, and perhaps also to create a more uniform and positive attitude on the government benches during the forthcoming parliamentary debate.

But this meeting did not result in any demand for further joint meetings. The independence of the respective parties has also been underlined by the fact that the individual cabinet ministers only attended meetings in their respective party groups, at which they put members in the picture as regards current government affairs and answered questions. No member of the government, of course, has any right to vote in a parliamentary group.

Communication with the Storting has also normally taken place through the cabinet minister's participation in committee meetings, but also quite often in meetings of the government section of the committee concerned. Important matters put forward by the government have often been outlined beforehand in the party groups, but since these are nevertheless most occupied with day-to-day work, their influence on the long-term political planning is greatly reduced.

The pattern that the cabinet ministers confined themselves to their respective party groups was also followed by the prime minister, who only attended meetings in the Centre Party's

group. Rarely was any deliberate attempt on his part to put himself above the parties apparent, even though in 1968 he chose to resign the chairmanship of the Centre Party, partly on the grounds that it was difficult to reconcile this with the prime ministership.

Four years' of coalition government have shown that there has not been any considerable integration at all between the co-operating parties at any rate on formal lines. The parties have each put forward their own election program.

The co-operation as regards the election in 1969 had no greater compass than such co-operation in 1965.

### *Summary*

To answer briefly the questions raised at the outset, the discussion in this account shows that the Borten coalition government has not introduced any essential changes at all in the formal decision process at the parliamentary level in the Norwegian political system. Nor are the informal changes that we have been able to register of a fundamentally different character from the system under a one-party government. It all goes to show that the government system in its traditional construction works flexibly enough whatever the type of government.

In the struggle between co-operation and maintaining one's own party image the coalition government has to a considerable degree preferred the latter to the former. Since the party image approach was chosen, so that the parties could stand out as independent and autonomous as possible within the framework of co-operation, there has not been any further discussion of new forms of co-operation.

Contact with parliament has been maintained in the traditional way. It has been based on the cabinet ministers' contact with their respective party groups, contact with the government sections in the different parliamentary committees, and by comprehensive, informal personal contact. The position of joint parliamentary leader has not received any marked formal and powerful status. Only one joint group meeting was held in the whole period, a fact that must be said to be clear evidence of the choosing of the party image in preference to extended co-operation.

The government's stability in the matter of personnel is one of the most characteristic features of its activity. This can be due to many factors, especially personal ones, but it is also an indication that the parties must have been especially keen to preserve the positions gained on the formation of the government. The coalition has been marked outwardly by a joint external pressure towards solidarity, while inwardly the parties' wish to stress their own independence has created little, indeed nearly no, shifting in the governments' composition as well as its working pattern.

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