

Extreme Right Parties in Scandinavia

An overview

In Scandinavia four parties belong to the family of «Extreme Right Parties»: the Danish Progress Party (1972 -), the Norwegian Progress Party (1973 -), the Danish People's Party (1995 -) and the Swedish New Democracy (1991 -). It is, however, questionable if the label «extremist» is at all appropriate. In relation to a continental European context, the parties cannot be regarded as extremist but in a Scandinavian context they are definitely deviant or extreme compared with the bulk of the other parties which are rather conventional.

The Progress parties were formed as anti-tax parties, reacting against the rapid expansion of the welfare state. Initially, immigration was not even on the agenda. The Norwegian party was inspired by the success of the Danish party which had been launched in 1972 by tax lawyer Mogens Glistrup. Both parties had their electoral breakthrough in landslide elections in 1973 with 15.9 per cent for Glistrup and 5.0 per cent of the votes for its Norwegian sister party, originally named *Anders Lange's Party for a Strong Reduction in Taxes, Duties and Public Intervention* after the founder of the party.

Without any clear inspiration from abroad, a Swedish sister party emerged by 1990 when Ian Wachtmeister and Bert Karlsson met occasionally in an airport and decided to form a new party named *New Democracy*. These three sister parties were all formed by persons outside the networks of the old party system, as a protest against all other parties. The Swedish party turned out to be a «flash party» which nearly fell apart before its second election after its initial breakthrough with 6.7 percent. The party did not survive the next election. A likely explanation is extreme conflicts amongst the leadership at a critical stage.

The Danish party was consolidated under the leadership of Mogens Glistrup in the 1970s but has experienced chronic turbulence in leadership ever since. While Glistrup was imprisoned for tax evasion in the early 1980s, Pia Kjaersgaard took over his seat in Parliament and managed to capture real leadership of the party. As Glistrup became more and more extreme and was increasingly marginalized within the party, he launched a new and more radical party in 1990: the Party of Well-being. It never managed to run for elections, however. Glistrup was expelled from the Progress Party and lost public attention.

In 1995, mainly due to personal power struggles, Progress Party leader Pia Kjærsgaard formed a new party of her own. In the beginning, the new party, *the Danish People's Party*, did not deviate ideologically from the Progress Party. But it soon abandoned the last remnants of a neoliberal heritage from the Progress Party and focused on the issue of immigration and on nationalistic appeals. In the 1998 election, the Danish People's Party obtained 7.4 per cent of the votes and emerged as the *de facto* successor of the Progress Party. The old party only survived (with 2.4 per cent of the votes) because of the personal popularity of its leader, Kirsten Jacobsen. However, things went completely out of control when the delegates at the 1999 party congress admitted the old Mogens Glistrup (born 1926) party membership, in recognition of his achievements as the founder of the party. Glistrup immediately exploited the media's interest and launched a series of very extreme statements against Muslims. The MPs demanded that Glistrup be excluded and when they were overruled, all four MPs left the party (but remained in Parliament as a group without the intention of launching a new party). According to opinion

polls, the Progress Party does not seem to have any chance of recovery. Thus, the Danish People's Party is the only successor of the Progress Party. Since the breakdown of competition from the Progress Party in 1999, support for the Danish People's Party in opinion polls has typically varied between 10 and 15 per cent, depending on the public debate over immigration problems.

Until the beginning of the 1980s the Danish Progress Party remained clearly stronger than its Norwegian counterpart. Gradually, however, the Norwegian party became the more successful. In the 1997 parliamentary election it seized the position as the second largest party, with a support equal to its Danish counterpart in the 1973 breakthrough election which remains the peak of its success. The Norwegian party has survived critical phases. The founder of the party, Anders Lange, suddenly died in 1974, at a moment when the party seemed doomed to fall apart. For some years, the party was in a chaotic situation with a shifting leadership. The party was voted out of parliament in 1977, and few commentators believed that the party would recover. However, the aspiring party leader Carl I. Hagen proved such assessments wrong. Since 1978, Carl I. Hagen has been chairman and the undisputed leader of the party. He has even been described as the «owner» of the party. This has not prevented quarrels and controversies, and several vice chairmen and aspiring leaders have dropped out in protest. But none of them has seriously tried to launch new parties.

The Norwegian Progress Party has had its ups and downs but in the 1987 local election it exceeded 10 per cent for the first time. Not surprisingly, this election was coloured by the immigrant question which was raised in the second half of the 1980s as a consequence of the dramatic increase in the number of asylum-seekers. Just as in Denmark. In the subsequent parliamentary election in 1989, the party received an even better result (13.0 per cent), helped by confusion and disagreement within the bourgeois bloc over the relationship with the Progress Party. However, soon after this success, a conflict between «extreme liberals» and «populists» emerged. The conflict culminated in 1994 with a split, four MPs out of ten left the party together with the youth organisation which was itself a neoliberal stronghold. Nevertheless, the subsequent 1995 local election turned out to be a victory. The explanation seems to be simple – the immigrant question once again emerged as a central issue. Among those who voted for the Progress Party and in the election survey could mention the most important issue for their party choice, one-half referred to the immigrant question. The party appeared for many voters as a single issue party: nearly 90 per cent of those who regarded the immigrant question as the most important voted for the Progress Party. As the party has «issue-ownership» of the immigrant question, it has had an electoral advantage whenever this issue reaches the forefront. But in the 1997 election campaign the immigrant issue was not highlighted and indeed, the party also has other rallying cries when necessary.

For some months in the autumn of 2000, the Progress Party ranked as the number one party in Norwegian opinion polls. Commentators were shocked by the small anti-tax party from the 1970s becoming the largest party in Norway with support from approximately one-third of the respondents. In this period the immigration question was not a salient issue. One source of support for the Progress Party was, however, the discontent attached to soaring fuel prices, which in several European countries triggered protest demonstrations. The Progress Party forcefully argued in favour of cuts in oil-taxes. As the Norwegian fuel taxes are at a record high, the fuel prices are among the highest in the world. This may easily appear paradoxical, as the surge in oil prices also meant a lot of money in oil-revenues to the Norwegian government or rather to the state-owned oil-fund.

As a consequence of all the oil-money a new conflict issue has appeared in Norway: Should the oil-revenues be spent, or should they be saved? To some extent, all the political parties agree on spending oil-money. The question is – how much? The Progress Party has been the clearest exponent of the spending alternative. At the same time the Progress Party wants to cut taxes, but much less forcefully than in the 1970s. Normally this calculation does not add up – the old adage that you cannot spend more public money and cut taxes at the same time. But with oil-fund resources available, what is ordinarily considered a wrong may easily appear as accurate. However, nearly all the other parties complain that this policy is irresponsible and will have many bad consequences. It will heat up the economy, lead to increasing inflation, and in the long run unemployment will increase.

In this way, Hagen and the Progress Party are a channel for opposition to the Establishment, not only to official immigrant policy but also to economic policy. However, what the Progress Party ranks as its first priority is not really controversial at all: Most parties including the Progress Party hold the opinion that the most urgent problem in Norway today is the deficiency in the health sector and care for the elderly. The Progress Party has gradually built up a reservoir of trust in the voters' eyes. The party's «competence image» on this valence issue is high. A survey in November 2000 revealed that no other party had such a high score in the evaluation of the party with the best policy for the elderly. As the Progress Party has never been in government it is also without responsibility for the deficiencies in the welfare sector. The party has never ruled and hence never erred. Surely, it is a definite advantage that the party easily appears to be the only alternative to the dominant political course. However, the Progress Party has been eager to enter the government. This is especially important perhaps for Carl I. Hagen as the development of the party can be regarded as his life-project. His aim may be to end his career with a seat in the government, a personal triumph: the outsider become insider. In order to succeed the party must in Hagen's words be «responsible and predictable». This strategy implies that the free-speaking element of the party, especially on the immigrant question, must be silenced or expelled. A lot of internal struggles in the party have resulted and a fundamental question can be posed: the Progress Party has always been an anti-Establishment party and, if the party becomes a part of the Establishment, will the *raison d'être* of the party then disappear with voter defections as a result?

The transformation of the party into a more acceptable and reliable potential partner in a centre-right government has been unexpectedly difficult. Two MPs have been expelled with reference to illoyal behaviour *vis-à-vis* the party. One of them has strong grassroots support in his own constituency. His expulsion has consequently aroused both bitterness and accusations of undemocratic procedures. As a result, alternative lists under other labels than the Progress Party have emerged for the forthcoming 2001 parliamentary election. The consequences may easily be the launching of a new party. Carl I. Hagen fought his battle on many fronts. Even leading figures in his own camp of «loyal» members have been dethroned. Hagen's own crown prince, Terje Søviknes, was forced to leave his position as a vice chairman. He tried to prevent the public disclosure of a sex scandal, but finally admitted to a sexual encounter with a 16-year old girl during a convention of the party's youth organisation.

Carl I. Hagen's original plan was to redress the party in order to be prepared for a governmental position. It has so far been highly unsuccessful. The effects have been the opposite of his intentions. The party appears *less* reliable than before, and it has lost its position as the largest party in the opinion polls. However, in spite of all the turbulence the party has not collapsed and still appears to gain considerable support. In the opinion polls from May 2001 support has been at the lower edge of 15 per cent.

The Progress parties' political message has changed somewhat over time with consequences for the social profile of the voters. Three phases can be discerned which also follow a chronology: anti-tax, neo-liberalism, and anti-immigration. The start was a tax-revolt, then gradually the Progress parties advocated pro-market solutions and in the 1970s became a forerunner for neo-liberalism which step by step has spread from the right to the left on the party-political spectrum. From the second half of the 1980s the immigration appeared as a salient issue. The anti-immigration profile of the parties contributed to a proletarianization of the voters. The share of blue collar workers increased as well as those with low educational attainment. As the Danish People's Party has a more outspoken anti-immigrant message than the Norwegian Progress Party it makes sense that the Danish party has a clearer working-class profile than its sister-party in the north. Even before the introduction of the immigrant question the Danish Progress Party had a stronger representation of blue collar workers than other non-socialist parties, but it is since the mid-1980s that the working-class representation has become disproportionately high. Similar patterns have been registered for the Norwegian party. Some traits in the social profile are however stable: male dominance and disproportionately high recruitment from private sector. Concerning age, the Norwegian Progress Party and the New Democracy clearly have had their strongest foothold in the youngest cohorts. However, in the most recent elections the age distribution in the Norwegian party has levelled out somewhat. As regards Denmark, a deviation can be noted. In contradiction to what is the most normal pattern regarding the Extreme Right Parties, the two Danish parties have had a stronghold among rather old voters.

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Table. Electoral support for the Progress Parties and the Danish People's Party, 1973-2002. Percentages.

Norway

Norway: electoral support for the Progress Party														
1973	1975	1977	1979	1981	1983	1985	1987	1989	1991	1993	1995	1997	1999	2001
Pa	Lo	Pa	Lo	Pa	Lo	Pa	Lo	Pa	Lo	Pa	Lo	Pa	Lo	Pa
5.0	1.4	1.9	2.5	4.5	6.3	3.7	12.3	13.0	7.0	6.3	12.0	15.3	13.4	14.7

Denmark

	1973	1975	1977	1979	1981	1984	1987	1988	1990	1994	1998	2002
Danish People's Party											7.4	12.0
Progress Party	15.9	13.6	14.6	11.0	8.9	3.6	4.8	9.0	6.4	6.4	2.4	0.6

Norway: Pa=Parliamentary election, Lo=Local elections; Denmark: Parliamentary elections only. Source: Statistical Yearbooks