

Sussex Migration Working Papers

Matter of Decency?

The Progress Party in Norwegian Immigration Politics

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Summary

This paper is about the Progress Party and the part this political party plays in Norwegian immigration politics. The Progress Party has marked itself as a party in opposition to the dominant immigration- and integration policies in Norway, and has to a significant degree drawn popular support for its anti-immigration politics. Adjectives such as anti-immigration, rightwing, populist, new right are often used to describe the party, and can certainly provide the first few indications of what kind of political party this is. But if we look at the party political landscape of Norway and the position of the Progress Party within this, the question is not only what the Progress Party is, but what they are made into by their political opponents. This paper is about the Progress Party and what they say, but also about their opponents, what they say about the party and how they construct their enemy

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Preface

This paper is a revised version of a paper given at a research seminar of the Sussex Centre for Migration Research on 28 February 2001. I would like to thank the seminar participants for their useful comments and questions. This work was carried out during a period at Sussex as a Marie Curie Fellow at Sussex, as part of the 'Migration and Asylum Research Training Initiative'. The initiative is funded by a grant of the European Commission, contract number HPMT-CT-2000-00043. I would like to thank the Sussex Centre for Migration Research for providing this opportunity to spend time at Sussex, and in particular I want to thank Professor Ralph Grillo for the many stimulating conversations we had during my stay at Sussex.

Introduction

In the summer and fall of 2000, more than 30 per cent of the respondents in several opinion polls said they would vote for the Progress Party. According to these polls, the Progress Party was the largest political party in Norway for a period. While Norwegian politics in general receive little or no attention in international mass media, the British media at least has paid attention to the strong position of the anti-immigration right wing in Norway. So why is the Progress Party the only thing of interest which is happening in Norwegian politics? It is worth pointing out that in Norway too, hardly any political party receives as much attention in the mass media as does the Progress Party. First, there is a certain degree of scandalous potential in a party like the Progress Party, as disturbing to the Guardian readership as it is to the political, intellectual and cultural establishment in Norway. Thus the Progress Party makes interesting news stories. But I wonder if it is also something about the almost perverse combination of Norway and the idea of a xenophobic right-wing party such as this. With almost no unemployment and still plenty of oil in the North Sea – why do people vote for the Progress Party? This is not a question I will be able to answer in this paper, suffice it to say that the rationale of voting for the Progress Party should not be reduced to anti-immigration sentiments only¹. On the other hand, if one wants to understand Norwegian immigration politics, it is impossible to overlook the part played by the Progress Party. Whatever their influence on actual Progr not be deb

From 1985 to 1987 the number of asylum-seekers increased steeply. While only a few hundred asylum-seekers arrived in the early eighties, as many as 8,600 people applied for asylum in Norway in 1987. The newspapers were full of articles about new arrivals, and concerns arose about what to do with these 'streams' and 'flows' of refugees entering the country. The lack of an institutional apparatus to receive and house these people and process their asylum applications did indeed cause problems. Processing times were long, many asylum-seekers were housed in mountain resort hotels, sometimes generating discontent in the local communities and feeding arguments about all the benefits asylum-seekers received for free that were allegedly out of reach for most Norwegians. On the other hand, anti-racist movements also gained ground and with it, accusations of 'public racism' [*statlig rasisme*] in the authorities' dealings with the asylum-seekers (see Brox 1991).

In the midst of these events, the Progress Party began to speak about immigration and position itself in opposition to the dominant immigration policies. This is also when they began to advance on the opinion polls. Immigration was politicised in the early seventies in the sense that this was when the authorities started to develop policies for immigration control and for the integration of immigrants into Norwegian society. As mentioned, the first government white paper on immigration was published in 1973. However, if by politicised we mean that immigration became an issue that mattered for voters, 1985-1987 was the period when this happened (Bjørklund 1999). The

Progress Party were the ones who brought the issue onto the political agenda in the sense that the party publicly tried to make a conflict issue out of it, also in the context of election campaigns.

Some remarks on the political system in Norway may be helpful at this stage. Norway has a proportional election system and a multi-party system. There have traditionally been two dominant parties in the post-war e(rty)]TJ0 -1.21 q-i

understanding of the need to control and regulate the influx of immigrants. The Progress Party was the only party that was openly critical to the reception of asylum-seekers and what they saw

opposition to that which is not decent – the Progress Party and their immigration politics.

Much, perhaps most, of the debate on immigration politics, as it takes place in the mass media, revolves around the Progress Party. They have been active in bringing the issue onto the public agenda, successfully presenting themselves as the only party challenging the other parties' tacit consensus on immigration and thus 'representing' popular scepticism. They have what election researchers describe as *issue ownership* to immigration politics (Bjørklund 1999, Aardal et al. 1999). This means that some parties seem to 'own' certain controversial issues in the sense that voters have clear opinions as to which party is the best in dealing with these (Aardal et al. 1999: 23). Not only are the Progress Party's adherents much more likely to mention immigration among the most important issues for casting their vote, also people who do not vote for them often mention their immigration policies as the most – or least – preferable⁴.

⁴ In the general election of 1997, when immigration politics was low on the agenda during the election campaign, 20 per cent of the Progress Party's electorate mentioned immigration among the most important issues, while as much as 28 per cent of all voters was of the opinion that the Progress Party had the best policy regarding reception of immigrants (Aardal et al 1999: 25).

But is the Progress Party really important in the shaping of Norwegian immigration politics? They are rarely in a majority when immigration related bills and issues are debated or voted on in parliament. Their points of view concerning immigration have hardly met one favourable response from political commentators or fellow politicians. More important than their ability to achieve support for their proposals in the *Storting* is perhaps that the Progress Party, with the success they have enjoyed under the headline of restrictive immigration politics, has itself become an object of concern among the other parties. Their periodically considerable success has often been conceived as more than mere competition, but as a political and moral problem in itself. Firstly, their success indicates the presence of xenophobia and prejudices in the population. Secondly, they are seen to increase the presence of such sentiments by the ways in which they argue about immigration and immigrants. In this sense the Progress Party, and the kinds of sentiments it is seen to embody, has itself become a part of the problem of immigration politics. It is this double position of the Progress Party – marginalized from, but still at the heart of

The Progress Party before immigration politics

The Progress Party was founded in 1973 as a right-wing protest party under the unchallenged leadership of Anders Lange, who also gave the party its original name: 'Anders Lange's Party for strong reductions in taxes, duties and public interventions'. The too powerful state was the new party's enemy. It positioned itself as opposing all other parties, who were concertedly seen to be responsible for the ongoing growth in bureaucracy, public intervention and taxation levels. Thus, the Progress Party has from day one challenged the predominant conception of Norwegian politics as consisting of two opposed blocks, the socialist and the non-socialist, led respectively by the Labour Party and the Conservative Party.

Changing phases of electoral triumphs and destructive internal struggles have also characterised the party throughout its existence. With a very brief platform, under the heading 'We are tired of being exploited by state capitalism', they quite unexpectedly succeeded in having four representatives elected to the *Storting* in 1973. Anders Lange's authoritarian style soon conflicted with those who wanted a more conventional party organisation with party programmes, membership and congresses. His death in 1975 did little to ease the tensions, but it did bring his opponent and deputy, Carl I. Hagen, a seat in the Parliament⁵. Hagen became the chairman of the Progress Party in 1978 and managed to consolidate the many groups that over the years had broken with the original Anders Lange's Party. Most commentators, inside and outside the party, seem to agree that his political and oratory talents and capacities are at the core of the party's survival and success.

Was Anders Lange's Party concerned with immigration? It was not mentioned in their brief political platform from 1973. In the more extensive account of the party's principles that was formulated in 1975⁶, they were at pains to explain that they were not a neo-nazi or neo-fascist party, but there was no mention of immigration or migrants. However, the abolition

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large degree of equality, where one precisely tried to eradicate great differences between various groups of the population because this can create conflicts? In this sense one has in the Norwegian society – and I have no problems in giving credit to the Labour Party here – eradicated the old class distinctions [...] One wanted equality because this would be more peaceful, a better society than a society characterised by conflict (Carl I. Hagen, Progress Party, *Stortingstidende* (1996-97): 4029).

He thus makes a link between equality and peace and harmony. Furthermore, in doing this, he appeals to central values in the egalitarian Norwegian political tradition. The way he frames the attractions of equality is worth noting. It is the absence of conflict in an egalitarian society that is stressed. Alternatively one could have argued for equality in terms of justice or the rights of

However, to understand what makes the Progress Party stand out from the remaining parties in immigration political discourse, we need not only to look at their policies, but must also understand the position they occupy in relation to other parties. The distinction between the Progress Party and the remaining political parties has often been constructed in terms of moral and decency – *anstendighet* in Norwegian. As mentioned, when any other small party grows bigger, this changes the balance of power among the parties; when the Progress Party expands however, it is seen to symbolise that something morally disturbing is going on in politics and in the population. The source of this concern about the decency of politics, which the Progress Party provokes, can to a large extent be located in their immigration policies. Some election campaign episodes may be illuminating in this respect, and I will illustrate this through some examples from the election campaign in 1999¹².

The 1999 election campaign

The 1999 election campaign started with the Progress Party in what had come to be seen as their characteristic posture. MPs Øystein Hedstrøm and Vidar Kleppe appeared in open meetings on immigration politics – often referred to as ‘immigration shows’ – received massive attention in the press and were quoted with the kind of statements I referred above. The mass media were critical, but devoted much space to the pair, frequently referring to them in a vocabulary drawn from showbiz – show, circus, tour and so forth. In this sense they were ridiculed and not taken seriously as politicians and MPs, but at the same time their behaviour were seen as highly troubling in a moral sense. The kind of statements Kleppe and Hedstrøm were quoted on would later in the election campaign repeatedly be brought up by their opponents to illustrate the allegedly dominant attitude in the Progress Party – a kind of intertextuality which served to build up the image of the Progress Party as a party with an indecent take on immigration.

Carl I. Hagen’s relationship to Kleppe and Hedstrøm soon became more important than the MPs themselves. He did not distance himself from the way they spoke about immigrants and immigration. Kleppe and Hedstrøm were in the press increasingly referred to as *verstinger* – in English, literally ‘worstings’, a notion that previously has often been used about school kids with problems such as petty crime, truancy and violence. Were *verstingene* representative for the Progress Party’s policy? Several politicians and a

bishop challenged Hagen to reject the Kleppe and Hedstrøm’s performances and clarify what the party line really was. Few commentators expressed any degree of surprise over Hagen’s refusal to apologise for his colleagues’ conduct. They were seen as part of a game, a strategy consisting in ‘speaking with two tongues’. On the one hand, Hagen was to maintain the party’s image as a responsible and serious political party. On the other, Kleppe and Hedstrøm – the pitbulls as another journalist called them – were to appeal to prejudices and ignorance in the population, in short, to play on xenophobia.

This is an accusation that the Progress Party constantly has been exposed to since they first started to speak about immigration in the mid-eighties:

More knowledge and openness around what immigration implicates, for better and worse, will contribute to a more successful immigration politics. Unfortunately, many central representatives of the Progress Party contribute to the opposite. They misinform and build up under prejudices(et)-Ind ignorance (Jens Stoltenberg, Labour,

Dagbladet

09.08.99.).

They are not so much seen as being racist themselves, as to exploit the racist and xenophobic sentiments that exist in the population. This makes their practice appear in a morally dubious light – they woo the bad guys; they benefit from what should not have been there, and may even serve to strengthen prejudices and resistance to immigration within the population. This is put in opposition to the, on this matter, broad consensus among other parties, which is based on an allegedly decent immigration politics where a generous – but rarely specified – number of refugees are received, and where it is possible for immigrants to be integrated into Norwegian society in a less assimilatory way than that which the Progress Party advocates. However, while politicians

¹² See Hagelund 1999 for an extended analysis of immigration politics in the election campaign of 1999.

wrote a number of newspaper columns where they tried to create legitimacy for their own policies and practices by rejecting the extremist-label that had been attached to them and call upon values such as truth and honesty. The other parties pretend to be more decent, they claimed, but in reality they are not so different. The difference is that the Progress Party is honest. Thus they tried to undermine the other parties' attempts at making the Progress Party into something fundamentally different than them:

All larger parties in Norway know very well that only a small percentage of the refugees in the world can get residence in Norway. The

a party containing elements such as Kleppe and Hedstrøm? Didn't they thus contribute to make the Progress Party into a decent party like any other? Hagen made it clear that his support would not come without the Government making concessions, and demanded reductions in the numbers of so-called 'asylum immigrants'. The centre-parties refused. 'This is about putting decency before political positions', said one centrally placed MP (Gunnar Kvassheim, Liberal Party, *Dagsavisen* 06.07.99). The Prime Minister followed up:

As a country with a Christian and humanist cultural heritage, we must take responsibility for these people, without coupling it onto internal political games about the national budget (Kjell Magne Bondevik, Christian Democrats, *Dagsavisen* 06.07.99.).

We see that much energy has been spent in the election debates on demonstrating distance from the Progress Party on matters of immigration politics, while they are woo-able in other fields of policy when their support is needed in parliament. There is an image of immigration as belonging to another and more moral sphere than other political issues. To the extent the indecency of the Progress Party is restricted to their immigration policies they are on the one hand kept outside the political circles of respectability, while their numeric strength in the *Storting* can be made use of in the ever-important search for compromise and coalitions that characterise a parliamentary system under minority governments.

Conclusion

Progress Party discourse has a lot in common with right wing, anti-immigration discourse all over Europe. Parallels can certainly be drawn with Enoch Powell in Britain, the *Front Nationale* in France and Haider's Freedom Party in Austria. This material could also successfully undergo a linguistically orientated critical discourse analysis where the party's repeated denials of racism and rhetoric of being a responsible and decent party, could be dissected to demonstrate how their discourse is imbued with an ideological message that systematically serves to legitimise the privileged position of white Norwegians as opposed to immigrants, or what the Progress Party in their latest programme draft terms 'people with background outside the Western culture complex' (*kulturkrets*). I do not at all consider such analyses irrelevant, but am a bit concerned about the tendency to end up with some kind of good guy/bad guy scheme where one either ends up classifying almost every political statement as somehow racist, or draws a sharp dividing line in the political landscape

between the nice and the not so nice – or the decent and the indecent.

What I have tried to do here is to look less for subliminal expressions of racism, and more on the kind of *problematisations* the Progress Party – and in a larger project, also all the other political parties – has made of immigration. How has immigration emerged as a political problem, and what do these problematisations look like? What we have seen here, in the case of the Progress Party, is a movement from problematising immigration in terms of economy, expenses and welfare state issues, to problematising immigration in terms of culture and ethnic conflicts. This kind of movement from economy and welfare to culture can not only be observed in the discourse of the Progress Party, but also among other political parties and in the governing of immigration in general. As Norwegians increasingly describe themselves as living in a multicultural society, the dilemmas of multiculturalism occupies a larger part of the political agenda.

Without disregarding the very significant differences between Progress Party policies and what other Norwegian parties stand for, most parties are concerned about the same issues as the Progress Party is – they are concerned about controlling the influx of asylum-seekers and of managing cultural diversity in ways that does not threaten what is conceived to be Norwegian. In this sense, the otherness of the Progress Party in Norwegian immigration politics is perhaps most of all constituted by the position they occupy in political discourse as the anti-thesis to the decency of the other parties.

What I in general have found striking about my material – a material that does stretch wider than the Progress Party part of it that I have discussed here – is the emphasis that is put on *decency*. This kind of language – we are a decent party, we do lead a decent immigration politics, immigrants or asylum-seekers do get a decent treatment – is widespread among all the parties, including the Progress Party. Disagreements and conflicts in this field of politics revolves, to a large extent, on the meaning of decency, and what one can say and not say to remain within the limits of decency. This is not to claim that Norway or Norwegian politicians necessarily are extraordinarily good or decent. In terms of reception of refugees and asylum seekers for example, the country does not really stand out from other European countries.

I think it is important somehow to account for this dimension of morality in Norwegian immigration politics. It seems to me that discourses on immigration politics can be read as discourses on

political and national identity. Discourses where the nature of our political system and national community are being produced, reproduced and negotiated, and where the making of immigration- and integration policies also can be seen as attempts at defining own identity and indeed confronting the parts of it that are represented by the Progress Party.

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