

Despite Norway's stable economy, a resurgent Conservative party may mean its ruling red-green coalition is no longer assured a third term in office.

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It will prove difficult for Norway's red-green coalition to win a historical third term, argues [Sten Inge Jørgensen](#). Following its sister-party in Sweden, the Norwegian Conservative Party is now successfully portraying itself as a new Labour Party in an attempt to chip away votes from the governing coalition.



“Human beings, not billions”. The favourite slogan of the Conservative party (Høyre) leader Erna Solberg sounds better in Norwegian than English: “Mennesker, ikke milliarder”. It is designed to change voter's impression of Høyre as a “cold” party for rich people.

This month, Høyre launched the website arbeidspartiet.no – easily confused with that of the Norwegian Labour Party (Arbeiderpartiet): arbeiderpartiet.no. The domain leads you straight to their old website, but several headlines indicate that change is in the air. One posting is from a speech given by one of their brightest young stars, Torbjørn Røe Isaksen. He states that Høyre will keep the basic regulatory framework of the labour market, and that they view trade unions favourably.

In interviews with Norwegian media, Isaksen has provided concrete examples on how Høyre should change its policy. His most substantial suggestions involves support of today's generous sick-leave-money (100% of the salary), consent to Allmenngjøringsloven (that tariff agreements also covers non-unionised labour), and restrictions in the party's liberal policy concerning business's possibilities to hire temporary workers. It is too early to say how Høyres game-changer-attempt will affect the parliamentary election, which takes place next year. The day after Isaksen gave his interviews, several important party-members opposed him publicly, making it clear that his proposals are only suggestions in an on-going process.



The Labour party is not panicking. It seems to feel confident in its ability to strike back, simply by pointing to Sweden, where Høyre's sister party has governed as “blue labour” since 2006. There, the number of unionised labour members has plummeted and unemployment is almost twice as high as in Norway. If the tens of thousands of young Swedes who work in Norway had been included in the Swedish unemployment-statistics, the situation would look as grave as in some southern European countries.

But according to the latest opinion polls, the governing coalition has lost its majority. Prime minister Jen Stoltenberg's Labour party currently receives support at around 30-33%, which is insufficient when their coalition-partners Senterpartiet and Socialist Left both are struggling to keep above the electoral threshold, with support-levels between 4-5%. Still, there is some comfort in the polls measuring preference for the prime minister; here Stoltenberg still has a lead with 46.8%. But Høyre's Erna Solberg has gained four points since

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the last poll and now reaches 38.9%.

It might prove difficult for Norway's red-green coalition to win a historical third term, but the main reason is probably not that people dislike the direction the country is taking. The economy is strong, unemployment is low and salaries are steadily increasing. The media loves to present Norway as a safe haven in a crisis-ridden Europe.

But to what extent can Labour claim credit for this situation? After all, are Norwegians not simply lucky to get so much wealth from oil and gas? The truth is that this factor is often overestimated. Much of the income from the oil and gas-sector goes straight into a future fund; only 10% of public expenses will be paid for by "oil money" in 2012. Thus there is good reason to believe that it matters who is in charge, not least considering the fate of energy-rich countries in other parts of the world.

Most political observers agree that Labour's main challenge is to get this message through to the voters. Their main slogan for the last half year is fittingly: "Safe Governance".

The good news for Jens Stoltenberg is that the Governing coalition seems strengthened by recent events. First, the Socialist Left's (SV) new leader Audun Lysbakken, who many feared would be more radical and uncompromising, seems to have softened up. He even supported Norway's participation in the Libya-intervention, quite remarkable as he comes from the left wing of a party established in opposition to NATO. Some weeks ago, SV also got credit for turning Norway's climate policy in their direction, after a fierce fight which threatened to bring the coalition to an end.

The last party of the coalition, Senterpartiet (a party mainly for farmers), historically spent most of its governing-periods in centre-right coalitions, but now seems solidly placed with the left. When one of their former allies, Venstre, a centrist-liberal party, recently decided that it could support a government that would include the right-populist Fremskrittspartiet, this became even clearer. True, the number of Norwegian farmers continues to decline year by year, but Senterpartiet feels certain that the speed of this process would be significantly higher with a rightist coalition.

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