

National Review / Digital July 19, 2010

Among the Progs

A peek at the conservatives and libertarians of Norway

BY JAY NORDLINGER

Oslo, Norway

‘W’E will be eating Israeli potatoes,” announces our host, with mischievous, defiant glee. He is Kristian Norheim, “international secretary” of the Progress party, the Reaganite, Thatcherite party here in Norway. Seven of us are gathered for a festive meal. What’s the big deal about Israeli potatoes? Ah, you need to get to know Norway. Israel is not the favorite country of this country. This is a country where Israeli products are typically boycotted and damned, not eaten. Norway’s government was the first outside the Islamic world to recognize Hamas.

Put it this way: Norway’s attitude toward Israel is approximately that of the Middle East Studies department of the University of Michigan.

But the Progress party is a group apart, on this as on virtually every other issue. The Progress party makes a point of serving Jaffa oranges — oranges from Israel — at its conferences. Its leader, Siv Jensen, visited Israel in February 2008. She and her delegation went to Sderot, a town on the border with Gaza. While they were there, the town came under rocket attack, from Hamas. The Norwegians, with others, made a run for the air-raid shelter. Israelis were killed that week, but not that day.

The next winter, Israel went into Gaza, to stop these rocket attacks. In Oslo, there were riots, as the Muslim community reacted. Jensen gave a speech outside the parliament building, in support of Israel, and in support of peace and coexistence in the Middle East. The mob — howling, armed, and violent — threatened her. (You can get a taste of this on YouTube.) But she carried through with the speech. She tells me, “That was the scariest thing I’ve ever done in my life. It was surreal” — Norway prides itself on being a peaceable country.

By the way, there are two items of particular interest in Jensen’s office: a little Israeli flag and a bust of Reagan. It would be hard to convey how extraordinary these symbols are in the traditional Norwegian political culture. An American politician might be less scandalous for having kiddie porn in his office.

Back to our festive meal, at Kristian Norheim's place. Two of the guests are a couple from Taiwan — she works at the embassy. Taiwan, like Israel, is not one of Norway's most favored nations. The People's Republic of China has pride of place, naturally. But the Progress party is fond of Taiwan, this plucky democracy, with its free economy and free, independent spirit. Jensen led a delegation to Taiwan, too — this was earlier this year.

After we've eaten, Norheim takes our little group to the parliament building, the Storting. As we enter, I say, "Are you sure that a couple of Taiwanese and an American conservative are allowed in here?" Under Progress protection, sure.

Seven parties have seats in the Storting, and, with the exception of Progress, all of these parties are socialist, to varying degrees. The leader of the Conservative party — the party closest to Progress — attended the Democratic convention in Denver two years ago. (Siv Jensen attended the Republican convention.) The Socialist Left party is one of the three parties that form the current coalition government. (The others are Labor and the Center party.) The Socialist Left party, in its manifesto, declares that the United States is "the greatest threat to peace in the world today." There you go.

The Progress party was founded in 1973, to advance the principles of classical liberalism. The party declares that its philosophy "starts with the democratic assumption that the people are best placed to decide what is best for them." This is radical, almost revolutionary stuff here in Scandinavia. Progress's symbol is an apple: healthful, good for you. Norheim likes to crack, "An apple a day keeps the government away." The symbol of the party's youth branch is a thumbprint: a symbol of individualism. Everyone has a thumbprint, and everyone's is different, unique.

So, Progress must be a fringe party, right? Just a curiosity, in this strongly socialist culture. Not on your life. The country is getting less socialist. Progress is the second-largest party in the Storting (after Labor). It has 41 out of 169 seats; in the elections of 2009, it garnered 23 percent of the vote. I ask Siv Jensen, "Do you expect to be prime minister?" She says yes. I say, "When?" She says 2013 — after the next elections. "In coalition with whom?" I ask. The Conservatives.



Siv Jensen

Haakon Mosvold Larsen/AFP/Scanpix

She will not get much help from the media — the Progress party never has. The media here are unremittingly hostile to the party and its philosophy. They are “very red,” as Jensen says, “very red.” To add insult to injury, they are state-funded — imagine a nation of NPRs (or worse)! The Progress party aims to change this. An American who has lived here twelve years, and is a news junkie, tells me, “I don’t think I’ve ever seen a positive story about the Progress party. Not one. They’re treated like the KKK or something.” So, how does Progress make progress? Jensen says that the Internet has been a boon. It’s a way around the official media. Televised debates have helped, too, as people can see Jensen and other Progs unfiltered.

“Progs”? Norheim has a friend at the Cato Institute in Washington who refers to Progress-party members as “Progs.” It seems to suit them.

Hanging out with them for a few days, I find them, not only brainy, principled, and nervy, but fun — you might expect that. They tend to have a gonzo spirit, and an American spirit. They are unabashed in their America-love. The “special adviser on financial policy” for the party is the frontman of a group called Teddy Trigger and the Gatling Guns. They do rockabilly. Progs have been known to refer to Coke as “capitalist water.” They revel in what others — so many others around them — condemn.

One of my habitual questions, for these conservatives and libertarians, is, “How did you get this way? How did you come to think as you do?” And they almost invariably respond, “I grew up in a socialist country!” — as if that were all the explanation needed. They felt stifled, and were bursting to break free into a new way of living.

Siv Jensen was such a Norwegian. She was born in 1969 to a couple who owned a shoe store, here in the

capital. She soon found that she was a “liberalist,” as she says. She argued with her staunchly, obediently socialist schoolmates — and she is arguing still. She does it extraordinarily well. I spend an hour with her, running the gamut of issues. I wonder, “If she’s this articulate in English,” a language she merely studied in school — she has never lived in an English-speaking country — “what can she be in Norwegian?”

She is one of the few politicians in Norway to stand up to radical Islam — and, in so doing, to stand up for Muslims here who want to integrate and live a free, Western-style life. There are women here who aren’t allowed to leave the home. Who are forced into arranged marriages. Who are forced to undergo FGM, female genital mutilation. Jensen speaks up for these people, and she decries the country’s political establishment for turning a blind eye.

It won’t surprise you that the establishment routinely denounces her and Progress as racist, xenophobic, Islamophobic, blah, blah, blah. I hear it with my own ears. One Progress official, at least, is able to laugh off the denunciations fairly easily. He is Morten Hoeglund, the foreign-policy spokesman. He is married to a Muslim from Kazakhstan. And when he is called a hater of Muslims, he says, “May I introduce you to my wife?”

I ask Siv Jensen point-blank whether she regards Islamism — radical Islam — as a threat on a par with Nazism and Communism. She says, unblinkingly, yes. And, once more, it is a threat, not only to Western civilization (bad enough), but also to those Muslims who wish to live within that civilization: and who may have fled their homelands in order to escape the radicalism they now find choking them in places like Norway.

Chief among her political models are Reagan — he is sitting right behind her — and Thatcher. (In 2008, *Standpoint* magazine in London ran a feature about her titled “A Norwegian Thatcher?”) And her writer of choice is Ayn Rand: “I have read her books over and over again. I just love them. They inspire me, they provoke me, they make me feel alive — they force you to reflect on a lot of issues in your society.” Has any writer ever received a finer tribute? So, Jensen is a Randian, then? “No, not all the way through. Her ideas are a bit too radical for me. But, when I was younger, I got inspired by reading her, and I think everyone could benefit, because she forces you to think — and it’s healthy to think, no matter what your ideology.”

Follow me into Kristian Norheim’s office, please — it must be the most politically incorrect room in Scandinavia. There are three posters of Churchill. There’s Reagan, of course: “Viva the Reagan Revolution!” There’s Barry Goldwater: “In your heart you know he’s right.” There’s a George Washington doll, and a George W. Bush doll. There’s a picture of the Stealth bomber (!). There’s a hat from the New York Fire Department. There’s an Israeli flag, a GOP flag (with elephant), a Gadsden flag

(“Don’t Tread on Me”). And that’s only a fraction of the inventory.

The pièce de résistance, perhaps, is a Pez dispenser shaped like a Wal-Mart truck. “This is so politically incorrect,” Norheim explains. In Norway, Wal-Mart is the very symbol of gross American capitalism. In 2006, the Norwegian state divested its pension fund from Wal-Mart: The company’s not unionized, you know. But Norheim thinks Wal-Mart’s just fine. You know what else? “I was baptized on the Fourth of July.”