

# **The roots of populism's success in Norway**

**Martin Sandbu**

Counterpoint is a research consultancy that helps its clients understand the social and cultural dynamics that shape risk.



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## The roots of populism's success in Norway

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# Introduction

Norwegians infrequently find their country's reputation under attack. But last October, headlines around the world screamed that Norwegians had elected the extreme right-wing party of mass murderer Anders Behring Breivik to government. In a firefighting effort, Norway's diplomatic corps was mobilised to explain that while Breivik had indeed once been a member, he had never played a significant role in it (he quit because he found it too moderate), and that the Progress party, while populist and on the right, is a serious organisation with a comprehensive policy programme, not a one-trick pony of Islamophobe conspiracy theorists.

Nevertheless, foreign journalists can be forgiven for making the link. Grégory Tervel, a French correspondent in Norway, wrote after the election that seen from abroad, Progress' cabinet participation is a paradox in need of explanation. He is right; but the paradox runs deeper than just one ballot's outcome of electoral arithmetic. Progress' success reflects something that is often missed by observers of the bulwark of social democracy that Norway is taken to be: an antipathy towards the Labour party that is surprisingly broad and shockingly aggressive in its most extreme manifestation.

## Social democracy and the A4 life

*No one has a moral right to denigrate the A4 life*

Thorvald Stoltenberg in the 2013 election campaign

Norway has a good case going for it being one of history's most successful societies. An underappreciated factor of Norway's success, however, is whom the social model is successful *for*. Norwegian social democratic politicians are fond of quoting Tage Erlander, onetime Swedish Labour leader and prime minister, who reportedly said: 'A politician's job is to build the dance floor; so that everyone can dance as they please.' The claim implicit in Erlander's words is that the Nordic model of social protection does not come at the cost of individual freedom, as conservatives claim. Social democracy is better for you, whatever lifestyle you choose to pursue. Or as a Norwegian acquaintance more succinctly puts it: 'the state is your friend.'

The key feature of Norwegian social democracy is that it involves perhaps the greatest socialisation of risk for a majority of the population that any large society has achieved. Being a middle-class Norwegian, which most Norwegians are, is an extraordinarily safe proposition. If you embrace the lifestyle that has been catered for, the risk that any outside disruption will expel you from it is vanishingly small. This is made possible not primarily by oil wealth (although that obviously helps) but by very large transfers within the middle class (to homeowners with mortgages; to couples with young children; to the

rural districts), an extensive provision of public goods (notably education that ensures a solid minimum level of skills throughout the population), collaborative and lightly corporatist industrial relations that have compressed the wage distribution, and the substantial bureaucracy that goes with all these arrangements.

When a Labour party titan like Thorvald Stoltenberg<sup>1</sup> defended the moral worth of 'A4' living, of 'the dream about a safe life', in the 2013 election campaign, it was not trivial electioneering but a message from the core of Norway's social democracy. What Norwegians call the 'A4 life' is a lifestyle as standardised as the eponymous paper size. Norway's ideal version of bourgeois life in late modern capitalism involves family life with home ownership (as well as ownership of a mountain log cabin, a sailboat, or both); two parents who work full time but with short working days and a generous allotment of holidays; year-long parental leave with each child, followed by the use of subsidised childcare from age one and by a state school system that prides itself on uniformity (the 'unity school', on which more below, is as politically hallowed in Norway as the National Health Service is in the UK). It involves work, but not too much work. Norwegians rank among the OECD's most diligent in terms of labour participation and among the most leisurely in number of hours worked.

The risk-sharing carried out by Norway's welfare state, while strongly equalising, cannot avoid making some lifestyles more equal than others. Even if the social democratic ambition were as modest as a dance floor (which it is not), there would remain the matter of what music is played. And what about those who do not want to dance?

A4 cannot suit everyone. There will always be some unable to achieve it. The misfits, maladjusted, or unfortunate who in some countries would count among the

working poor, and in others among the long-term unemployed, are in Norway parked on disability benefits. Then there are those whose lifestyles are just more complex than what a bureaucracy geared towards making A4 work smoothly can easily accommodate. A trivial but telling dispute has flared up in Oslo because schools refuse to let pupils take leave for family occasions or trips abroad. Finally, some people dislike on principle the social democratic model's patronising nature. (Parents who rebel against a headmaster's refusal of leave, confident that their child will come back to school none the worse after a trip, are threatened with losing the child's place in the school.) All this shows that social democracy can create new cultural cleavages by the very way it closes the socio-economic gaps that riddle other countries. Progress' founding ethos (even its original name!) was to combat taxes, levies and government intervention, and this continues to animate its supporters.

A number of other cultural fault lines alienate a minority from the society that (mostly) Labour built. Multiculturalism is the most salient case. Another is feminism. The welfare state as constructed in Norway (and its neighbours) has intentionally strengthened the position of women within the family, the workplace, and society at large. There are traditionalists on the religious right, as well as non-religious critics of a supposed disempowerment of men, for whom Labour is the enemy in a culture war. The (Labour) minister for equalities in the outgoing government infamously said that a woman's choice to stay at home with her children was worth less than the lifestyle of a mother who went out to work, courtesy of public childcare. When her replacement – from Progress – was asked which types of unequal treatment most concerned her, her answer was discrimination against stay-at-home mothers.

These cultural conflicts are narrower than in many other countries. Still, they are crucial for understanding the antipathy to Labour that is easily missed because it is not often talked about. But it exists, and it is an antipathy that in its broad form generates support for a party like Progress, and in its extreme form turns into dangerous conspiratorial hatred.



## Labour: The hated party

*I've waited a long time to say this. And for a long time I've been looking forward to saying what I'm going to say now: (shouting) Bye bye Jens!*

Siv Jensen, Progress party leader, on election night, 9 September 2013

Siv Jensen's victory scream on election night offers a window onto an aspect of Norwegian political culture that is most often obscured. Jensen was addressing a congregation of Progress party faithful, and triumphalism was not a given. The party had lost a quarter of its vote share since the previous national election four years earlier. The final tally of 16.3% was, however, better than the catastrophic 11.7% in municipal elections in 2011, just weeks after Breivik, a one-time member, killed 77 people in a bombing and a shooting massacre. It was also enough to make Progress piggyback onto the centre-right Conservative party's success. By October the two parties would form a minority 'blue-blue' coalition government. As Jensen mounted the stage that night, the right-wing populist protest movement she leads was on the cusp of taking executive power for the very first time – and just as importantly, was helping to boot the Labour party and its prime minister, Jens Stoltenberg, out of office.

Electorally, the ballot turned on the patrician Conservatives. But culturally, it was a contest between two people's parties: the Labour party, whose shape-shifting social democracy has long permeated life in Norway, and Progress, the only sizeable party to reject

substantial parts of that heritage. The rabble-rousing Progress party was founded in the 1970s on opposition to the taxes and bureaucracy of the post-war Labour-led state. It grew its support by attacking immigration in the 1980s and multiculturalism from the 1990s on, both core centre-left policies at first. In the last decade, Progress has been condemning a supposed 'sneak islamisation' of Norway. Before the 2013 election, this rejection of the country's dominant social consensus had put Progress beyond the pale of executive responsibility in the eyes of the rest of the political spectrum.

International observers find it difficult to get Progress right. The party is regularly, and wrongly, put in the same category as the Front National, the Austrian Freedom Party, the Sweden Democrats, and other examples of Europe's nastiest parties. In fact there is no serious extreme-right political force in Norway. Progress is right-wing to be sure, but it does not have the fascist or Nazi sympathies of some of those other parties. What makes Progress worthy of international interest is that it illustrates Norway's unusually short distance between establishment and populace, in the realm of political ideas as much as in socio-economic status. Despite Norway's image as the home of progressive reasonableness, there are undercurrents that need be neither progressive nor reasonable. Progress offers a harbour for two of them. One is a surprisingly broad scepticism about the Labour party's political project that lies just under the surface of Norway's popular psyche, linked to the cultural fault lines described above. This could, perhaps, be put down to a run-of-the-mill anti-establishment stance. But it lies at one end of a spectrum that, at the other end, seamlessly bleeds into conspiratorial hatreds – of which Breivik himself is the most extreme case – and these have a habit of emerging closer to the mainstream than one would like.

Unlike in many other countries, these political undercurrents have not fuelled significant extremist *movements* – but nor are they channelled off into irrelevant backwaters. Rather, they seem constantly to blend in and out of the mainstream without serious confrontation, and nowhere more visibly than in Progress. That is the significance of Jensen's holler of good riddance to Stoltenberg. While directed, no doubt, at voters who had simply had enough of Labour – the one-sixth who voted for Jensen, and many more beyond – it could also be heard as a vindication of the smaller number of Norwegians for whom the dislike of Labour is altogether more sinister. The paradox is how, in an overwhelmingly consensual, egalitarian and well-educated country, mainstream views can cohabit with extreme, even conspiratorial, beliefs – not just inside Progress, but in Norwegian society at large.

## One of us?

*The sound of Behring Breivik's voice is starting to get on my nerves... On several occasions I've caught myself deleting text messages before sending them, because I've formulated myself like Behring Breivik... Overall there are a whole lot of things I have said and done from time to time that I've started to think about. The horrible thing is that we actually have a bit in common.*

Kristopher Schau, 'Court notes week 2', *Morgenbladet* 26 April 2012

One reporter stood out as the most unlikely journalistic presence at Anders Behring Breivik's trial. Kristopher Schau, a lanky man sporting sideburns, is a 40-something comedian, musician and performance artist whose oeuvre includes a TV programme involving him committing all seven deadly sins; a band fined for putting a fornicating couple on stage; and the performance *Decline*, in which he spent a week in a shop window feeding on fast food.

Schau was hired to report on the trial by *Morgenbladet*, the closest one gets to an intellectual weekly in a country where 'intellectual' is a dirty word. It was a paradoxical touch of brilliance. Where most were at pains to show just how deviant a monster Breivik was, Schau homed in on a deeper monstrosity, which was how *typical* Breivik was of Norwegians from his milieu – including Schau himself. When the presiding judge asked the terrorist whether *World of Warcraft* was a violent computer game, Schau found that "Behring Breivik [and I] were in the same place: two men, not young, not old, overbearingly looking at a woman one generation above us and thinking: 'poor you, are you so scared of computer games?'". Then there was the way he spoke:

*When describing what he had thought about the possibility that the police would kill him, he used exactly the words I could have used in a different context. He was 'fucking unkeen on that', he said. But that's how I talk. These are my words he's using. Those are the strange, little moments when Behring Breivik seems not like a monster, but just like an ordinary guy.*

Yet Schau missed a trick. 'In his ideology I find nothing in common, thank God', he reported with relief. But for many of Schau's compatriots the commonalities with Breivik did not in fact stop there. The revulsion with his violent acts was universal. But many of the views expressed in his ideological screed, a 1500-page manifesto distributed on the internet in the hours before his murders, were instantly recognisable to anyone who had had an eye on blogs, internet forums, and websites devoted to similar complaints – from the widely shared sense of cultural loss because of immigration, to a harsher desperation at a supposed imminent Muslim takeover, and even the notion that 'cultural Marxists' in the Labour party were consciously seeking this 'deconstruction' of Norwegian society: the local version of the Eurabia thesis.

A recent book by John Færseth<sup>2</sup> is a safari guide of sorts to the conspiratorial fantasies found in Norwegian society. There are those relating to supernatural phenomena – UFOs, mind control via radiation, and the like. Others, rooted in the world of alternative lifestyles, think vaccines are intentionally harmful to health, or that vapour trails from aeroplanes camouflage the spraying of the population with chemicals.<sup>3</sup> But the most worrying are the explicitly political conspiracy theories that see in everything the designs of a secretive group bent on domination, of which the Eurabia thesis is the most potent.

These conspiracy theories all have global currency. What is particularly Norwegian about them is the place they reserve for the Labour party. According to Færseth:

*... [a] rhetoric, where the Labour party is referred to as something near a mafia or a totalitarian regime, unites just about every community I have described in this book, with the exception of people with a history on the left...there exists a virtually murderous hatred towards the Labour party among some Norwegians, which cannot be compared with common scorn for politicians or antipathy towards a party one would not consider voting for... a not so small subculture of Norwegians exists that regards today's Norway as being a virtually totalitarian society, where dissidents are gagged by corrupt or politically controlled courts, and where the media dare not disclose what is going on out of fear of losing their public subsidies.*

Much has been made of how Breivik was an internet terrorist. Indeed, all the evidence is that he was radicalised by Islamophobic conspiracy theories online that originated outside of Norway – by such authors as Michael Spencer or Bat Ye'Or. But Schau's intuition was more correct than he himself thought: ideologically too, there was something typically Norwegian about Breivik, even if his Raskolnikovian willingness to take the logic to its deadly extreme was not.

## Norway's Eurabia

*We are digging our own cultural, ethnic and religious grave in Europe, so somebody actually has to wake up before it is too late.*

Christian Tybring-Gjedde in Norway's parliament, 5 April 2011

Christian Tybring-Gjedde is afraid of Islam and unafraid to say so. The Progress member of parliament and outgoing leader of the party's Oslo chapter is important because he pulls off a feat that in another country might be more readily exposed. He combines the unthreatening broad populism that is Progress' stock-in-trade – of 'merely saying what most people think', 'calling a spade a spade', et cetera – with unabashedly stoking the most conspiratorial versions of these sentiments.

There are not all that many Muslims in Norway. The exact number is uncertain, for it is a redeeming feature of Norway's otherwise creepily comprehensive population statistics that they do not collect information about religious or 'ethnic' affiliation (though the national statistics bureau tries to make up for that by keeping count of how many Norwegian residents have non-Western ancestry). On the best estimates, however, the proportion of Muslims in Norway is perhaps 3-4 per cent. Norway has received immigrants with less than open arms, especially those from 'alien cultures' as local parlance puts it, but that has not prevented some from feeling invaded. Non-Muslim Norwegians on average think Muslims are vastly more fundamentalist and opposed to western values and cultural integration than Muslims in Norway report themselves to be.

Islam-scepticism has quite an impressive politico-intellectual infrastructure in Norway, one that skirts the border of Eurabia theorising without necessarily crossing it. It has its political apologists – apart from Tybring-Gjedde, there is the four-period Conservative parliamentarian and later Council of Europe member Halgrim Berg – and intellectual ones, such as the New York-born, Oslo-settled writer Bruce Bawer (the author of *While Europe Slept*). An erudite blog called document.no provides an often enlightening, trenchantly alternative take on news reporting and political debate (it spearheaded a successful campaign against hate speech legislation). An activist organisation called Human Rights Service, while regularly reviled as anti-Islam for its obsession with such customs as the veil, has also performed the creditable service of putting female genital mutilation and other difficult topics on the political agenda.

Many of these people and institutions may be blinkered or tendentious, but by and large represent honest worries about the compatibility of Muslim immigration with maintaining the prevailing culture. What is one to do, however, with this sort of rant?

*What was wrong with Norwegian culture, since you are dead set on replacing it with something you call multicultural? What is the goal of stabbing our own culture in the back? ... It is Labour that sees to it that those with a Norwegian culture flee many districts in Oslo, and leave behind enclaves where Muslim uniformity, dogmatism and intolerance obtains ever stronger conditions for growth... But: are we going to help the Labour party substitute for Norwegian culture with 'multiculture'? Never! Are we going to contribute to the cultural betrayal?... Are we ever going to feel 'multicultural'? Never in the world. For we don't believe in multiculturalism. We think it's a dream from Disneyland. Systematised rootlessness. Long-term idiocy, and we think it may tear our country to shreds.*

This heady language of backstabbing and betrayal appeared in an op-ed by Tybring-Gjedde and a fellow party member in *Aftenposten*, the national daily newspaper of record, in 2010. The same year he gave a lecture where he compared Islam with Nazism, adding that things are worse now than they were in the 1930s. ('Back then you were confronted with an ideology you could crush. It's hard to crush a religion.') The lecture, which remains available for all to watch online, must have resounded with Breivik: his manifesto contains faithful echoes of Tybring-Gjeddes arguments.

The point here is not to blame Eurabia proselytisers for what Breivik did, but to highlight the connection between the conspiratorial hatred for the Labour party that motivated him and the broader antipathy against Labour. For the connection goes well beyond coexistence. In other countries where conspiracy theories and respectable scepticism co-exist, they tend to do so in separate circles – or more precisely, the establishment segregates off the conspiracy thinkers. In Norway, in contrast, conspiracy theories have a fast track into the establishment, popping up regularly in places such as the parliamentary pulpit and the national press, where the average informed European spectator would expect higher standards. I have argued that the ill will towards Labour has its roots in the breadth of the social democratic project itself. But how can it be that such a highly educated and prosperous society makes it so easy for that ill will to take a conspiratorial turn?

## Levelling and the critical public

*You shall not think you are anything special.  
You shall not think you are any smarter than us.*

Commandments one and three of the 'Jante Law'  
Aksel Sandemose

Even if a minority of Norwegians have reasons for scepticism about the country Labour has built, it is paradoxical that Norway should so easily let it transmogrify into the conspiratorialism Færseth documents.<sup>4</sup> Conspiracy theorists by definition blame their grievances on secretive powerful groups. They inherently reflect a suspicion of elites, real or imagined. But in egalitarian Norway it is hard to discern any elites at all. The very word 'elite' is taboo (except in sports), or only used with sarcastic or derogatory intent. One might expect this to have inured Norway to conspiracy theories. The reality is quite the contrary: the country's intellectual defences against them may well have been blunted by its anti-elitist culture.

That culture is both cause and effect of Norway's material egalitarianism. It predates post-war social democracy. All foreigners settled in Scandinavia are sooner or later told of *Janteloven*, the conformist commandments Danish-Norwegian writer Aksel Sandemose set to rule social relations in Jante, an imaginary (but all too real) village from his books from the 1930s. A dislike for differences must be part of the reason why Scandinavian electorates have supported such extensive welfare states. But it has also discouraged independent thinking. 'Norway is a free country inhabited

by unfree men', Ibsen wrote. His complaint was, in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, with the failure of intellectual liberation to follow political liberalism.

It remains the case that Norway does less than other countries – outside of sports and some other fields – to cultivate exceptional abilities. For much of the post-war period it was even actively prevented; social democratic school policy centred on an extremely homogenising system known as 'the unity school'. Much like the A4 lifestyle, it caters well for the large majority of average talent; less so for those at the very bottom or at the very top. The upshot of a heavily consensual culture combined with an educational system aiming for the middle is that Norway has little in the way of a critical public. Shared prosperity has come with a tolerance for intellectual and even practical mediocrity, even among the gatekeepers to the national debate – those in the media, but also in the professions and government.

The Breivik case provides two telling illustrations. The first is a scandal that was avoided by a whisker, in which the terrorist would have been cleared of criminal guilt despite his meticulous admission of what he had done. A non-conviction, which would have put him in forced psychiatric care, was nearly assured by two court-appointed expert psychiatrists who found Breivik psychotic, which under Norwegian law rules out criminal liability. Their leaked confidential report created enough consternation to prompt the court to appoint another pair of expert witnesses who found no psychosis, instead diagnosing Breivik with narcissistic personality disorder.

This was not simply a difference in professional judgment. The first report barely qualified as professional at all. Per Egil Hegge, one of Norway's most seasoned political journalists, bluntly dismissed its scientific status because 'the conclusions bear no relationship to the premises'. The text was poorly

written; the descriptions of Breivik's behaviour in different examinations were verbatim repetitions of one another, as if they had all been written at the end of the observation process – which the psychiatrists later confirmed was largely the case. They qualified as 'neologisms' terms used by Breivik (cultural Marxist, justiciar knight, and so on), which if outlandish, were hardly the sort of unintelligible utterances the International Classification of Diseases lists as a criterion for schizophrenia. To the psychiatrists, their own unfamiliarity with the terms seemed sufficient for treating them as symptoms of mental disease.

'Maybe it's just us who are a bit slow', one of them said in court. She meant it ironically. But with few exceptions (such as Hegge), nobody in Norway dared suggest that this was what their diagnosis rested on. Instead there was a striking unwillingness to suggest that two esteemed professionals could be incompetent. That their conclusions were mistaken, yes, or even that the whole discipline itself was ill suited to the task – these thoughts were widely argued, but always with great respect for its practitioners' authority. It was as if the public admitted that the emperor's new clothes were inappropriate, earnestly recognised the difficulty of finding the correct outfit for a monarch, and set up a commission to consider whether the office of the imperial morning dress ritual needed reform, but never could bring itself to mention or even notice the plain fact of his nudity. Even the prosecutors asked for an insanity verdict, on the grounds that the mere existence of the first report – which they seemingly found it inconceivable to jettison on the grounds of poor handiwork – created sufficient doubt about Breivik's sanity. (The court, of course, had to make a choice, and duly skewered the first report as well as the prosecution's servility to it.)



The other tale of accepted mediocrity came later the same year with the official enquiry into the authorities' response to Breivik's attacks. It found that a risk assessment had predicted the attack on the government headquarters in chilling detail, but no action had been taken to secure it. It also blamed hopelessly inadequate training, communication systems and command lines for the fact that police arrived at the island of Utøya more than half an hour later than they could have done, enough for Breivik to kill dozens more youth politicians. It was a deep failure of governance, which in any other democracy would have toppled the government. Not so in Norway. A lone national newspaper called for his resignation, but the prime minister got away with expressing his regret and promising to 'take responsibility by acting on the report'. And across the country, there was an unwillingness to dwell on the basic, glaring incompetence with which both security and policing had clearly been managed.

What does this have to do with conspiracy theories? A lack of critical standards by which to judge arguments and performance mainly favours the status quo. But it also weakens the resistance to conspiratorial delusions – a sort of social Dunning-Kruger effect<sup>5</sup> – as it disables people from telling facts from suppositions and good arguments from bad. A public sphere in which celebrated intellectual or cultural 'authorities' may flirt with, say, the Protocols of the Elders of Zion – which happens in Norway – without disqualifying themselves from being listened to is also one in which there is little to guide those seeking an alternative to the hegemonic social democratic consensus. An intellectually uncritical culture may even encourage conspiratorial thinking. Incompetence cannot always go unnoticed, and when it is noticed, it demands to be explained. For those not content to conform to the received view it is a short way to attributing covert malice to what is really unchallenged mediocrity.

## Conclusion

*In a negotiation you have some victories and some defeats.  
We have achieved much, but it is important to remember that  
we can't realise everything right away.*

Siv Jensen, speech to Progress party's national board  
upon entering government, 7 October 2013

This essay has argued that the standard picture of Norway as a consensual social democracy is overstated, both within and outside of Norway. There is a larger repository of antipathy towards the Labour party in Norway than is usually admitted. And the most radical fringe of that antipathy is more extreme than often recognised. Both phenomena have been at work in the Progress party's journey to success. Most European countries have a right-wing populist party; in many, their support is in the double-digit percentages of votes. But they have rarely been admitted to government.<sup>6</sup> If Norway's uncritical public culture allows a smooth slide from broad populist discontent to conspiratorial obsession, it is also what made it possible for a movement with the ugly elements Progress undeniably contains to scale the heights of executive power.

How should we assess this unusually short distance from the pit to the peak? The big question is whether the uglier end of the spectrum will gain or lose in influence from Progress being in government. Will the blue-blue coalition legitimise the more radical thoughts entertained among Progress members and supporters, as many Norwegians fear not only on the left but far into the centre-right? Or will the responsibility of governing domesticate Progress's wilder fringe?

So far, the signs point to the latter. Progress has gone out of its way to lower expectations of any big policy changes. The most controversial figures from Progress were not given cabinet posts. Tybring-Gjedde is marginalising himself from his party, having demanded but not received its blessing for opposing the government whenever his conscience goes against a compromise immigration policy agreed with the centrist parties. Siv Jensen herself now heads the finance ministry, the nemesis of all populist initiatives, where it is being said that Progress are 'very afraid of making fools out of themselves'.

A fear of extremism is rushing over Europe as the imminent European Parliament elections look set to feature large gains for populists and extremists of the left and the right. Having Progress in government in Norway should therefore be instructive beyond the country's own borders. It will test the permanence of power's domesticating effect on populism and probe the electoral robustness of a tamed populist party. The political experiment that Norway has just embarked on merits close attention in the coming years.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> He is a former foreign minister and father of Jens Stoltenberg, the prime minister at the head of the Labour-led coalition that governed from 2005 to 2013.
- <sup>2</sup> *KonspiraNorge*, Oslo: Humanist, 2013.
- <sup>3</sup> According to press reports, Norway has some of the world's most liberal regulation of alternative medicine, and Norwegians spend about 0.2% of the country's GDP on such treatments.
- <sup>4</sup> Note that this phenomenon is not limited to the Eurabia thesis or other right-wing views. In 2006, Jostein Gaarder (author of the global bestseller *Sophie's World*) criticised Israel's war in the Gaza strip with a comment article redolent of 1930s language about Jews.
- <sup>5</sup> The Dunning-Kruger effect is the cognitive bias that leads incompetent people to overestimate their own competence while failing to recognise true competence where it exists.
- <sup>6</sup> In Western Europe, the only obvious post-war case before Norway was Austria in 2000, when Jörg Haider's Freedom Party joined a coalition government. In Italy, Lega Nord has participated in government, but is not as consistently right-wing as either Progress or such parties as France's National Front or the Netherlands' Freedom Party.



How can it be that Norway, a prosperous, successful country, has so easily allowed populism to penetrate its establishment?

In this thought-provoking essay, *Financial Times* journalist Martin Sandbu challenges the traditional picture of Norway as a consensual social democracy and explores the various elements of Norwegian culture that have over time fostered a deep-rooted conspiratorial populism. Sandbu aims to explain the source of a phenomenon that manifested itself most violently in terrorist Anders Breivik's attacks in Oslo and Utøya in the summer of 2011. Along the way he reflects on the Norwegian 'A4' life, the Jante Law, the Eurabia conspiracy theory and the rise of the populist Progress Party. He concludes by asking whether it is Norway's mindset of 'mediocrity' that has laid the foundations for populist mobilisation.

This is not just a must-read for anyone with an interest in Norway's particular cultural make-up; Sandbu's analysis also contains vital insights into the roots and prospects of populism across the whole of Europe.