

The Norwegian *Storting*: A less predictable parliament



By Hilmar Rommetvedt

In his seminal article on ‘numerical democracy and corporate pluralism’ published in the 1960s, Stein Rokkan claimed that ‘votes count, but resources decide’. Important political decisions were not made in the Norwegian Parliament, the *Storting*, but at the negotiating table where civil servants met with representatives of organized interests. For decades to come, most Norwegian observers subscribed to the ‘decline of legislatures’ put forward by Lord Bryce. However, today we may speak of a revival of the Norwegian Parliament. For since the 1970s, the *Storting* has become a more active, less predictable and more influential political institution.

Constitution and political system

In 2014, Norway celebrated the bicentenary of its Constitution and the establishment of the *Storting*. For four hundred years, Norway had been under Danish rule. Denmark had sided with Napoleon, and after his defeat, it agreed to hand over Norway to Sweden. This was not accepted by the Norwegians, and a Constitutional Assembly was constituted. On 17 May 1814 the members of the Assembly signed a Constitution based on the principles of sovereignty of the people and separation of powers. Today, several amendments have been made, but it is still considered to be the same Constitution – one of the oldest in the world.

Article 1 declared that ‘The Kingdom of Norway is a free, independent, indivisible and inalienable realm. Its form of government is a limited and hereditary monarchy’. Article 49 stated that ‘The people exercise the legislative power through the *Storting*’. Male citizens over 25 years were entitled to vote in general elections if they were civil servants, landowners or property owners of a certain value in the cities. The right to vote was limited, but compared to

the standards of the time the Norwegian Constitution was one of the world's most democratic ones.

After a short war in 1814, Norway was forced into a union with Sweden. An amendment to Article 1 was accepted, stating that Norway was 'united with Sweden under one King'. However, legislative power should still be exercised by the people through an independent Norwegian Parliament. The separation of legislative, executive and judicial powers, and the King's right to veto new laws, led to decades of struggles over power between the King in Stockholm and the *Storting* in Oslo. The struggle climaxed in 1905, when the King in Sweden vetoed a new law on separate Norwegian consular services. On 7 June, the *Storting* declared that the union with Sweden was dissolved due to the King's inability to perform his duties. A coup d'état had been carried through, and luckily the Swedes accepted full independence for Norway. In two referendums, overwhelming majorities decided that Norway should still be a monarchy, and that a Danish prince should be installed as King of Norway.

Parliamentarianism got its breakthrough in 1884, when the *Storting* decided that members of the King's Council (government) should meet in the Parliament. There are no investiture requirements in the Constitution. A new government does not need a positive vote of confidence, but it needs to be tolerated by the majority of the *Storting*. In case of a vote of no confidence, the government (or single government minister) has to resign. The latter has been accepted as constitutional custom for a century, even though it was not included in the written Constitution until 2007 (implemented in 2009). The position of the Parliament vis-à-vis the executive is strengthened by the fact that the *Storting* cannot be dissolved by the government.

It has been argued that the last text you should read in order to understand the Norwegian government system is the Constitution. Article 3 and 12 states that the 'executive power is vested in the King', and that '[t]he King himself chooses a Council'. Now and then, the government is still referred to as the King's Council, but according to constitutional custom, the King has to appoint a government that is accepted by the majority of the *Storting*. In practice, the King does not interfere with the executive power, even though the government still meets every Friday at the Royal Castle in Oslo.

From 1945 to 1961, Norway was governed by single party, majority governments formed by the Labour Party. In subsequent periods, most of the governments have been single party minority governments or minority coalitions. Majority coalitions governed from 1965 to 1971 (Centre Party, Conservatives, Christian Democrats and Liberals), 1983 to 1985 (Conservatives, Christian Democrats and Centre Party), and 2005 to 2013 (Labour, Socialist Left and Centre Party). After the election in 2013, a minority coalition was formed by the Conservatives and Progress Party. The government formation was based on a formal and rather extensive agreement with the Christian Democrats and Liberals.

Electoral system

General elections are held for fixed terms, in September every fourth year (the next one in 2017). Universal suffrage was adopted in 1913. All citizens above the age of 18 are now entitled to vote, and to be elected to the *Storting*. General elections are based on proportional representation of party lists.

Each of the 19 counties constitute an election district. A total of 169 seats are distributed among the counties on the basis of the number of citizens and geographical size. The number of citizens is added up with the number of square kilometers multiplied by 1.8, and divided with 1-3-5-7 and so forth. Seats are distributed on the basis of the numbering of quotients. The distribution of seats is recalculated before every other election in order to adjust to changes in the population

of the counties. The geographical element in the formula is included in order to compensate for long distances in peripheral and sparsely populated counties. In the present *Storting*, the number of seats vary between 4 in the counties of Aust-Agder and Sogn og Fjordane, and 19 in Oslo. Owing to its geographical size, the northernmost county Finnmark with its 5 seats is overrepresented compared to the size of its population.

Nomination of candidates is a decentralized process carried out in the county branches of the parties. Almost all candidates reside in the constituency in which they are nominated. Interference in the process by national parties and attempts to nominate candidates from other counties, occur in exceptional cases only. Candidates are rank ordered by the parties. Formally, the voters may change the ordering of the candidates, but in practice the election of candidates is determined by the parties.

The allocation of seats among the parties is carried out in two steps. First, with the exception of one seat in each county, the seats are allocated to the parties on the basis of a modified Saint-Laguë method, using 1.4 as the first divisor. In the second step, the 19 seats which have been excluded in the first step, are allocated as seats at large in order to achieve the highest possible degree of proportionality. In this step, the parties need to have reached a threshold of 4 per cent of the votes at the national level. At present, eight parties are represented in the *Storting*: Labour (*Arbeiderpartiet*, 55 seats), Conservatives (*Høyre*, 48), Progress Party (*Fremskrittspartiet*, 29), Christian Democrats (*Kristelig Folkeparti*, 10), Centre Party (*Senterpartiet*, 10), Socialist Left (*Sosialistisk Venstreparti*, 7) and Green Party (*Miljøpartiet De Grønne*, 1). The importance of the geographical dimension is reflected in the fact that in the chamber MPs are seated on ‘county benches’, not according the customary left-right seating of parties.

Members of the *Storting* constitute a political elite, but probably less so than in most countries. The level of education has increased considerably, and is higher than the average among the citizens. Until the beginning of the 1970s, less than 10 per cent of the MPs were female. At present, the share is 40 per cent. Increasingly, prior to the election MPs have been paid full-time politicians or employed by their party organizations, 4 per cent in 1961-65 and 34 per cent since 2013. Broadly speaking, the political attitudes of MPs correspond with the views of their parties’ voters, even though the views of MPs may be more distinct.

Organization and procedures of the *Storting*

The organization and activities of the *Storting* are regulated by the Constitution and the Rules of Procedure. The *Storting* was established as a semi bicameral Parliament. All members were elected in the same general election. Then one fourth of the MPs were appointed members of the *Lagting*. This was done by the *Storting* itself, and based on proportionality among parties. The remaining MPs became members of the *Odelsting*. However, the separation of chambers applied to legislation (decisions on formal Acts) only. In most cases, including the state (fiscal) budget, the *Storting* operated as a unicameral Parliament. In 2007, the Constitution was amended and at the implementation of the new provision in 2009, the *Storting* turned into a unicameral Parliament.

The *Storting* convenes on the first working day in October and appoints presidents and secretaries. Each MP is appointed as a member of one of twelve standing committees. Committee membership and the appointment of committee chairs are, as far as possible, based on proportional representation of the parties. Committee chair positions are distributed among both government and opposition parties. For the present term, the size of committees vary from 8 to 18 members. With the exception of the Standing Committee on Scrutiny and Constitutional Affairs, matters are allocated to committees according to policy areas such as finance and economic affairs, labour and social affairs, energy and the environment, family and cultural

affairs, health and care services, business and industry etc. In addition, the *Storting* appoints an Enlarged Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence, and a European Consultative Committee. The task of the first one is to consult with the government on important foreign policy, while the latter deals with matters regarding the agreement with the EU on the European Economic Area.

Bills are first proposed in the *Storting*, either by the government or by MPs. Bills are then sent to one of the standing committees. A spokesperson is elected from among the members in order to prepare a draft recommendation. Ordinary committee meetings are held on camera, but the committee may hold open hearings with ministers, civil servants and other persons whom the committee request to attend. The committee submits a recommendation with a proposed decision to the *Storting*. The recommendation includes comments and remarks from a unanimous committee or, as in most cases, from various party factions.

The fiscal budget is the first major issue to be dealt with when the *Storting* assembles in the autumn. On the basis of the government's proposal, the parliamentary parties prepare their own alternative budgets. The budget process is coordinated by the Standing Committee on Finance and Economic Affairs. The *Storting* approves budget ceilings for various expenditure areas on the basis of a recommendation from the finance committee. The other standing committees may suggest reallocations within the ceilings decided. The final decision on the fiscal budget for the following calendar year is made by the *Storting* by 15 December at the latest. However, budget amendments may be made by the end of the following spring session.

Usually, matters are put to the vote at the end of the day's sitting. Half of the MPs have to be present and they have to vote for or against. Abstention is not allowed. Alternatives are voted one by one until one of them receives a simple majority of the votes cast. By norm, the most extreme alternative is voted first. Usually an electronic voting system is used. However, roll call voting is used for particularly important and controversial matters, and for votes of no confidence. A proposal to amend the Constitution must be submitted to the *Storting* during one of the first three years of the four-year parliamentary term. It is then considered by the *Storting* in one of the first three years after the election. A qualified majority of two-thirds is needed to amend the Constitution.

In addition to legislation and budgeting, a major function of the *Storting* is to control the executive. The Standing Committee on Scrutiny and Constitutional Affairs reviews the records of decisions made by the government and auditing of state accounts. The committee is empowered to investigate whatever the committee finds necessary in order to exercise the *Storting*'s control of the public administration. An investigation needs the support of a third of the committee's members only. Other important institutions for parliamentary control are the Office of the Auditor General and the Parliamentary Ombudsman. The latter supervises the public administration on the basis of complaints from citizens.

A variety of procedures for questions and interpellations provide individual MPs with opportunities to obtain information on specific matters from government ministers. Question Time is held every week and include both written questions submitted a few days in advance, and oral questions to be answered immediately. Interpellations are questions on matters of greater scope, and the minister is obliged to respond within a month. The answer is followed by a debate. Finally, MPs may raise written questions to be answered in writing.

Since the beginning of the 1970s, a substantial rise in the levels of activity and conflict have been observed in the *Storting*. The number of private member's bills increased from 15 in 1984-85 to 180 in 2009-10, followed by a drop to 138 in 2012-13. Ordinary question time questions were introduced in 1949 and peaked in 1989-90 when government ministers had to answer 856

questions. Questions to be answered in writing were introduced in 1996 and reached a total of 2028 questions in 2011-12.

From 1945 to 1973, 84 per cent of the recommendations from the standing committees were unanimous. In the period from 2005 to 2013, this was the case in only 28 per cent of the recommendations. Government defeats in parliament have increased from less than one vote per month in the beginning of the 1980s to more than five in the 1990s, and nearly eight at the turn of the millennium (recommendations and votes on budget are not included here). However, not surprisingly the majority coalition from 2005 hardly lost any votes in the *Storting*.

The level of activity reflects a substantial increase in staff resources and the working capacity of the *Storting*. In 1971, 151 persons were employed by the *Storting* and 23 by parliamentary party groups. In 2009, the corresponding figures were 442 and 184 respectively. Lobbying is another factor. As a supplement to, or substitute for, corporatist representation in a decreasing number of public boards, committees and councils, interest groups have increased their lobbying towards the *Storting*. According to surveys among the MPs, a fair amount of the parliamentary questioning, dissenting remarks in committee recommendations, and private members' bills are related to interest group lobbying. 80-90 per cent of the MPs agree that interest group lobbying furnishes them with alternative information and counter expertise, and therefore improves their ability to control the executive's follow-up of the resolutions and intentions of the *Storting*.

References

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