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Centre-left bloc wins Norway poll

The Norwegian prime minister has accepted the defeat of his centre-right government in parliamentary elections.



Economist Jens Stoltenberg, 46, was prime minister in 2000-2001

Kjell Magne Bondevik lost to a Labour Party leader who had campaigned to spend more of Norway's huge oil wealth on the welfare state.

With nearly all votes counted, Jens Stoltenberg's centre-left bloc was set to get 88 seats, ahead of Mr Bondevik's coalition with 81 seats.

Norway is poised to have its first majority government for 20 years.

Mr Stoltenberg won on promises to increase welfare spending while criticising the government for promising tax cuts for the rich.

He said many voters agreed with his bloc's message "that Norway can do it better, that we have fantastic possibilities which we can use in better ways, not least in terms of what we should spend large amounts of money on".

Far-right success

The big winner on the conservative side was the far-right Progress party, the BBC's Lars Bevinger reports from Oslo.

The current government has relied on their support in parliament for the past four years but have refused to include the populist and anti-immigration party in the government.

In return, Progress leader Carl Hagen made it clear he would not support Mr Bondevik in the event of a centre-right victory.

Now Mr Hagen's party will represent a major opposition voice in the new parliament with its 37 seats, up 11 seats from the last elections in 2001.

Mr Bondevik said he would inform the king of his government's intent to resign on Tuesday.

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Oil wealth

His coalition has overseen major economic reforms in the oil-rich country over the past four years, including tax cuts.

Mr Stoltenberg accused the government of favouring the rich while neglecting the welfare state.

Norway's North Sea oil revenue amounts to some \$38bn (£21bn) annually.

Norwegians already enjoy one of the world's most generous welfare systems, but say there is always room for improvement.

A new centre-left government is expected to continue Norway's line on foreign policy - which includes peace negotiations in various conflicts, including in Sri Lanka, our correspondent says.

There would not, however, be a new application from Norway to join the European Union any time soon, he adds.

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