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Some Norwegians Dismayed Over Nobel Peace Prize for European Union

By WALTER GIBBS

OSLO — The Norwegian Nobel Committee's decision to [award the Nobel Peace Prize to the European Union](#) has opened old fault lines in Norway's domestic political landscape and raised the ticklish question of why the country has twice rejected joining the 27-member union.

Thorbjorn Jagland, a former Norwegian prime minister from the Labor Party who is chairman of the Nobel committee, championed Norway's last drive for European Union membership, in 1994, but voters rejected the idea. He faced criticism on Friday that he was engaging in politics by honoring the bloc.

"The award is being steered by domestic political motives," Audun Lysbakken, leader of the Socialist Left Party, said in a statement.

The Socialist Left Party, which often attacks European Union policies, even suggested that Mr. Jagland exploited the sick leave of a Socialist Left committee member, who had suffered a stroke and was therefore not able to argue against the selection. The five-member committee is appointed by Norway's Parliament to reflect roughly the political makeup of the legislature, currently ruled by a center-left coalition dominated by Labor and which includes the Socialist Left.

Much like the European Union, the Nobel committee operates on a consensus basis, and generally announces unanimous decisions — as it did this year. No rule specifies that the vote must be 5 to 0, officials said, but by tradition dissenters must resign, which typically attracts attention.

There was a stir in 1994 when the [award](#) went to Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and Foreign Minister Shimon Peres of Israel and Yasir Arafat, chairman of the Palestine Liberation Organization. Committee member Kare Kristiansen of the Christian Democrats opposed Mr. Arafat's inclusion, and quit in protest.

There might have been a similar situation this year if longtime committee member Aagot Valle of the Socialists had not suffered a stroke recently and been replaced by Gunnar Staalsett, a former Church of Norway bishop with a more moderate political agenda.

A Socialist Left spokesman, Snorre Valen, said that Ms. Valle would never have stood for an award to the European Union because of its poor handling of the current financial crisis, severe unemployment and the rise of right-wing extremist groups in countries under pressure to cut budgets.

Ms. Valle gave a brief interview to the newspaper Bergensavisen after the announcement, saying only: "I have not had anything to do with this prize award, and I take no responsibility for the E.U. receiving it." She could not be reached for further comment.

Mr. Jagland, the committee chairman, dismissed suggestions that he had any sway over Ms. Valle's temporary replacement.

"If somebody thinks that I can dictate to him then they are on a totally different planet," Mr. Jagland said. "These are independent people and Gunnar Staalsett is strongly in favor of this award even though he is personally opposed to Norwegian membership. He recognizes the important role the E.U. has had in maintaining peace over all these years."

Mr. Staalsett, who once served in Parliament for the anti-European Union Center Party and previously on the prize committee, did not return phone calls. Committee members usually leave the talking to Mr. Jagland.

The strongest resistance to European Union membership in Norway comes from the country's farmers, who enjoy highly protective customs barriers, and fishermen, who fear that other European countries covet Norway's rich cod, salmon and herring stocks. Norway's soaring oil-based economy, with the lowest unemployment rate in Europe and annual economic growth above 3 percent, has made the prospect of joining less likely than ever, according to opinion polls.

Geir Lundestad, the prize committee's executive secretary, said support for European Union membership in Norway was "at an all-time low."

With little danger of igniting a new membership battle in Norway, Mr. Lundestad said, the case for recognizing the European Union was easier to make than ever in the Nobel boardroom. He said the body had been passed over for the prize many times because of politics.

“For domestic reasons in Norway, it’s been difficult to give the award to the E.U., but now it is done,” he said.