



## The Truth About Obama's Nobel Prize

### **Nobel Prize Committee Chair Thorbjørn Jagland is shamelessly seeking the spotlight.**

Lene Johansen | October 13, 2009

Most of the world, including President Barack Obama, woke up last Friday to quite a surprise. But the real story is that Thorbjørn Jagland, the new committee chair of the Nobel Peace Prize Committee, wanted to start his tenure with a splash. He had promised insiders a winner that would gain international recognition.

TV2, the largest private broadcasting network in Norway, called the results during their evening news Thursday. I asked the reporter who had made the call, Gerhard Helskog, why he thought Obama would be the winner.

“Jagland is the new leader of the Committee,” he said. “And Jagland, how should I put this... is a grand thinker.”

But before we look more at Jagland, let's look at the history of the Peace Prize. Alfred Nobel's testament assigned the responsibility of the Peace Prize to the Norwegian parliament, which is called the Storting. When Nobel died in 1896, Norway was not yet independent, though there was local self-rule. Thus the Norwegians would be in charge of the Peace Prize because they would be able to keep the Prize untainted from national political concerns.

Norway gained independence in 1905 and gained control over its own foreign policy. The Storting selects the Nobel Committee, but the tradition is to select emeritus members of the political community that are no longer in active politics. This seems to be changing with recent membership choices.

Jagland retired after 16 years in the Storting this month. He served as the president of the assembly for the last four years. His tenure also included one year as the secretary of state under current Prime Minister Jens Stoltenberg, and nearly one year as an embattled prime minister himself during the late 90's.

The members of the Council of Europe elected him to be the new general secretary of that

organization earlier this month. Some legal experts suggested Jagland should resign from the Nobel Committee. Leading an international organization of 50 nations could lead critics to question the independence of the Nobel Committee, said Eivind Smith, law professor at the University of Oslo.

Friday's award decision landed as a bombshell in Norway. The announcement brought a surprised gasp from the media that was crammed into the Nobel Institute building and Twitter exploded with acerbic comments from members of Storting, pundits, and reporters.

"Obama? Come on!" was a comment from Torbjørn Røe Isaksen who is a member of the Storting. "Hu Jia was judged and came in short. He is in jail and is less glamorous of course."

Most of the comments ridiculed Jagland and suggested the real motivation, his need to make a big splash and get access to an important man.

"The Nobel show needed a superstar this year. The prize went to the biggest star of them all. What great way to promote Norway!" said Kristine Meklenborg Salvesen. She is a research fellow at the University of Oslo and a former reporter.

Author Ida Jackson quipped that the Prize should be renamed "the-prize-you-get-if-you-are-a-politician-Jagland wants-to-dine-with."

Anders Gæver, the New York City-based correspondent for the largest newspaper in Norway, said he was speechless, but happy that he did not take the bet that Gerhard Helzkog had offered him the night before.

Experts commenting in national media were somewhat kinder, but floored by Jagland's audacity.

"One wonders if the Nobel Committee wanted to achieve the status provided by giving the Prize to the sitting American president," said Nils Buthenschøn, president of the Human Rights Institute.

The leaders for all opposition parties, across the spectrum, criticized the decision. The Progress Party, Conservative Party, and Liberal Party felt it was a premature award. The leader for the Red Party was outright furious. Jagland is a member of the Labor Party, which currently controls the executive branch.

Other experienced reporters in Norway shares Helzkog's view that this decision was Jagland's doing. When Wilhelm Steinfeldt from the publicly-owned Norwegian Broadcast Corporation pressed him during an interview Friday evening, Jagland said that everyone "eventually agreed" that this was the right thing to do.

The Committee has defended its decision by saying that Obama has opened up the

international diplomatic scene after some “scary years”, as Jagland puts it. Norway is heavily vested in the UN system and the whole political elite is happy to see U.S. participate more in UN processes.

His official English manuscript for the award says “Multilateral diplomacy has regained a central position, with emphasis on the role that the United Nations and other international institutions can play.”

His Norwegian announcement used the word “should” instead of “can”. This is a fairly significant change of wording, because it reflects the Norwegian ambitions for being an international powerbroker in humanitarian work. The national ambition is paired by classic public choice concerns.

The last three decades has changed Norwegian politics. Politicians used to retire back to the local community they came from. The 1968 generation gets promoted into jobs in international organizations. The job openings are fueled by public petroleum funds from the North Sea. Jagland’s new job in the Council of Europe is just one of many examples.

The nomination deadline was February 1 this year. At that point Obama had been in office for just a matter of days. Although Jagland tries to hide the transparent populism behind this decision, there is no doubt that there are publicity motivations behind the prize. This was probably the reason behind the embarrassment Obama displayed in the White House Rose Garden on Friday.

Jagland defends the decision by saying the prize has been used to give momentum to existing political processes before. His two favorite examples are the prizes awarded Willy Brandt and Mikhail Gorbachev.

“One could say Obama opened up world politics the way Brand and Gorbachev opened up east block politics,” Jagland said in a post-announcement video interview with Norway’s largest newspaper VG.

But these examples do not stand up to scrutiny. Brandt’s Ostpolitik was almost 8 years into the process of improving relations with the eastern block in when he got the award in 1971. Gorbachev had a five-year tenure under his belt as secretary general of the Politbureau when he was awarded the prize for his Glasnost and Perestroika policies in 1990.

The question everyone has been asking is what results Obama has produced to deserve the Peace Prize. According to Nobel’s will, the award should be given to someone who has promoted peace and fraternity in the past year.

“Al Gore’s prize last year had no immediate results, but we wanted to promote the attitudes he supported,” said Jagland in a post-announcement interview with TV2

This speaks volumes toward a prize that is being politicized for personal and national purposes. And for the record, last year's award winner was Martti Ahtisaari. The security and media circus surrounding Al Gore's prize was in 2007. This is an interesting Freudian slip, when the world is trying to understand the motivation behind the Obama award.

I can see Jagland being ingenuous enough to think the Nobel Prize will help Obama bring Obama-style hope and change to the rest of the world. When the TV2 reporter asked him about a potential domestic backlash against Obama due to the award, Jagland was clueless.

"They should be proud of a leader that shows such a good stance to the world, and who promotes the will of the world community the way he has done," said Jagland.

It is not the first time he makes bad judgment calls in foreign policy. While he was Secretary of State in 2001, he called the president of Gabon "Bongo from Kongo" on national television. The Norwegian version of the Onion, Opplysningskontoret, ran a story stating the Nobel Prize was awarded to Bongo from Brooklyn. There were 100 versions of this joke on Twitter on Friday.

Obama's embarrassment was due to Jagland's desire to reinstate his public image as a statesman. The most telling sign is probably a comment Jagland made in one of his post-announcement interview.

"It was exciting to meet the world press," he said. "One of the most exciting things I have done."

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