

## **Norway, independence, social democracy and Scotland's referendum**

### **Nordic Horizons Seminar, 20<sup>th</sup> June 2012**

Keynote speaker - Øivind Bratberg

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Introductory remarks from Nicola McEwan on behalf of the Public Policy Network

Jenny Marra MSP is the host for tonight – introductory remarks – the Better Together/No campaign is about to launch. Not only the SNP looking to the Nordic countries – she introduced a debate last week in Parliament on gender quotas, a concept which came from Sweden. Happy to host this event.

#### **Øivind Bratberg**

'Great to see small nations that don't qualify for the European championships spend their evenings on hope building activities!'

Book to be published next year will try to say something about how social democracy has shaped those societies.

Many similarities between Norway and Scotland.

1905 – Norwegian independence

1814 – key date – year when Norway got its constitution. Start of the wave of national sentiment that led to independence in 1905. Specialists in the 19<sup>th</sup> C will find that in that time there were parallel developments in Norway and Scotland.

Between 1814 and 1905 they were in a monarchical union with Sweden – had their own Parliament – but e.g. foreign policy was still with Sweden.

In 1905 they were a small egalitarian nation.

Some words about the labour movement. Easy to draw a myth about a country always presumed to be egalitarian etc – but there was also a profound social conflict at this time. Labour party mobilising the working class, but then incorporation of labour party into the nationalist sentiment/agenda...

## **The Nordic model, as it is commonly understood.**

3 essential pillars.

1. strong trade unions – high membership, centralised negotiation between TUs, employers and the state – coordination and compromise between partners.
2. comprehensive welfare state – part of the myth – that a strong state is a very expensive and inefficient – their position is 'not so much welfare benefits for the poorest, but public services to all
3. activist industrial policy

Also, high participation in the labour market, small wage differences, gender equality etc

### **Trade unions**

Are a vital part of the Nordic economy. What are the effects of having most employees 'organised'? For one, once decisions are taken, they apply across the board. So, not a radical agenda – because an extensively organised workforce will work to protect its interests – and its interests will be close to the interests of society as a whole.

### **Welfare state**

Extensive public services combined with small wage differentials help form a sense of security. All Nordic countries have a focus on international trade – they can maintain competitiveness because strong infrastructure at home. This 'collective way of operating' has great benefits when operating internationally. They do well in the international economy.

'Society as encouragement, not a roadblock for entrepreneurship' – good quote from Jens Stoltenberg, Prime Minister of Norway – see presentation. "This is social democracy."

### **Only Nordic? Or transferable?**

- The Norwegian case has been aided by national and social cohesion...
- ....but the quintessential element: institutions for collective decision making and continuous mobilisation from below.
- Welfare state as "institutionalised solidarity"
- Ability to create and willingness to share

Is it transferable or are there cultural components that you can't replicate?

He doesn't think it's the case that the Nordic states set out to be the most egalitarian etc...but there were key moments...

Some of the things the social democrats have done, things the Labour parties have done are about institutionalising solidarity.

Lots of autonomy at local level; state responsibility is seen as a mouthpiece of collective.

Social democracy relies on ability to create and the willingness to share – openness.

How is Scotland different from all this? He thinks it should be for us to consider. Not an easily transferable ideal.

### **Nicola McEwen, Institute of Governance**

She found interesting the history and variation within the 'Nordic model'.

She looked at some stats on social indicators from the Nordics.

eg the proportion of people in the UK living in substandard accommodation is twice as high as anywhere in Scandinavia.

She looked at UK wide stats but her hunch is that Scotland looks closer to the UK than the Nordics.

There are some differences – e.g. we are more inclined to look at universal provision in Scotland than happens elsewhere in the UK.

Income inequality – we look a lot like the rest of the UK nowadays

Social attitudes – not much difference

There are differences at a political level.

She's not going to comment specifically on independence issue – does not see a lot of difference between some of the positions being put forward so far. (e.g. devo max cf independence)

If we were to move to independence or some constitutional change within the union; there would be a need for some form of cross border co-operation. We hear about the Nordic Council – does that offer a model we could adapt?

There also appears to be some solidarity across the jurisdictional boundaries of the Nordics – can we learn from this?

### **Questions/discussion**

**Øivind** – re Nordic Council and concept of co-operating across borders – he notes that what the Nordic Council does now crosses over with the EU; he wonders if the different relationship between Scotland/UK and Europe may have an impact.

**Lesley** – struck by how things in Norway can be controlled by very small local municipalities yet have such high quality services. Given nature of Scotland, with some very poor neighbourhoods - how does that work equitably?

**Lesley** – gives an example – kindergartens – everyone has them, does that mean that they are driven from the centre? Are municipalities forced to do it?

He says not quite – yes, the idea comes from the centre but the municipalities want to buy in – and the funding comes largely from the centre.

**Lesley** – are you a member of a party?

**Øivind** – we are all Labour Party lay members – there's no 'national party' to choose from, they're all working from left of centre, so...

**Lesley** – scans the room and asks how many people present are members of parties – nearly half. (But we're not a typical group of the population.)

**Øivind** about periphery and centre – the 19<sup>th</sup> Century mobilisation for independence in Norway emerged from an alliance of progressive smallholders and farmers – from rural areas, not from the cities and industrial cities. National character was identified as being from the periphery, not from the centre.

**Q – George** – about the role of conscription in social democracy

**Q – Rob Gibson** – wondering about the contrast between the authoritarian collectivism of Scotland the democratic collectivism of Norway. The development of social democracy in Scotland is completely different from that of Norway.

**Rob McAlpine**, Jimmy Reid Foundation – interested in transferability – if a Nordic country was to put in place a policy on alcohol, he doubts it would see one of its biggest corporations threatening to take it to the European Court...he doesn't think we get enough of a sense of how the Nordic countries are managed and controlled. He wants to understand more about this.

**Øivind** – start with the last one. Rupert Murdoch never saw any profits coming from Norway so he stayed away! But more seriously – there is a closer relationship between 'the governors' and 'the governed'. Most of it comes down to cultural institutions.

Military conscription – national service could be all sorts of things these days. Military service doesn't work that well in Norway – it's supposed to be 1 year but less than half the youth do that year. He posits maybe there's scope for some kind of national/community service that need not necessarily be military service.

**Lesley** notes that post 1814, Norway enfranchised all landowners – which effectively enfranchised all men in Norway, which would not have happened here. They also introduced PR very early on. These are longstanding supports for that egalitarian approach which we don't have the same history with in Scotland.

**Nik Brandal** (University of Oslo) – on 1814 – you could make an argument that the mobilisation from below was an instrument used by the Norwegian elites to destabilise the Swedes.

**Dag Einar Thorsen** (University of Oslo) – there might sometimes be an advantage to being a bit backward on things – can overtake, take shortcuts, learn from others.

**Lesley** – so what could we do? We know we can't become you, but what would be important for us to think about?

**Nik Brandal** – start driving on the right!

**Dag Einar Thorsen** – you don't need conscription or land reform – those things are not so important. Move towards a Nordic type of society – simple things – the importance of trade unions, one thing that's quite simple is have a tax deduction for union fees. When the conservative Swedish government wanted to diminish unions, they took away the tax deduction. The trade union congress lost half a million members.

**Marina Shaw** – her organisation works with the most vulnerable families – was interested in the right to have a nursery place for 1 year olds – she sees this as a real strength, the society acting as a protective factor. Lesley adds – where did the move for this come from?

**Øivind** – There has been a soft left coalition since 2005 – that year they extended good existing nursery provision so that every child is entitled to a kindergarten place between 1 – 7 years old.

**Nik Brandal** – this is the secret – the number of women in the workplace in Norway – good for the economy – for that to happen, we need the state to

take care of the children – social mobility is dependent on a good welfare state and state childcare provision.

**Q from woman** about the monarchy – how do you deal with it?

**Øivind** – there was a referendum after 1905 – monarchy or republic? And the vote was pro-monarchy. The King is a ceremonial figurehead and a very popular one – they don't have the land entitlements etc.

**Q from woman** – how many Norwegians own their own homes? And on education – ref the film stars son being in state school – what's the proportion of private schools?

**Øivind** – private schools are supposed to offer an alternative pedagogical approach in order to be approved – Norway has 4% private school pupils. A wee bit more in Sweden. The educational system is pivotal to social mobility.

**Nik Brandal** – some research suggested 4 year olds in Norway have poorer language skills (than where?) because they spend too much time playing (in kindergarten) and not enough time learning .... But Norway scores through the roof for children's understanding of human and social rights, and democracy....

**Øivind** – home ownership – high levels of home ownership but it doesn't impact on social justice as such.

**Q from man** – oil fund – would like to know more about their approach.

**Øivind** – the oil fund is an investment in the future. Need to have a sustainable economic policy. The money generated by the North Sea oil goes into the oil fund – as does the gas fund

**Bob de Souza** – given globalisation, are there tax loopholes?

**Q from woman** about trade unions and relationship between public and private sector – is trade union membership primarily in public sector?

**Q - Community organiser** – Power in Community – re disillusioned voters in eg Possil, areas of large scale structural unemployment. Do they exist in Norway and what's the response?

**Øivind** – doesn't think it is a huge issue – most Nordic people and politicians don't buy the globalisation issue – intervention from Liverpool guy – tax change last year so that the richest 10% paid more tax than they ever had?

On trade union membership – in Norway there is a gap between public sector (about 50%) and private sector membership (about 70%) – but both are higher rates than UK.

Grassroots organisation - the whole concept of the big society has been viewed with bewilderment by Norwegians – they don't get what it is about! There is no animosity between civil society and the state – there's a great deal of integration.

**Alice, from Global Debt organisation** – do NGOs have a large role?

**Michael Hance** – comment – Does Norwegian Social Democracy depend on the country being a national entity with people feeling Norwegian as well as sharing a political outlook? He suggests Norway's collective culture is as much a national one as a social democratic one.

**Øivind** – internationally the Nordic states are known as 'corporatist' states – they incorporate NGOs etc into the state machinery.

**Nik Brandal** - references a writer who describes the 'Nordic Sonderweg' – a preference for protracted discussions that take forever but involve absolutely everyone that might be impacted on by the outcome, rather than radical or revolutionary change.

The move to develop the 1814 constitution was not, as assumed, a step towards independence, but rather an attempt to reunite with Denmark.

**Q from woman** – re oil – do you have debates about the morality of selling oil...? But her main question is about public engagement and how high it is? And when pressed by Lesley she opted for the public engagement question.

**Øivind** – much of it dates back to when and how citizens were mobilized for independence – and it has been sustained since then.

**MEETING ENDED 20.15 Lily Greenan**