

Øyvind Østerud (ed.): *Norway in Transition: Transforming a Stable Democracy*. London / New York: Routledge 2007, 219 S.

This author recalls an episode the morning after the Norwegian general election on September 10, 2001. Just as I was watching smoke pouring out of one the Twin Towers, I received a call from the director of the political science department in Vilnius – where I was based at the time. In a state of awe, I mentioned the terrible images from New York – of which he was clearly blissfully unaware, as he replied: “listen, I have a much more important issue to bring up.” The issue in question was a radio reporter who wanted to ask me about Norway after the fresh election. The journalist must have been equally unaware of the monumental changes that were taking place across the Atlantic, since he kept posing cheerful questions about Norway. Feeling somewhat upset about what I saw on CNN – let alone by the shocks that were still to come – I do not remember very clearly what was said during our conversation, but I do recall the journalist asking me: “what can Lithuania learn from Norway?” Again, I am not sure what I possibly could have answered, but I have often thought about this question later: “What are the lessons to be learnt from Norway?” Is Norway at all interesting for comparative political scientists? The

paradox of Norway, I have come to conclude, is that it is a rather boring, yet highly anomalous, case in the comparative literature: “boring” due to its affluence, stability, homogeneity and comprehensive welfare system; “anomalous” because nearly all countries with vast natural reserves tend to be rather unstable, corrupt and undemocratic: look to Russia, Nigeria, Venezuela, or the entire Middle East.

The volume at hand, originally published as a special edition of *West European Politics*, presents the case for a stable democracy under transformation, as it were. Norway, like practically all contemporary states, has indeed been compelled to re-adjust to global changes on a fairly comprehensive scale. Hence, the public sector is being restructured and streamlined, governing principles are being reinterpreted, cosy corporatist structures make way for greater pluralism, voters are less loyal to the political parties, authorities are less trusted, and so forth. In his typically crisp style, Østerud presents a tidy overview of the state of contemporary Norway in the introductory chapter. Moreover, he points out three fields in which Norway appears to be “interesting

to the outside world”: 1. the Norwegian “political model” – with its from-the-cradle-to-the-grave welfare services; 2. the peculiar international position of the country – not least because of its notorious decision to turn down EC/EU membership twice; and 3. its posture in international affairs – this is the land of the Nobel Peace Prize, after all. Somewhat unfortunately, though, the two (overlapping) international dimensions are all but ignored in the subsequent chapters.

Why is that so? It is perhaps rather fitting that foreign policy is so overlooked: just as the European Community transformed itself into a vast entity of 27 members (and, perhaps, still counting), successive Norwegian governments have been forced to balance the negative outcome of the 1994 referendum with a quiet EU adaptation. As an EFTA member, Norway has obtained nearly all rights – and taken on a similar number of obligations – of the Common Market via the European Economic Area (EEA) agreement, the brainchild of former EU Commissioner Jacques Delors, and enthusiastically embraced by the mighty Norwegian Prime Minister at the time, namely Gro Harlem Brundtland. Mrs. Brundtland clearly saw the EEA as a waiting room for upcoming EU members. It might have worked this way, had it not been for the fact that most other

original members (Sweden, Finland and Austria) quickly left the room, while Switzerland never even entered. Importantly, the EEA was not cut out to be a platform for other, much poorer EU contenders, which left smallish Norway alone in the room with two Lilliputian states, namely Iceland and Lichtenstein. Although the EEA agreement may in fact have been the only sensible way out of the chaos for the – for once – so divided nation: after all, the voters had not cast their ballot on the alternatives to membership. Arguably, when leading EU opponents toyed with the idea of launching a “different” agenda (i.e. *annerledeslandet*), staying outside could have entailed far more radical changes than membership would. Be that as it may, many opponents and advocates agree on one thing: the EEA is a rather lacklustre compromise, implying that Norway must keep up with the bureaucratic implementation of the *Acquis*, while not actually having much of a say in terms of shaping EU laws – taxation without representation, as it were. The Peace Prize and a couple of fine detours to Sri Lanka, Guatemala and the Middle East aside, Norwegian foreign policy does not offer that luring, independent voice as many EU-opponents may have anticipated back in the 1990s. I would imagine that foreign policy is a lot more interesting in, say, Helsinki than in Oslo.

On balance, what this book offers is a fairly conventional sequence of public policy studies. Several of the authors discuss the health of the “Norwegian model”. Christensen brings up the core elements of the Nordic / Norwegian model of governance, suggesting that it is being transformed by a recent reformist impetus. This reform wave, an underlying theme in several chapters of this volume, is largely derived from New Public Management (NPM) – a highly influential paradigm within the school of public management studies, seemingly affecting the public sector machinery in the entire Western hemisphere. Rommtvedt examines a different set of changes to the Norwegian model of governance, in a chapter dedicated to the decline of neo-corporatist arrangements and, consequently, the greater dispersion of power. A consequence of this “pluralisation” is, according to the author, a shift of power from the executive to the legislature. This change may be a good thing for representative democracy, although it invariably brings along more instability, as Strøm, Narud and Valen’s chapter testifies to. The authors weight up the implications of Norway’s long-held traditions of minority governments. One of the implications, it seems, is that it weakens the accountability of the executive branch, which again means that the voters may have a hard time identifying the parties – particularly

those in power. Heidar’s chapter echoes many of these arguments, as he tries to account for the recent “diffusion” of the Norwegian party system. Nobody symbolises these changes more visibly than Carl I. Hagen, the leader of the somewhat preposterous Progress Party for almost 30 years. Mr. Hagen has been admired and despised in equal measures by the general public. He may well have whipped up xenophobia and anti-establishment sentiments among the voters, or even helped undermine general trust in the Norwegian political class. But he is nevertheless one of the most influential figures on the Norwegian political scene during the last two decades.

Centre-periphery relations receive the bulk of the attention in two chapters, each arguing that recent local government reforms – largely based on the mantra of the aforementioned NPM thinking – represent a new form of centralism. Arguably, the centre-periphery dimension has always played a more prominent role in Norwegian politics than in, say, Sweden or Denmark – even if Norway shares with the rest of Scandinavia a time-honoured tradition of centralism. Tranvik and Selle, however, argue that centre-periphery relations are being curtailed. This shift spells dramatic changes at the very core of the Norwegian democracy model – even more profoundly, the authors claim, than

in other European democracies. Conversely, Baldersheim and Fimreite are open for the prospects of a new form of regionalism, albeit based on considerably larger territories than the current, smallish municipalities.

At a glance, many of these chapters seem to suggest that Norway is in a severe state of flux. Is that really the case? All things considered, Norwegian politics remain as solid and peaceful as a fjord! Suitably, then, in the final chapter of this volume, Engelstad and Gulbrandsen suggest that the basic features of the Norwegian welfare model remain underpinned by solid support from the political establishment as well as business leaders. Since a push for change to the welfare model is unlikely to come from below, the “Norwegian model” might just tag along for the foreseeable future. At least as long as the vast natural reserves keep flowing. But herein lays an interesting paradox of Norway: the oil wealth may turn out to be more sour than sweet. Many Norwegian citizens question the wisdom of saving the revenues from these resources, shrugging off the suggestion that spending would create inflation. They consider the so-so standards of schools and hospitals and ask: why can we not invest more on improvements? In an interesting contribution, Listhaug addresses the issue of “resource curse”, which has poisoned politics in many oil-

rich countries around the world, but he finds the presence of just a mild form of this curse in the Norwegian case. His study reveals that many citizens question the self-imposed restriction on public spending – and perhaps even warm to the tax and spending proposition made by the Progress Party: you can have the cake and eat it. Nevertheless, Norwegians continue to put their trust in their political institutions. Listhaug’s chapter demonstrates that Norway in fact is a rather curious case in the comparative literature.

*Norway in Transition* works quite well as an introductory text on contemporary Norwegian politics – better, in fact, than many single-authored books that are available on the market. By and large, the contributors are well-established heavyweights within the Norwegian political science community. Solid and credible stuff, for sure, but the readers are deprived of fresh and perhaps even thought-provocative perspectives on Norway. Once again, what is interesting about Norway from a comparative perspective? If you already hold the opinion that Norwegian politics is rather dull, you are not likely to change your mind after reading this volume.

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