

'More pressing need for a regional policy once Norway joins the EEC' from Le Monde (26 January 1971)

Caption: On 26 January 1971, French daily newspaper Le Monde lists the demands of Norwegian farmers and fishermen who require greater flexibility of Community rules on agriculture in the event of their country joining the European Economic Community (EEC).

Source: Le Monde. dir. de publ. FAUVET, Jacques. 26.01.1971, n° 8 098; 28e année. Paris: Le Monde. "L'entrée de la Norvège dans la CEE rendrait plus nécessaire une politique régionale", auteur:Doutrelant, P.-M. , p. 17.

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More pressing need for a regional policy once Norway joins the EEC

From our special correspondent

Oslo. — It was a senior Norwegian official who told us that: ‘There are three categories of people opposed to the Common Market: the left-wingers, the fishermen and the farmers.’ In Honningsvåg, a small port nestling among the snows of the North Cape like the set for a Disney movie, we found only two of those categories, for the farmers have long since gone. The 17 stockbreeders recorded in the 1960 census of the island have disappeared, but there are a number of left-wingers in addition to the fishermen. Quite a surprise! Those involved have a simple explanation: they think they can benefit from the current upheavals in the fishing industry ‘to show the fishermen the right way to go’.

While that might seem a somewhat naive expectation, there is real concern among the fishermen of the Far North. ‘Why should we join the European Community? We are fine as we are’, explains Hans Eriksen, head of the Kamøyvaer Cooperative. ‘We do not want to be ruled from Brussels. What does the Common Market mean for us? Foreign trawlers in our territorial waters mean the end of our livelihood.’

Indeed, the common fisheries policy requires each country to grant to vessels from every other Member State access to the marine resources under its sovereignty and to exploit them. So, if Norway joined the Common Market, there would be nothing to stop French or German trawlers from fishing along its coastlines.

This is what Honningsvåg’s fishermen cannot accept. It is easy to see why, when 93 % of their catch comes from sovereign waters or contiguous areas. The nearby Gulf Stream makes the Norwegian coast one of the richest fishing areas in the northern hemisphere. Another singularity is that the fleet consists mainly of tiny, one-man boats: Norway has only 70 trawlers, as against Germany’s 130 (which are at all events much larger) and France’s 500. Everyone in Honningsvåg is afraid that the arrival of foreign factory ships in Norwegian waters would deal a serious blow to local fishermen and, through them, to the entire economy of the Far North. One need merely recall that fishing and related activities constitute the livelihood of one fifth of the population of Nordland and one third of the population of Finmark province. ‘How can we take such a risk?’ is the question on everyone’s lips in Oslo’s official circles. ‘We already have a population density of only four per square kilometre in the northern regions. If the fishermen leave, they will turn into a desert.’

A good case

Here, the Norwegian Government has a good case. Can we imagine that the Six would refuse to amend the regulations governing the common fisheries policy, even though its balance would be entirely overturned if the four applicant countries were to accede? The Six produce 1 700 000 tonnes of fish and import 500 000 tonnes. The ‘four’ produce 4 800 000 tonnes — almost three times as much — of which they export 750 000 tonnes. So the enlarged Community would shift from importing to exporting fish. This would require a review of the Community regulations, which were drawn up to deal with the fish shortage in the Community of Six.

Above all, Norway wants to see an amendment of the clause on territorial waters. It can expect to get its way, since the Six have already agreed to a five-year retention of a three-mile national fishing limit in Brittany and southern Italy. It is also calling for regulations to be drawn up to govern the markets in frozen, salted and dried fish and fish for industrial processing; the current regulations mainly cover fresh fish.

Norwegian catches consist of 80 % herring, mackerel and capelin, which are processed to make flour or oil. The remainder — cod, coley and haddock — is sold for human consumption, but 93 % of it is first frozen, salted or dried. ‘Enlargement would alter the structure of the Community market’, according to a Norwegian memorandum to the Six. ‘New market organisation systems would have to be established. Solutions would also have to be found to the new problems connected with export of surpluses to third countries.’

What are the solutions, though? Oslo is keeping its cards close to its chest and keeping to its policy of ‘wait

and see'. 'Government experts are working on this question', is the laconic answer of Mr Bratelli, leader of the Labour Opposition. 'We will not take a stance until we know the outcome of the negotiations.'

In truth, the two parties have differing priorities. For the Labour Party, with its solid presence in port communities, the first demand to Brussels should be for fishing rules to be amended. Yet for the Prime Minister and the Liberal Party, strongly supported by the rural community, agriculture remains the top priority. 'In terms of fisheries, the difficulties are merely technical and can easily be resolved', according to Mr Seip, leader of the Liberal Group in Norway's Parliament. 'Protecting our farmers remains the biggest issue.'

Agriculture provides jobs for 13 % of the workforce. Farms are small: of 160 000 farmsteads, 100 000 cover less than five hectares and only 6 000 more than 20 hectares. Climatic conditions, topology and transport difficulties make farming highly problematic. In these conditions, it is a miracle that Norway provides for 98 % of its own requirements in animal-based foodstuffs. It does, however, have to import 84 % of plant-based foodstuffs from elsewhere.

By and large, Norwegian agriculture produces the milk, butter, cheese, eggs, potatoes and almost all of the meat that the country needs. Cereals and sugar are imported, as are most of the fruit and vegetables it consumes. It is not difficult to see that, once again, golden export opportunities are opening up for France's cereals, beet and fruit producers.

The difficulty is with animal-based foodstuffs, which provide Norwegian farmers with three quarters of their income and are purchased at high prices through a public assistance scheme which, depending on the product, either provides British-style 'deficiency payments' or French-style price support. Aligning Norwegian prices to Community levels would mean a 30 % drop in milk prices and a 54 % reduction in the price of eggs. Farmers' income overall would fall by 58 %.

None of Oslo's politicians can tolerate this prospect. They all emphasise that any increase in the rural exodus would be unacceptable: in a country with such a hostile climate and such a sparse population as Norway, farmers play an essential role in managing and maintaining the countryside. 'We are calling for a special scheme for agriculture', the Norwegian negotiators explain. 'This exception would not cause problems for anyone. In a ten-country Community, less than 1 % of agricultural production would come from Norway. We are talking about a special scheme, not a transitional scheme. The hostile natural environment is a permanent fact.'

What will the Six decide? The British application has taken so much of their attention that they have not yet taken a decision on the substance of the Norwegian request. It gives rise to an interesting problem: would not the Community's agricultural policy benefit from greater flexibility? Even in France, it has been noted that the policy's rigidity and cumbersome nature favoured an eventual centralisation of basic production in the best situated plains, while compounding the natural difficulties of some remote regions. Many have called for the policy to be adjusted according to the particular characteristics of the regions, using methods which would not necessarily destroy the unity of the Common Market.

Hence, if the Six granted special status to Norwegian agriculture, this might set a favourable precedent. There will come a day (and the sooner, the better) when the many roles of farmers and fishermen will have to be recognised. 'Basically,' quipped the Mayor of Honningsvåg, 'we are helping society by living at the North Cape. We are keeping the island open for tourists. Who knows, maybe the technocrats from Brussels might want to spend a weekend here some time soon!'

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