

Frantz W. Wendt, The Northern Council: its background, structure and inaugural session

Caption: In 1957, Frantz Wilhelm Wendt, Secretary-General of the Danish delegation to the Nordic Council, gives an account of the development in relations between the Member States of the Nordic Council and outlines the decisions adopted at the end of its inaugural meeting in Copenhagen on 13 February 1953.

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The Northern Council : its background, structure and first session

by Frantz Wilhelm Wendt
Secretary General, Danish Delegation to the Council

I

The Northern Council held its first session in the Danish capital, Copenhagen, in February of this year (1953). This assembly, elected by the parliaments of Denmark, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden, is the latest result of the efforts of several generations to further co-operation among the countries of Northern Europe.

The basis for this co-operation is found in the common background of race, language, religion, folkways, legal system, and political and social outlook shared by the Scandinavian peoples. In centuries past they have been, for long periods between 1380 and 1520, united in a federation which also included Greenland and Finland and which stretched from North Cape to Hamburg. After this so-called Kalmar Union was dissolved early in the sixteenth century Denmark, Norway, Iceland, Greenland, and the Faroe Islands continued as one state until 1814 when Norway became independent but was obliged to a personal union with Sweden. This new Norwegian-Swedish union was terminated in 1905. Iceland remained a part of the Danish Kingdom until 1918 when it became a sovereign state with the king of Denmark also its king. Finally in 1944 this last link between the two peoples was abolished and Iceland declared itself a Republic. The Faroes and Greenland are still parts of the Danish Kingdom but the former has enjoyed home-rule since 1948. Greenland, which hitherto had been governed as a Danish colony, has by a constitutional reform in the spring of this year (1953) been put on an equal footing with Denmark proper, with the right to elect its own representatives to the Danish parliament.

Sweden and Finland comprised a single kingdom from about 1100 until 1809 when the latter country was conquered by the czar of Russia. From the start Finland held an exceptional position among the countries dominated by the Russian Emperor. During the revolution in 1917 Finland obtained its freedom and is now a republic.

These long-lived unions, particularly the Danish-Norwegian and the Swedish-Finnish, have had great influence in creating wide similarity in administration, religion, juridical system, and to a certain degree in language, among the countries involved.

On this common basis of culture, language and history a so-called Scandinavian Movement was started around 1840 by the National-liberals of the several countries who consciously strove to intensify the feeling of belonging together and to increase co-operation among the Northern states and peoples. It is true that this nineteenth century Scandinavianism did not succeed in its two main projects: a dynastic union and a defensive alliance. Nevertheless, the work that was done created a strong and broad basis for an ideal which has grown steadily ever since and year by year drawn the Northern peoples closer together.

This co-operation has taken many forms. Societies, organizations and institutions of every description have worked together across the frontiers, creating professional and personal contacts of both practical and ideal character. Since 1919 a special and very active organization, the Norden Society, with branches in all five countries, has existed for the single purpose of strengthening and widening Scandinavian co-operation.

The various Governments, also, have long been working together. A currency union was created in the 1870's but was disrupted by the First World War. Juridical cooperation, begun in the 1880's, has, on the other hand, continued ever since and steadily produces new results. As no common parliament exists the enactment of collective laws for all the countries has not been practicable: but the individual parliaments have enacted identical laws previously worked out by expert committees of representatives from the various countries. A great degree of legislative uniformity has thus been created, particularly in the fields of economic, family welfare and insurance legislation.

Another shining example of Northern co-operation is found in the sphere of social policy which is of such

great practical importance for the welfare of the individual citizen of the modern age. In this field legislation has, to all intents and purposes, succeeded in abolishing the frontiers separating the Scandinavian countries. Each country does its own legislating but in innumerable spheres it has been agreed that when a citizen of one of the countries moves to another, he (or she) enjoys the same social rights as the natives of that country. This applies to social welfare services, old-age pensions, health insurance, industrial accident insurance, and in large measure to unemployment insurance.

In the broad scope of cultural life, too, spirited and profitable co-operation is carried on, abetted by the similarity of language. This cultural co-operation takes place in all fields, from elementary education to the most advanced scientific research.

In the economic sphere, on the other hand, there have as yet been few outstanding results beyond the establishment of the Scandinavian Airlines System. This successful enterprise, however, is irresistible proof of the advantages to be gained by the individually small Northern countries through intimate economic co-operation.

Characteristic of the development of co-operation in the North is the quite informal manner in which it has been pursued. The Governments have appointed experts who have negotiated together. Individual members of one Government have met their counterparts in the other Governments and discussed questions of mutual concern. The parliaments have kept in contact through the more or less unofficial private Northern Inter-Parliamentary Union. In the League of Nations and later in the United Nations the Scandinavian representatives have, as a natural result of common approach to the problems involved, arranged to act in concert whenever feasible. Similarly, the Scandinavian foreign ministers have met frequently during the last twenty years or so, to discuss current problems of common interest. All this co-operation has developed naturally, without stipulations or any other sort of binding agreements. Indeed, permanent co-operative organs were long unknown.

The experiences of the Second World War did much to strengthen the feeling of Scandinavian solidarity and the will to expand its fields of operation. One result was that, in the years following the war, a number of inter-Scandinavian commissions and committees were established in various spheres to plan more systematic co-operation than hitherto. Such bodies were created for ordinary legislation, for social welfare policy, for cultural co-operation, and, finally, for facilitating travel-intercourse in the Northern countries.

Furthermore, in 1948-1949 a Northern military-policy commission was formed to examine the possibilities for the establishment of a defensive alliance or other forms of military co-operation between Denmark, Norway and Sweden. To the great regret of the majority of the peoples of all three countries it was found to be impossible at the time to carry out the idea. The thought, however, is by no means dead but lives on in wide circles in all three countries. In the meanwhile, the disappointment caused by this failure provoked partisans of Scandinavian co-operation to intensify their efforts to strengthen the bonds in other fields. Important developments have since resulted - by far the most significant being the establishment of the NORTHERN COUNCIL.

II

Behind the creation of the Northern Council lies several generations of systematic endeavours, particularly the ever-increasing Scandinavian co-operation of the past thirty years. The initiative for its establishment was taken in 1951 by the half-official Northern inter-Parliamentary Union when a proposal, put forward by the Danish members, resulted in the framing of a recommendation which was laid before the parliaments of Denmark, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden during 1952 by their respective Governments. In Denmark and Sweden the Communists, only, voted against the proposal while all the democratic parties stood solidly behind it. In the Norwegian Storting, where no Communists have seats, a number of members of the democratic parties voted against it. Also in the Icelandic Alting opinions differed. Finland had already at an early stage announced that it did not feel at liberty to take part in the establishment of the Council. The by-laws, however, make it possible for that country to take part in the meetings whenever Finland desires to do so.

From the outside world the creation of the Northern Council has been hailed with much good-will except by the Soviet Union and the Communist-ruled countries of eastern Europe. The press of these countries has attacked the Council from standpoints which reveal a total lack of understanding of its aims.

According to the statutes of the Northern Council the Council shall consist of sixteen delegates, each, from the parliaments of Denmark, Norway and Sweden, and five from Iceland. The parliaments, themselves, select their representatives in such a way as to assure the representation of different trends of political opinion. At the first session all of the parties seated in the four parliaments were represented except the Communists who did not have enough votes to send a delegate. The various parties made a point of selecting prominent members to represent them.

An indication of the importance ascribed to the Council by the Governments of the four countries is seen in the fact that fifteen ministers took part in the first session, appointed by their respective Governments. Denmark and Sweden sent five, Norway four and Iceland one. Among these fifteen were the prime ministers of all four countries as well as the foreign ministers of Denmark, Norway and Sweden. The ministers may take part in both plenary and committee meetings but have no voice in their decisions. To experience gained in the Council of Europe can be ascribed the desire to maintain the closest possible contact between the delegates and members of their Governments.

In the by-laws it is laid down that the Northern Council is an organ formed for the purpose of consultation between the Rigsdag of Denmark, the Alting of Iceland, the Storting of Norway, and the Riksdag of Sweden, as well as the respective Governments of these countries, on matters where joint action by all or some of the countries is desirable. This means that also questions concerning only two of the countries may be taken up by the Council. In such cases representatives of the other countries may take part in the deliberations but not in the voting. No question is, according to the by-laws, outside the Council's competence.

As the name itself implies, the Northern Council is a consultative and advisory body, only, and cannot make decisions that are binding on the individual countries. In the first paragraph of the statute the Council is expressly designated as a consultative body. It can adopt recommendations to the Governments, each recommendation to be accompanied by a statement as to how each member of the Council voted in the matter. But it is obvious that recommendations which are supported by the great majority of members will weigh heavily with the individual parliaments and Governments.

According to the by-laws the Northern Council shall meet once a year in ordinary session at a time to be decided by the Council, itself. Furthermore, extra sessions are compulsory - in addition to those which the Council itself decides upon - on the demand of at least two of the Governments or twenty of the members.

The sessions are to be held in the capitals of the respective countries as decided upon by the Council. After careful consideration it was agreed that no fixed rotation between the countries should be established.

The Governments and the Council's own members are the only ones who have the right to place proposals before the Council. Thus, the Council cannot take up proposals brought forward by persons outside their ranks or by other organizations.

The various permanent commissions for Scandinavian co-operation appointed after the Second World War shall make annual report to the Council. Likewise, the various Governments shall report to each ordinary session the measures taken in pursuance of the recommendations made to them by the Council. The reports of organizations and Governments, alike, may form the basis of discussions in the Council and of proposals for new recommendations.

The Council is assisted in its work by a permanent secretariat for each of the participating countries. During sessions the Council can appoint committees to examine proposals, reports and other matters before the Council. These committees may also meet between sessions and the Council may further appoint other

committees to treat particular problems between sessions. On the other hand it is not the Council's task to carry out its own expert research. Generally speaking, this is in the hands of the Governments.

III

The first meeting of the Council took place in Copenhagen in the Danish parliament building and was opened by King Frederik IX. For its first president it elected Hans Hedtoft, former Prime Minister of Denmark, who had been one of the most energetic in the establishment of the Council. In his opening speech Mr. Hedtoft stressed the fact that the Northern Council was not, and was not meant to be, a Northern Parliament or Over-Parliament. But he was convinced that the new body would inspire the Scandinavian Governments and parliaments to work in close harmony to solve important problems. He ended by emphasizing that there had never been any discrepancy for the Northern peoples between Northern and European or Northern and Universal. On the contrary - he said - it was his conviction that "by working in close co-operation in the North we can better serve the larger unities. Indeed, we veritably believe that the development of regional units like our Northern group is a sine qua non for reaching the goal of inter-European and international endeavours".

The most important problem of the first session was for the Council to agree on forms of procedure. It was necessary to take into consideration the fact that the members came from four different parliaments which each one had its own methods of operation. As a basis for deliberations provisional rules of procedure had been worked out, designed to unite a rational *modus operandi* with consideration for the customs of the several countries. Despite the fact that these rules were not familiar to a single member they proved to be surprisingly satisfactory. The members slipped without difficulty into the new machinery.

For the rest, the work during the first session comprised a general debate on problems to be taken up by the Council and the methods of treating them. Most of the proposals on the table were put directly into the hands of committees without previous discussion. This procedure will also be followed in future. However, members were given the opportunity to make short remarks before the proposals were committed. After they had been considered by the committees the proposals and committee reports were discussed in plenum.

While the plenary meetings were public and fully reported in the press as well as broadcast in part, the committee meetings took place behind closed doors. The Council appointed four committees: a committee on cultural questions, a committee on economics and traffic, a committee on social politics, and a juridical committee. A working committee was appointed by each one of the national delegations with the special function, as laid down in the rules of procedure, of nominating candidates for the various committees.

Seats on the four committees were so distributed that each of the three large countries had four representatives on each committee and Iceland one representative on three and two on the fourth. The individual delegations strove to make their representation on committees as politically diversified as possible. It was interesting to note that the political parties which had no representative of their own nationality on a committee felt that it was politically represented on that committee by members of the same party from the other countries. In the election of committee chairmen an attempt was made to distribute the posts not only among the various nationalities but also the various parties. A Conservative Norwegian headed the Juridical Committee, a Liberal Dane the Economic, a Swedish Social-Democrat was elected chairman of the Cultural Committee, and another Social-Democrat, from Iceland, was given the chair in the Committee on Social Politics. A non-political Danish civil servant was attached to each committee as secretary. The individual delegations had their own experts with them who, together with Danish experts, were invited to present their views before the committees.

Despite the fact that the assembly was composed of representatives from four different countries, each speaking his own language (the Icelanders, however, spoke in Danish), not the slightest lingual difficulty arose. This was true of the written word as well as of the speech. Documents were printed either in Danish, Norwegian or Swedish and the various speeches were protocolled in the language employed by the speakers.

IV

During the session nine recommendations were adopted and later transmitted by the President and Danish Secretary General to the respective Governments, which are now considering them.

Recommendation 1 invites the Governments to examine the possibilities of publishing a Parliamentary Bulletin which will spread knowledge of the work of the Northern Council and of the individual parliaments.

Recommendation 2 suggests further co-operation among the Northern countries in the sphere of postal, telegraph, and telephone services. It particularly recommends arrangements whereby the individual country's domestic postal and telegraph rates will also apply to the other Northern countries. Likewise, uniform zoning regulations for telephone traffic within the entire region is recommended.

Recommendation 3 suggests continued co-operation among the Northern countries in the sphere of health service.

Recommendation 4 invites the Danish and Swedish Governments to carry out research that will throw light upon the economic and traffic problems raised by the construction of a bridge over, or a tunnel under, the Sound.

Recommendation 5 deals with economic co-operation. It expresses the belief that closer economic co-operation among the Northern countries would strengthen the economy of the individual countries. At the same time, however, the Council declares that it is fully aware that such cooperation would raise a number of complicated problems relating to commercial policy and production. Therefore, any change should take place only after exhaustive inquiry and in such a way that the new policies would be to the advantage of every one of the countries involved. The Council requests that the existing Commission for Scandinavian Economic Co-Operation publish its findings at the earliest possible moment. In this connection the recommendation calls attention to the fact that the Commission in recent years had worked in contact with industry in the several countries and that the investigations thus made had proved that economic co-operation could be of advantage to a number of branches of industry in the Northern countries,

Recommendation 6 deals with social-political questions; in this field the fundamental results, however, have already been attained.

Recommendation 7 deals with a question of far-reaching importance. It recommends that the Governments investigate what concrete and practical steps might be taken for the successive removal of the inequalities in legal status between citizens of the individual countries. Comprehensive material illuminating this problem had already been collected on the initiative of the Swedish Government. Besides the recommendation made, the Council appointed a committee of seven to follow developments in this matter between sessions.

Recommendation 8 deals with a large number of cultural questions, among others division of work among cultural institutions; the establishment of new cultural institutions to be shared in common; financial aid to organizations working for lingual community in Scandinavia; augmented possibilities for students to study and reap the benefit of examinations taken in other Northern countries than their own; the establishment of a Scandinavian Folk High-School; and the extension of a school instruction in the languages of the other Northern countries.

Recommendation 9 deals with problems regarding freer traffic between the various Northern countries. Last year passports were abolished for Scandinavians traveling from one country to the other. The Northern Council now desires that the right to remain in another Northern country without passport be unlimited (at present it applies for 2-3 months). Likewise, it proposes that citizens of one country be relieved of the necessity of seeking permission to work in another Northern country (Denmark and Sweden have already abolished this regulation for each other's nationals). Furthermore, the Council recommends that an attempt be made to abolish the ordinary customs and currency control at frontiers between the countries. Finally, the Governments are called upon to continue their investigations into the possibilities for abolishing passport

control for non-Scandinavians at frontiers between Northern countries so that the whole of Scandinavia (including Denmark) would form a single passport region.

V

Before separating after its first session, the Northern Council agreed to accept an invitation from Norway to hold its next ordinary session in Oslo, Norway's capital, during the first half of August 1954.

During the intervening months the Governments will examine the recommendations that have been transmitted to them. They will work in close contact with its other on these recommendations as in almost every cases results are dependent on joint treatment. Thus, the establishment of the Northern Council not only means much closer contact between the individual parliaments and political parties but also between the several Governments of the Northern countries.

Nor is it less significant that the appearance of the Council has greatly contributed -and will continue to contribute - to the focusing of public attention on Northern co-operation. This applies not only to the European and American press but also to the press of the Northern countries, themselves. Furthermore, the augmented interest of the inhabitants will result in a growing demand from the voters and the national parliaments for concrete results from the work of the Council. Therefore, it is with full justification that the first session has been described as a significant milestone in the history of Northern cooperation.