

Interview with Bjørn Tore Godal: negotiations on Norway's accession to the European Union (Berlin, 19 June 2007)

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[Christian Lekl] As Foreign Minister, it was ultimately you who conducted the negotiations on Norway's accession to the EU. What, for Norway, was the focal point of the negotiations?

[Bjørn Tore Godal] Then, as previously, fisheries, regional policy and agriculture. Other issues were actually simpler, because the EU's political development had been fairly similar to that of the Nordic countries: the same issues, the same priorities, the same principles, the *acquis communautaire*. It made sense. In general terms, it made sense. We had become more familiar with the EU's internal rules, and they had been made by people like us, with the same priorities as Norway, holding the same discussions. People felt a little more at home than they had expected. We weren't so different from each other. The exception was, as I mentioned, that we needed to safeguard our regions, and our regions were closely tied up with fisheries and agriculture.

[Christian Lekl] Could you describe the issue of regional policy in more detail?

[Bjørn Tore Godal] First of all, it must be said that Norway is very sparsely populated. This means that you can travel for hundreds of kilometres and see very few people, and our population distribution, our settlement structure is a major issue in Norway. It is always a problem, membership or not. The EU's regional policy had by then become much more strongly developed than in the 1970s. It could be seen in Ireland, Spain, Sicily and Greece that the EU had made very a strong contribution to regional development in the EU Member States. That was our impression too, but our problems are different from those of other EU and European regions, particularly as a result of Norway's very sparse population, and this special factor was successfully incorporated in the negotiations. Sparse population distribution became a criterion in its own right, reflected in the concept of 'northern agriculture' as opposed to agriculture in southern Europe. This was accepted in the discussions at the time. And I think that, from a regional-policy and agricultural point of view, the outcome was respectable. The negotiations went rather well, but the area of fisheries remains, and at the time was a definite sticking point.

[Christian Lekl] How did the negotiations on the 1994 Fisheries Agreement progress?

[Bjørn Tore Godal] It has to be said that the Spanish and Portuguese, and to some extent the British, had interests that were at odds with ours — we wanted access to the market and they wanted access to resources. My colleague at the time, Jan Henry T. Olsen, also known as 'No-Fish Olsen', put it well: 'We're not giving any fish away in Brussels.' That was our principle, and we conceded very little ground. I must say that, at the time, we had fairly strong support from Germany, which, from a political viewpoint, was very much in favour of having Norway in the EU. And we cooperated very closely with Chancellor Kohl and my counterpart, Klaus Kinkel, and with the German Government. But that wasn't the only government to take a sympathetic view — other governments also recognised the importance of fisheries policy in Norway, politically, mentally and psychologically, and began to oppose the conflicting Spanish interests, which was helpful to some extent.

[Christian Lekl] That means that the majority of EU Member States at the time supported Norway's accession?

[Bjørn Tore Godal] Yes, in principle they all supported our accession, but to a varying degree. That has to be said. Germany and the United Kingdom, and the countries of central and northern Europe, saw Norway as an integral part of Europe. Without Norway, the Nordic dimension would be incomplete, so to speak. And thanks to our international tradition of free trade, a visibly active foreign policy, good resources and significant wealth — then as now — Norway was seen as a natural partner. And from a European point of view too, where the aim was to assist Europe's poorer Member States. That was why there was strong support for our accession.

[Christian Lekl] Can you describe Norway's accession negotiations with the EU in more detail?

[Bjørn Tore Godal] Relations with the Commission were, of course, very important, particularly with the Commission President, but also with the other Commissioners. However, the Council Presidency was also very important, and, as Foreign Minister and also Trade Minister at that point, I was in frequent contact with almost all my EU colleagues with the aim of winning support for Norway's position. Our colleague in the Council at that time was the Greek Trade Minister Theodoros Pangalos, a unique character, and he gave us a bit of insight into the discussions taking place within the EU. It was also a difficult matter within the EU itself, and one day he asked for a personal meeting, at which he was highly critical of Klaus Kinkel, saying 'Bjørn, you have to talk to this impossible man, Klaus Kinkel.' And I said 'Why? He's a nice guy.' And he said 'No, he's not "nice", he's more Norwegian than you!' I found that very funny, but it was a tricky situation inside the EU and this comment was illustrative of its internal differences. There were those who supported us throughout the negotiations and those who were critical. For the Greek Council Presidency, this polarisation within the EU was extremely difficult to manage. That is quite clear.

[Christian Lekl] How was the Accession Treaty perceived in the end, by Norway and by the EU?

[Bjørn Tore Godal] Well, we were all rather pleased. The exception, once again, was fisheries, where the British unexpectedly managed to secure certain fisheries interests in southern Norwegian waters. That may have had a decisive effect on public opinion in southern Norway, among the southern Norwegian fishing community. The northern Norwegian fishermen were critical in any case. They said 'The Treaty may be good, but how long will it last? New majorities will come into play in the EU that could decide everything at a later date. What's written down now means nothing.' There was general suspicion, therefore. Although it looked good, people suspected that the situation would change. But then there was the unexpected development in south-west Norway with the British demands, which affected mackerel and some other fish stocks. In general the Treaty was very positively received, but that wasn't enough to secure a majority.