

Interview with Bjørn Tore Godal: the first rejection by referendum of EC membership for Norway (Berlin, 19 June 2007)

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[Bjørn Tore Godal] In 1972, I was anti-EU. That is perhaps quite interesting in this context. We saw the EU as a capitalist construction for the rich countries of Europe. EFTA, the European Free Trade Association, was actually bigger and was less biased by the political incorporation of capitalist principles. It was about open access to the market for capital, goods and services and nothing else. In the 'no' camp, the belief was that the EU was only there to serve rich people. Free trade, yes, but without these principles. Environmental protection, equal rights, the major issues of the 1970s and 1980s, were not integrated into the EU as principles. They came later, but at that time we saw the EU as a small organisation. We wanted a comprehensive European perspective, with broad cooperation between east and west in Europe, between EFTA and the EU. But not direct EU membership. That was how things were seen.

[Christian Lekl] And how generally was Norwegian society split for and against?

[Bjørn Tore Godal] Mostly, it has to be said, the leading figures in our economy were in favour of membership. The unions were generally against. The parties of the right were for, those of the left against, and the Social Democrats were divided. That was the general picture.

[Christian Lekl] What in your opinion tipped the balance in favour of rejection, what was the main argument?

[Bjørn Tore Godal] I think in Norway there is a feeling of distance. What Oslo and Brussels mean is that everything is decided centrally. This distance is particularly important in Norway. It takes a particular form: if you rotate Norway around its southernmost point, Mandal in southern Norway, the northern tip of the country would end up further south than Rome. A huge distance, you understand. It is a long way to Oslo, but even further to Brussels. This mental impression of distance is a politically important issue for us. It was the same in 1994. We know the politicians in Oslo — many do not like those people — but Brussels is so far away. That has immense significance for us.

[Christian Lekl] And to what extent did the union idea, for example, play a role in the debate?

[Bjørn Tore Godal] It has to be said that in Norway, 'union' means 'others decide'. That is something we learn as children at school. We had unions with Denmark and Sweden for 500 years. Union meant that either the Swedes or the Danes decided. That is how it was perceived. Norway is an old country, but a young nation. We have only been independent since 1905.

And we do not take kindly to the prospect of handing over our decision-making prerogative. That was the feeling in 1972 and again in 1994, although there were new elements in the most recent discussions.

[Christian Lekl] In fact agriculture and the fishing industry played a major role in the debate.

[Bjørn Tore Godal] Absolutely. The 'no' movement was split, there were side issues. There were fishermen and farmers who were mostly very much against it. But not all fishermen, because fish exports are very important to Norway, as you know. In agriculture, we only have defensive interests. But there is a general feeling in Norway that 'others would like to take our resources'. Whether it be fisheries, oil or gas, and our agriculture in any case cannot stand up to competition from the bigger agricultural countries in Europe. This feeling of centralised authority and the influence of rich and powerful countries in Europe, seen together with our resource situation, conveys the general picture.