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COMMENTARY: Norway: Not Necessarily Poles Apart

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Abstract

Ken Sell is the Principal of Trondheim International School, Norway. Originally from Queensland, Australia, Ken was employed in various education capacities by the State education authority, Education Queensland, before deciding to take up the challenge of school leadership in a foreign country. In this article he reports his adventure.



After several months of bitter coldness, a lack of sun and isolation the Norwegian farmer, at the first sign of spring, climbs to the top of the mountain only to see the neighbouring farmer standing on the other side the valley. As their gaze meets the farmer cups his hands and yells; 'Go away.'

Arnt Einar Andersen (Local Dentist 2009)

The traditional view of the Norwegian as a resilient pioneer has been reinforced by centuries of hardship and isolation. Living in temperatures well below zero Celsius for more than six months of the year means going outside and meeting people requires immaculate planning and a real sense of purpose. Mind you Norwegians say there is no such thing as bad weather only bad clothing. Norway's climate has two seasons: a white winter and a green winter. Those born in Norway might argue otherwise, but I can't see how three days at 20C is a summer

Having lived in Norway for nearly four years I understand why stereotyping the Norwegian as a lonely, solitary and introspective Viking type is believable; however, this belies the reality I experienced. The real reason why Norwegians ignore you in the street is because of the danger of lifting your eyes from the ice covered pathways. Norwegians really are a friendly, considerate and discerning people once you get to know them. They know how to laugh at themselves and, although self-assured, they are not by any means arrogant.

As a head of an international school in Norway I am privileged to have worked in the Scandinavian schooling context and despite the Finnish getting all the press and accolades as an exemplar educators there are things we can learn from the Norwegians. Rather than discuss how Norway compares to Finland, or any other education system for that matter, I will focus on a few present day Norwegian values that we might be able to learn something from and how they have indirectly enabled some social innovation to occur at our school.

Two recent events have shaped Norway's modern history and values. Economically, the country won the lottery when it discovered oil and gas in the late 1960's. Culturally, the country was split in its support for the German Nazis in the Second World War. Equitably sharing this new-found wealth among its five million inhabitants in a world populated by 7 billion people and creating a society that withstands the lure of totalitarianism have shaped political thinking and actions for the last 50 years or so. But the Norwegian values I will shortly describe emerged from a period dating back to at least early 1800s.



Deep inside the Norwegian psyche resides a set of values that I believe come from two habitually opposed political creeds. Norwegians, in the main, are a resilient people with a clear expectation that each individual takes responsibility for their actions. Valuing personal responsibility stems from the *'liberal farmer'* tradition that dominated the early democratic political landscape in Norway. More recently, the Norwegians' strong sense of personal responsibility is balanced by a desire to work together for the greater good. This belief is associated with the *'social democratic'* tradition and the growth of the Union movement in the 1930's and 40's. Unionisation in Norway did not come from significant industrialisation as was the case in Britain and other western European nations. It grew from the desire to share the very few resources Norway had at the time. It is hard to believe that Norway was, for many years, considered one of the poorest countries in western Europe.

Yet if we look closely we can see there is some congruence between these two political traditions that make Norway unique. The combining of these political creeds circuitously provided the context for legislation that supported our school to enhance its social cohesion and encourage innovation as I show later.

So what are these values? Norwegians have a strong believe in individual responsibility and, refreshingly, view litigation as an ineffective way to solve problems. Mistakes are things Norwegians learn from. Trust underpins consensus building and Norwegians value consensus as the best way to make decisions and thus create shared responsibility. Norwegians also believe each individual has an individual responsibility to build the nation's collective social capacity.

The Norwegian has a conviction that mistakes are things not to argued about or to aim blame at. If you have a car accident in Norway the authorities can instigate fault sharing principle as a way of apportioning liability. Maybe this is why, for a country with roads made of ice, it is not surprising that it has the lowest per capita road deaths in the world.

I'll describe, all be it anecdotally, the contrast between an Australian school district's approach to learning from mistakes compared to what I experienced in Norway.

In Norway a child is able to climb trees in the school yard. I know, 'What are they thinking?', but I have seen them do it - climb a tree as high as they can go. However, this particular child fell out of the tree and broke his arm. The parent approaches the school and requests we teach all children how to climb trees better. Imagine the learning the child gains by such an activity and the response of the parent. In Australia, a child broke their arm doing a handstand in the playground



before school started. The parent threatens litigation for negligence and the school's District Director immediately bans handstands and student access to the playground before school starts. Imagine the learning the child gains from this approach.

In a much broader context, the response of the Norwegian government and its people to the massacre in Oslo and Utøya Island in 2011 was, by and large, devoid of blame and accusations. From memory only one politician went looking for someone to blame but he was immediately shut down. While the hegemonic western media searched for those 'responsible,' the Norwegian politicians, statespersons and public consoled, mourned and then investigated what the country could learn from the tragic event. Norway demonstrated they had a collective obligation to share the responsibility for the event and to learn from it.

Norwegians value shared responsibility and consensus decision making. Norwegian school students conduct community service assignments and problem solving projects as a collective and collaborative activity. Another anecdotal story highlights the type of student the Norwegian system can produce compared to the American and British systems:

A university professor tells me the general difference between the American and British post graduate students and their Norwegian counterparts. The American and British have greater content knowledge yet find it difficult to know where to start when asked to collaborate to solve a problem. On the other hand, the Norwegian students may lack some content but they are far better at working together to solve a problem. One would imagine that collectively solving problems at a post graduate level requires a high level capacity to reach consensus.

At a recent conference in Australia I heard concerns that assessing group work seems to choke any concerted attempt by teachers or the system to embed collaboration, teamwork and consensus as a legitimate way of solving problems let alone learning and creating.

So Norwegians are very trusting. They believe the best way to create an inclusive society is to make decisions through consensus. They expect individuals to work in groups to solve problems and share responsibility as a matter of course. They learn from mistakes without fear of retribution or blame thus ameliorating the individual to take risks as a way of learning. I believe it is the combination of these values that obliquely underpin the rationale for a piece of industrial relations legislation that supported our school to engage in a re-culture process.

I found it intriguing that Norway, with its policies and mindset aimed at maintaining the hard earned status quo, has within its industrial relations legislation a law that enables flexible on site working



agreements. This legislation is based on trusting individuals to engage in a consensus decision making approach to develop a work place agreement and because of it our school developed what is called a 'local tariff agreement' that accounted for the contextual features of the school operating within the Education and Private School Acts of Norway.

From a distance, one could be excused for thinking Norway's industrial legislation would not support government funded (private) schools to create their own set of working conditions. Like Australia, Norway is a country that has a highly unionized teaching workforce. It seems the congruence of the values that exist in within two political creeds made it possible to develop a collective working agreement, negotiated directly with the teachers. Through this type of industrial relations mechanism, which the unions tend to oppose, we enacted a process of 'social innovation' that resulted in re-culturing the school. This process was supported by the idea of shared responsibility and collective capacity building while at the same time valuing individual teacher entrepreneurialship.

So what happened in this little school just south of the North Pole?

The Norwegian Working Environment Act¹ attempts to create an equitable and inclusive working environment. Predominately this legislation is considered the domain of trade unions in Norway with the employers towing the line. However, within the labyrinth of Norwegian Law there is a small but powerful piece of legislation that allows schools, in the absence of a Unionised workforce, to negotiate a 'local tariff agreement'. Our school, rather than adopting the 'one size fits all' working conditions as outlined in the national agreements, used the 'local tariff agreement to support changing what Hargreaves and Fullan² describe as the substance and form of the school's culture. We set about altering teacher beliefs and relationships, not by changing the very good Norwegian school teachers' physical working conditions, but by focusing on enhancing the school's professional capital³. Our teachers tended to have an individualistic approach to work supported by a 'factory mentality'. The local tariff agreement developed through consensus helped the school change this.

So it was that the Staff Recognition Incentive Scheme (SRIS) emerged out of the local tariff agreement. Most incentive schemes have been rightly derided for the negative impact they have on a school's working environment. The customary incentive schemes tend to reduce rather than increase teacher engagement and motivation by producing a culture of mistrust and selfishness. Yet here in Norway, in the true spirit of social democratic reform, legislation rhetorically associated with the 'liberal farmer tradition'

¹ Norwegian Government (2009) *Working Environment Act*, Oslo. Retrieved <http://www.arbeidstilsynet.no/lov.html?tid=78120>.

² Hargreaves, A. Fullan, M. (2012) *Professional Capital: Transforming Teaching in Every School*. School Teachers College Press, New York.

³ Hargreaves, A. Fullan, M. (2012) *Professional Capital: Transforming Teaching in Every School*. School Teachers College Press, New York.



produced a trusting environment that enabled individuals, through consensus, to promote the school's collective capacity and share responsibility for the outcomes.

Norway, like all societies, is full of contradictions but it seems the combining of 'liberal farmer' and the 'social democrat' traditions make Norway unique in their approach to the development of their society. It seems to me that Norway has successfully placed the politics of fascism into the dust bin of history while not denying the individuals capacities to share responsibility and indeed the significant new found resources. While it is evident that there are opposing political parties in Norway trying to gain power based on debunking the values of the other, one reality is that when these values are combined it is shown that individuals have a better chance of working together for the collective good.

After all the farmer did not really mean **'Go Away.'**