

2.4 Norwegian development politics for the north, and for the future of Finnmark

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Introduction

Popular participation in the development of policies has strongly declined over the last decades along with membership in political parties¹. The current level of paying members is only 5% of the voters. This is a matter of concern. Professor of political science Knut Heidar points to a potential situation where the players are a small number of professional politicians on one hand, and ad-hoc voters on the other. Broad political discussions among ordinary people are decreasing, and we are losing the arena for political debate among ordinary people. This is a democratic dilemma since regional development needs to include broad political involvement.

In the current situation, democracy within the Norwegian parliamentary system is being more and more dependent on “Non-Governmental Organizations” (NGOs) to be the counterpart to politicians in the necessary debates on a multitude of topics. As an NGO, the “Norwegian Society for the Conservation of Nature” (NNV) has no power, but can use our freedom of speech to shout out warnings, to point at possible risks, and to pray for caution. We hope to open the eyes of policy makers when we point out the hidden aspects of upcoming plans that the industries have no interest in disclosing. Nature needs protection against ruthless exploitation. Unless NGOs provide additional views and complimentary information, the basis for political decisions may be strongly biased and incomplete, and political decisions could be disastrously wrong for our future.

Today the county of Finnmark, and the Arctic region, is facing a number of important questions with great opportunities, big consequences, and possible serious implications. We must try diversifying the prevailing optimistic perception of the situation, by throwing a glance at the reality that we are facing: **What makes our circumstances so insecure, where are the risks, and what can go wrong?**



There is a “run” for the resources of the North

I start with a glance at the current situation: During the last decade we have seen continuous pressure for exploiting the resources in northern Norway. The offensive strategy of the government was stated officially by Prime Minister Stoltenberg in his “High North Policy”, of 2005². There is a complex background behind this, and as usual money and politics are the big drivers. **Primarily** the pressure comes from industry. The World is beyond “Peak oil”, the oil and gas industry is eager for more, and the mineral industry is knocking on the door. **Secondly** the areas of the North are sparsely populated, and the current development trends accelerate centralization and migration, with an unknown long-term impact. The “High North Policy” of the Norwegian government hence raises a crucial question: Is this a strategy just for the government or a strategy that also benefits the North?

In addition to the general policy, the Minister of Industry has released a *Mineral Strategy*. He was, however, outspoken enough to admit that the focus of the strategy³ was to facilitate for the industry.

Where will the current strategy lead us?

A strategy only focused on two industrial avenues, is far less than what the region needs. We need a long-term plan for a sustainable future, including the post oil era. This plan must include far more than just a few decades of mineral exploitation. A strategy for the North should describe the main national goals, and define where the development of the northern societies should end up. National policymakers cannot just “facilitate”, avoid describing where to go, and leave the means and the end result to the industry.

On top of this, local political communities, in most of the municipalities, seem to have only one matter on their agenda, to exploit all possibilities for jobs now, and local growth now, no matter the cost, the sustainability, the consequences, and where it will eventually bring the municipality and the region. By the first glance any new jobs may appear as a good development, and thus appear to be a sound measure. But is it sustainable, will it help the local community, and how will it change the regional structure and society in the long run?



Since we do not yet know what the new strategy will lead to, there are a lot of important questions to answer:

- Is all this good, or may it possibly be bad for the North?
- What will be the end of this “run”?
- Will this be a robbery that in the end leaves Finnmark empty of resources?
- Will it bring us a region in balance, with prosperity and happiness to us all?
- And for the ongoing process: how can we secure the best outcome for the region?

The best process gives the best outcome

The best way of securing a good result is often to make sure that we apply the best possible process. A democratic process is one that is open, transparent, honest, and takes into account who the players are, and which side of the game they are playing. We must be attentive to different positions – different perspectives. To start, one has to realise that local interests, national interests, and global interests may not be identical, and that different segments of the industries also have their own different goals.

The investors often claim that their interests coincide with the public interest. That is at best only part of the truth, mostly a very small part, and more often than not - there is a direct contradiction. What we experience is that investors and their companies want to extract and consume the resources with as high a profit as possible and as fast as possible. This seldom coincides with long term social growth and sustainable development for local arctic societies, or for the region as a whole. Politicians should not accept industry’s definition of the situation as the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. But our biggest challenge is convincing officials and politicians to take this reality into account, and find their own answers. They must consider the totality and long-term impact of the projects in question, and independently check the balance and benefit for the society and for the public interest.

The presented facts – and the real truth

The second big challenge is to establish what the true and significant scientific facts of the matter are. The basic background for decision making is most often provided by the developer. Thus, the quality and completeness of the information should not be taken for granted. Unfortunately, a healthy scepticism seems to be a scarce commodity among politicians. The



local public management bodies have a duty to provide independent data, not only rely on what is provided by the developer. However, research costs money, time, and resources, and we mostly find that alternative assessments are not provided. We fear that the political wish for more jobs can shade their insight and make politicians turn the blind eye to the risk involved. This makes consequences from the lack of external insight and objections even more severe.

Deficiencies in today's political development processes

We have noted a lack of political respect for our legal framework. To our great surprise, we have experienced that the limits of the law are not necessarily fixed limits for political actions, not even for established politicians and local political parties.

A desire to change the current law is democratic freedom. But when the current legislation is being bent and circumvented, or simply ignored and broken by politicians themselves, their attitude is dangerous and far from democratic. We have seen numerous examples, e.g. when the County governor executes his duty and cancels municipal decisions made contrary to national law and regulations, he is met with anger by top level politicians on the municipal level.

We experience that science, knowledge, and international conventions are not necessarily the main basis for decisions. Our experience shows decisions being made contrary to scientific advice and conventions:

- When the national "Institute of Marine Research" strongly advised against allowing subsea tailings in Repparfjord – they were ignored, their objections not even considered in the municipal process.
- When the Red King Crab was imported from the Pacific by Russia, the Norwegian government protected it⁴, although the UN convention on Biodiversity commits us to eradicate alien species⁵.
- The majority of the government wants to drill for oil in the nursery of the north Atlantic cod – in spite of professional advice from marine research⁶ and the relevant ministries.

Even when the sum of national law, international conventions, scientific advice, and recommendations from administration points the same way, and great risks are being pointed



out, they can all be ignored. When politicians are focusing sufficiently narrow minded on their shortsighted ambitions, they may ignore the inconvenient truth.

Necessary changes in the political decision process

The people of the North need to know that the national strategy leads towards a sustainable future for them. They also need to be able to trust the facts, the process, and the decision makers. Better oversight and transparency is necessary. To obtain this the public must have access to the scientific documentation of facts, and of the possible consequences. The people should always know what the unbiased administrative recommendations are, and the politicians should not be allowed to tamper with the professional recommendations. The purpose of this is to make the public, the political opponents and the administration capable of finding the real and true basis for the political decisions – and it will be possible to make the political decision makers politically responsible for what they do.

Global consequences and responsibilities

The world society has a number of vital questions to solve. Because of their grave consequences, it is necessary that we all take universal responsibility for the big questions now. The UNESCO advisory body COMEST (the World Commission on the Ethics of Scientific Knowledge and Technology) states in the Foreword to their “The Precautionary Principle” that:

In today’s environment of rapid scientific research and technological development, different ways to apply new knowledge and innovations are constantly being engendered that present us with ever more possibilities and challenges. We stand to benefit from the greater range of options this progress brings. However, **with more choice also comes more responsibility**. Conscious of our roles as stewards of the world in which we live, notably on behalf of future generations, **we must therefore take care in exercising these options.**⁷

So the UN has determined that we all have global responsibilities. Sustainability for life on earth is at stake, and two of the most imminent risks are unquestionably climate change and decreasing biodiversity. Erna Solberg’s new Norwegian government platform⁸ states that:

The government will base its policy on stewardship and the precautionary principle. We have a responsibility to ensure that the world we leave to our



children is in at least as good a state as it was when we inherited it from our ancestors. We must step up the development of renewable energy. The Government will pursue a proactive climate policy and will strengthen the agreement on climate policy reached in the Storting.

Very wise words, but will they be followed by the necessary action to match our obligations for the future?

Climate sceptics hamper vital actions

When climate change is the subject, and the limits for CO2 emissions are discussed, we often hear opponents of action say that *'we don't know for a fact that human activities affect the climate'*. A university study⁹ of 12,000 scientific reports in a 20 year period found that 4,000 of those reports had a conclusion on cause. The study also found that 97% of these reports concluded on human activities as the cause. Even this was not enough to make the newly appointed Norwegian Minister of Agriculture reconsider her previous stance as a *"climate sceptic"* when questioned on national broadcast¹⁰.

Consequently a crucial question is, "What should you do if you do not know the magnitude of hazards ahead?" For most people the answer is easy: Take care - better safe than sorry! Let us exemplify this: Should we protect our babies from chemicals like Phthalates when they are only suspected to cause hormonal disturbances, reduced fertility, and birth defects? Or should we continue exposing them to a possible risk until we through experience have obtained 100% evidence that the hazard is real?

No, of course, we should not! The risk is too grave to accept, even when the probability is low. Instead we must use the Precautionary Principle, as we should do in all high risk situations.

The Precautionary Principle

The UN has recognized the need for ethical guidelines in situations where risk is involved, and UNESCO has, through the COMEST, provided an answer⁷: **"When human activities may lead to morally unacceptable harm that is scientifically plausible but uncertain, actions shall be taken to avoid or diminish that harm"**.



Morally unacceptable harm refers to harm to humans or the environment that is threatening to human life or health, or serious and effectively irreversible, or inequitable to present or future generations, or imposed without adequate consideration of the human rights of those affected. When in doubt, the only morally acceptable choice to avoid grave risk is: **DON'T DO IT!**

What is the global context in which to use the precautionary principle?

What is the context in which we have the challenge of doing the right choices to obtain sustainability on earth? We can clearly see the effects of climate change. Man has disturbed the balance, and we now experience the hottest climate in 4,000 years. The diversity of nature is rapidly decreasing, and species die out a 1,000 times faster than normal. We can measure a record high CO₂ level in the atmosphere, and it also results in an ever increasing ocean acidification¹¹. The main answers are also known: Stop emitting greenhouse gases! Stop burning fossil fuels! Stop destroying habitats! We know what to do – but where is the responsibility, and where is the action?

Use of the land: Should we choose short-lived industry or sustainability?

In addition to global questions, dilemmas also occur on the regional and local scale when politicians are tempted by the opportunity of establishing new industry, and often forget the long-term perspectives. Finnmark is the largest county in Norway with 49,000 square kilometres populated by 75,000 people. Finnmark is slightly bigger than Denmark with 5.6 million inhabitants and a population density 80 times higher. But we still experience conflicts of interest over the use of the sparsely populated land.

The important conflict lines are often drawn between sustainable activities on one side, and resource consuming activities on the other. The lifespan of consuming activities like the oil- and mineral-industries are relatively short, typically between 5 and 50 yrs. Contrary to this, the sustainable activities yields an endless output – if we take care and protect their sustainability:

- We know that cod fishing off the Norwegian coast has taken place for more than thousand years. Oil production in the Norwegian North Sea started less than 50 years ago and is now on the decline. Short-lived “fun” and “easy money” in oil is a grave hazard to the fisheries that are able to supply endless production of food.



- The current development is also a threat to the historical settlement patterns designed to simplify exploitation of the sustainable resources of the sea. Wages in the oil sector sets a standard of living that customary trades cannot compete with. This undermines a sustainable future.
- When locals lose their right to harvest the fish swimming by their doorstep, as they have done for millennia, this is a threat to the basis of a stable population in the arctic.
- A drastic toll is being taken on living space for Sami reindeer herding.
 - Reindeer herders lose their land to mineral extraction, cottage building, snowmobile trails, windmills, and power lines.
 - The level of awarded mineral exploration rights in Sami areas is alarming.
- Mines and mineral excavation destroy areas of traditional sustainable use, by occupying the land, destroying habitats, disturbing the wildlife and reindeer, and release poison and harmful particles in pastures, fjords and out in the sea.

The sustainability and diversity of nature crumbles. The development leads to loss of species and habitat at sea and ashore. The current development strategy puts the historical and future mainstay of the sustainable livelihood in Finnmark and the Arctic at risk.

How do we act in the face of this?

Norway used to be an environmentally responsible Nation. Our *“Mother of the Nation”* – Gro Harlem Brundtland, paved the way on the global scale – but in Norway we have lost the track. The state has ratified a number of important international conventions, laws, and regulations – but we don’t always respect and abide by them:

- One example is our management of the Red King Crab - an invasive species: The Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) commits us to eradicate it. Even if it is on *“the black list”* in Norway, it is one of our best protected species. Economic considerations overrule caution, natural hazards, and commitment to agreements.
- Another example is the internationally agreed reductions of CO₂ emissions. We have been increasing when we should start decreasing¹², and even now Norway plans up-scaling of petrochemical production, one of the biggest contributors of greenhouse gases.
- We are legally bound by *“The EU Water Framework directive”*, but it is often being ignored.



- The Bern Convention compels us to protect endangered species. Even so the Norwegian predators are killed far beyond sustainable levels.
- We have an international obligation to protect the North Atlantic Salmon, but we still pollute fjords where they should be given a safe haven. And the producers of farmed salmon present a danger of genetically polluting the Indigenous populations of natural salmon.

The challenges are grave – we need action now!

Most people recognize that life on earth is facing a number of significant challenges. Most of our politicians also do, but too many seem to be overwhelmed by the magnitude of the challenges, and don't look further than the tip of their noses to find what is best in the long term. And even if they have serious environmental ambitions, there are a lot of tripwires around:

- Environmental management in the municipalities is often downsized, overworked, and they are unable to manage all their challenges. They may lack both information and environmental education, and those who are qualified are often being used for other administrative purposes.
- A lot of the politicians who should provide the good solutions, lack the will and the courage to prioritize the environment and its sustainability over short-term gain by unsustainable industries.
- Their close proximity between the voters and local politicians may prevent them from making good decisions that may be unpopular in their local constituency.
- The handling of environmental issues in the Norwegian government ministries is reorganized. The previous power at the Ministry of Environment has been pulverized by dividing power in environmental issues between all ministries. Their environmental competence is lower, and so is their will to prioritize environment at the cost of their main political responsibilities. The fact that central control is unpopular in the regions, also dampens political will to preserve natural values.
- Populism is prevailing, and votes seem to be more important than environmental issues. Politicians do not increase their popularity by being doomsday prophets. Reducing air-travel and traffic on the roads will not make voters happy in the near term, and will not



motivate them to re-elect – even if the right actions may cause the current politicians to be the heroes of the future.

The responsibility for the future belongs to us all!

Norway needs political authorities with better quality, integrity, objectivity, and independence when handling environmental and developmental issues. We have pointed out flaws in **political processes**, but we must also make sure that the politicians themselves have a sound personal basis for their decisions:

- They should not participate, and especially not be key players, when they have a personal economic interest in the results
- Politicians are also responsible for making sure that objective facts support their decisions, they should not be allowed to trust facts provided by the developer alone, but they do
- Investigators that provide research and science as a basis for environmental decisions should not be paid by the developer. Instead, we should change our system and let the investigations be designed, contracted and managed by the authorities. Only the bill should be taken care of by the developer.

In today's practice the developer designs the questions in the investigation, and the developer is the source of the livelihood of the investigator:

- Is there no reason for caution in this situation?
- Do investigators always provide an objective picture of the consequences?
- May market forces influence investigators to provide the answers that the market wants?
- Or can we be sure they are never tempted to deliver a slightly colored picture of reality?

Administrative management must secure an unbiased basis for the political decisions, and give the public a chance to provide to this by sharing their information and knowledge. NGOs should be used as a source for alternatives. Research should be used as a tool to find the truth and the best options, not as a tool case where you pick and choose, and take only the arguments that fits your previous assumptions or political ambitions, and to hide the truth and suppress the opposition.



The system needs a change, and the World needs **you** to take action. We all need to take part in discussions of local issues, provide information, provide knowledge and local arguments, and give power to local NGOs that provide alternative views. We need to question the impartiality of management, investigators and politicians. And we have to elect politicians that are willing to see longer than the next election, and have the wisdom to prioritize the next generations and the future of earth.

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