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Svalbard, the State and Store Norske, 1916-1976

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1. Introduction

Since its founding in 1916 and for sixty years, Store Norske Spitsbergen Kulkompani (Store Norske) was a private enterprise with a particular and privileged role in Svalbard. While virtually all other Norwegian coal companies either went bankrupt after a few years of operation, were taken over by the state, or experienced a combination of the two, Store Norske remained a private company with the state as a major creditor and staunch supporter. How and why did Store Norske acquire this privileged position, or what might be described as a "special relationship" with the state? How did it work and why did the government finally decide to nationalise the company in 1976? These are the main problems I am exploring in the present paper. [2]

Store Norske's significance in the history of Svalbard is sufficiently known to allow some initial observations and hypotheses. First, the company clearly played a role in Norway's struggle for sovereignty and maintained close contacts with government officials and state. This was the beginning of the special relationship. Second, like other Norwegian coal companies Store Norske soon became dependent on financial support from the state, a dependency that translated into formal bindings in the early 1930s. At this point, the state could have taken over Store Norske – or even liquidated it, being its sole creditor. The government chose to do neither. This indicates that Store Norske was considered useful as a private entity. However, the state reconsidered in the 1970s and nationalised the company. Taking the historical experience of other coal companies in Svalbard into account the question is perhaps not so much *why* this happened, but rather why the state allowed a privately owned enterprise to manage a whole community and valuable resources in Svalbard for so long – sixty years?

My thesis is that Store Norske changed from being instrumental in shaping Norwegian policy towards Svalbard to becoming itself an instrument for state policy. When Norway

[1] I am indebted to the editors and peer reviewers for providing valuable and constructive advice and input to the revision of my manuscript.
[2] A popular, shorter version of this paper in Norwegian ("Svalbard, staten og Store Norske") is published in the official anniversary publication 14 August 2025: *Svalbard – del av Norge siden 1925,* Oslo: Justis- og beredskaps-departementet, 70-83.
https://www.regjeringen.no/globalassets/departementene/jd/dokumenter/diverse/svalbard-del-av-norge-siden-1925.pdf

assumed sovereignty in 1925, it did not establish an extensive administrative apparatus for Svalbard, neither at local nor at central level. In many ways Store Norske effectively functioned as a local proxy for the state. It was a practical and relatively cheap way to manage the main Norwegian settlement and coal resources in Svalbard, while keeping direct public involvement at arm's length. Such an arrangement bears the hallmarks of the company towns that proliferated within extractive industries during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. But this kind of governance also resembles a form of corporatism. During and after the Second World War Norwegian authority was challenged on several fronts. In the 1960s and 1970s, the government's ambitions regarding Svalbard grew, which required tighter political and administrative control. The old company town model was no longer expedient. Therefore, when the opportunity arose around 1975, the state nationalised Store Norske and put an end to sixty years of formal independence as a private enterprise.

2. Central concepts

In the title and throughout the text I use the term *state* to denote the central civil authorities of Norway. Unless specified, the state is a collective designation of the elected government and its civil service, first and foremost the ministries, but also other bodies of public administration. When I use the term *government* specifically, I mean the college of (relevant) ministers who represent the executive power and who initiate or make decisions concerning Svalbard. Of course, *Stortinget* (the parliament), also represents the state and the nation being the elected, legislative power. It will sanction the government's proposals or decisions, but it may also initiate policy and instruct the government. It is worth noting that the *Svalbard Act* (Lov om Svalbard), which was brought into force when Norway took over sovereignty on 14 August 1925, to a large degree is an enabling act that empowers the government to regulate through secondary legislation without seeking the express consent of the Storting. Consequently, the government and central administration have had – and still have – a relatively strong position in the governance of Svalbard. At the same time, there is a long tradition in Norway of cross-party unity when it comes to Svalbard policy. For all practical purposes, then, *state* in the current text represents the official will of the Norwegian political and civil authorities.

The coal-mining settlements that emerged on Svalbard in the first decades of the twentieth century were single-sided industrial sites, what we often call *company towns.* The concept of company town holds many historical and geographical varieties, but typically entails that a single corporation – here, the coal company – is employer, landlord, provider of infrastructure and partly regulator in a certain geographical area. Without going into the scientific discourse on company towns in time and space, I want to emphasise some features that are relevant in the case of Store Norske.[3] Svalbard's company towns were a business model designed for extracting and exporting raw materials in a remote and initially lawless area. All the necessary infrastructure for production as well as living had to be built from scratch. This was done by the company, in most cases a private enterprise, which could control recruitment of the workforce and

[3] I am relying here on Trang (Mae) Nguyen's well-referenced survey and interesting discussion of global company towns (Nguyen 2025). I thank the editors for bringing this article to my notice.

its working and living conditions to a large degree. The relative absence of legislation and public administration – a lack of state, if you will – gave the company and its management a powerful position in the settlement. The jurist Trang (Mae) Nguyen calls this feature of classical company towns "the corporate control order", which not only included financial and spatial control, but also social and moral control over the workforce (Nguyen 2025). In her influential study of Longyearbyen 1916-1975, historian Bjørg Evjen thinks along similar lines and writes about a controlled, "total community" dominated by Store Norske (Evjen 2006).

While the company town model is helpful to understand Store Norske's particular role in Svalbard, it does not quite capture the dynamic interaction between the state and the company, the public-private dimension of governance. Therefore, I introduce two additional concepts that may help explain this relationship, namely *proxy* and *corporative organisation*. My thesis is that Store Norske was an instrument for Norwegian policy. I maintain that at least for periods of time the company acted as a functional proxy for the state in Svalbard. By this I mean that the private company took on responsibilities towards the inhabitants of Longyearbyen that normally would be provided as public services – for example school, hospital, church, and other kinds of welfare services. Such delegation of tasks from public to private is indeed compatible with the company town model.[4] However, the cooperation went further. Store Norske operated on behalf of, and sometimes as an agent for, state interests on Svalbard, not least regarding properties and resources. This was not an *ad hoc* arrangement but an institutionalised cooperation. At one point – in 1933 – the state formalised the operating conditions for Store Norske and secured itself a seat on the board. In addition to this institutional relation there are numerous examples of the state seeking Store Norske's advice and inviting the company into policy making. Furthermore, there are indications that the company was able to influence its regulatory framework by way of its government contacts. These are elements of what I would call a *corporative organisation* of the public-private relationship. This model does not fulfil the criteria of "societal corporatism" as defined by Phillippe C. Schmitter, nor has it anything to do with authoritarian "state corporatism" (Schmitter 1974). It is rather a special case or subset of a Scandinavian corporative tradition where the state systematically involves private and professional interests as well as non-governmental organisations into decision processes and negotiated cooperation (Nordby 1994).[5] I will go no further into the theories of corporatism but use the concept to characterise a relationship where the state decides the general framework and sets the goals but allows a single private corporation to influence policy and to represent public interests, while still operating quite independently.

[4] It is also compatible with the requirements of the Mining Code (Bergverksordningen) that was introduced in 1925, in parallel with the enforcement of the treaty, and which defines the mining companies' social responsibilities. In many ways, the Mining Code presupposes company towns.

[5] The so-called "Nordic Model" with its emphasis on tripartite bargaining and societal involvement is often perceived as neo-corporatism. However, there is hardly an unequivocal, precise definition of the term.

3. State of research

The rich international literature on various company towns is of limited interest in the present paper since mine is not a comparative study, but the cited article by Nguyen provides relevant examples and perspectives (Nguyen 2025). There are some very good studies of British and Swedish exploration and coal-mining companies that operated in Svalbard until the 1920s (Kruse 2014; Avango 2005). These works are relevant in my context of public-private interaction but concern only the early phase of Svalbard's industrialisation. Russian coal mining and community development in Svalbard have been explored in a series of scientific and popular works by Aleksandr Portsel and synthesised in his 2022 monograph (Portsel 2022). The state-owned Russian company Arktikugol has mined coal in Svalbard since 1932 and operated three settlements – Grumant, Barentsburg, and Pyramiden. It might be fruitful to compare Arktikugol and Store Norske, their relation to the state, and their respective local communities, but that would exceed the frames of the present paper, which is a case study of Store Norske as private enterprise.[6]

There are numerous books about and by Store Norske but the scientific literature concerning its history before 1976 is sparse. Willy Østreng has studied the company's role in the Norwegian struggle for supremacy over Svalbard, which I will come back to (Østreng 1974). Roger Sørheim's small study of the governmental Spitsbergen Coal Committee in the 1920s has been useful (Sørheim 1995). A research article by Tore Grønlie about the state's plans to nationalise Store Norske in the 1960s is of course of great interest here (Grønlie 1981). The work of prime relevance is undoubtedly Bjørg Evjen's standard monograph on Longyearbyen (Evjen 2006). It almost exactly covers my period and the study object, Store Norske. She focuses on the local social history and compares the development of Longyearbyen to single-sided industrial communities elsewhere in Norway and the Arctic. Adolf Hoel's huge work on the history of Svalbard companies, including Store Norske, is an invaluable source of information but requires critical handling (Hoel 1966). Jan Kvello's book on Store Norske from 1945 to 1975 is also worth mentioning (Kvello 2006). It offers lots of relevant historical information, often accompanied by more personal comments and interpretations, but it lacks good documentation.

I have little or nothing to add to Evjen's analysis of the local community and Store Norske. My contribution is rather an assessment of the relation between the company and the state, how it developed over time, and how it affected – and was affected by – Norwegian Svalbard policy. I have touched upon the theme in earlier works (see references), but the present is an attempt to make a more systematic, longitudinal study. My main sources are public documents from the government and Stortinget as well as secondary literature.[7] I also draw on my earlier research into government archives, first and foremost those of the Ministry of Justice and Police and The Ministry of Trade and Industries (Arlov 2011).

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[6] In the cited work, part 3, Portsel does attempt a comparison of social conditions in the Russian and Norwegian settlements on Svalbard. I have not found it very helpful with regard to the public-private relation that is my main focus here.

[7] I have made good use of the comprehensive digital archive of parliamentary papers, reports, minutes etc. at https://www.stortinget.no.

4. The foundation of Store Norske

On 6 March 1916, a group of prominent representatives of Norwegian industry, finance, and politics met in Kristiania (presently Oslo) to form a syndicate. Already at the time of founding the so-called "Norwegian Spitsbergen Syndicate", the shareholders subscribed for an amount of 2.65 million Norwegian kroner (crowns). Within a week, further shares were issued, so that the total capital reached three million kroner. The purpose of this capital formation had been clear since 1915, namely "[…] the purchase and exploitation of coalfields on Spitsbergen".

The initiative was prompted by concerns about the national coal supply after the outbreak of the war in 1914. England was the main provider and many people in neutral Norway feared for supply security in a situation of international war. This applied to both private and public actors. The Norwegian Railroads were the country's largest coal consumer, but the entire transport sector, fisheries, and industry depended on imported coal. Imports kept up during the first war years, but coal prices rose – like the price of everything else in times of strong inflation. Self-sufficiency and national preparedness were therefore the order of the day for the government.

Another immediate reason for establishing the Spitsbergen Syndicate was that some large coalfields and production facilities in Svalbard recently had been offered for sale. First and foremost, these included the Arctic Coal Company's (ACC) occupations and mines. The ACC's owners, Ayer & Longyear, were based in Boston, USA. Before the war, the ACC sold all its coal to Norway but ceased production in the summer of 1915. Negotiations about the sale of the Svalbard assets began. The Norwegian interests in the syndicate got the winning bid and on 30 November 1916, the private enterprise Store Norske Spitsbergen Kulkompani A/S (hereafter Store Norske) was founded with a share capital of 9.6 million *kroner* (Arlov 1991).

5. Advancing in no man's land

Store Norske was formed at a time when Svalbard still was a no man's land, a *terra nullius* internationally known as Spitsbergen. The diplomatic process that took place before the war to create a legal and administrative regime in the archipelago had not been successful. Recently independent (since 1905), Norway had initiated multilateral negotiations on the "Spitsbergen issue" with a rather undisguised ambition to gain Norwegian supremacy of one kind or another. That quickly proved unrealistic in the face of other interested states, Sweden in particular. The international conference in Kristiania in the summer of 1914 discussed only varieties of joint administration, not Norwegian sovereignty. Anyway, the parties did not reach an agreement and the outbreak of war later that summer precluded any further process.

The war opened a window of opportunity for Norway in Svalbard – in more than one way. Partly, it put practical obstacles in the way for foreign companies' activity, among them ACC. That created room for Norwegian investors. Partly, capital accumulated in neutral Norway during the so-called Speculative Time ("jobbetiden") because of increased demand for Norwegian goods and raw materials, and not least transport services that the merchant fleet could provide. This was capital looking for investment opportunities.

Above all, the war turned the balance of power in Europe upside-down and hence also political interests. What had seemed impossible before the war no longer appeared unrealistic once peace was restored.

Considering this, it is hardly coincidental that Store Norske as well as a few other coal companies were established during the war. The demand was there, prices were high and rising, and capital was available. The question is to what degree political interests too were in play. Were these private enterprises instruments in the Norwegian government's quest for sovereignty in Svalbard? Or perhaps it was the other way around, with private capital mobilising the political authorities to secure its own and the nation's economic interests in the archipelago? In short – who was instrumental to whom? (Arlov 2022)

Many authors have pointed out the cooperation between, or even infiltration of, public and private interests in the Spitsbergen question. It is far from a Norwegian phenomenon only. In Sweden there were equally close contacts between actors from politics, science, and industry promoting coal mining in Svalbard (Avango 2005). In the United States, owner of ACC John M. Longyear repeatedly lobbied the political authorities for support of company interests – not without success (Berg 2017; Singh 1980). The British prospecting companies Northern Exploration Co. and Scottish Spitsbergen Syndicate similarly tried to mobilise the British government, with significantly less luck (Kruse 2014). As might be expected, national positioning peaked during the peace conference in Paris in 1919, where the Spitsbergen question found its solution (Jones 2017).

Thus, Store Norske was not alone exploiting a network of public and private actors to promote their own commercial objectives and at the same time work for what we loosely may call national interests. On the contrary, at the time there was nothing unusual about this kind of shared interests across sectors, often reinforced by personal and family ties within the society elite. There are, however, some factors that make Store Norske especially interesting in this context. First, the company was by far the largest and most important Norwegian economic actor in Svalbard, with owners belonging to the absolute top tier of Norway's business life. Second, the company was exceptionally well-connected with the government and central public administration and was at times actively involved in policy and law development in Svalbard. Third, Store Norske remained a private enterprise for sixty years, as opposed to most other coal companies that were either bankrupted or nationalised by the state – or a combination of those two. What was it about Store Norske that made the company deserve this privileged position?

6. The midwives

The geologist and polar activist Adolf Hoel (1879–1964) described the establishment of Store Norske in these words (my translation):

> With the formation of this company a great national question was happily solved. Thus, the biggest and most valuable coalfields on Spitsbergen were secured for Norway. It may be said with reasonably high certainty that if this had not happened, Svalbard would not have been under Norwegian sovereignty today (Hoel 1966, 796).

Hoel himself played a role as advisor by acquisition of coalfields on Svalbard and rarely understated his own historical significance. All the same, his perspective is interesting as

a hypothesis: Store Norske represented the solution of a "national question" that can be directly connected to Norwegian sovereignty. Is there any substance in this?

Obviously, acquiring the American occupations and facilities in the Isfjorden area increased Norwegian economic and territorial interests in Svalbard. Before the First World War, the ACC was practically the only industrial enterprise with a permanent presence and continuous production in the archipelago. To the extent that presence and resource exploitation were a prerequisite for claiming and enforcing territorial supremacy, the formation of Store Norske was an important step. Adolf Hoel and his circle of polar activists probably believed this to be the case (Drivenes 2004). Whether this was a point of view shared by Norwegian authorities around 1915-1916 is another matter. One year into the war, supply security was perhaps more important than dreams of territorial expansion. Notably, it was Director General Platou of Norway's State Railways (NSB) who first approached Hoel to enquire about the possibility of providing coal from Svalbard as a replacement for expensive British coal.

However, NSB was not the only public actor to engage. Political authorities quickly became involved, and at the very top level too: Prime Minister Gunnar Knudsen and Minister of Foreign Affairs Niels Ihlen. Both men personally took part in the foundation of the Spitsbergen Syndicate. In fact, the PM himself signed up for a major stake.[8] By lending political – and private – capital to the establishment of Store Norske the head of government signalled that this was indeed "a great national issue". Surely, this stimulated interest and subscriptions among private investors and helped realise the acquisition of ACC. But whether Knudsen and Ihlen were practically and economically motivated or intended to position Norway in the struggle for supremacy on Svalbard, is not easy to determine. Both men were Left Party (Venstre) politicians, industrialists and business owners; they hardly saw a contradiction between providing supply security and planting Norwegian flags in no man's land. Furthermore, they probably had no ideological scruples concerning public-private cooperation; Knudsen and Ihlen embodied both roles in one.

However, when the Spitsbergen Syndicate commenced its activities in Adventfjorden and Grønfjorden in the summer of 1916 it was as a sovereign, private enterprise.

7. Store Norske and the Treaty

In 1915-1916 the question of Svalbard's status under international law was not on any political agenda. The diplomatic process had been put on ice, and the Norwegian government had no intention of bringing it forward again. From a Norwegian perspective, the negotiations at the conference in Kristiania in June 1914 had not been very promising. Judging by the atmosphere, any form of supremacy or privileged position for Norway seemed completely unrealistic.

The war, however, changed the conditions in several ways. Not only did the American Coal Co. dismantle its activities on Svalbard in 1915 and sell out to Norwegian interests, but its owner John M. Longyear became the biggest shareholder in Store Norske and a backer of both the company and Norway in the Spitsbergen issue. International lawyer

[8] MFA Ihlen was present at the founding meeting in the Norwegian Spitsbergen Syndicate on 6th March 1916, while PM Knudsen was represented by proxy. The PM signed up for a block of shares worth 150 000 kroner. None of them held formal positions in the syndicate or the company (Westby 2003).

Robert Lansing, who knew Longyear and the issue well, became Foreign Secretary of the USA in 1915. Somewhat earlier, contemplating the ill-fated Spitsbergen negotiations in 1914, he had written a scientific paper where he proposed that Norway get sovereignty over the archipelago. The article was published in 1917, and Lansing's view became the official US position two years later during the peace conference in Paris (Berg 2017; Lansing 1917).

The Norwegian merchant fleet had contributed substantially to allied warfare, but at a heavy cost: more than two thousand sailors perished and maybe as much as fifty percent of the ships were lost during the war. The Entente powers, particularly France, depended on Norway for raw materials to produce ammunition, among other things. Norway was the "neutral ally" that that could hope to be compensated for its losses once the war was over.

This moment was approaching in fall 1918. When the armistice was signed on 11 November, Russia was in full dissolution following revolution, capitulation, and civil war. Germany had lost the war. Both states had engaged in the Spitsbergen issue before the war, but they were now prohibited from asserting their interests at the peace negotiations that were due to start in Versailles in January 1919.

Norway's dynamic diplomatic envoy to Paris, minister Wedel Jarlsberg, reported home that it might be possible to solve the Spitsbergen question to Norway's advantage. The government consulted with industrial actors, particularly the Norwegian Shipowners' Association, about suitable demands at the upcoming peace conference. They received unanimous advice to go for sovereignty over Spitsbergen. That was, perhaps, to be expected – many of the shipowners had economic interests in Store Norske and other coal companies (Arlov 2022; Westby 2003). Also, when the government sounded out the parliamentary Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs in November 1918, the clear message was to present a claim on sovereignty over the archipelago in Paris. At more than one instance, Wedel called for such instructions, but the government hesitated – maybe because it felt committed by the negotiations before the war, which were based on shared jurisdiction, a *condominium*. Finally, in March 1919 Wedel received the instruction he wanted, and Norway made public the desire for sovereignty over Spitsbergen (Arlov 2011; Totland 2025).

The process leading to the signing of the "Treaty Concerning the Archipelago of Spitsbergen" (Svalbard Treaty) on 9 February 1920, has been thoroughly researched and described by others, so I will let that rest here (Berg 2017; Fife 2016; Mathisen 1951; Ulfstein 1995). However, we must ask: Did Store Norske play any role? The answer is yes, although we should not overestimate its significance for the outcome. As already mentioned, private enterprise in Norway leaned on the government to go for full sovereignty. Among them were several shareholders in Store Norske. The company was repeatedly in contact with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) early in 1919. Very concretely the company initiated an "unofficial", private committee to explore the legal conditions concerning the Spitsbergen question (Østreng 1974). The committee was headed by professor, previous Minister of Justice, Fredrik Stang. Furthermore, the majority consisted of people closely connected with Store Norske: chairman of the board Carl Lundh, his vice chairman C.W. Eger, board member Kristen Nygaard and managing

director Karl Bay. Both Lundh and Nygaard were lawyers and Supreme Court attorneys. The MFA was supportive of the committee's work but did not participate directly. The committee, however, drafted a complete treaty proposal based on Norwegian sovereignty. Stang was present in Paris and assisted Minister Wedel in July 1919 when Norway was asked to forward a treaty draft.

Political scientist Willy Østreng found big similarities between the Stang committee's draft and the final Svalbard Treaty. He maintains, in general, that Store Norske as "sub-national actor" wielded significant influence on Norwegian policymaking and the outcome in Paris (Østreng 1974). When it comes to the treaty text itself, others believe that the contribution from Wedel´s second adviser, international law expert Henri Fromageot of the French *Ministère des Affaires étrangères* (MFA), was more important.[9] Anyway, there can be no doubt that Store Norske was very active towards the foreign affairs leadership throughout 1919 to promote Norwegian – and their own – interests. Seen from a company perspective, the high priority was to secure satisfactory operating conditions for coal mining: law and order, safe property rights, and low taxes.

8. The Norwegianisation of Spitsbergen

On 25 September 1919, the High Council of the peace conference accepted the treaty proposal from its appointed Spitsbergen Commission. By that time the text of the treaty had essentially been finalised, and the Norwegian government had approved the result – possibly with a shade of resignation over the rights granted to foreign citizens and companies. The full text became public only after the signing of the treaty in February 1920. In those days and weeks, the widespread joy of Norwegian sovereignty was mixed with scepticism and disappointment regarding the treaty's stipulations on equal treatment, taxation, defence measures, and so on. This divided attitude also spilled over into parliament (Stortinget). Therefore, it became the government's policy to fight against the limitations and strengthen Norwegian interests pending the enforcement of the treaty and assumption of sovereignty. That took more than five years – and six different governments.

While Store Norske could be content with the outcome of negotiations in Paris during fall 1919, reality struck hard right after New Year: on 3 January 1920, Mine number 1 in Longyeardalen exploded. In the middle of the polar night, 26 people were killed and the mine was shattered. This was a tragedy for the small local community as well as for the company. It was exacerbated by the economic crisis following the world war. Coal prices plummeted to 20-25% of the wartime level. Banks and enterprises collapsed. Store Norske had paid its shareholders handsome returns during the war but now became completely dependent upon state guarantees and support, as did all the other Norwegian coal companies (Sørheim 1995; Handelsdepartementet 1932).

Despite – or perhaps because of – the difficult situation Store Norske took an active part in the process from the solution of the "Spitsbergen question" in 1919-1920 and until Norway assumed sovereignty over Svalbard in 1925. I call this period a "Norwegianisation", both figuratively and literally. It entailed getting a suitable Mining Code in place, securing Norwegian property claims, acquiring German and Russian

[9] Rolf Einar Fife, personal communication, 2022.

recognition of the treaty, and making laws for Svalbard that defined the formal association and administration of the archipelago. Ultimately, the government needed to overcome Stortinget's scepticism in order to ratify the treaty.

Obviously, Store Norske had a commercial interest in solving several of these issues. At the same time, the company's knowledge and competence were sought by the state, meaning the ministries that executed – and to a large degree developed – the government's policy. Particularly Carl Lundh, chairman of the Store Norske board, was highly valued. As mentioned above, he was a member of the private Spitsbergen committee. As early as in August 1919 Lundh was recruited by the Ministry of Justice to join the committee that worked out proposals for a Mining Code (Bergverksordning). As soon as the treaty was signed, the ministry commenced the work on laws for the territory. Lundh also served on this committee.[10] After New Year 1923 the Ministry of Foreign Affairs established a preparatory legal committee to coordinate Norwegian property claims towards foreign interests, claims that would be overseen by a special commissioner after the treaty had entered into force, in accordance with the Annex of the treaty (Ulfstein 1995). None other than Carl Lundh chaired this committee. And *à propos* Norwegianisation: Lund headed the geographical names committee set down by the Ministry of Trade and Industries (Handelsdepartementet) in 1924, which among other things recommended that the name of the archipelago be changed from Spitsbergen to Svalbard (Arlov 2020).

Let us bear in mind that throughout this whole period, Store Norske was a completely private enterprise even though the state supported the company financially by economic guarantees and pre-paid coal purchases. Considering the involvement of company officials, particularly the chairman of the board, it seems clear that Store Norske held a privileged position with a unique opportunity to influence political and administrative processes that shaped the company's – as well as their competitors' – operating conditions. The close interaction between state and company during this period is a vivid example of what I call corporative organisation.

9. Sovereignty at minimum cost

In the summer 1924, Stortinget ratified the treaty with a certain resigned disappointment regarding the stipulations that "[…] significantly reduce the value of this sovereignty" (Stortinget 1924; Utenriksdepartementet 1924).[11] Around the same time, a proposition for laws on Svalbard was put forward by the government. However, it was withdrawn before being put to the vote and re-forwarded the following year in a revised version. After much debate and many contradictions, the Svalbard Act was finally passed by Stortinget and formally approved on 17 July 1925 (Arlov 2011). Thereby, at last, everything was ready for taking over sovereignty.

The official ceremony at Skjæringa in Longyearbyen was carried out in a quite modest form. At very short notice, Store Norske was asked to prepare a flagpole. The white paint was all but dry when, at 12 o'clock sharp, the Minister of Justice, Paal Berg gave the order to hoist the Norwegian state flag. Sigurd Westby, a senior engineer at Store Norske, wryly commented on the event (my translation):

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[10] Both committees were headed by Director General at the Ministry of Justice, Edvin Alten.

[11] Stortinget, minutes: St. forh. 1924, 21 July, p. 2741-2743. My translation.

> And then the state flag slid to the top for the first time on Svalbard. And Svalbard's free, but therefore sometimes a bit worrisome existence as "Terra Nullius" was over. "We" had become a part of the Kingdom of Norway (Westby 2003, 312).

There is something very concrete and at the same time deeply symbolic about this. Not only did Store Norske provide the state with a flagpole – it *was* in many ways this flagpole, a sovereignty marker. The dire economic situation after the war and uncertainty regarding the future of coal mining made the state – both the political and administrative authorities – choose a cheap solution to the administration question. Willy Østreng characterises it as "a minimum regime" and a "laissez-faire period" in the history of modern Svalbard (Østreng 1975). For the most part, the local state representatives were only a *sysselmann* (Governor) and a *bergmester* (Commissioner of the Mines). Otherwise, Svalbard was remotely controlled from the Ministry of Trade and Industries in Oslo. That is, to the extent that steering was necessary or required. The settlements in Svalbard were ruled by the mining companies. For example, Store Norske was not inclined to offer accommodation to the newly appointed sysselmann Bassøe when he arrived in fall 1925. Consequently, the government's High Representative had to move in at the state's telegraph station on Finneset in Grønfjorden during the first winter.

At first glance, it would seem that Norway did not allocate too many resources in its new, northernmost region, but the term "minimum regime" begs qualification. In an enduring time of crisis like the 1920s, the state spent approximately 23 million kroner to support Norwegian coal companies directly and buy out foreign interests. In comparison, that sum equalled half the cost of building another significant national infrastructure project – the *Dovrebanen* railroad across the Dovre mountain plateau, from Dombås to Støren, which was completed around 1920. In 1920, the Ministry of Trade and Industries established a special Spitsbergen coal committee to coordinate the state's support. The committee held six hundred meetings and visited Svalbard on several occasions during its functioning period till 1926 (Sørheim 1995). The state ensured that the major coal consumer, the State Railways, bought their coal from the Svalbard companies – and paid up-front. The state also levied pressure on the steamship companies that received public support to do the same.

Thus, the state pursued a very active industrial policy towards Svalbard. What it did *not* do was to start coal mining itself – yet. The state took over debts and helped finance the mining by private companies until the property claims were secured in 1925-1926, but then the state subsidies ended and production had to be suspended. Some of the companies were later taken over by the state but not for the purpose of producing coal. That changed, as we shall see.

Store Norske, on the other hand, continued coal mining as a private enterprise even after 1925 – at least nominally. In practice, the state retained control through the Ministry of Trade and Industries. In the 1920s, Store Norske accumulated significant debts to both Centralbanken and the state, some 7.5 million kroner altogether. When Centralbanken went bankrupt in 1923, the state acquired Store Norske's debt, becoming its sole creditor by 1929 (Handelsdepartementet 1932). The state's General Director for Industry (Industridirektør), Hjalmar Batt, became member of the board. That same year, the

Ministry appointed a Svalbard Commission with a mandate to go through the state's economic interests on the islands. The commission presented its report in 1931, and its conclusions were adopted by the government. The two companies Bjørnøen A/S and Kings Bay Kull-Compani A/S were nationalised, while Store Norske was refinanced, its debt was written down, and the state took a mortgage on its properties. The company had to sign an agreement that secured national, state control in every way – known today by insiders as the "1933 agreement". Among the stipulations, it was required that the board of directors and the supervisory board must consist of Norwegian citizens and that 60% of the share capital must remain in Norwegian hands at any given time. Property could not be sold or rented out without consent from the Ministry. Further, the company should put ground and quay at the disposal of the state when needed, free of charge, and help provide suitable accommodation for public officials (Handelsdepartementet 1931, 1932). The state reserved the right to appoint two members out of five of the board.

By the 1933 agreement the state effectively placed Store Norske under severe administrative and financial constraints. In its comments to the Svalbard Commission of 1929 the board pointed out – with badly concealed bitterness – that if only they had been allowed to sell their property claim in Grønfjorden to NESPICO, the Dutch company that started up Barentsburg in 1920, Store Norske might not have needed to take out expensive loans from Centralbanken and the state. Maybe there was some truth in this purely commercial judgement, but during the intense phase of Norwegianisation the state put its foot down on any sale of property to foreigners. Store Norske had to comply with national considerations, as did all the other Norwegian companies.

The state had taken control but allowed Store Norske to continue as a private company – why? Stortinget explicitly wanted that "[…] the private character of the company should be preserved to a highest possible degree" (Stortinget 1932, 7). There might have been an element of prevailing industry liberal ideology here; Christoffer Hornsrud of the Labour Party was the only dissenter in the Svalbard Commission who voted for the full nationalisation of Store Norske at this point. But it was probably a result of pragmatism – after all, Store Norske operated in a good manner and loyally followed the directives of the Ministry. After refinancing, the coal mining went well without further state support in the 1930s. From a political perspective, it must have seemed like a simple and economically effective way of securing Norwegian presence, and not least contributing to employment and coal supplies in a time of hardship in the country. Store Norske often pointed to this effect and was ever self-confident about providing substance to Norwegian sovereignty on Svalbard. A more speculative explanation might be that the state preferred to maintain an arm's length distance from the coal mining activity in Svalbard in case it went badly. From a political point of view, it would presumably be less burdensome if a private enterprise were responsible, not the state. I have not, however, found anything in the official sources that substantiates such a hypothesis.

10. New war, new crises

In the chaotic days of May 1940, when Norway was being occupied by German armed forces, Store Norske was indeed nationalised – for a few days. However, the company's leadership succeeded in persuading the fleeing government to reverse this decision (Hoel

1966). Therefore, during the first year of the Second World War, both the Norwegian and the Soviet coal production in Svalbard continued. In the summer 1941, however, it was decided among the allies in London to evacuate the settlements. The evacuation took place in August-September – without the German occupiers discovering the operation. The British evacuation force destroyed important infrastructure and put the coal stocks on fire to prevent them from being used by the Germans.

The Store Norske leadership, first and foremost director Einar Sverdrup and chairman Hilmar Reksten, set up office in London. They put pressure on the Norwegian exile government and British military authorities to send an expedition force to Svalbard. From a military perspective, the justification was a need for intelligence and weather forecasts, but Sverdrup and Reksten's prime motivation was to secure the coal mines against further destruction. Director Sverdrup, himself a trained army officer, lead operation "Fritham" in 1942 with soldiers who for a large part were previous employees of Store Norske. He and fourteen others were killed when the expedition force was attacked in Grønfjorden by German fighter airplanes, but a small Norwegian garrison was established and prevailed during the war. It could not prevent that Longyearbyen and the mines were almost completely destroyed during an overwhelming German attack in September 1943 (Lund 1990).

Restoration works started immediately in the summer of peace, 1945. The dynamic chairman of the board, shipowner and shareholder Hilmar Reksten, had been able to place orders for vital equipment in England and the USA with currency loans from the state, so the coal mining could start quickly. Store Norske applied for war reparations and was granted 16.5 million kroner in 1948. This sum was not enough by far to cover all the investments that were required, so once more the state came to assistance with loans, credit and bank guarantees. From 1945 until 1971, when Store Norske began receiving operating grants from the National Budget, the state provided support for around one hundred million kroner in the form of loans, bank guarantees and direct grants (Kvello 2006).

After the war, a paradoxical situation emerged where the private Store Norske got a competitor in the state-owned Kings Bay Kull Compani (Kings Bay). The state had decided to reopen coal mining in Ny-Ålesund in response to the energy needs of the restoration works in Norway. The problem was that the Kings Bay pits were literally perilous. Serious explosion accidents occurred in 1948, 1952, and 1953. The accidents were investigated. Stortinget was critical of the Ministry of Industry apparently not following up its security responsibilities as the owner. Closure was considered, but instead the government chose to go for a modernisation of the coalmines in Ny-Ålesund. Store Norske felt that the state prioritised its own company, but considering the support they were receiving themselves it was hardly a foundation for jealousy.

Since 1958 Kings Bay was directly controlled by the Ministry of Industry in the sense that the Secretary General of the ministry, Karl Skjerdal, became chairman of the board. He and the powerful Principal Officer of the Mining Office, Harry Lindstrøm, became heavily involved in coal mining on Svalbard. At this point in time, there was a coal market crisis with low prices, and this sharpened the competition between public Kings Bay and private Store Norske. Establishing the state-owned coking plant Norsk Koksverk in Mo i

Rana was an element of the ruling Labour Party's active industrial policy, intended to create a primary customer for coal from Norwegian producers, Store Norske as well as Kings Bay. In the Ministry, Skjerdal and Lindstrøm started planning an amalgamation of the two companies under state ownership (Grønlie 1981). A fatal accident in the Esther pit in Ny-Ålesund on 5 November 1962, killing a whole shift of 21 workers, put an effective stop to these plans. In the ensuing process, commonly known in Norwegian political history as "The Kings Bay Case", the Labour government was forced to resign and a public investigation into the Ministry of Industry was initiated – among other things. Coal mining in Ny-Ålesund was closed down by Stortinget exactly one year after the accident (Kristensen 2013).

Neither research nor petroleum exploration or pelagic fisheries in the 1970s created many local jobs on Svalbard. Consequently, Store Norske remained the only enterprise that could uphold a sizable and stable Norwegian presence on the archipelago, some 700-800 people in Longyearbyen. The Ministry as well as the political authorities acknowledged that there were no real alternatives to Store Norske's coal mining if one wanted to maintain Norwegian activity on the islands. Indeed, that was something the authorities wanted badly during the Cold War when there were more than two thousand Soviet citizens in two-three settlements on Svalbard.[12] This gave Store Norske bargaining power in the struggle for funding. In a parliamentary proposition from 1967 about loans and grants to Store Norske it appears that the relevant ministries had searched in vain for alternative industries. Although Norwegian sovereignty did not depend on industrial activity, an interdepartmental committee argued for its continuation (my translation):

> According to the Svalbard Committee's view, national interests suggest that one should seek to maintain Norwegian industrial activity on Svalbard. If necessary, the state should be willing – within reasonable limits – to venture capital for the continuation of Norwegian industrial activity. In this connection, one must be prepared to take a certain risk that investments and guarantees may lead to losses (Industridepartementet 1967; Stortinget 1968).

The Interdepartmental Svalbard Committee refrained from defining what "reasonable limits" might be, but this proposition was about an investment loan of 32 million kroner to open Mine 6, a second loan of 18 million, and a grant of 4 million for exploration of a future Mine 7 on the state's ground. As mentioned above, from 1971 Store Norske received annual subsidies from the ordinary National Budget, in which Stortinget simultaneously determined the coal production volume for the coming period. Store Norske had definitely become an instrument of the state on Svalbard; there was little left of its past as private enterprise, save for the private ownership.

11. Exit the state's proxy?

The 1970s mark a watershed in Norwegian Svalbard policy. This is summarised in the first comprehensive White Paper (stortingsmelding) about Svalbard after the war, report no. 39 for 1974-1975. Here, the government states (my translation):

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[12] Grumant was closed in 1962, while coal mining continued in Barentsburg and Pyramiden. The latter was built up after the war but abandoned in 1998.

> Based on the special circumstances that prevail regarding Svalbard it is of great significance that the state has the highest possible degree of steering and control of Norwegian activity on Svalbard. It is not satisfactory to leave up to private interests to make decisions about the scope of the continuing national involvement (Justisdepartementet 1975, 52).

The "private interests" in question here are, of course, Store Norske. Even disguised in a bureaucratic-political lingo the statement appears as rather pointed. Did it mean that the state no longer could or would use the company as its proxy on Svalbard?

Since the 1960s, the state had been forced to use ever increasing economic means to keep Store Norske's coal mining – and thus the local community in Longyearbyen – alive. In the 1970s, a coal resource crisis arose. The company made plans for a new development of Sveagruva that would require an investment of close to half a billion kroner. The state, on the other hand, planned to strengthen the local public administration and to improve communications, not least by building a permanent airport. Furthermore, there was a cross-party political wish to improve the living conditions in Longyearbyen, particularly housing. With the heavy investments ahead and the "normalisation" of the local community envisaged in White Paper no. 39 it was clear that the state needed to take closer control.

In 1973, a deal was struck to expand the share capital of Store Norske and develop the coal mining. The state increased its position to control a third of the stock. As the company chronicler, Jan Kvello, has documented, there was no widespread desire or demand at the time, neither locally nor centrally, that the state should take over the company completely (Kvello 2006). However, there had been lasting internal conflicts among the owners that caused irritation with the company on the state's part. When major shareholder and previous chairman, Hilmar Reksten, experienced a sudden lack of liquidity in his shipping business he made a deal with the state to sell his shares – at a 700% premium. When the other shareholders became aware of this, they demanded an equally generous offer. In 1976, Stortinget granted the 67 million kroner that were needed to buy out all the shareholders – save for 1% who rejected the offer, possibly for sentimental reasons. Whether it was planned in advance or not – Store Norske was absorbed and became a part of the state.

12. Conclusion

This paper explores the interaction between private enterprise and public policy on Svalbard in the period 1916-1976, exemplified by the most prominent Norwegian coal-mining company, Store Norske Spitsbergen Kulkompani. Adolf Hoel argued that without the making of Store Norske, Svalbard would not have been under Norwegian sovereignty today (Hoel 1966). That is an exaggeration, but for sixty years Store Norske was a private company with a unique, privileged position on Svalbard. No other company received similar support and attention from the state over time, not even Kings Bay Kull-Compani, which since 1933 was the state's own company.

Through changing political and economic times, Store Norske functioned as an instrument for Norwegian Svalbard policy. By and large, the company loyally followed up

the government's wishes even when they contradicted the company's self-interest and commercial priorities. For example, Store Norske was used as an agent, a straw man to buy properties like Sveagruva, Grønfjorden, Colesbukta, and Bjørnøya. Initially, the company showed little or no interest in acquiring these objects when they came up for sale, but the state provided loans with deferred repayment and no interest for the purpose and then placed all kinds of liabilities on them to secure national interests.

The obvious explanation for Store Norske's loyalty is that the company totally depended on the state providing funds at critical points. The state became the sole creditor in the late 1920s and obtained a place on the board of directors. According to the 1933 agreement the state could appoint two members to the board. After the Second World War, the state financed rebuilding of the mines and new investments, provided guarantees for private bank loans, and finally, from the early 1970s, assumed full responsibility for deficits by allocating annual funds via the National Budget. Store Norske could not sell property or other major assets without the ministry's consent. All this gave the state political and administrative authorities potential and actual influence, and in practice full control.

The loyalty went both ways. The state entrusted this private enterprise with the power and resources necessary to maintain and manage a Norwegian local community in Svalbard, as well as to oversee important assets. In the relative absence of legislation and local public services in Longyearbyen, Store Norske operated as a proxy for the state. In return, the state was relieved from the burden of building up a broad public administration to serve a very small, remote, and not necessarily permanent Norwegian population in Svalbard. Furthermore, having private owners meant financial burden-sharing and access to operational and commercial competence. This arrangement was probably pragmatic, cost-efficient, and mutually beneficial – at least for a period of time.

To a certain extent, Store Norske's relative independence, or leeway in operation, is compatible with the company town model, and in accordance with some stipulations of the Mining Code for Svalbard. But the relationship with the state was broader and deeper, the cooperation closer and more institutionalised than the classic company town model presupposes. In the interwar period, representatives of Store Norske were recruited to important governmental committees that developed policy and legislation, while, conversely, the state appointed members to the company's board. During the Second World War, Store Norske successfully resisted nationalisation in 1940, and two years later more or less pressured the Norwegian exile government in London to send a military expedition force to Svalbard – headed by Store Norske's Director Einar Sverdrup. One of the main objectives was to take care of the abandoned coalmines. During the Cold War, the company cooperated closely with Norwegian civil and military security and intelligence services to identify and avoid "troublemakers" in the workforce (Arlov 2011). The examples of a special relationship can be multiplied.

This integration of public and private interests resembles the kind of neo-corporatism that is a hallmark of the Nordic Model – in terms of how power and influence are mediated, interests are negotiated and decisions made, rather than with regard to wage formation and bargaining. Stein Rokkan called it "the corporative channel" (Rokkan 1966). In line with this, I propose that the relationship between Store Norske and the state until 1976 can be characterised as a *corporative organisation*. In spite of the state having ultimate

control and decision power, it was not a pure patron-client relationship. The Ministry of Trade and Industry seems to have had a good and trusting relationship with Store Norske throughout the period. The company was always confident about its role and significance in Svalbard; it was and liked to be regarded as the appropriate instrument for maintaining a Norwegian presence and activity in the area. Very simplified: the state defined the goals and Store Norske embodied Norway's political ambitions on Svalbard.

When the government finally nationalised the company in 1976, it was partly because an opportunity arose to purchase most of the shares, partly because new times required new solutions. At this point, the company town model was an anachronism, abandoned long ago throughout the industrialised West, Norway included. Store Norske's paternalistic position had become an obstacle to development of the local community in Longyearbyen. Closing the welfare gap and "normalisation" compared to mainland Norway became a political issue in the 1970s. It was an attainable goal as the state was growing richer thanks to the development of Norwegian oil and gas resources. Modern communications broke Svalbard's isolation and enabled a more hands-on steering by the central administration in Oslo, backed up by expanding public services locally. The relative lawlessness of Svalbard, meaning a lack of public legislation and regulation compared to mainland Norway, was gradually being reduced. These developments removed any justification of continued private corporate governance. The state accepted the consequences and absorbed Store Norske.

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