

'The 'no' vote supporters want to remain masters in their own home' from La Libre Belgique (28 November 1994)

Caption: On 28 November 1994, with reference to the Norwegian referendum on the accession of that country to the European Union, the conservative daily newspaper La Libre Belgique reviews the arguments of the supporters of the 'no' vote.

Source: La Libre Belgique. 28.11.1994, n° 332; 111e année. Bruxelles: Edition de la Libre Belgique S.A. "Les partisans du « non » veulent rester maîtres chez eux", p. 2.

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The ‘no’ vote supporters want to remain masters in their own home

In the far north of Norway, in Lapland, the bastion of the ‘no’ vote and traditionally the labour heartland, Mrs Brundtland was unable to persuade the fishermen that their waters will remain Norwegian, that they will be masters of their marine resources and that the ‘southern pirates’, particularly the Spanish and the Portuguese, will not come and infest those waters. The fishermen listen with an air of indifference. Just as in the 1972 referendum they have decided to vote ‘no’.

Independent

‘If it is “yes” then we will declare the Lofoten archipelago, situated 2 000 km from Oslo, a free territory, independent and anti-EU,’ asserts Svein, unblinkingly. In two hours he has collected more than 300 signatures for his planned independent state. ‘The cod and the whale are our entire life. We don’t want Brussels to get its hands on them,’ he says.

Along with the fishermen, farmers represent a veritable bulwark of ‘no’ votes. They fear being forced to leave their land for want of adequate subsidies that will shrink from 80 % (the highest in the world) to 50 %, leaving them miserable in spite of themselves.

For this country of 4.3 million people, living in a vast kingdom on the outer reaches of northern Europe, independence is like a sacred fire. You only have to observe the country’s national day on 17 May to recognise the visceral, passionate attachment that Norwegians feel for their flag and their country and understand this intense nationalist sentiment and obvious pride that is not seen anywhere else in the world.

They have to say ‘yes’ or ‘no’ to the European Union, but the very word ‘union’ already provokes a pathological feeling of rejection.

No submission

‘Our country, which was subjected to union with Denmark and Sweden for almost five centuries, has not forgotten its history. It was not until 1905 that we were freed from our ties to Sweden. And the Second World War showed once again that the Norwegians would not accept submission, either under the Nazis or under others,’ says Henri Valen, one of the most respected political scientists in the kingdom.

The ‘no’ supporters, led by the charismatic Anne Enger Lahnstein, a 45-year-old nurse, have had an easy time of it. ‘We have the people behind us, not the weight of capital and money,’ she declares, recalling the small fortune that employers’ associations have spent in support of the ‘yes’ vote. ‘But votes can’t be bought with kroner, posters on walls, or adverts in the newspapers and on TV,’ she says. ‘People are not stupid. They know what they want and what Europe will mean for them.’

She has the backing of an ‘Anti-EU Movement’ with 140 000 members, a real powerhouse with an army of volunteers who are ready to go knocking on doors to win over the swing vote. ‘If in doubt, vote “no”,’ say its supporters.

Scaremongering

On the other side, the pro-European organisations look pathetic.

‘The alarmism of the authorities and the pro-Europeans won’t make much of an impression on the Norwegians,’ according to Mrs Lahnstein, who accuses ‘the pro-Europeans of brandishing the threat of an increase in interest rates, a deepening of the crisis, an outflow of capital and more unemployment. But that’s all very easy to say. We don’t believe in being the victims of scaremongering.’

This farmer’s daughter, known as ‘the queen of the “no” vote’, whose centrist party (formerly the agrarian party) is the only grouping with 99 % of members opposed to the EU (the remaining 1 % being undecided),

says that ‘rejection of the Union is not a passing craze but is deeply rooted in the mind, spirit and heart of Norwegians, who refuse to be governed from abroad and want to be masters in their own home’.

Even if there is a very close ‘yes’ victory, the Norwegian Parliament could prevent the country from joining the EU. The centrists, left-wing socialists, the Red Alliance and the Christians have a blocking minority that they intend to use.

Anticipating this threat, the Prime Minister has even considered dissolving Parliament and holding new elections. ‘The people’s choice must be respected. It would be absurd if their elected representatives chose otherwise,’ he believes. Whatever the outcome of the vote, Norway will be torn apart just as in 1972, and the wounds will take a long time to heal.