

Interview with Bjørn Tore Godal: Norway's second rejection by referendum of accession to the EC (Berlin, 19 June 2007)

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[Christian Lekl] When we were talking about Norway's membership application, you mentioned the 'Nordic wave'. Although Sweden and Finland joined the EU, the Norwegian people voted against their country's entry. What, in your opinion, were the reasons for this second rejection by the Norwegian public?

[Bjørn Tore Godal] As I said, I believed in the Nordic wave, but people say half-jokingly that when Sweden does something, we do something else. And that's how it is, because nothing can be taken for granted in this respect. Politically and psychologically, for this margin of Norwegians — there was a difference of only 2 or 3 % between majority and minority — there was no incentive. Joining was not seen as hugely significant. The thinking was: it makes no difference to us what the Swedes do; we're a separate country, we do things differently. And that is how it works. In any case, we're ... Things are going well for us, even now, so why should we get involved? The political arguments are weaker — they're too intellectual.

[Christian Lekl] Were there differences and parallels compared with the first referendum, as some of the arguments also featured in the first ...?

[Bjørn Tore Godal] There were many similar circumstances. That must be said. For us, it was regional policy, fisheries, centralism and democracy. As I said, it's a long way to Oslo, but even further to Brussels. These factors played a part in both 1972 and 1994. What was different — completely different — was the change in Europe as a whole. Our EFTA partners all wanted to be a part of it, with the exception of Iceland and Liechtenstein. That was a new factor, and, for me personally, of importance, but it was of no significance to the marginal Norwegian voters. There were also other differences: the EU's internal political development was far more advanced in 1994 than in 1972.

[Christian Lekl] How did the international community react to the 'no' vote?

[Bjørn Tore Godal] They were very disappointed. For instance, I flew to Bonn to explain to my colleague Klaus Kinkel what had happened in Norway, and had hardly begun when he said to me 'Bjørn' — my first name — 'I am very disappointed with you. By now I know every Norwegian fish by their first names and then you say no?' It was felt very deeply, which is understandable. The tone was slightly warmer in London and Paris, but the comments were similar.