

The light in the middle of a dark Norwegian winter *Curious politician offers peek into political culture*

by Frances Moore Lappé, December 18, 2004

Oslo, Norway. Here to experience Kenyan Wangari Maathai becoming the 2004 Nobel Peace Prize Laureate, I don't expect also to get a peek inside Norway's political culture. But at the Nobel banquet I had the good fortune to be seated next to Jon Lilletun, leader of the Norwegian Christian Democratic Party. As the courses kept coming, each served on gold-trimmed settings designed for the Nobel celebration, he told me how pleased he was to talk to an American.

"Please, help me understand your country," he said gently. "I am a Christian, and I know President Bush is a Christian and feels that his religion guides him. How can a Christian approve the death penalty?"

I shook my head, apologetically, having no insight to offer. Lilletun also wanted to know how a Christian could execute the kind of war taking place in Iraq. I couldn't help there either.

Lilletun also couldn't grasp how the U.S. could be so rich – just as Norway itself is – yet not feel an obligation to share with those less well resource endowed. Norway, as it happens, gives the highest percent – almost 1 percent – of its GNP to foreign aid of any country in the world. "Since America views itself as a Christian country, why does it give so little to help poor countries?"

I explained that Americans see themselves as the most generous people on earth. Polls report that Americans' median estimate of what we give away in foreign aid is 20 percent of our federal budget. In truth, it is less than one percent of our budget -- or .15 of one percent of our GNP -- less than *any* industrialized country. America offers more in subsidies to our cotton growers, for example – many of whom are huge and wealthy operators – than in aid to all of Africa, where markets for poor cotton growers are undercut by our subsidies.

Americans' impulses are generous, I assured him; but we are profoundly misinformed. Most information, I said, comes through a handful of corporations for whom media is a medium for selling. "Here," Lilletun explained, "we pay \$200 a year and have excellent public television. That's what most of us watch."

As we walk the hallways of Norway's Parliament – with no security guards in sight – I confess to being a bit troubled by the idea of a political party that makes religion part of its very identity, as does his Christian Democratic Party. Believing strongly in the separation of church and state, I ask: “Do you allow prayer in schools?”

“Oh, no, of course not. We teach *about* religion in school. But we don't practice religion in our schools. Our curriculum devotes more time to studying Christianity than other religions, but we teach about others as well.” Relieved, I'm then taken aback to learn that Norway's constitution makes the Evangelical-Lutheran Church the state religion.

Obviously, a society's culture is at least as powerful an influence as are its grand documents!

We then proceed into the elegant hall where legislators deliberate. “Here is where I sit,” he says, pointing to one of the blonde, wooden chairs. “I don't sit with other members of my party. We arrange ourselves according to geography, to the area we represent.”

My imagination jumps the ocean to our “two sides of the aisle” Congress, and I ponder whether simple seating arrangements are part of what fuels the us-against-them mindset, which seems to have become even uglier in recent years.

We pass by the huge portrait of the first female legislator, elected in 1904, and Lilletun notes that today 40 percent of the Parliament is female.

As I prepare to leave, he explains a bit about Norwegian political parties. “Let me put it this way,” he says, “Our Conservative Party is probably to the left of your John Kerry.”

The contrast in our cultures I feel at every turn – from the sleek, fast, quiet train that carried me from the center of the airport to the center of town to the wide boulevards open not to cars but to pedestrian holiday shoppers.

How fortunate, I feel, to have dropped down into a dark Norwegian winter to experience the light of my hero Wangari Maathai winning the Nobel peace prize, as well as the light of this faraway culture. I only wish I'd had more answers for the hospitable Mr. Lilletun.

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