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Theme: Nordjobb turns 30

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REDAKTØR-ANSVAR

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A space for Nordjobb?

"Ambitions are often bigger than the results when it comes to Nordic cooperation, but that does not change the fact that the dogma is alive and well. And so is the feeling that we still have something valuable which should be looked after, nurtured and developed. So there is something at the core of all this," says Poul Nielson in Portrait. Perhaps a perspective worth a thought as the Nordic Labour Journal focuses on Nordjobb.

EDITORIAL
22.06.2015
BY BERIT KVAM

Last year the Nordic region celebrated 60 years with a borderless labour market and 40 years of cooperation on gender equality. Now the Nordic Labour Journal looks back at 30 years of Nordjobb.

According to Nordjobb's homepage their aim is to find summer jobs, accommodation and cultural activities in a different Nordic country for 18 to 28 year olds. Since 1985 Nordjobb has found summer jobs for some 25,000 Nordic youths, many of whom have stayed engaged in Nordic issues and cooperation. We meet some of them in this month's Focus: this is where the future Nordic enthusiasts are born.

One of those enthusiasts is Loa Brynjulfsdottir, former General Secretary at the Council of Nordic Trade Unions (NFS), now head of the international department at the Swedish Trade Union Confederation (LO). The Nordic region is my home, she says: "Iceland represents my roots, I spent some childhood years in Norway, I feel at home in Denmark and in Sweden where I live now."

She found summer work with Nordjobb and later worked for the organisation. It has given her a lot, she says. But she also said no thank you to working among old people with crooked backs in the Finnish countryside. Not many youths would thrive on a remote island either, especially when there are no other young people around. Anna Leppännen runs the local inn at Mykines, a Faroe island which is 45 minutes by boat from the main island. It is lonely. Not because she doesn't meet anybody, but she would have liked to be in touch with others working through Nordjobb. Neither has she had many cultural experiences since she has been working non-stop for 31 days. Whether she is a future Nordic enthusiast remains to be seen.

Not all employers hire Nordjobb youths for the right reasons, but as you can read in this month's Theme there are plenty of examples of Nordjobb youths whose experiences have been extremely valuable.

Poul Nielson underlines that the Nordic model is built on some basic values. "In order to secure our opportunities and to build on what we like about the Nordic region, we have to be proactive and make sure our basic values are well known." Here there is a space for Nordjobb.

See all articles in theme

Volvo-sjefen Pehr G. Gyllenhammar og hans gruppe har fremlagt forslag som kan gi nordisk samarbeide mer driv og dynamikk.

GYLLENHAMMAR-gruppen har presentert sine forslag — og appellert til de fem nordiske statsministre: Fjern «murer» og hindringer landene imellom, la oss få til ster- være fundamentet for ytterligere «byggeklosser» på nordisk basis.

DENGANG, mot slutten av 1970-årene, falt

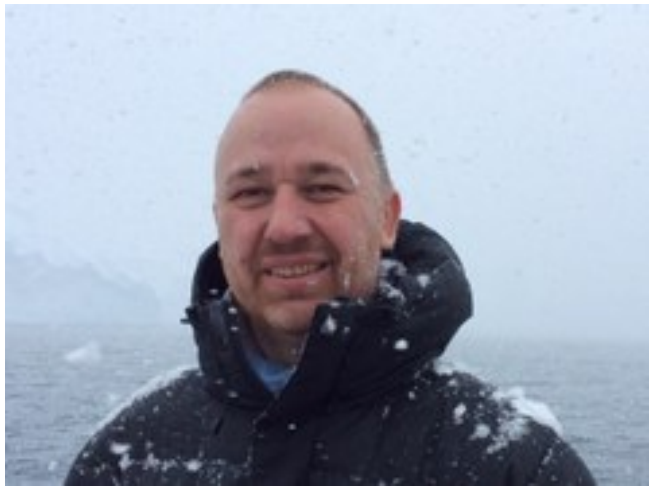
Swedish Volvo head Pehr G. Gyllenhammar led the group which proposed the establishment of Nordjobb (facsimile from an Aftenposten editorial)

Nordjobb turns 30

If Nordjobb had been established as a result of labour market policies it would probably never have lasted for 30 years. But getting youths short term jobs in a Nordic neighbouring country is about so much more.

THEME
22.06.2015
TEXT: BJÖRN LINDAHL, PHOTO: FORENINGEN NORDEN, PRIVATE

This year 750 young people aged 18 to 28 will have the opportunity to work in a different Nordic country. At the same time there are 90,000 Swedish people getting a Norwegian personal ID number. The Nordic region as a borderless labour market is already a reality.



"Swedish youths might not need much help to get to Norway. But there are other parts of the Nordic region which are more exotic, like the Faroe Islands and Greenland," says Espen Stedje, Secretary General at the Nordic Association in Norway.

He worked with Nordjobb himself 21 years ago, in Vaasa, Finland.

"The important thing is the combination of job, accommodation and cultural activities," he says.

Pure goodwill

When the Nordic Labour Journal calls former Nordjobb participants, we meet nothing but enthusiasm. Full schedules are cleared to make time for interviews. Many Nordjobb veterans have continued to work with Nordic issues.

"You meet them everywhere in the Nordic system," says Ulf Andreasson, senior advisor at the Nordic Council of Ministers' department for Trade and Energy Policies.

"For instance in political cooperation at the Nordic Youth Council, but elsewhere in the system too, like in our Nordic institutions and voluntary organisations. I believe Nordjobb has had a role in creating the future Nordic enthusiasts," he says.

Great friendships

While Espen Stedje worked at a summer camp for children in Vaasa, Finland, Ulf Andreasson went with Nordjobb to the Faroe Islands in 1991. He got a job at the water sanitation plant in Torshavn municipality.

"This suited me well as I was studying to become a civil engineer."

Ulf Andreasson remembers the great friendships he developed with the five other Nordjobb youths in the Faroes. He shared accommodation with them and other work colleagues. He also clearly recalls the exciting journeys between the islands.

"Before I joined Nordjobb I had worked for six months in a fisheries plant in Iceland's Westfjords. Without these two experiences I would not be working with Nordic cooperation today," he says.

Like many other Nordic projects, Nordjobb was born out of the disappointment over the failure of yet more grandiose projects. In his book 'The Dream of the Nordic Region', historian Svein Olav Hansen writes how the plans for a joint Nordic TV satellite had crashed a few years earlier. It would have been able to relay neighbouring countries' radio and TV transmissions in a time when there were still few channels to choose from.

Swedish Volvo head Pehr G Gyllenhammar was tasked with leading a group of senior industry men (not a single woman to be found in that group of 10 people!) who would assess the economic cooperation between the Nordic countries, and suggest different measures which could stimulate growth and further cross-border investments.

Not for the sake of money

Neither the Nordjobb youths nor the older generation left home for the sake of money. The experience itself is the most important thing, together with the unique way you can experience a different country by working there. Then there are the contacts you get through the cultural activities which are organised by local Nordic associations. The contacts are beneficial both for the locals and the visiting youths.

The golden age of all things Nordic was the 1960s and by the mid 1980s the enthusiasts were getting on a bit. In came enthusiastic youths who gave meaning to the work.

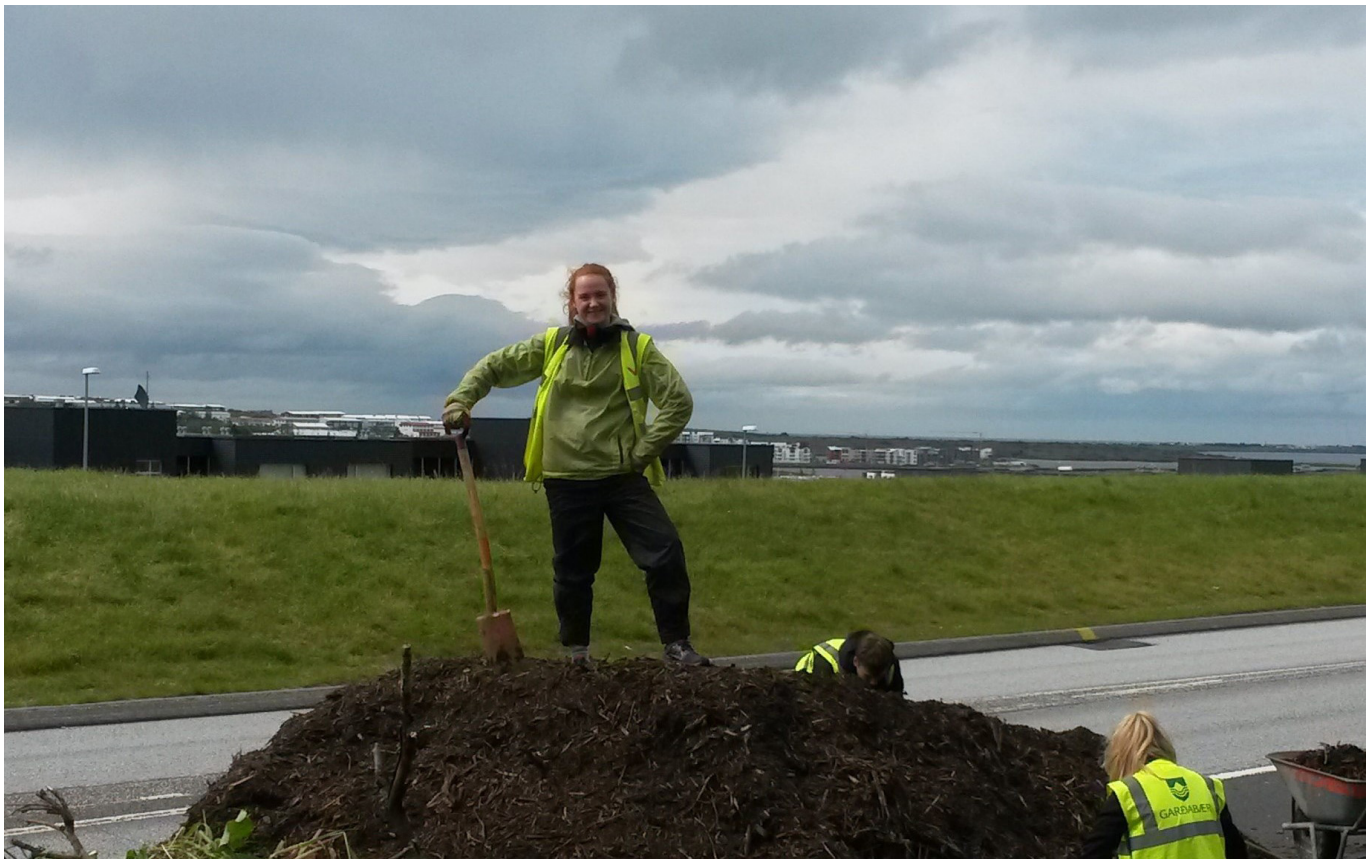
Espen Stedje remembers the fantastic Ostrobothnia beaches:

“I grew up in the south-east of Norway, a few hours from the border with Sweden. So this was new to me. What also struck me was the feeling how close Finland was. I was also struck by how the Fenno-Swedish community existed parallel to the Finnish community.”

Ulf Andreasson was also marked for life:

“The ties you make with other countries and places in your youth will always have a special place in your heart. My Faroese experiences have also meant that I always pay a little extra attention to what goes on there, and also in Iceland,” he says.

See all articles in theme



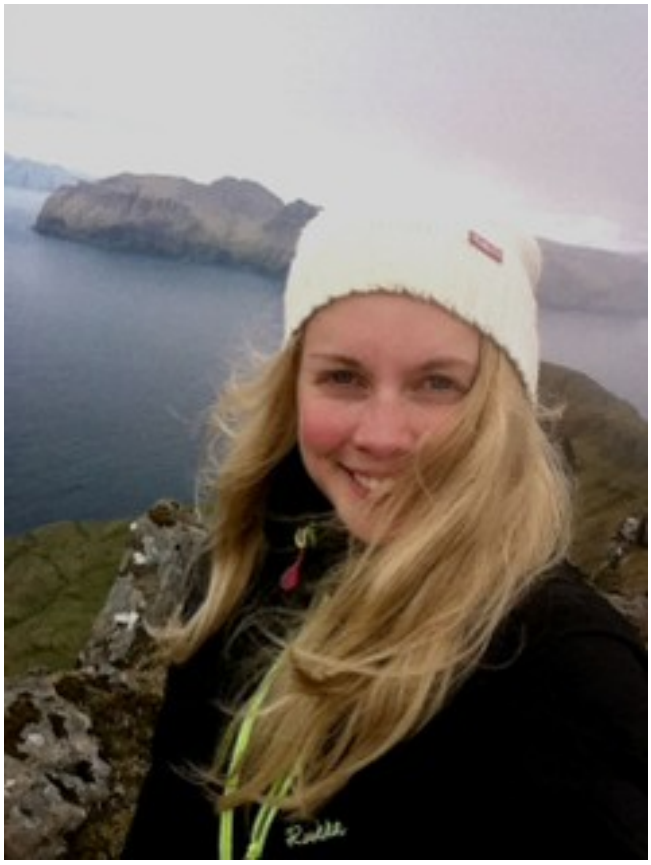
Emilie Sommervold and her Nordjobb friends Oda Bjellum and Simon Finnäs on an Icelandic roadtrip

Many different experiences await Nordjobb participants

Young people travel across the Nordic region to work with tourists, weed spinach fields and public parks or pack prawns in Greenland — all thanks to Nordjobb. And the experiences are all unique.

THEME
22.06.2015
TEXT: BJÖRN LINDAHL, PHOTO: PRIVATE

Finnish girl nearly alone among puffins



Anna Leppännen has been allowed to try something completely different. She works at an inn on Mykines, the westernmost of the Faroe Islands.

“It takes 45 minutes to get here by boat. The island is ten square kilometres and there are 10 permanent residents,” she says.

It’s rather different from her home city of Tampere and its 200,000 inhabitants.

Most people come to see the puffins and the tallest mountain, Knúkurk, which is 560 metres high.

“The birds stay close to the lighthouse and most of the tourists are interested in animals and nature.”

The inn is much smaller than what it would have been back in Finland. It is more like a summer house, she says.

The first month she was the only person on the island from Nordjobb. The ferry arrives twice a day and most tourists arrive on a day trip, but there is room for four overnight guests.

“I prepare food and drinks and serve. There is lots to do. We could have more people working here. The tourists mostly come from Denmark and Norway, but also from Germany, the USA and Australia. Everyone asks what a Finnish girl like me is doing here.”

Anna speaks Finnish and has never really got to try out her school Swedish.

“The Danes don’t understand Swedish, but I am proud when I manage to talk the language with Swedish and Norwegian tourists. I don’t understand Faroese at all. I live with the family where the wife is responsible for the inn. The husband is a farmer.

“I was alone here for about a month, but one week ago Fanny arrived from Sweden, also through Nordjobb. I have never been away from home on my own for so long before.

“The problem is not that I don’t see enough people, there are tourists coming every day. But I am a bit sad that I can’t meet other people from Nordjobb like those who are staying on the bigger islands. All the tourists ask how I manage to live here on my own for three months!

Anna Leppänen has met everyone who lives on the island, but since most of them are pensioners the party factor isn’t particularly high.

“It has been very cold. Most of them used to be sheep farmers.

“Speaking Finnish-Swedish leads to a lot of misunderstandings, and the family I am staying with speak to me in Danish. I thought it would be easy to understand Danish when you know Swedish, but it is not!”

Nordjobb has a Facebook group where people plan different meets. Anna and Fanny hope to take part in some of them.

“But now I have been working for 31 days with no time off. My first holiday will be on Sunday.”

Icelandic girl in Danish spinach field

For Gerður Gautsdóttir Nordjobb has become something which engages the entire family. Her job is to monitor

spinach plants at Jensen Seeds in Odense, Denmark. Last year she had the same job alongside her older brother. This year she is back with her younger brother.

“There are more than 300 spinach fields in Denmark and the country has specialised in the export of spinach seeds. Spinach comes in both male and female plants. Only the female ones are harvested, but you need the male ones for reproduction purposes. Sometimes the wrong types of plants will emerge, so-called ‘off-types’, which we must remove from the fields,” explains Gerður in a mix of Swedish and English.

Despite spending several periods in Denmark she still speaks better Swedish than Danish, because she was an exchange student in Uppsala for six months.

“We spend a lot of time outdoors, and I get to see a lot of Denmark because we drive across the entire country to different fields.”

This year she will be working for five weeks. She thinks the pay is good, but agriculture is not something she will go for when she is back in her home city of Reykjavík.

“I studied to become a teacher and now I am taking a master in tourism. I am from Reykjavík,” she says.

“The difference between being a tourist and to work in a country is that when you’re a tourist you just walk around looking at tourist stuff. When you work you become more like the Danes themselves, you become part of the society, so to speak.”

Before Gerður left for her Nordjobb posting she was interested in Nordic culture which is where her own country’s culture springs from, but now she is even more interested. The countries have so many things in common.

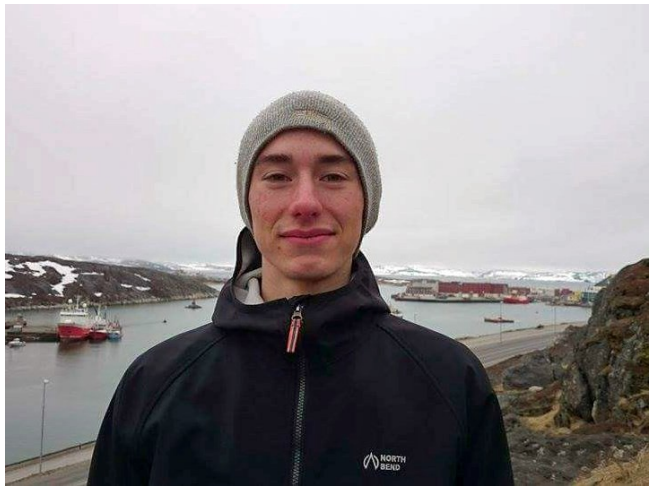
“The Danes aren’t particularly different from us, but they have better weather!

“The money is not the most important thing about Nordjobb, it is all about the experience. Trying something new and meet other young people of the same age from different countries. We are 15 people living together in an agricultural college. Most come from Sweden and Iceland. Some are from Finland and last year there was a Norwegian too.”

Have you experienced anything negative?

“No, nothing that I can think of!”

A Swede in a Greenlandic prawn factory



“This is my second time in Greenland through Nordjobb. Last summer I went to Ilulissat and worked in the fisheries industry. This time I’m in the capital Nuuk and work in a prawn factory,” says Isac Albertsson.

He had just graduated last year and sought work through Nordjobb because he wanted to go abroad and try something new.

“I applied to go to the Faroe Islands, Iceland and Greenland and very quickly got an offer to work in Ilulissat, and I didn’t hesitate. The experience was so positive that I chose to return this year in order to see more of Greenland.

“Last year we were four people from Sweden, Norway and Denmark in our workplace plus four more in other places, and we shared a flat which the employer rented out.

“This time we are three from Sweden and Finland hiring a house in Nuuk.”

He has been well received both times and the Greenlandic workers seem happy to receive labour from other parts of the Nordic region, according to Isac.

“Sadly we have not yet had any meet-ups.”

Do you feel isolated?

“I have lived in Nuuk and Ilulissat which are Greenland’s largest and third largest cities with 15,000 and 4,000 inhabitants respectively. That is considerably more than the number of people living in my home town in Sweden.

But the cities are isolated and hard to reach, which means you can only go to other cities by plane or boat since there are no roads.”

“Most Greenlanders can speak Danish but we mostly speak English and body language since Danish is not always the easiest language to understand!”

Greenland is different in many ways to Sweden. Everyday life is far calmer up here and life is more relaxed, thinks Isac.

“I have only been here in the summer, but even then the weather is very unpredictable with low temperatures, strong winds and snow and rain. This June you still got snow storms on your way to work, and there is still snow on the ground.”

What do you do at the prawn factory where you work now?

“Here at Polar Jaat in Nuuk I pack, weigh and freeze the prawns. In Ilulissat I worked with packing, cleaning, cutting and freezing fish. Work was more exhausting last year with quite a lot of heavy lifting. But this year it is considerably lighter as I am mostly working in the storeroom, packing and weighing parcels.

What has surprised you the most?

“That’s nature, which is particularly amazing in Ilulissat. It is an incredibly beautiful city and I recommend everyone who are considering a trip to Greenland to go there.

“Anything negative? Prices are high in Greenland. It is expensive to travel here but food, the Internet and accommodation is also expensive.

Norwegian park keeper in Reykjavik

Emilie Sommervold spent two months working in Reykjavik in the summer of 2014. She got a job as a municipal park keeper and worked in a group with two other Nordjobb people — Oda Bjellum, who can be seen in the picture on the right, and Simon Finnäs.

“I heard about Nordjobb by coincidence. I had been travelling a bit abroad and came home needing a summer job, so I went online searching for ‘Job in Europe’ and ‘Job in the Nordic region’.

“It might sound a bit silly for a Norwegian to work in Iceland, which has just emerged from a crisis, but I didn’t go there primarily to make money. I wanted it to be an experience. It was fantastic! It is quite different to work in a country than to simply go there to live or being a tourist.”

There were many Nordic events during the two months.

“We had Nordic nights at the Norden Association, where we all brought one food dish and shared many activities like walking in the mountains together.”

She was less used to being a park worker.

“I have worked for a company hiring out snowmobiles. I live in Trondheim now, but earlier I lived in Svalbard. So Icelandic nature feels a bit like ‘home’.”

Emilie had not been engaged in Nordic cooperation before she travelled with Nordjobb.

“It opens your eyes to the Nordic experience,” she says.

She didn’t learn much Icelandic.

“You learned a few phrases, but with the others from Nordjobb, who included several Finnish-speaking Finns, and with the Icelanders themselves we ended up speaking mostly English.

“The Icelanders know some Danish, but that would be like saying I know how to speak French just because I was taught it in school.

“But the languages are so similar that if I really went for it I would probably learn Icelandic quite quickly. When we were just Danes, Norwegians and Swedes together we spoke a kind of Scandinavian.”

Would you have managed to get a job in Iceland by yourself?

“I guess I could have, but it would have been difficult. You get so much help through Nordjobb. All you need to do is say yes or no! I have tried to get a job earlier when travelling, in New Zealand, but that was completely different.”

She did not make a lot of money from the job in Iceland.

“You pay the journey yourself and when you have some time off you don’t want to just sit at home. You want to go out and experience things.”

What surprised you the most about the people of Iceland?

“They are good at what they do. They are very creative and there is a much broader cultural life than in Trondheim. They are very urban in away, even if they are living on an island.”

Working through Nordjobb in her home country

Suvi Pehkonen works through Nordjobb at a hotel in Mariehamn in Åland. She is a Finnish speaker but normally studies Nordic languages at the University of Helsinki.

“I used to study Italian, but found out that it wasn’t for me. I have always liked Swedish, so I applied to go to Sweden and Åland.”

She is a receptionist and the only one in the hotel working through Nordjobb, but there is one other Nordjobb person in the restaurant. Suvi books the guest and welcomes them.

“I’m really enjoying this and think it is interesting to meet so many people. I grew up in a pretty small place south in Finland called Forssa, but one year ago I moved to Espoo and travel from there to the University of Helsinki.”

Forssa is a purely Finnish language town and municipality, while Mariehamn and Åland are purely Swedish language.

“We are quite similar, I guess. What surprised me about Åland is that people are so friendly.”

So far she has only met two other Nordjobb workers in the six weeks she has been on the island. But there is a Facebook group with 41 people who are all working on the Island right now. Suvi has visited some of the sights like Kastelholms castle and the Maritime Museum, and she has been out with a work mate.

“I’m renting a flat and there are two bedrooms. In a few days another Finnish girl who is also with Nordjobb will be moving in.

“I would really like to work with Nordic issues in the future!”

Busy days when Nordjobb people flocked to Norway in the 80s

“Wow! Has it already been 30 years since Nordjobb started up!” Eva Jakobson Vaagland, the first Nordjobb project leader in Norway, is surprised when we call her.

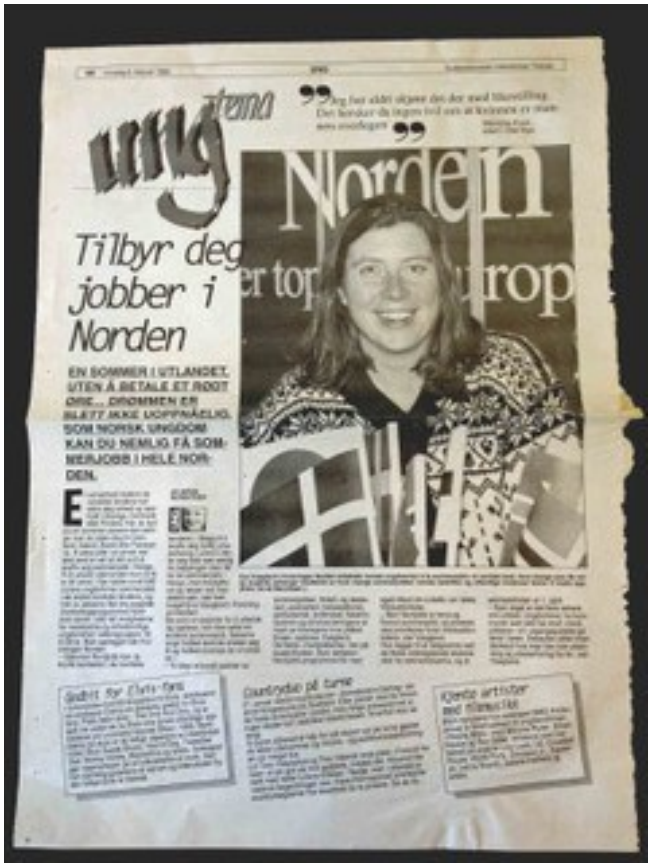
THEME
22.06.2015
TEXT AND PHOTO: BJÖRN LINDAHL

A few days later we meet in her office at the Norwegian Safety Office in Oslo, with a view over the palace gardens and a large map of the Nordic region on the wall.

She tells us that she was moving from Sweden to Norway in 1987 and applied for various jobs, including one advertised by the Norden Association. She had been studying Nordic languages at the University of Stockholm and had also married her Norwegian lecturer who had got a job in Oslo.

“So I was tuned to all things Nordic, you could say, but not quite prepared for how big Nordjobb would become.”

Nordjobb had been founded in 1985 and the first year it was run as a consultancy. Then it became a trust, with the Norden Association as the main actor. Little by little it was financed by the Nordic Council of Ministers.



'In 1887 interest in Nordjobb exploded and everyone wanted to go to Norway, which had the highest salaries and a thriving nightlife. There was no Internet of course, and I had stacks of hand written applications piled half a metre high along the office walls," says Eva Jakobson Vaagland.

The trick was to find the ones who were most suitable and to find jobs and accommodation. Not everyone came well prepared. A Danish girl who had got a job in Hammerfest in the high Arctic north of Norway was asked how she planned to get there. "I'll get the train!" she said, ignorant of the fact that the railway goes no further north than Bodø, nearly a thousand kilometres further south.

Steep learning curve

"It was a very steep learning curve for me when it came to everything Norwegian; Norwegian social conditions, the Norwegian labour market, subletting of flats, cheap spare time activities and so on. But it was fun — and exciting to see Norway together with the Nordjobb workers, from Kristiansand in the south to Hammerfest in the north, in shops, fisheries, breweries, at the post office, in banks, at IKEA and so on."

She thinks back with joy on all the lovely young people, busy days and the strangest of problems that needed solving; lending out bedding and kitchen equipment, mending broken hearts, finding a home for a rabbit which could not stay in the bedsit, taking someone to A&E and so on — apart from making sure everyone had a job and a place to stay.

"Everyone was generally very positive and excited about their meeting with Norway — then as now the price of beer was a topic for conversation. We had the Norden Association of course — youths as recreation leaders/support workers everywhere so that those who travelled here were quickly introduced to the outdoor life, showing them the best places to swim and the cheapest bars. "

All-in-one

"A programme like Nordjobb was a great advantage of course — that you get more than just a job — an "all-in-one" with a job, accommodation, spare time activities and training."

Most people working through Nordjobb in Norway in 1987 lived in Oslo. IKEA alone employed nearly 50 of them.

"I went out to IKEA with caseloads of applications. Since many had applied for several countries it was also important to sort the applications so that those who did not get a job in Norway got a chance in a different country. But I could only fax six applications at a time — not 600!

"There were relatively few Norwegian applicants. Most chose to go on holiday instead."

But Eva had to deal with some of the problems of those who went abroad too.

"There was a common Nordic labour market, but there were strange problems like Iceland's burial tax. You got it back if you didn't die!

"It also took time to find smooth ways of sorting out tax documents. Many shelf stackers had to work for weeks without pay because it took so long. As a Nordjobb consultant you sometimes also had to act as a bank and lend money to those who needed it."

The Nordjobb culture

After a while a particular Nordjobb culture emerged. Young people were told that they were not only doing a summer jobb — they were ambassadors for their own country. It was

not expected of them, but many youths addressed local associations and held slide shows from their home countries.

“Every Tuesday night and every weekend there were activities, study visits and excursions. The Nordjobb group were above average social, open and knowledgeable in many areas, so we also had nights when they were responsible for various activities including courses in mind mapping, dance evening and theatre. More serious activities included Norwegian courses and talks about various themes.

“It is almost incredible that Nordjobb has been around for 30 years!” exclaims Eva.

Do you feel we need Nordjobb today?

“I believe we need to take as many paths as possible in the Nordic region and send out ‘pilots’ who can clear those paths for others to follow, in order to strengthen the community, meet each other’s cultures and spread ‘popular’ knowledge.

“Young people seem to find their way from Sweden to Norway without problem right now. That path is well trodden — but Norwegians need a push to go and work and study in Sweden and other Nordic countries. It is also important to make sure we have exchanges with the more remote areas of the Nordic region.

“It would be good if Nordjobb could focus measures where measures are really needed — making sure the participants really get a good experience. I believe in quality rather than quantity. Being interested in the Nordic region is not in our genes, you cannot inherit it. You need to be smitten, contaminated, if you are to develop an interest for the Nordic region and Nordic cooperation, and the opportunities which lie there.

“Nordjobb can be a good source of contamination and shows the way to a community which we already are a part of linguistically, historically and culturally, and which can enrich our lives,” says Eva Jakobson Vaagland.

See all articles in theme

Loa Brynjulfsdottir: The Nordic region is my home country

As soon as Loa Brynjulfsdottir was old enough, she applied for a job through Nordjobb. That was in 1990 and the start of many years working through Nordjobb and a strong feeling of Nordic belonging.

THEME
22.06.2015
TEXT AND PHOTO: GUNHILD WALLIN

Mention Nordjobb and a smile spreads across Loa Brynjulfsdottir's face. She gladly talks about it and has even cleared space in her fully booked schedule to tell us about her Nordjobb experiences.

"Nordjobb has given me a lot of positive things. You become comfortable with everything Nordic and being with other Nordic people. It has also expanded my horizon and offered me many exciting opportunities. And it has prepared the ground for much of what I have done since," says Loa Brynjulfsdottir.

We meet in the legendary Swedish Trade Union Confederation (LO) building in Stockholm's Norra Bantorget area, where she has been the head of LO's international department for some years now. She is both a Nordic and international person.

"I have always used all the opportunities I've had to go out and experience something new and different. I have always wanted to get out," she explains. One reason, she believes, is that she spend four years living in Norway as a child. The desire to get out resulted in a year as a college exchange student in Hamburg, research in Namibia and Mozambique funded by the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency SIDA, six months studying Spanish in Cuba and eight years in Brussels. But her travels started in the Nordics, with one year in a job she found through Nordjobb in Finnish Tampere when she was 18. The possibility of finding work through Nordjobb was quite well known in Iceland in the early 1990s, she says.

A tiny city of people with crooked backs

The first period in Finland could have gone badly for a less proactive person. The Palkane plant nursery outside of Tampere did not represent her dream of new experiences and meeting new people. The city was small to say the least, and the nursery was full of people with crooked backs, damaged by life-long work bending over. There were few Nordic youths and they were offered space in an old people's home where age had made former nursery workers even more crooked.

"I cannot carry on like this," thought Loa Brynjulfsdottir, who went to Nordjobb's Tampere office and asked to be moved. They listened to her and she was moved to 'Piparipakkari', a job packing ginger bread at the Brander Oy bakery. There she spent her days sitting on an overturned beer crate next to a young woman who only spoke Finnish. The ginger bread was put into their boxes while loudspeakers pumped out international pop music translated into Finnish.

"I can't remember it being difficult. I shared a flat with a Norwegian in Tampere city and Nordjobb organised a lot of different activities," she says.

Love for the Faroe Islands

The next summer she went out again. This time with Nordjobb to the Nordic House in Torshavn in the Faroe Islands. A fantastic job with fantastic colleagues and exciting excursions to remote islands, says Loa Brynjulfsdottir who also learned to speak Faroese with the help of her Icelandic skills and the Norwegian she learned as a child in Norway.

She talks about how they travelled to the Mykines island far into the sea to catch puffins and how they were trapped by poor weather for four days and had to be rescued by helicopter. Or how they were invited to celebrate the Õlavsøka national day with new Faroese friends in their home. Nordjobb in the Faroe Islands was the beginning of a life-long love story with the Faroes and of lasting friendships.

The Faroe Islands, 1992. Nordjobb participants have dressed up one of their Nordic friends in a sheepskin found on a walking trip. Loa Brynjulfsdottir is in the centre, wearing a pink shirt

"The best thing with Nordjobb is that you get to know youths from other Nordic countries. You get friends everywhere and experience something new in safe surroundings. Work and accommodation is already taken care of, and then there are all the social activities — you are not lonely. Lots of fun activities are on offer and there is a great deal of partying," she says and gladly recommends young people to grab their chance and go.

"It is also a chance to learn how to understand the other Scandinavian languages. These days Nordic people tend to speak more and more English with each other, but the language becomes so much richer if you understand each other in your own languages," says Loa Brynjulfsdottir, who can now move freely between the Scandinavian languages.

Learned about the labour market

In the winter after her first job through Nordjobb she joined the Norden Association's youth club in Reykjavik, and after a few years she was heading Nordjobb in Iceland and later in Sweden too. She fixed jobs, accommodation and social activities. She also introduced the participants to their work places and kept in touch with them while they were there. The idea behind Nordjobb is precisely to learn about the languages, history and culture where you end up and to meet young people from across the Nordic region.

"This taught me about the functions of working life and it made me interested in the the labour market and the importance of having a job, what it means to people. I also became aware of what you can achieve by working across borders. At LO we use the Nordic cooperation to become a stronger voice internationally," she says.

That she is now living in Sweden does not have much to do with the fact that she married a Swede. They had their first child in Brussels and longed to go home to the Nordics — to which country was never really important. One native country can become several.

"Iceland represents my roots, Norway is close because of the childhood years I spent there, I feel at home in Denmark and in Sweden where I now live. That is why the entire Nordic region feels like my home country," says Loa Brynjulfsdottir.

See all articles in theme

When Gunvor Kronman became Gunnar in the warehouse

For some, Nordjobb means that life takes a new and interesting turn. For Gunvor Kronman the job in Danish Aalborg had a dramatic and crucial impact.

THEME
22.06.2015
TEXT: CARL-GUSTAV LINDÉN, PHOTO: CATA PORTIN

It was 1985 and Finland was a backwater in Europe. The Soviet Union was the closest neighbour and the social climate was backward. Finland's father of the nation, Urho Kekkonen, was in his last year. Gunvor Kronman read philosophy, literature and Nordic languages at the Helsinki University. She had an idea.

"I wanted to learn how to read Søren Kierkegaard in his native language."

Gunvor Kronman was a member of the Pohjola-Norden Association and saw a notice in their membership magazine. It was a presentation of Nordjobb, an opportunity for young people to try working in a different Nordic country. Nordjobb was completely new at that time, it was its first year and not everything went to plan.

Feminist

Gunvor Kronman landed in the Danish city of Aalborg in early summer and offered her services at the Danish Co-operative Wholesale Society, FDB, which owns COOP. The person who welcomed her looked at her in a funny way. Her papers said that Gunnar Kronman from Finland would be driving a forklift truck in shifts together with the other 210 men in the warehouse for convenience goods.

When it dawned on him that Gunnar was Gunvor who had no driver's license, she was given an office job instead.

"I said no, you'll have to teach me how to drive a truck," she says and continues, "I was a feminist after all."

She lived in a collective together with all these men, loaded and unloaded crates with varying success. Some fell over. But the men on the team, whose salary depended on how well the group was working, never said a word about the fact that Gunvor Kronman helped lower the piece rate.

Several of her work colleagues came from Iceland as many Icelanders were studying in Denmark at that time. These ones had stayed the summer in order to work. This is also where she first tasted the Icelandic speciality rotten shark.

A nice man

When the job ended, Gunvor Kronman went on a train journey through Europe on her own, and met a nice Danish man as early as on the stretch between Denmark and Hamburg. He was somewhat surprised that a young and sweet, as he believed, Danish girl spoke with such a gutsy workers' dialect, but this was what she had picked up in the warehouse without realising its social connotations.

Henrik Thostrup and Gunvor Kronman became a couple and still live together while their two adult daughters have move out. Her husband later got work through Nordjobb in Finland, as a biologist at the Kemira chemical company. After meeting Henrik, Gunvor Kronman carried on studying at the Aarhus University where she graduated through the Nordplus programme. The agreement between the University of Helsinki and Aarhus was already prepared, but Gunvor Kronman made sure that it was signed so that she could travel back to Denmark again. So not only was she among the first to use Nordjobb, she was also among the first to use the Nordplus student exchange.

The family has lived in Denmark several times, including when Gunvor Kronman worked for the Nordic Red Cross organisations as a coordinator for humanitarian work in Africa. Later she was offered a job by Knud Enggaard, the former Danish Minister of Defence from Venstre, as the coordinator for the Baltics and north-western Russia at the Nordic Council of Ministers.

"For me Nordjobb became a fork in the road which made many choices for my life. It opened the gateway to the Nordics."

Language issue

Gunvor Kronman sees mobility as the best part of the Nordic cooperation.

"If we are serious about a mobile Nordic labour market and a Nordic student market, then these systems help."

For Finland, which is outside of the Scandinavian family, the language issue is critical. It is a Nordjobb prerequisite that you must have knowledge of the language in the country where you want to work. Today it is not a given that young Finnish language speakers have studied any other language than English, and they might speak very little Swedish.

"I am a product of the golden age of Finnish language education, and read two native languages and three foreign ones."

After her Nordic séjour, she moved to Africa and worked for several years with humanitarian work for the International Red Cross and the Red Crescent. Today she is the CEO of Hanaholmen, a Finnish-Swedish cultural centre, and continues to work with Nordic issues.

"Nordjobb has given my life a Nordic platform."

See all articles in theme

New Danish government: A new and challenging course for Danish labour market politics

Denmark's new centre-right government faces the hard task of reforming the country's unemployment benefit model.

ANALYSIS
22.06.2015
TEXT: MARIE PREISLER

Denmark gets a new centre-right government after parliamentary elections on 18 June 2015, which sensationally made the Danish People's Party the country's second largest party. The exact makeup of the new government is yet to be decided, but it will be led by the leader of the liberal Venstre party Lars Løkke Rasmussen, even though Venstre lost a few mandates.

Negotiations with the Danish People's Party and the others in the so-called 'blue block' are expected to take several weeks, partly due to disagreements about central labour market policies. The Danish People's Party has promised to improve conditions for people on unemployment benefit, while Venstre says it will not spend one krone more than today.

The Danish People's Party also wants to increase public sector spending by 0.8 percent year on year, while Venstre before the election said there would be no increase in spending — a position the party seems to be backing away from somewhat efter the election result.

With this election the Social Democrats achieved its greatest growth for 14 years and regained its historical position as Denmark's largest party. They still lost power because the parties in the so-called 'red block' lost seats. So the Social Democrat leader, Prime Minister Helle Thorning-Schmidt, stepped down both as head of government and of her party after ten years at the helm.

With this, Denmark has lost its first ever female prime minister, but in her leaving speech Helle Thorning-Schmidt said she would not be the last. She was probably thinking of her successor, newly appointed leader of the Social Democrats Mette Fredriksen. She has held several government posts. Her final post was Minister of Justice, and in her period as Minister of Employment she carried out a range of labour market policy reforms, including the controversial halving of the time period in which people could claim unemployment benefit.

In his first comment to the election results, the president of the Danish Confederation of Trade Unions (LO) Harald Børsting did not hide the fact that he was very disappointed over the change of government.

"It's rubbish," he said

At the same time the LO President did express hope for a good relationship with the new government.

"We will create jobs, that is our priority," he said. He hopes a centre-right government will cooperate constructively with trade unions.

During the election the Venstre leader Lars Løkke Rasmussen said he would invite the social partners to talks aimed at finding solutions to a range of major social problems, including how to handle the economic challenge of having so many people on social benefits.

The LO President is ready to accept the invitation:

"We always welcome an invitation to tripartite negotiations," said Harald Børsting on election night.

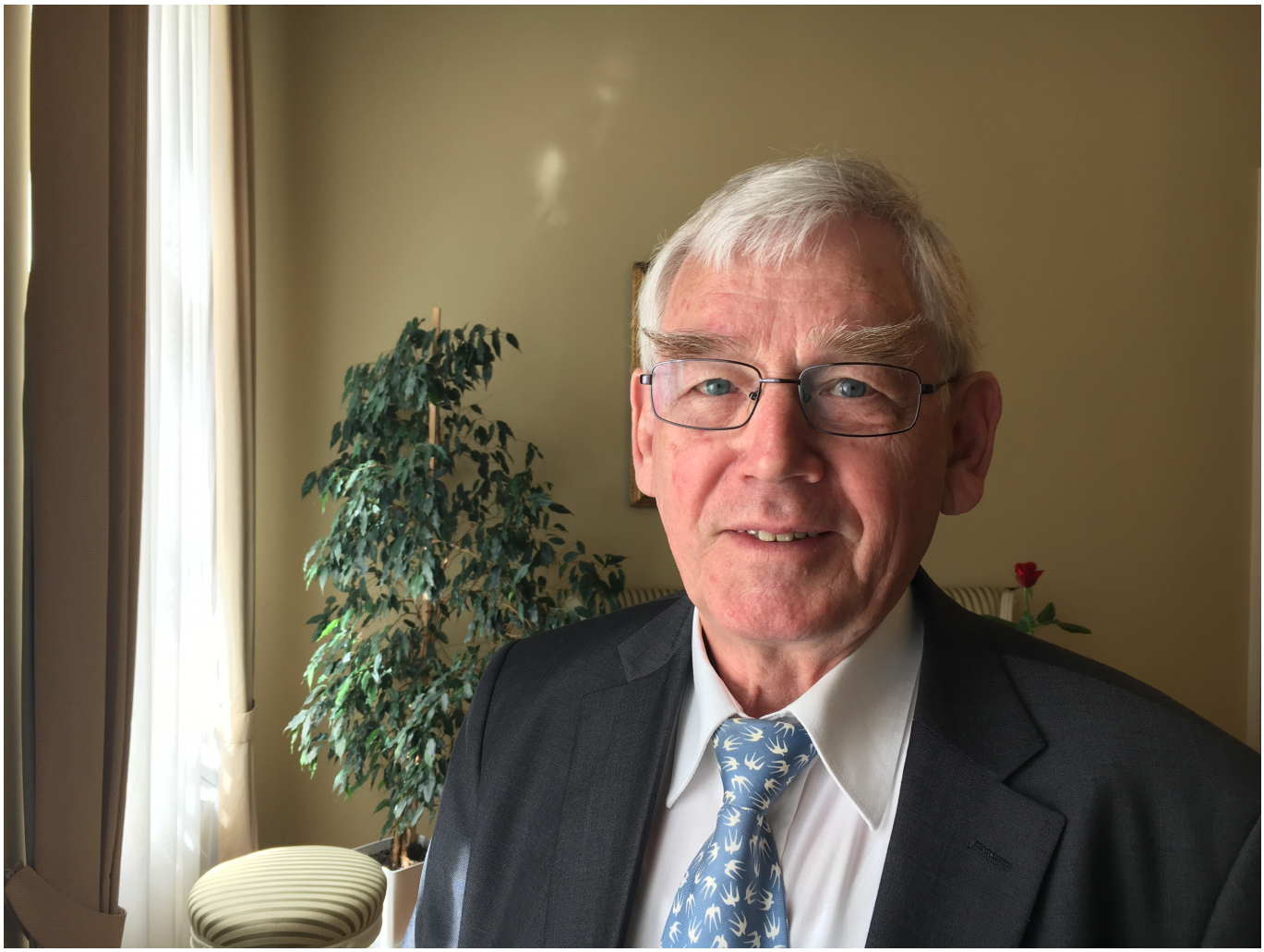
The outgoing government helt tripartite negotiations in the spring of 2012, which ended without result.

After claiming victory, Lars Løkke Rasmussen said he wanted to pursue several broad cross-party agreements.

"If we stick together across party lines we can create solid results," said the Venstre leader.

An unprecedented number of voters changed party during this parliamentary election; a total of 42 percent voted dif-

ferently than they did last time around. That is far above the normal of one third.



Former EU Commissioner Poul Nielson: The Nordic region plays a role

"The Nordic region is not an island in the global society. If we want to protect what we care about and make sure we are not overrun by the values of others, we need to enter that fight," Poul Nielson tells the Nordic Labour Journal.

PORTRAIT
22.06.2015
TEXT: BERIT KVAM, PHOTO: HEIDI ORAVA

Poul Nielson has accepted the challenge of producing a strategic analysis of the Nordic labour market cooperation. About a year from now the analysis should result in ideas and possible alternatives for how to strengthen that cooperation. In six months he will present his preliminary assessment to the Nordic employment ministers.

"European integration is a gift to Europe," explains Poul Nielson.

He thinks the Nordic region's challenge is to clarify which role it can play in Europe.

"In order to secure our opportunities and to build on what we like about the Nordic region, we have to be proactive and make sure our basic values are well known."

Poul Nielson is a politician. He has been active in the Danish Social Democrats party since the late 1960s. He has been Energy Minister and Minister for Development Cooperation as well as EU Commissioner for Development and Humanitarian Aid. Now he is going to help strengthen Nordic labour market cooperation.

Poul Nielson is well aware that his long political experience is of value.

"I have seen the machine room from the inside," he says.

"My political experience is a plus, but it is also important to be aware that this is not a social democratic task. I will take a step back from my political role, but will use some of the knowledge and competence I have gained as a politician."

Poul Nielson will perform a strategic analysis of the Nordic cooperation on labour market issues in order to identify areas for improvement, but he has never before specifically worked with labour market politics, which will now be the focus of his work. He has been told that this is not a disadvantage, but perhaps a plus.

"I won't be confronted with things I have said and meant before," he says.

Working class

His long experience means his career took off at a time when the world looked quite different. When he talks about his background, I think of the character Palle in the Danish TV series 'Better Times' ('Krøniken'), which was set in the same period as his own time in politics. Did he see himself in Palle?

"Palle was a social economist. I am a political scientist. What I have in common with many from my generation is that I grew up in a working class family and together with my sisters I was the first to get an academic education.

"This is important in many ways. It is considered a victory for what we stand for and for the education system which offers opportunities."

He got a High School graduation from the USA in 1961 on an American Field Service AFS scholarship. That changed his view of the world and of himself. He joined student politics and fought against the Vietnam War before becoming and MP and then government minister — first Energy Minister in Anker Jørgensen's government and later Minister for Development Cooperation in Poul Nyrup Rasmussen's government.

And now you will be manning the barricades for the Nordic region?

"My work now can easily be used to strengthen what we call the Nordic model. The Nordic democracies are not something that we just have. It is something we must work on to develop further."

He is humble in the face of his assignment.

"It is completely unrealistic to imagine that I can produce a proposal for solutions and ideas which are completely original; something nobody else has every thought of."

On the other hand Nordic cooperation has a core which he believes it is important to highlight.

"Ambitions are often bigger than the results when it comes to Nordic cooperation, but that does not change the fact that the dogma is alive and well. And so is the feeling that we still have something valuable which should be looked after, nurtured and developed. So there is something at the core of all this."

The necessity of the impossible

Like all politics, Nordic cooperation is about the art of the possible, but Poul Nielson underlines that if you only look for political compromise the scope becomes too narrow.

"Politics can have two dimensions. It is the art of the possible, yet you could also say it is the fight for the necessity of the impossible when you enter into the ethical challenges which present themselves when you want to create a better world. This is when you get into thinner air.

"There is a tension between the two. If you only consider politics to be the art of the possible, anyone can become a politician. To a large extent they already can, of course, but there should be more to it than that. My assignment lets me go outside of what has so far proven possible, and I imagine I will be presenting some dilemmas which the Nordic governments must relate to; many 'what ifs'. There could be a small element of inspiration here, which could also be called a provocation in the type of work which has been chosen here."

An X-ray image?

Well, it isn't an ultrasound scanning to find out how the patient is doing. You could call it a strategic analysis.

You will perform a strategic analysis and come up with suggestions for action. Do you have an example?

"It's to do with identifying ideas and possible areas where you are free to act. I am not limited to coming up with something which must be implementable right away. But you also have to make sure you don't come up with something which could look like a test balloon or just some ideas which can be shot down for being too utopian."

He will not delve any more into the analysis. Poul Nielson is in what he calls the information gathering phase, and has

begun pondering over the task. He will spend the summer reading up on the topic. The plan is to spend a lot of time on talking with all those who are interested in labour market co-operation. The first deadline is 17 November, when employment ministers meet. Then he will focus on working on the report which he is due to deliver in a year.

In the machine room

You say you have seen the European machine room as a Commissioner. What do you mean with the machine room?

"The Commission has the right of initiative, and the court has a right and an established practice which means they are not static. They do not look like the administration of a typical international organisation, which is usually reactive, carrying out what members have decided. They act politically. This is what is hard to understand, and which opens up for criticism if you fail to understand the seriousness in the fact that Europe now has decided to invest in the cooperation. Europe has decided to integrate more with Europe. Many have not allowed themselves to understand this," says Poul Nielson and carries on:

"The idea of the European Union has a certain dynamic. The Commission wants to create common solutions. This is the reality. Yet there are still major differences between the countries. In the Nordic region this is particularly visible when it comes to some of the models and measures which emerge as a result of European labour market developments.

"So labour law and the labour market represent a major theme which will colour my work going forward."

He does not want to comment on this any further, but nevertheless underlines the fact that the Nordic model is not one single model.

Definitions cannot explain everything

"There is no congruence in the Nordic region. In Sweden and Denmark the labour market is governed by negotiations between the social partners with no interference from the state. In Finland and Norway the negotiated settlements are elevated through legislation by making them universally applicable or by introducing a minimum wage. This is a model which is more similar to the European procedure. I don't want to go into further details now."

One of Poul Nielson's main points is that you must avoid getting lost in details about the differences between the Nordic models. It is not a problem to live with notions which are difficult to define in great detail, he says.

"We have other notions which we live with without problem even though we don't define them in much detail. For instance the notion of love. It is difficult to talk about it, but we know very well what it is and what it isn't."

He would rather focus on the overarching perspective.

"This is about the ideas behind the Nordic welfare society where you apply a softer approach to how decisions are made in society, through negotiations based on trust and openness. We also agree that inequality is a threat to our security.

"There are some values behind this. The modern welfare society as a general concept is part of the Nordic model. So when you present it in this way, there is a Nordic model which the world outside looks to for inspiration, also the world outside of Europe."

This is where you find the basis for the proposals he wants to put forward.

"As we strive to influence developments in Europe and elsewhere in the world, this is an important resource for the Nordic region. We have a role in the UN as well as in the Nordic region, and the Nordic region as a notion or brand has a value out there. This is not something the Nordic region can let lie. We must live with the fact that the Nordic region has a role to play and this is a field which is included in my work.

"We must make sure that our democracies and our transparent and humane societies are developed. This is not something we simply have, this is something we need to work together to develop. These are leads which in different areas will be covered by my work.

"We must be proactive and sure that our basic values are known and understood for what they are," says Poul Nielson.

Complicated relationship between EU and Nordic labour law systems

The courts have acquired a greater role in the labour law system at the expense of politicians and the social partners. And knowing what the law actually means is becoming so difficult for employers and trade unions that the rule of law is under threat, argue the authors of a new book from the Nordic Council of Ministers.

NEWS
22.06.2015
TEXT: KERSTIN AHLBERG, EDITOR EU & ARBETSRÄTT

'Europe and the Nordic Collective Agreement Model' is published as a result of a project run by the Council of Nordic Trade Unions (NFS), and the book highlights the challenges facing the Nordic labour law systems when dealing with EU law, the EEA agreement and the European convention on human rights.

The book's editor, Professor Jens Kristiansen at the University of Copenhagen, says the labour law systems in the Nordic countries are similar in many ways. There is a high degree of organisation among both employees and employers, collective agreements play an important part in the labour law systems, these agreements usually completely regulate wages and employment conditions in the trades or occupations they cover and legislation play a limited role compared to most other European countries. These systems are now being affected by some developing general tendencies.

European law increasingly complex

One of these tendencies is that the legal system is becoming increasingly complex. EU law and EEA law, interpreted by the Court of Justice of the European Union and the EFTA Court respectively, are complex enough. At the same time they are increasingly interacting with the European convention on human rights, which is interpreted by a third court; The European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg.

When member states gave the EU competence to adopt rules covering labour and employment conditions, they made it very clear that pay and industrial action should remain national issues. This means the EU cannot introduce a directive covering pay conditions or the right to take industrial action. But in later years we have learned that trade union strike action can constitute an illegal restriction to the right of establishment and the free movement of services. It also turns out that the EU can exhort member states to reform their wage systems within the framework of the integrated guidelines for economic and employment policies. The fact that the Union does not have the power to introduce a directive covering a certain issue, does not stop it from interfering in the same issue according to treaty rules granting the Union the power to act within other areas, Jens Kristiansen points out.

There is also a complicated hierarchy between different types of rules which makes it even harder to predict how far rights and obligations go according to different labour law directives. The directive on the posting of workers, for instance, says it is up to member states to decide what are minimum rates of pay. But the directive is not there only to protect posted workers and prevent social dumping. It is also meant to promote the freedom of movement guaranteed by the treaties. Since the EU treaties, the EEA agreement and the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights are all ranked above directives, it is unclear how much freedom the member states really have. The fact that there are two different law courts does not make things any easier. The EFTA Court and the Court of Justice of the European Union make statements on the same issues but are not always in agreement.

Change in balance between law and collective agreements

Another tendency is the fact that the legislator has gained a more prominent role in relation to the social partners. The state has the responsibility for making sure EEA law, EU law and the European Convention are all complied with. This demands some kind of legal framework. That is why there is no doubt that the implementation of different EEA and EU legislation tips the balance in favour of legislation, Jens Kristiansen thinks.

There has not been any more fundamental changes to the division of labour between the social partners and the legislator

in the Nordic countries, however. This seems to be down to two things:

Firstly, member states have only given the EU limited powers to adopt rules covering labour law issues. The EU cannot introduce directives on a range of trade union and politically sensitive issues, for instance the right of association and the right to take industrial action, wage conditions, employment protection and occupational pensions.

Secondly, the social partners and legislators in the Nordic countries have obviously agreed to implement obligations under EU/EEA-rules in a way which interferes as little as possible with the existing division of labour. In all of the countries labour law directives have led to more statutory provisions which cover employment contracts, but not to comprehensive legislation on wage and employment conditions.

A more central role for the courts

One of the most eye-catching tendencies is the fact that courts have gained a more central role in relation to legislators and the social partners. Courts have gained a legislative function, since they have to interpret domestic rules in a way which is consistent with EU/EEA law and the European Convention, while making sure national legislation is in line with the country's obligations according to these.

Thus the wide political room for manoeuvre usually enjoyed by the legislator and the social partners in the Nordic countries is circumscribed. Both domestic and European courts have decided on a wide range of issues which in a Nordic tradition have traditionally been considered to be purely political. This includes for instance whether state interference in a labour conflict is an unacceptable interference in the freedom of association, whether union-led strike action is compatible with the freedom of movement of services and whether a legal limit for the pensionable age can be considered to be age discrimination.

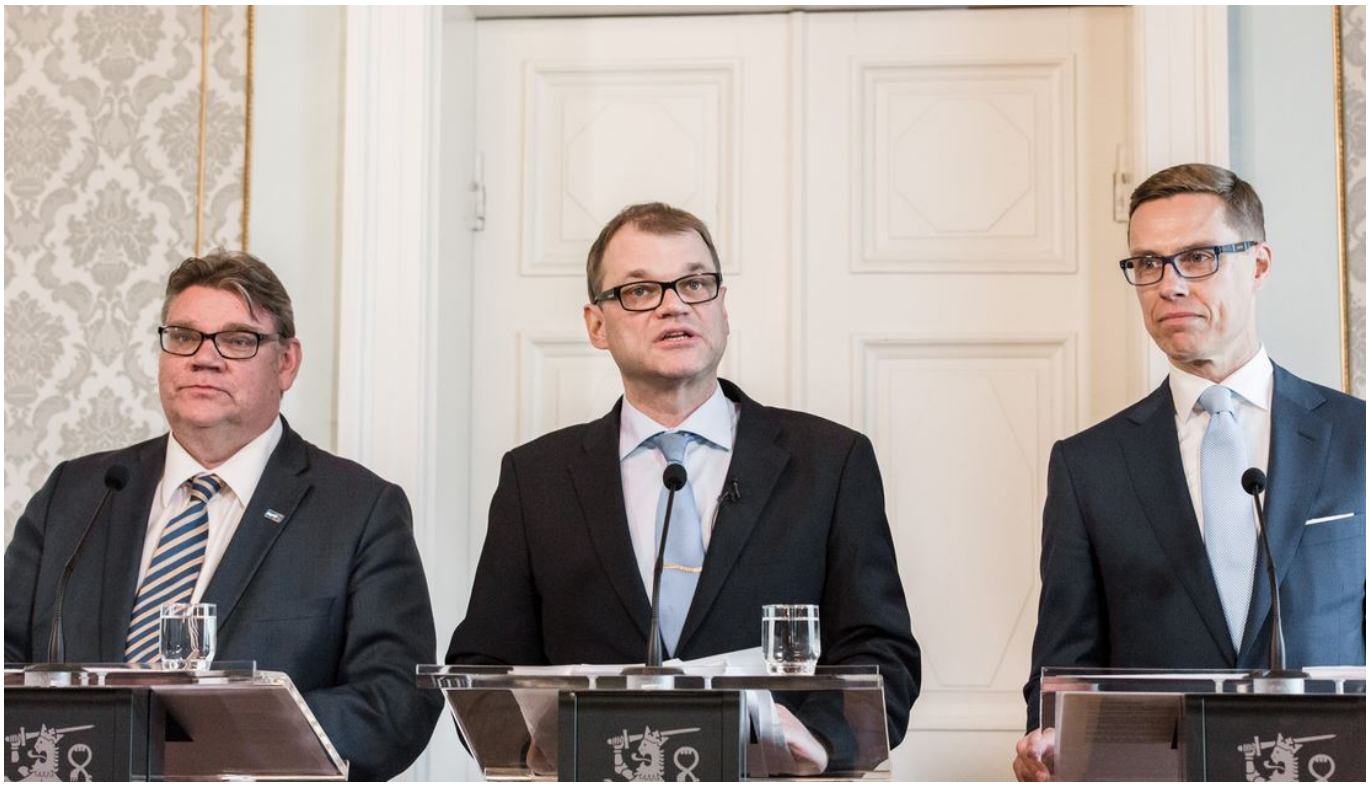
In all three cases the legislator's political interpretation has been subject to the censorship of the courts, based on vaguely formulated European legal principles.

A threat to the rule of law?

The increasingly central role of the courts has affected not only the political room for manoeuvre, but also the employees' and employers' ability to trust domestic legislation. When the courts interpret laws and collective agreements to make sure they correlate with the country's European obligations, private organisations may run the risk of having to pay for the fact that national law is not compatible with EU law.

Kristiansen uses the Swedish Laval ruling as an example, where a majority in the Swedish Labour Court seemed to have no qualms about ordering the trade unions to paying considerable damages for acting in a way which was legal according to Swedish legislation. Another example is Danish employers who were ordered to pay damages for terminations of employment which were legal according to Danish legislation, but in breach of the EU law principle of equal treatment which bans age discrimination.

This has now led to the Supreme Court of Denmark asking the EU Court of Justice what should be given more weight — the principle of equal treatment or the principle of the rule of law — i.e. allowing people to know what counts. The question is written in a neutral language, for sure, but in reality the Supreme Court thinks the EU Court of Justice puts too little weight on the rule of law, says Jens Kristiansen.



Prime Minister Juha Sipilä from the Center Party (in the middle of the photo) leads a centre-right coalition. To the left Timo Soini, Finns Party, to the right Alexander Stubb, National Coalition Party.

Labour market and gender: tough challenges for Finland's new government

Negotiations to form a new government in Finland are over and the new government ministers in the three party coalition are ready to start the job of lifting the country out of the economic crisis. For the past ten years there has been plenty of political activity but the results have not materialised. Labour market reform is one of the most difficult issues.

ANALYSIS
12.06.2015
TEXT: CARL-GUSTAV LINDÉN, PHOTO: SAKARI PIIPPO

Just a few years ago Finland was top of the class in the Eurozone. Suddenly the country is rock bottom together with Cyprus when it comes to economic growth. This is not a political dream scenario for the conservative parties the Center Party and the National Coalition Party and the populist the Finns Party.

But Prime Minister Juha Sipilä is used to landing big, complex projects. As a business leader in the IT sector he established a reputation as an extremely efficient and focussed performer. His business career also made him a multi-millionaire and the richest prime minister in Finland's history so far.

Sipilä has a corporate leader's attitude to cooperation; everyone should be pulling in the same direction and there is no space for solo missions. In order to establish a joint vision the

government will spend the first month working in an open office.

Keeping them in check

This is a problem particularly for the less than coherent populist party who's party leader Timo Soini has his work cut out just keeping his members in check. One of his new ministers, Jari Lindström, who is Minister of Justice and Employment, has already launched a solo initiative promising to bring back the obligation for companies to contribute to the state pension system. Lindström, who was an unemployed machine supervisor in the paper industry, explained that he had not realised how important the word of a government minister was.

He has also been confronted with the fact that he personally wants to bring back capital punishment in Finland; private thoughts a minister of justice should keep private.

Timo Soini himself will now have to balance the two contradictory roles as Finland's Foreign Minister, who negotiates in accordance with the nation's interest, and as a merciless EU critic. That paradox has been noted abroad too. Sir Graham Watson, head of The Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE), compares the appointment to putting count Dracula in charge of a blood bank. Even the French satirical magazine Charlie Hebdo has mentioned Soini and the populists' rise under the headline "Helsinki moves away from Europe".

Programming

Sipilä's business-like approach is evident in other ways too. During this spring's government negotiations a new word entered the Finnish vocabulary; iteration. Juha Sipilä, a trained engineer, borrowed the term from the world of computer programmers in order to explain how the government talks would carry on until they arrived at the desired goal. It is known as being "in the loop", a loop of activity, feedback and decisions.

The government platform which was arrived at through this loop is dominated by cuts to public services. The costs of nurseries, elementary schools, higher education and research are being cut, along with the overseas aid budget.

The country's means-tested unemployment benefit will also be lowered, while defence spending goes up. It could look like Finland's new government over the coming four years will move billions of euro from nurseries, education and welfare to the armed forces in order to gunboats and fighter jets.

"I have nothing against strengthening the armed forces in turbulent times, but I don't like the government's way of taking money from families, pensioners and people who are less well off," says Jan Sundberg, a professor in political science at the Helsinki University.

He wonders what effect this will have on social cohesion, but takes a 'wait and see' approach to what effect the government's policies will have in the coming four years. Except for one issue. Further restrictions to Finland's already minimal immigration numbers is seen by the Finns Party sees one of the absolutely most important issues.

"The risk is less immigration and that is not good for Finnish society," says Sundberg.

"We should have open immigration, lower the demands for learning Finnish and open our western borders."

Corporatism

Labour market reform is one of the most difficult issues. Finland is an extremely corporatist country where the power balance between trade unions, employers and government is cemented in blocks looking after their own interests. As a result, political reforms have remained more or less stagnant for more than ten years.

The Sipilä government is now talking about two different projects. One is a so-called social contract between the social partners in late summer. It is still not clear what this will entail but the aim is to reduce labour costs. Several central industry leaders have already said they will take a five percent pay cut. The other project is a continuation of the employment and growth agreement which has already been reached, with a central wage agreement for the next three years.

The government added plans to lower the means-tested unemployment benefit by 200 million euro next year, which had trade unions fuming. Sipilä quickly delayed that decision in order to keep the peace.

The government platform also includes measures aimed at easing employment protection and the rules for fixed term contracts which legal expert say are unsustainable. While working hours are being extended there is no reference to a better working life.

The noise of the past few weeks also highlights the fact that none of the new government members have experience from negotiating major social agreements. There is therefore a risk that the interest blocks will remain as entrenched as ever in four years time when this parliamentary term is over.

Weaker women's rights

The Nordic Labour Journal has previously written about how the new government's core values are based on family, faith and country, with an openly male and conservative profile. Women's position in society is clearly weaker after the election. Recently a group of 85 Finnish university heads and researchers signed an open letter to Sipilä's government, criticising the government platform's total lack of gender equality measures.

"Women and female dominated trades pay an unreasonably large proportion of the economic and human cost for the government's new measures," they felt.