

## The 17th of May – The National day in Norway

This day, the 17<sup>th</sup> of May, is a day for celebration here in Norway – one big party, una fiesta! Everybody, especially the kids, are looking forward to this day. They are allowed to eat as much ice-cream as they can swallow, and we buy balloons and other fun kids-stuff. In every place and city there are brave men and women holding speeches for the citizens, and there are parades where the kids and their families are waving their flags marching through the streets yelling “Hurrah, Hurrah” after some band playing. Everyone is happy, and they put on their best cloths – some wear their national costume, and these clothing vary from which special part in Norway they are from, that means that the costumes tell where in Norway your blood comes from. You are soon going to watch and take part in, or look at, this celebrating here in Oslo.

To many people there is a kind of seriousness to this day – a kind of profound respect, gratitude, and humility.

What is happening today? – We are celebrating our *national* day, the day when our constitution was signed almost 200 years ago. We are celebrating our freedom, our democracy, our independence, and that means that no other is above us using their force, and it means that we can follow our *own* guidelines. What does this mean? We can live out our own identity – our nationality. We do have some common references which make us Norwegian. Which are these? Where do they come from? From our history, language, culture? What makes us Norwegians? What constitutes our Norwegian identity? Do we have a Norwegian soul, something special which no one else has, and if so - what does this mean? Is it the free Norwegian soul we are celebrating?

But - it is also right to say that we are celebrating our constitution which contains some universal values. In 1814 Norway was freed from the union with Denmark as a result of the Napoleon wars. Some men saw this as Norway's opportunity to become a sovereign state and they gathered making our constitution. This was strongly influenced by the period of enlightenment in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, thoughts already expressed in the American Declaration of Independence and the French Declaration of Rights. The Norwegian Constitution was one of the very first to express and incorporate these human and democratic values.

This Constitution of 1814 had one ugly spot, one paragraph that not makes us very proud: Jews and Jesuits were not allowed into the state. (Removed in 1851) Why was this inhuman paragraph among all the other ones which were filled with the spirit of the enlightenment? Perhaps religious values, but also the value of being a *true* Norwegian, also were parts of the thinking of the founders. The period was also influenced by thoughts about national spirit; *a free nation is a nation which has the power and opportunity to live out its own true soul.*

This idea about reaching freedom through living out your true nationality has influenced the Norwegian society as many other. To put ahead our own culture and history has been a part of our official policy until our days. The plans in the school have parts which clearly are into the building-our-nation-project, and these parts are not only based on the values in our constitution. What is, and what should be the common reference world for the Norwegian population? Does a true Norwegian have a particularly Norwegian way of living his or her life?

When people seek together they need something which they can share, something that shows every one of them that they are a part of this group. The disadvantage is that everyone outside the group is excluded because of the lack of common references.

In my classes I want every pupil to prepare a proposition or a question which leads to a discussion. Deng asked “Am I a Norwegian?” He is borne in Norway, he talks perfectly (and quiet advanced) Norwegian, he has a Norwegian passport, he knows every Norwegian custom, he has been marching in parades on the 17<sup>th</sup> of may since he was a little child, he listens to the same (un-Norwegian Anglo-American) music as every other youth, he plays football, and so on – His own conclusion was that he is *not* – he also has a heritage from Nigeria through his parents - and he doesn't look like a Norwegian. The class was divided in two: Some said “No, Deng – of course you are a Norwegian, others were quiet and thoughtful, and some agreed and said that it is impossible to fill the concept of Norwegian coming from Africa.

As you know - Last summer we had some terrible killings here in Norway. The trial is going on this spring – right now. The murderer says that multicultural and Marxist-influenced politics is destroying the *true* way of living *true* Norwegian lives now and in the future, and so is happening in whole of Europe – he says.

I am afraid of these extremely right-wing ideas.

But the thoughts and values in our constitution are the best defence against this fascism. They are universal and not something exclusively Norwegian, but we are lucky to have them as the basic for our laws and institutions – and this is something worth celebrating!

I am sure that the universal ideas of freedom and democracy have become part of our common reference world. And if there is such a

thing as a Norwegian Spirit, I think in many ways I can appreciate that too - and take part in celebrating it. As long as we know our selves, **other** ways of living will not represent a treat, rather something that enriches us. We thus can be friendly and open up our minds and homes.

Let's go celebrating!

Olav Birkeland