

## AN INTERVIEW WITH JON-ÅGE ØYSLEBØ, NORWEGIAN MINISTER COUNSELLOR, COMMUNICATION AND CULTURE



Counsellor Jon-Åge Øyslebø

# “Engagement with the Arctic is part of our daily life” by John Bechtel

**SP** I noticed from your resume that about 25 years ago you were a journalist for a Norwegian financial newspaper. What prompted you to switch careers to the foreign service?

**Mr. Øyslebø** I saw an opportunity to explore other countries from the inside, and to see my own country from a different perspective. Only by first understanding how you are perceived by others is it possible to have a successful interaction with them. Understand them first in order to be understood.

**SP** We are focusing in this issue on all things Arctic. With reference to Norway in particular, what's the first thing that comes to mind?

**Mr. Øyslebø** *The U.S. has an important presence in the Arctic because of Alaska, but the Arctic is a very different experience for Norwegians because 10% of Norway's population is above the Arctic Circle. So the Arctic is very much on our radar all the time; we have a much stronger engagement with the Arctic. It is part of our daily life.*

*It's about more than oil and gas, it's about everything. It costs more money to extract oil and gas from the Arctic than it would be to, say, get it out of sand somewhere. The current price of oil and gas on the world market does*

*not make it viable at the moment to push for Arctic operations. But we have a long term vision for the area that encompasses managing nature itself through scientific endeavors. There are political and commercial interests, to be sure, but the Norwegian people in general are very focused on conservation and preservation of the environment. Perhaps because we live so far north, we are essentially an outdoors people. Our attitudes on this predated oil.*

**SP** Why do you say that?

**Mr. Øyslebø** Over the course of a hundred years, Norway went from being one of the poorest countries in Europe to being one of the richest. When the mass migration of Norwegians to America took place, only Ireland had more emigrating to America than Norway. Most people in Norway survived by farming, but only 3% of our area is suitable for farming and the climate can be harsh compared to many other places.

Take my family for example. My father was born in 1926 and grew up on the land of our original family farm. He was not the oldest son, and in Norway the land passes to the oldest son so that farmland does not get divided and subdivided with each generation until every farm is the size of a postage stamp. In the 19th century, many of our sons left the farms and went to the coasts of Norway, where they found employment as sailors and that's how Norway achieved some prominence in the shipping business.

In the late 40s and early 50s the government paid for my father to go to university and he became a professor. Social security was instituted in 1967, one year before oil was discovered, and only 22 years after the Nazi occupation. So some of our leaders way back then, before oil, were forward-thinking.

**SP** Like every country, Norway has its large population centers, but you also have a large number of small communities, some of them very small, with only a few hundred people. What are people in these communities doing to earn a living?

**Mr. Øyslebø** Yes, we have lots of communities with maybe only 20 households, and people in these communities are pretty much doing what they have always done, which is small agriculture, or fishing, or small industries that service those occupations, like processing the fish, or processing the agricultural products. Also the public sector is a major employer, and with new technology we have been successful at decentralizing many of our government and administrative functions. This makes it possible for many of our educated young people with high level skill sets to return to the communities of their extended families and do their work locally, which is something many of them really wanted to do anyway.

**SP** What would you like to share with our readers about climate change?

**Mr. Øyslebø** Because we are part of the Arctic, whatever is going on with global climate patterns becomes observable here first. So you could say we have our fingers on the pulse of international climate changes that begin here and have delayed effects thousands of miles away.

**SP** Very quickly, where should our readers who want to visit Norway think about going?

**Mr. Øyslebø** Tromsø and Svalbard/Spitzbergen. Google it. You'll see. Both are extraordinary and very unique places to visit.

**SP** On behalf of our readers, thank you for sharing with us.