

# Failed regionalism?

## The nexus between Nordic cooperation and European integration

In mid-February 1950 Jens Otto Krag, the Danish trade minister, travelled to Oslo for a meeting with fellow Nordic leaders. Just a year earlier, Sweden, Norway and Denmark had failed to agree plans under discussion since May 1948 for the militarily unaligned Scandinavian Defence Union (SDU), the fallout from which saw the latter two abandon their neutrality and join the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). For Krag, the gathering in the Norwegian capital was thus an opportune moment to reflect on the status of Nordic cooperation. There was, he declared, a good deal about which to be upbeat. Even without mentioning the various historical, social and cultural similarities which bound them, the countries already enjoyed political and parliamentary collaboration that few others could match. And each had in common an economy highly dependent on export trade and an economic model centred on full employment and industrialisation. They could hence be expected to foster further political ties and consolidate access to each other's markets. Yet the failure of the SDU negotiations, according to Krag, also brought with it 'a certain disillusionment with Nordic cooperation', the episode merely the latest illustration of 'Nordic goodwill' having failed to translate into 'practical results' at a time 'when European or European-American cooperation seems to be much more successful'. This, he concluded, was revealing of a wider reality that Nordic policymakers ought now to confront: 'The matter is this: the problems of the Nordic countries today are such that they can only be solved on an international basis. Nordic cooperation may help contribute to solving our difficulties but it can only ever be supplementary, indeed only secondary' (ABA, Krag Papers, Box 17, Handwritten notes of speech, 18 February 1950).

Krag's remarks capture well a sense of failure which, for some scholars, is all too common a feature of efforts by the five Nordic states – Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden – to cooperate more closely with one another (Sundelius and Wiklund, 1979; Hecker-Stampehl, 2004; Østergaard, 1994; Miljan, 1977; Hemstad, 2008). There was, the argument usually runs, a measure of low-profile consultative form of collaboration, what Nils Andrén (1967: 384) called 'cobweb' integration and Amitai Etzioni (2001: 184) terms an 'associational web' of looser cultural and social ties. But as Bengt Sundelius (1982: 181) noted, in terms of government-led grand designs, 'history seems to indicate that the Nordic countries have failed dramatically when they have tried to undertake major, conspicuous cooperation projects.' At first sight there is a powerful logic to this reasoning. It is certainly difficult to dispute that in the field of defence the governments have a poor track record. Indeed, the collapse of the SDU was just one of several failures stretching back to the interwar period (Salmon, 1997; Kaukiainen, 1983). Proposals for economic cooperation in the region look to have fared little better (Wahlbäck, 1973). There were doubtless several bright spots. One example frequently highlighted is the Nordic Cooperative Wholesale Association (*Nordisk Andelsförbund*) which

sprung up in 1918 to help ease access to goods whose supply had been disrupted by the First World War (Hilson, 2018; Patmore and Balnave, 2018; Stenius, 2010). Another is the Scandinavian Airlines System (SAS), a tripartite government-owned company established in September 1946 as the joint flag carrier for Denmark, Norway and Sweden (Andrén, 1984). Yet alongside such feats appears to stand a considerably larger catalogue of projects which for one reason or another ultimately floundered. In the two decades prior to 1945 alone, suggestions for a common currency, cooperation among Nordic central banks, the joint promotion of trade and industry, and a commodities-sharing system, all came to naught. The two decades after were arguably bleaker still, with proposals in the 1950s for a Nordic customs union and accompanying investment bank, and in the late 1960s for a full-blown economic community (Nordek), failing to see the light of day (Strang, 2016).

The redundancy of many these ventures is thrown into still sharper relief when contemplating – as Krag did in the speech referenced above – the relative speed and determination with which the six states of the European Economic Community (EEC) integrated after 1945. Again, scholars do point out several exceptions. Among them are the Nordic passport union agreed in 1952 and the system of free mobility within the confines of the common Nordic labour market launched in 1954, both of which predated by several years equivalent measures laid down in the Treaty of Rome (Wendt, 1979). But these innovations were apparently unable to mask the basic incapacity of Nordic integration to accommodate, at one extreme, Denmark, which by the late 1950s tended to prioritise relations with Britain and increasingly Germany (and thus the EEC) as the primary destinations for its agricultural exports and, on the other, neutral Finland, whose sensitives over its relationship with the Soviet Union ruled out any move towards the supranational level. The result, according to Barbara Haskel (1976), was that neither the will nor the potential gains ever really existed in adequate measure to push a Nordic plan over the line. Bo Stråth (1980) and others (i.e., Schiller, 1984) go one step further: for them, the concept of Nordic integration was nothing short of an illusion, never really a practical economic substitute for joining either the EEC or the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) which came before it. That today Denmark, Finland and Sweden are firmly wedded within the European Union (EU) as full members, and both Norway and Iceland access its internal market through the European Economic Area (EEA), might suggest that in a tussle between EU and Nordic integration, it was the European level which eventually prevailed.

The aim of this chapter is not to dispute the obvious disappointments that littered the Nordic landscape. On the contrary, the opening section will largely confirm both the scale of divergences between the Nordic countries and the level of awareness from within the governments themselves about the limitations of regional cooperation. In the context of the current volume which hopes to explore the experiences of regional groupings within the wider European integration process, however, what the latter portions of the chapter will do is add a degree of qualification to this narrative of failure. For despite, and in fact almost regardless of, the fate of these regional initiatives, such setbacks have been accompanied by moments where

the pursuit of, and rhetorical support for, Nordic integration has nevertheless proven a key conduit for grappling with the many challenges and obstacles presented by a changing external environment and the broader European integration process itself. To view Nordic cooperation in isolation and berate the *naiveté* or failings of Nordic governments, in other words, risks overlooking the multitude of ways it has complemented, interacted or coincided with the Nordics' European policymaking.

### **The origins of a difficult relationship**

By some measure of course Nordic cooperation predates the post-1945 European integration process. As far back as the fourteenth century the Kalmar Union amalgamated the Danish, Swedish (into which almost all modern-day Finland was completely subsumed) and Norwegian (then controlling much of Iceland, Greenland, and the Faroe Islands) kingdoms into one. This 'stunning example of cross-national cooperation' lasted until Sweden's decision unilaterally to secede in 1523, redrawing once more the map of the entire Nordic region (Ingebritsen, 2006: 7). Norway, for its part, emerged as the subordinate partner in the successor Denmark-Norway Union ruled from Copenhagen until the Napoleonic Wars saw it re-established as a state within the Sweden-Norway Union under the rule of the Swedish King. Not until 1905 did the country gain full independence (Helle, 1974; Seip, 1997; Neumann, 2002). Meanwhile, Finland, having first been integrated within Sweden in around 1150, would remain so all the way through to 1809, when it was ceded to Tsarist Russia before gaining independence in 1917 (Hilson, 2008). And Iceland was likewise very much part of this Nordic (first Norwegian, then Danish) imperialism, having gained a measure of self-government with limited home rule in 1874 and full independence in 1918. Even then, regal links with Copenhagen would endure for another twenty-six years until the monarchy was finally scrapped in 1944 (Thomas, 1996).

Although a curt sketch of what is a huge swathe of history, it does allow us to understand more clearly the environment amid which subsequent moves towards Nordic regional cooperation were made. The student-led pan-Scandinavian movement of the nineteenth century could for instance point to the region's shared past and common linguistic, cultural and Lutheran heritage built up over these centuries to support their claim for (re)unifying Denmark, Norway and Sweden (Becker-Christensen, 1981; Holmberg, 1984). The same assumptions likewise underpinned the variety of cross-border cooperatives, political associations, voluntary organisations and interest groups which started to emerge around the same time. Quarrels over, for example, the lack of Swedish assistance in the Danish-Prussian war of 1864 or later the building of a Scandinavian monetary union in the 1870s, did admittedly bring into the open quite how little scope there sometimes existed at the high political level for the countries to cooperate, less still unify (Hilson, 2008: 18). But a more tempered 'Nordism' nevertheless survived well into the twentieth century. Across the political spectrum and at a wider societal level, this was anchored in the belief that *Norden* – literally 'the North' – was a homogenous unit of small sovereign democratic nation states isolated on the northern rim of continental Europe. All to varying degrees were resource poor and increasingly dependent on larger markets beyond the region. And

yet all were bonded by what for some was the growing exceptionalism of the Nordic ‘middle way’ marked by the same basic values, the mushrooming of (social) democracy, and an advancing interest in state-provided welfare (Sørensen, 1993a; Rerup, 1994; Østergaard, 1994).

Out of this emerged what Patrick Salmon (1997: 27) calls ‘a distinctively Scandinavian view of international affairs’. First was an acceptance that each country in the region would need to prioritise open international free trade. Acquiring essential raw materials and industrial goods from abroad, and in turn selling agricultural produce, would be essential if the countries stood any chance of modernising economically. Second, feelings of smallness produced the reasonable desire to remain outside great power politics and instead pursue a policy of neutrality and non-aggression. To a large extent both strands obliged the Nordic states to manage very different external realities: Denmark’s geostrategic position meant keeping a close eye on Germany while at the same time seeking out German markets for its then-dominant agricultural exports; Norway tended instead to direct its interests almost solely towards Britain (Berdal, 1997); Sweden’s relative size and industrial development placed a greater emphasis on Nordic, British and international trade (Salmon, 1997); Iceland’s exports depended largely on Denmark but its geographic position likewise put it within the UK’s strategic sphere of influence (Holbraad, 1991); and Finland was dominated by fears over Russia at the same time its agrarian economy traded heavily with eastern Europe, with exports of wood pulp and paper to Britain and Sweden of growing relevance from the 1890s (Olsson, 1993). But so seemingly persuasive was *Norden*, that the two strands also created the space in which to consult each other and discuss the mutual challenges they each faced. From the 1920s, the Nordic states seem to have come to terms with the fact that they possessed often conflicting geostrategic and economic interests and to have developed a Nordic component in the overall complexion of their foreign policymaking process.

This same basic pattern would continue in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War. It was the case with the Swedish-proposed SDU for sure. Differences in wartime experience made it easier for Oslo and Copenhagen to envisage accepting Western military aid and ultimately a future in NATO. But commitment to the Atlantic Alliance could not be taken for granted (Olesen, 1994a; Branner, 1990; Villaume, 1995). Nor by the same measure could the lure of *Norden* be dismissed out of hand. Nordic solidarity appears indeed to have been at least partially responsible for the decision by Swedish foreign minister Östen Undén to draft the SDU proposal to begin with. Undén’s line of thinking was that a neutral regional unit could help in Finland’s bid to secure its position as an independent power – a status then in some doubt in the context of its signing of the Finno-Soviet Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance (FCMA) Treaty (Kronvall, 2003). The Social Democratic (*Socialdemokratiet*, SD) government in Denmark was also highly enamoured of a non-aligned grouping, seeing it as a neat fit in its broader emotional and ideological support for all things Nordic (Villumsen, 1991; Olesen, 1994b; Petersen, 1979). Historians further agree that in Norway – the country often blamed with scuppering the SDU proposal – sections of the political establishment

were likewise genuinely open to a Scandinavian defence solution if it helped to boost the country's bridge-building policy designed to promote links both within and between East and West (Aalders, 1990; Sverdrup, 1996; Eriksen and Pharo, 1997). That the SDU plan exposed the diverging security stakes of the Scandinavian countries, in other words, did not negate what for some was the ongoing attraction of regional cooperation.

Equally, though, there was an obvious dimension of *realpolitik* to all this. Ideological and cultural affinity seems to have counted for very little if it could not simultaneously serve national interests. Viewed in this way, uneasiness expressed by opposition politicians and the popular press over the virtues of a neutral Sweden continuing to stand alone against an ever more bellicose Soviet Union, and the sense that a neutral Scandinavian bloc might well add to Sweden's international prestige, were probably each more a factor in the government's decision originally to advocate for the SDU than any sort of Nordic idealism or altruism (Molin, 1993; Sevón, 1995). This argument is strengthened by the fact that the SDU had from the start not received the universal acclaim which might have been expected of it were Nordic solidarity the overriding objective. Sweden's military almost certainly preferred building defence relations with the West over integration within a Scandinavian bloc. Swedish premier Tage Erlander himself admitted privately that he too was rather sceptical as to whether the SDU would, or should, be formed (Aalders, 1990). The pained and at times openly cool response of most decision-makers in Oslo meanwhile owed much to the gnawing suspicion of Swedish power and the still prevailing memories of Norway's recent history of being dominated by its Nordic neighbour (Skodvin, 1971). So too were they sceptical that Norway, either inside a Scandinavian alliance or on its own, could realistically defend itself in the event of war with Soviet Russia. Government ministers, most clearly among them Norwegian foreign minister Halvard Lange, thus grew convinced that an approach to the West would be needed. That the administration of Einar Gerhardsen chose to pay lip service to the SDU for so long appears in large part to have been motivated by fears of rupturing an already discernible split within his governing Labour Party over whether Norway ought to back the project or join NATO (*FRUS*, 1948, Vol. III, Bay to Secretary of State, 18 May 1948; Riste, 1985; Eriksen, 1972). And even if the strategy of the Danish government had by comparison been driven by a more sincere attachment to 'Scandinavianism', officials were dealt a severe blow by the fall of the SDU. The episode certainly put paid to any hopes of building Nordic defence ties: as of April 1949 Denmark, Norway and Iceland were each encased inside the Atlantic Alliance while Sweden and Finland stood outside (ABA, Hans Hedtoft Papers, Box 42, Erlander to Hedtoft, 23 February 1949). But as Krag's speech mentioned earlier made clear, it also gradually called into question whether there was much point in trying to establish binding institutional commitments in other areas too.

Doubts such as these were stilled in the short-term at least by a shift in attention towards cooperation beyond the military sphere. Of the two major proposals to emerge in the following few years, that for the creation of the Nordic Council (NC) in 1952 was by far the most high-profile. The immediate origins of the NC lay in the

August 1951 announcement by the then former Danish prime minister and SD leader, Hans Hedtoft, for a new regional parliamentary assembly. But the catalyst for Hedtoft's suggestion itself turned out to be a more complex blend of dynamics. One of these was a desire to reform the existing Nordic Inter-Parliamentary Union (NIPU), an advisory body set up back in 1907 by the Swedish, Norwegian and Danish legislatures and to which their Finnish and Icelandic counterparts acceded shortly before 1914. Almost from the off, the NIPU fell into the habit of doing little more than publishing proceedings and making recommendations without much fanfare, even if it did ensure a level of inter-parliamentary cooperation through annual meetings that became a frequent feature of the interwar and early post-war periods (Anderson, 1967; Wendt, 1959). Yet the successes of Nordic social democracy after 1945 conspired to give the NIPU greater salience. By 1951, there were signs of its ability to place on the political agenda not inconsiderable reforms to citizenship and labour laws and existing agreements in transport and communications – out of which the Nordic passport union and common labour market would eventually develop. It therefore made sense to capitalise on the success of these initiatives by placing parliamentary cooperation on a more formal footing. As great a spur was the belief by the likes of Hedtoft that these last successes were proof of Nordic integration having still a dynamism and momentum of its own. A revised NIPU would rejuvenate Nordic cooperation and ensure that it continued to play a vital part in political and public life; a sufficiently strong regional organ could even provide an ideal antidote to the diplomatic damage caused by the SDU debacle. The sort of organisation Hedtoft envisaged was consequently one overseen by a powerful secretariat with prime ministers and foreign ministers involved in shaping decisions, cabinet ministers voting on recommendations that could then be implemented domestically, and a parliamentary assembly organised on party rather than national lines to guarantee the inherently political – and by implication rather weightier – nature of the new body (Anderson, 1967: 22–5).

Quite how unrealistic were Hedtoft's expectations became apparent almost immediately. For very quickly the government found itself at the centre of a fervent debate about the degree of national sovereignty to be surrendered to the proposed assembly. As with the SDU, Norway emerged as a major stumbling block, with large sections of both Gerhardsen's governing Labour Party and almost all the centre-right bourgeois opposition hostile to anything more than an administrative secretariat being formed. The idea of ministers participating or voting in the NC likewise proved too much for the Norwegians. What eventually prevailed was a compromise between the Danish and Norwegian extremes, with Sweden occupying a sort of middle ground throughout. Cabinet ministers were hence permitted to attend plenary sessions but had no voting rights; a largely administrative presidium was established staffed not by permanent officials but a collection of smaller national delegations; and meetings would take place over the course of just a few days each year hosted by national parliaments. The Council that met for its inaugural session in Copenhagen on 13 February 1953 was thus a dramatically scaled down version of what Hedtoft had

originally envisaged, far more consultative in nature and with few real powers (Wendt, 1979).

Outwardly at least, the second major proposal to appear – plans for an ambitious customs union and a free trade area – suffered a worse fate. The impetus to form closer economic links, admittedly, had appeared prior to the SDU talks even commenced (Eriksen, 1987). But the more thought-out proposal came from Halvard Lange, who in July 1947 recommended a study group be formed to review the possibility of establishing a customs union. And it would be this Norwegian proposal that would spark a series of conversations which would linger long after the dust from the collapse of the SDU had settled. It is thus worthwhile briefly considering the various twists and turns that developments took in the intervening years, if only to highlight what for some is yet another example of Nordic integration appearing much simpler in theory than in practice.

The Norwegian proposal had in fact got off to a relatively positive start. Within a year, foreign ministers had created the Joint Nordic Committee for Economic Cooperation – chaired by then head of the Danish National Bank, C.V. Bramsnæs – to examine how the land lay on deepening economic ties. In its interim report published in January 1950, moreover, the complete eradication of internal tariffs and the building of a regional customs union stood out as measures considered both feasible and likely to bring obvious benefits to the economies involved. And yet a change of course by Norway – a result of unease that a customs union might detract from its post-war rebuilding efforts and open the country's less robust industrial sector up to competition from its Danish and especially Swedish counterparts – brought a sudden halt to proceedings. True, the Bramsnæs Committee's work would continue. But the whole occasion appeared to serve as a bitter reminder of the incompatibility of Nordic economic interests and difficulties in constructing formal regional institutions from which the Nordics seem never fully to have recovered (Milward, 2005). A resuscitation of the customs union talks at the NC's opening plenary in February 1953 was thus soon followed by yet another split between, on the one hand, Denmark and Sweden, both of which suggested continuing apace with plans to lift internal tariff barriers and, on the other, Norway and Iceland, whose governments would end up distancing themselves from the idea altogether. Attempts to heal these divisions were again made thereafter, with an intergovernmental meeting at the Swedish premier's country retreat, Harpsund, taking place in October 1954, extensive debates in the NC on the customs union issues following in 1956 and 1957, and even something approaching a compromise blueprint materialising by January 1958 (Miiles, 1997). And yet, in the words of Toivo Miljan (1977: 96), the basic problem remained that sustained efforts such as these 'did not materially change the positions of the respective countries as presented in the 1950 interim report of the Bramsnæs Committee.' With the decision taken in the summer of 1959 by Denmark, Norway and Sweden to partake in the building of the European Free Trade Association (EFTA), the plans for a Nordic customs union and common market were quietly shelved.

So does all this not in fact underscore the veracity of standard accounts as to the inherent failures of Nordic cooperation? Do the NC and abortive customs union project not represent a continuity of sorts with the SDU, in as much as all three ventures seemed in quick succession to expose the fragility of Nordic ties and the impotence of decision-makers in building strong regional structures? And by implication, should we not apportion blame to the Nordic governments for persevering for so long with ‘illusory’ alternatives to the broader European-level process of integration? The latter half of this chapter will highlight at least three reasons that, notwithstanding these obvious disappointments, suggest we ought to treat Nordic integration with a greater nuance than would normally be the case.

### **The conditions of Nordic cooperation**

The first reason to be somewhat cautious of the failure narrative is that it risks downplaying the context within which decisions in favour of pursuing Nordic cooperation were often made. Of these there were several, but one which ought to be mentioned concerns the relationship with the United Kingdom. The weakness of the German economy by the late 1920s and the instability the broader European political situation throughout the interwar period was such that Britain emerged as the major economic force for the Nordic countries on the eve of the Second World War. Bilateral agreements with Denmark, Norway and Sweden signed in 1933 ensured that Scandinavia became a key export market for the British (notably coal and textiles), but the figures for the opposite direction were far starker: at one point trade with Britain comprised as much as 60 per cent of Denmark’s entire exports, made up mostly of agricultural products like pig meat and dairy (Broad, 2017: 2). Crucially, this tendency had not simply disappeared by 1945. All five Nordic states were acutely aware that Germany’s defeat in effect meant that Britain would remain their principal economic partner in Europe for the time being. This was indeed borne out in the actual pattern of Nordic trade dependence on the UK that materialised over the subsequent few years. While undeniably lower than the pre-war average, 1950 nonetheless saw Britain take by far the single biggest wedge of Danish exports to the tune of some 42 per cent. Even as late as 1960, by which time both Britain’s economy and its year-on-year growth rates were lagging some way behind those of continental Europe, around a quarter of all Danish exports headed to Britain – the same figure for the six EEC members combined. And while less singly reliant on the UK, Finland, Norway and Sweden nevertheless counted on Britain to take anywhere between 15 and 25 per cent of their goods (Miljan, 1977: 287–97). No surprise then that Ashton Gwatkin, an official in the Foreign Office in London, should have remarked that Nordic dependence amounted to a sort of ‘unacknowledged economic empire of which London is the metropolis’ (Ludlow, 1979: 125).

This pattern of trade carried multiple implications for the Nordic countries. Most obviously, it meant the Scandinavians in particular often found themselves following where the British led. At the very start of the post-Second World War era this caused relatively few problems since there was in any case a degree of convergence in the interests of the countries concerned. Politically they all favoured

looser forms of cooperation for instance, preventing the assembly of the Council of Europe turning into a supranational parliament (*The Times*, 19 March 1951). Denmark, Iceland, Norway and Sweden were in an economic sense also each initially as comfortable as the British in placing their faith in the intergovernmental Organisation for European Economic Cooperation (OEEC) and the General Agreement of Trade and Tariffs (GATT, to which Finland but not Iceland belonged) as the primary forums within which to manage their foreign economic relations, boost post-war rebuilding efforts – a pressing issue especially for Denmark and Norway after having endured five years of German occupation – and liberalise global trade. Soon enough, however, the asymmetry that characterised their relations did slowly translate into a certain ambivalence towards the UK. A major cause of this trend came as the Scandinavians found themselves having to swallow a growing number of changes with which they were less than enamoured. Dependence on the UK for instance obliged them to join, rather reluctantly, the British-inspired Anglo-Scandinavian Economic Committee (Uniscan) negotiated over the course of winter 1949–50, despite the less than obvious economic virtues of doing so (*The Times*, 31 January 1950; Aunesluoma, 2002; Eriksen and Pharo, 1997). Against this backdrop, too, the Scandinavians were powerless to react when from 1949 the British pushed the idea of liberalising trade among OEEC members through a phased removal of import quotas rather than reducing tariff walls. The logic behind the move was sensible enough: Europe’s fragile post-war economic recovery could barely take the simultaneous removal of both tariffs and quotas, and quantitative restrictions were then the primary obstacle to free trade (Milward, 2002). Yet such a development, especially when combined with concurrent stalemate in GATT over how best to tackle tariff reductions, was a highly troublesome one for the Nordic governments (Irwin, 1995). For it ended up cementing already existing tariff disparities to the detriment of the Nordics’ less competitive manufacturers. It threatened to remove the most efficient domestic tool then available to comparatively low-tariff countries – of which the three Scandinavians were very much part – to shield their economies from competition from abroad. And it excluded foodstuffs at a time when the Danish and Norwegian were still heavily dependent on exports of agriculture and fish. The lack of reciprocity – the Danish would liberalise their industrial imports whilst no one would free their imports of Danish butter, for instance – would therefore carry huge implications for their foreign currency income and balances of payments (ABA, Krag Papers, Box 45, ‘Memorandum til OEEC vedrørende den danske liste over importregulerende varer’, December 1953; Swienty, 1994).

Alone, any one of these points might have been expected to provide the necessary impetus to look anew at the Nordic customs union negotiations which had in all practical terms ground to a halt by Norway’s dismissal of the Bramsnæs Committee’s interim report back in early 1950. It is already well known for example that throughout 1950–53 the Danish were a leading force within the low-tariff group of small economies who tried repeatedly to link the demolishing of OEEC import quotas with greater tariff concessions in GATT (Sørensen, 1995a). Having had this proposal rejected on more than occasion, and with general frustration over the

capacity of the OEEC and GATT to meet Danish economic needs rising exponentially, so the number of advocates in Copenhagen calling for a second look at a Nordic customs union as the only option then available to them likewise increased (ABA, Krag Papers, Box 17, Handwritten notes of speech in Iowa, August 1952). But several additional factors gave still greater urgency to the matter and indicated that all five Nordic states could ill afford to sit back and let events pass them by. To start with, British actions on import controls evoked wider questions about the future health of the UK economy and whether it would retain its status as Western Europe's pre-eminent economic power (ABA, Hansen Papers, Box 3, 'Handelsministerens tale i Ålborg handelsstandsforening, 27 October 1950; Laursen, 2012: 434). Given the continued sheer quantity of goods imported by Britain in the early 1950s, there was clearly no reason yet to dispute the calculation that had been made back in 1945 of the UK fulfilling the role of the Nordics' primary economic partnership in Europe. However, the rationale for hitching the Nordic wagon to the British economic star in the longer-term did begin to look increasingly flaky. It hence seemed in the interest of the Nordics' political leaders to think more seriously about how a regional bloc could shield the region from adverse economic currents and help make up for an expected shortfall in trade across the North Sea.

To some extent West Germany's post-war economic boom could well have offered solace. If nothing else, the impressive growth rates achieved by the West Germans after 1949 fed into Nordic perceptions that Western Europe's economic centre of gravity might soon start steadily moving from London to Bonn (Laursen, 2012: 434–7). And yet the redirecting of trade southwards was not simple a solution. From the vantage point of the early 1950s, Norwegian, Danish and Swedish imports from the six ECSC members – of which the West Germans formed the largest share – were already expected to climb in the coming years (Johansen, 1985). There was consequently the very real prospect that the German *Wirtschaftswunder* would merely see Nordic dependence on trade with Britain substituted with an increased economic reliance on Germany. Here, again, the incentive to do something on a regional basis was strongly amplified as a result.

Were all this not incentive enough, another condition under which Nordic ministers and officials were operating was the almost persistent domestic fervour in support of Norden. Neither disappointment with the collapse of the SDU, nor troubles over the customs union proposal, had dented the fact that Nordic cooperation remained extremely attractive to large sections of the public (Anderson, 1967: 119; Laursen, 1994: 8). A perfect example of this would include the membership figures of the *Norden* Associations (*Foreningen Norden*), a confederation of non-governmental organisations with branches in all five countries established to promote cultural understanding and social integration. At the dawn of the 1950s the Danish branch alone had amassed 30,000 subscribers, doubling to over 60,000 by the end of the decade. The Swedish equivalent could claim to include 15,000 in its ranks, rising to some 25,000 ten years later. To put these figures in perspective, the corresponding number of individuals involved in the committee of the Danish European Movement,

which held its first meeting in September 1949, was just 30 (Hansen, 1994; Laursen, 1988; Andersson, 1991).

These numbers mattered in two related ways. At the domestic level it meant that only the most daring of political leaders could feasibly have ignored the clamour for Nordic cooperation without risking some sort of backlash (Aalders, 1990). Arguably more significant is that public support served to remind politicians that it was never without cost to reject a Nordic solution either. The Norwegian government had learnt this to great cost in January 1950 when, having announced its qualms with the Bramsnæs Committee report, it faced a much bigger fuss than had been expected from within the Danish and Swedish press to the point that it began causing political stirrings back home. The fallout from this would make the Norwegian foreign ministry conclude that, going forward, a more emollient approach towards economic cooperation in the region would be required (Sogner, 1993: 317).

In practice all this meant that while on paper the basic case for Nordic integration appearing weaker the more the governments failed to convert proposals into concrete outcomes, the impetus, indeed the perceived need, for cooperation had not dissipated by 1950. Quite the opposite in fact: as the decade wore on, the pressures outlined above relating variously to the OEEC, to GATT, and to Britain's deteriorating economic fortunes compared to West Germany's improving ones, became only more pronounced. This was all the more so since over the next year or two the economic situation in the Nordic region was regarded as having started to change for the better from its post-war low, rendering earlier worries about inter-Scandinavian industrial competition less potent and eliminating one source of tension between the governments concerned. The fiasco over the Bramsnæs Committee interim report was thus swiftly followed by the decision to devote some not inconsiderable energy to relaunching the proposal for regional economic cooperation as the only real way of being able to get a hold on the problems they all simultaneously faced. In March 1950 the Norwegians had already initiated a new proposal for economic cooperation centred less on a customs union than a free trade area. Eight months later, Bramsnæs was provided with a new mandate to scrutinise whether abolition of tariffs on a sector-by-sector basis would be realistic. As the Committee's work continued apace, government officials meanwhile would launch a complementary set of fairly intense bilateral discussions. The result of these were that no later than February 1952, Lange and the Norwegian foreign ministry had accepted a regional unit could help attenuate the tariff problem in the OEEC and GATT and scale down dependency on outside actors like the British and Germans (Eriksen and Pharo, 1997). Within a year, Norwegian and Danish ministers and civil servants had agreed in principle to go ahead with a new regional initiative while leaving any remaining difficulties to be dealt once the new organisation had been established. And by early 1954 a meeting of Scandinavian socialist parties had started to draft the outlines of the new scheme, with familiar qualms over the OEEC, Britain and West Germany all cited as reasons to act (Laursen, 2012: 434–6).

Viewed against these pressures, the option in favour of pushing on with regional cooperation and continuing to find compromise where there seemingly existed none,

does become more comprehensible. The shared nature and particular blend of domestic and international challenges faced by the countries seems indeed to have resulted in a scenario whereby the Nordic choice was felt to be one of the few available options for policymakers to pursue. And once the initial choice had been made to hand the Bramsnæs Committee a revised mandate, the sincerity of this decision was evidenced by the persistent if informal degree of political manoeuvring which operated in parallel to these expert-level consultations. None of this indicated that Nordic cooperation was a failure in the way that it might later have been perceived.

### **Preparing to make concessions**

Caught up in this argument is the idea that, behind this series of initiatives, lay signs the Nordics were already prepared to start making the sort of sacrifices in terms of limitations to their sovereignty that would otherwise have been expected of them were they to have joined the supranational ECSC and later the EEC too. True of course is that Nordic views over the sorts of institutional models they were willing to countenance, and the degree to which each would have accepted a pooling of powers in matters like economic and social policy, varied wildly in the 1950s. Norway and Sweden could usually be found closely guarding national autonomy and resisting any hint of being involved in a supranational bloc of whatever type. The NC had after all not emerged into the more centralised, institutionally more robust forum that Hedtoft had initially expected of it precisely because officials in Oslo had chosen to block such a move. As this implied, Denmark was rather more accepting if not of full supranationalism then certainly of a far deeper coordination of government activities. Crucially, this began to apply equally to cooperation in the European sphere as it did between the Nordic countries. To understand why, it is vital to take a short deviation to explore the wider context of Denmark's foreign economic position in this period. Mentioned above was that the Danish had been badly hit by the OEEC tariffs issue. Things had only worsened following the Schuman proposal of May 1950 and the ensuing emergence of the ECSC. As a steel consumer rather than producer, there was admittedly little immediate need to join a common market designed to ease trade in iron ore, scrap metal and coal. But very quickly it became obvious that a producer cartel within the Six could well lead to high import prices. Hopes of remoulding the Danish economy from its concentration on agriculture to one based on technical industrial manufacturing, dependent on exports of consumer goods and machinery, would inevitably hit the buffers as a result (Sørensen, 1995a; Laursen and Olesen, 2000). And from the perspective of the Danish SD if no one else, this would carry major repercussions in terms of the ambitious welfare and full employment programmes they had instituted in government and hoped to maintain going forward (Sørensen, 1995a). Concerns about dependency on West Germany were thus tempered by realisation of the sheer scale of interests at stake and, for some, apprehension about the drawbacks of remaining outside the integration plans of the Six for too much longer.

What really mattered was that this trajectory implied Denmark would become more open to supranational European integration. During the Schuman negotiations this burgeoning flexibility had already seen Danish officials test the waters as to a potential membership bid to the ECSC. In April 1952 – several months before the ECSC was officially founded later in July – this then translated into an informal invitation from the Dutch economic minister, D.V. Spierenburg, for Denmark to take up a chair beside the Six (Branner, 1995: 120). Meanwhile, throughout the 1952–54 Green Pool talks – a Franco-Dutch initiative to produce a new supranational framework to manage the production and export of farmed products – Denmark’s agricultural lobby slowly accepted Danish inclusion in the scheme out of fear that exports would face increased competition from continental producers (Sørensen, 1998; Sørensen, 1995b). And sporadically throughout the 1950s, the matter of Denmark somehow joining or associating with the Six reared its head in conversations between officials in Copenhagen and Brussels. For so long as the economic problems created by the Six persisted, so Krag remarked in a meeting with the British ambassador to Copenhagen in May 1956, it was impossible to rule out Denmark becoming the ‘seventh member’ of the ECSC group then negotiating to expand their coal and steel community into a fully-fledged customs union and common market – a process that by 1957 led to the signing of the Treaty of Rome and creation of the EEC (TNA, FO 371/128347, ‘Record of conversation’, 22 May 1956). That Denmark might end up in the Six’s fold was now far easier to imagine.

Despite the likelihood of such a step being taken, however, the other Scandinavian states did more than enough in the meantime to demonstrate an openness of their own to the whole matter of regional integration. This was very evident in the decisions made both during and following the Harpsund meeting of October 1954. For the outcome of this meeting was that the three leaders took the step of reverting to the customs union concept through a sector-by-sector approach, with an ad hoc body, the Nordic Economic Cooperation Committee (NECC), appointed to examine anew the prospects for its creation. Initial indications that the NECC would get very far were, it is true, decidedly gloomy. Sweden, while positive, was careful to commit to any binding policies early on. Norway was true to form in refusing to countenance a strong secretariat being created on par even with the authority of the OEEC. But in part because of the successes of the Six’s own customs union and common market talks, and more basically because many of the earlier drivers of Nordic cooperation had grown more not less decisive as time progressed, the countries did eventually settle on an extensive set of recommendations. Significantly, these were sufficiently ambitious to not only help still Denmark’s flirtation with the Six for the time being at least, but by implication to hold out the promise of there being rather more substance to a plan for Nordic integration than had been the case with its predecessors (Haskel, 1976). The most detailed recent study of the Harpsund gathering portrays the governments, indeed, as having finally realised that industrial restructuring through rationalisation and economies of scale were necessary to keep pace with the rapid expansion of intra-European trade and respond effectively to the new environment of latter 1950s Western Europe (Laursen, 2012).

The enormity of this task meant the governments were prepared to accept in the Harpsund plan a set of features which both in scope and depth dwarfed anything which had come before. The format of the negotiations themselves were to morph in such a way that the NECC became a far stronger unit than the Bramsnæs Committee had been, organised this time around to include a host of leading ministers and top-ranked civil servants alongside specialist working groups offering input on any technical disagreements that arose. One standout point as result was the sheer scale and complexity of the competencies on which negotiators were able to secure agreement. Naturally this included building a common external tariff, but it was joined by extensive coordination of commercial and competition policies and an investment bank to channel investment into state-owned industries such as electricity and water. Another was the list of areas each government accepted would need to be covered by inter-Scandinavian tariff cuts. The starting point for this question was that, to be consistent with GATT rules, any such arrangement would have to cover 80 per cent of intra-trade among member states. Norway was originally unwilling to consider much more than wood, timber, paper and pulp and ships, which amounted to only 38 per cent of intra-regional trade. Even with its initially hesitant agreement to adding iron and steel, chemicals, electronics and metals and metal goods served only to bring the coverage to 58 per cent. Once the negotiations were underway, however, machinery was soon added to the list – bringing the total coverage to 69 per cent – with further bargaining on chemicals, pharmaceuticals and electrotechnical products eventually filling the gap. And this sign of progress was matched by a final element which placed the Harpsund plan on more a favourable footing, namely, the willingness both to make concessions on sensitive topics like a Nordic steel market and industrial restructuring, and to overlook those areas omitted from the scheme – among them agriculture and fisheries, textile yarns, fibres and clothing, and certain iron and other metal products – if that was all that stood in the way of an agreement (Sørensen, 1993b). It was precisely this sort of (admittedly hard-fought) compromise which had been so sorely lacking in the years prior.

While not without limitations therefore, it was a jubilant NECC which in October 1957 reported that officials had succeeded in bringing the agreed list of products covered by the customs union to 80 per cent of commodity trade (NECC, 1957; Sørensen, 1993b) And yet, since (as we will see below) a final decision on moving forward with the project would once again be affected by the course of outside events, and ultimately the customs union proposal would indeed be wound up in favour of joining EFTA, it is tempting to conclude that this was a breakdown like any other. There is little doubting, however, that there continued to exist a solid and sincere continuing interest in a Nordic arrangement. More importantly, it remained the case that, in pooling economic resources to the extent envisaged, Harpsund represented a critical break from the failures and somewhat half-baked schemes of the past. This was a viable option which promised not only to satisfy domestic aspirations for regional integration but could reasonably be expected to improve commercial relations with third parties like the EEC. For once, it seems, the Nordic states had

demonstrated a determination to reach a deal and potent alertness to the fact that it was in their common interests to do so.

### **Confronting integration through integration**

A third and final reason to take scholarly claims with a pinch of salt is that despite their subsequent breakdown, the attempts to build closer institutional ties were themselves symptomatic of the Nordic countries trying to come to terms with the broader process of European integration. Expectedly perhaps this was not always a conscious or deliberate move on the part of Nordic governments. To maintain as much would be to ascribe too much foresight to individual political leaders and an inevitability to their actions. But many of the Nordic schemes discussed above did closely trail wider developments at the European level. Attempts to forge regional integration might in this sense reasonably be seen as one way the Nordics countries started to adjust to the European integration process raging around them. And this would require us to view the nexus between Nordic and European cooperation as less black/white, either/or and ultimately success/failure and more complementary, contributory or causal.

Among the more striking illustrations of European developments being flanked by closer cooperation within the Nordic region, unsurprisingly, were those which came amid the frenetic process of Western European institutional building in the years immediately following the end of the Second World War. It is beyond doubt indeed that behind the July 1947 Norwegian study group proposal (mentioned above), lay a desire to mount a concerted Scandinavian response to the offer of US Marshall aid and the OEEC that would eventually be established to organise the flow of this financial assistance. Also beyond contention is that the March 1950 suggestion for the Scandinavians to form a free trade proposal (again referenced above), and most specifically the new mandate handed to Bramsnæs a few months later, came off the back of the Six's Schuman proposal (Laursen, 2012: 434). And it likewise appears the case that the wave of technical and governmental discussions throughout 1950–54 was conducted with the full knowledge that the economic tides in Western Europe were turning, that the centre of gravity would in the long-run probably favour the Six, and that a Nordic agreement in this respect would offer greater leverage in any future commercial negotiations between themselves and the ECSC powers (*The Times*, 18 February 1957). The Nordic need to respond to and, as small states, try where possible to lend a voice to the fast-changing international context, was thus a palpable driver of repeated attempts to forge cooperation among themselves.

This trend only became more apparent during the latter stages of the Nordic customs union talks. By 1956, Britain had itself announced a response to the Six's ongoing common market negotiations in the form of a planned industrial free trade area (FTA) covering all seventeen members of the OEEC. The impact of the British proposal on the Nordics' customs union plan was mixed. On the plus side it could well open additional markets for their traditional exports. At the same time, it ran the risk of neutralising the manufacturing preferences inherent in their planned scheme. So long as it excluded agricultural provisions – which, due to its Commonwealth

links, the British opposed – meant, moreover, that Danish farmers and the Norwegian fishing sector saw the arrangement as inherently flawed. These snags grew still more truly difficult when French insistence that the FTA include a long transition period risked excluding predominantly Swedish and Norwegian manufacturers, which could likewise face considerable discrimination.

Uncertainty like this, albeit with the positive NECC report in hand, had two distinct outcomes. On the one hand, it fed into the decision to postpone a final decision on whether to pursue the Nordic customs union. On the other, this was augmented by the realisation that a Nordic grouping would be vital to strengthen each country's bargaining power in the broader FTA talks should there turn out to be some sort of bilateral trade-off agreed between Britain and the ECSC Six. While throughout 1957 and 1958 the Nordic customs union was on hold, the prospect that its framework might be used to shield the countries from the worst excesses of European decision-making held constant support in Nordic capitals (Laursen, 1993).

It took until the collapse of the FTA in November 1958 finally to seal the fate of the Nordic customs union proposal. Despite the fact that it was deemed workable by the respective governments right up until this point, and that the FTA's successor – EFTA, a much smaller, seven-member trade grouping negotiated throughout the latter half of 1959 – was talked of as a feasible replacement for many of the objectives which had underscored the Nordic customs union to begin with, the saga has however still been judged a defeat for Nordic regionalism and an end to Nordic cooperation in the modern sense (Olesen and Villaume, 2006). There is, unfortunately, little room at the end of this chapter to go into the EFTA matter in detail. But it suffices to say here, that the difficulty with entirely accepting this description is at least threefold. First, it underestimates the degree to which the Nordic customs union idea was an authentic way of confronting the twin concerns of market access and political influence in Western Europe. Second, it downplays how the sacrifices and compromises made within the context of the NECC almost certainly helped prepare Danish, Swedish and Norwegian entry into EFTA. Third and last, it ignores how the ethos of cooperation as characterised by the Nordic customs union retained a latency despite the absence of an actual, functioning organisation. Threats of reverting to the Nordic customs union framework were for instance used to extract changes from the British during the EFTA negotiations. Ganging up by the Nordics, indeed, at times isolated the UK – it was for example forced to consider a bilateral agricultural deal with Denmark – and embrace changes – such as the classification of frozen fish as a manufactured item; in 1960 it was even pushed to include Finland as an EFTA associate member despite deep political reservations (Broad, 2019) – which it was otherwise loathed to do.

Nor moreover was this sort of behaviour totally unique to the EFTA talks. The Nordics were as energetic in using the power of Nordic cooperation to scold the British when in 1964 the government in London introduced a surcharge on imports, a move which threatened access for their industrial producers and came perilously close to forcing the collapse of the Association in its entirety (Broad, 2017; Archer, 1976). Even in the late 1960s, against the backdrop of possible enlargement of the EEC, another attempt at regional cooperation was to have the effect of influencing British

policy. Nordek was an ambitious economic and customs union which intended to extend ties to spheres as diverse as energy, transport, finance, social policy, education and research. Once again, this would meet with an unfavourable end: Finland, largely for Cold War reasons, chose to scupper the scheme at the start of 1970. And yet I have shown elsewhere that, notwithstanding Helsinki's eleventh-hour volte-face, the negotiations were themselves crucial for the Nordic countries in terms of wrestling with the ever-increasing economic and political prowess of the EEC, and that merely the idea of a cohesive Nordic bloc was enough to extract concessions from British policymakers (Broad, 2016).

All told, therefore, while the failure narrative is not without merits, there is I think good reason to approach such arguments with a certain caution. For despite recurrent disappointments, the conditions under which the Nordic states persisted in their attempts to forge stronger regional ties meant there was method behind the apparent madness. It is perhaps too easy to forget quite how considerable were the challenges presented by the transformation of the post-Second World War landscape, much as it is the enduring strength of deeply culturally embedded 'pro-Nordic' sentiments in civil society and among key political actors. Both elements implied that decision-makers could not dismiss outright the prospects of deepening regional ties. And both elements were also to see negotiations for Nordic cooperation conducted with greater seriousness and drive. This whole episode surely reminds us, then, that while the Nordic integrative experience did not, and perhaps never could, replace involvement in the wider integration project, regional cooperation was implicitly caught up with the move towards the European level. Simply concentrating on failure runs the risk of concealing, and discounting the value of, this process and the experiences that came with it. To fully understand the construction of modern Europe, in other words, it is necessary to incorporate accounts of these regional building-blocs into the story.

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TNA – British National Archives, Kew

FRUS – Foreign Relations of the United States

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