

The Nordic Council

The Nordic Council is the most prominent organ of Scandinavian Regionalism. It is a consultative assembly of MPs from the five Scandinavian countries of Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden.

Its operating principle is one of unanimity at the lowest common denominator of agreement, with plenary sessions being reduced to routine acceptance of Committee Reports.

The ethos of inter-Scandinavian relations is co-operation, a middle way between the use of force and political amalgamation ["neither fight nor unite"]. Co-operation is defined as fostering similarities, eliminating hampering differences in legal systems, social policy, transport regulations, educational structures, and economic opportunities. The aim is to retain individuality rather than the establishment of a superstate.

Scandinavia is a passport union, a common employment market, and a reciprocal social security area. Consular officials from one country may serve the nationals of the others.

The Danish, Norwegian and Swedish languages are all close, and the three are uniformly Lutheran. Traditionally the Danes favoured closer co-operation because of history (war with Germany 1864 & 1940); Finland also looked for support because of the Soviet Union; Norway has been less interested in closer co-operation also because of history, being under either Denmark or Sweden from the Middle Ages until 1905.

The Nordic Council came into being in 1952. It consists of delegations from the five parliaments - 16 MPs from the "Big Four" and 5 from Iceland, making a total of 69.

There is a Presidium of 5, which must not only represent different outlines but also different political opinions.

There are 5 Standing Committees - Cultural Affairs, Judiciary, Social Policy, Economic Matters, and Communications.

These Committees rarely carry out independent investigations but attempt rather to digest the findings of other investigative bodies, thus "supervising the work of governments".

There is no Nordic Council headquarters. The Council meets once per year for 7-10 days in different capitals.

Each national delegation has a Secretary-General, and these Secretaries-General set the agendas and sometimes even write the reports.

Any government or member can make proposals in Committee, to which experts, civil servants and ministers can give evidence. Voting in Committee is officially by simple majority, but the

aim in practice is to get unanimity. No proposal adopted by a Committee has ever been rejected by the Council in Plenary Session. Decision-making in the Plenary is by 50 per cent plus 1 of those present voting in favour, and the result is a Recommendation to governments.

Theoretically there is no limit on the topics that may be discussed, but fundamental differences in regard to issues of foreign policy and defence have ensured their exclusion.

However, the real matter of fact in Scandinavia is that civil servants of the Member States come together as departmental representatives on permanent intergovernmental organs of co-operation on anything and everything. And it was never intended that the Nordic Council would replace these administrative organs of co-operation.

The Nordic Council thus had great difficulty in making a place for itself, precisely because there is such a complete network for co-operation, which existed before its creation. For example, the Council has failed to get these intergovernmental bodies to report directly to it. In 1962 attempts to have the Recommendations of the Council binding on governments failed. The conclusion must be therefore that the Nordic Council has failed to penetrate governments either as an external pressure group or as an integral part of government. The member governments insist that inter-Scandinavian activity must be on the governmental level.

"The consciousness of distinguishing characteristics, real or imaginary, is stronger than the sense of shared values".

"Proliferation of contacts does not necessarily mean, or lead to integration. There is a need to ensure that consultation does not lead to compulsion".

"The success of measures of co-operation had made Nordic integration even less urgent".

"Scandinavia provides a negative example of the principle that formal integration must start with a constitutive political act".

"Co-operation (means) peaceful change by joint efforts to increase mutual advantage... not only must total benefit be maximised but there must be a mutually recognised reciprocal gain"