

Notes on Kristen Nygaard's early years and his political work

By Marius Nygaard

Chapter in "People behind informatics" by Lazlo Bözörményi and Stefan Podlipnig.
Institute of Information Technology, University of Klagenfurt 2003

Early years

Kristen Nygaard's paternal grandfather (also named Kristen) was a partner in a well-known law firm, holding several positions on the boards of large, Norwegian companies. His grandmother was known for her sharp tongue and political radicalism.

Kristen's parents were William and Dina Nygaard. She was a farmer's daughter, a gifted and warm person, to whom Kristen, his younger brothers Haakon and Sophus and sister Sonja were deeply attached. Dina's early death at 47 from cancer was a shock to the family. William was a multi-talented person who had studied or taught himself a wide range of subjects and skills, including art, philology (greek and latin), philosophy and later theology. He even worked at the Den Nationale Scene theatre in Bergen in the late thirties. His main career, however, was teaching, first at regional grammar schools (which were among the few offering classes in Greek and Latin), and later at the Fagerborg grammar school in Oslo, a short walk from their home in the Majorstua area.

The gatherings of the many colorful and outspoken people in the big Nygaard clan often resulted in heated discussions on politics, art or personal matters. Occasional abrupt departures added to the fascination for Kristen and the other children. William and Dina often invited colleagues and friends round, artist and scholars among them. The atmosphere of hospitality and openness was an inspiration to Kristen and his wife, Johanna, to follow that tradition in their own home.

Kristen's first years at school were spent in Bergen (1933-38). Traditional rivalry between east and west Norway, and especially between Oslo and the old capital of Bergen, was reflected in hostile attitudes towards Kristen on the part of some of his school-mates. His refusal to adopt the local dialect did not make things any better - neither did his willingness and ability to fight. Almost daily conflicts resulted in him being transferred to the local Rudolf Steiner school, which turned out to be more productive.

When the family moved back to Oslo in 1938, Kristen finished elementary school before completing his secondary education at the Fagerborg grammar school during the war years (1940-45).

From an early age, Kristen showed exceptional and diverse talents, a fact which was recognised by his parents. They supported and encouraged him but could not contribute much to his progress, as he was mainly interested in the natural sciences and mathematics. From his secondary school years onwards, his insistence on knowing everything about the topics that he encountered developed into a pattern. He was allowed to discuss his studies of moss and lichen with university professors. Another lasting passion was astronomy. Kristen's main interest, however, was mathematics in which he had taken university-level lectures and won a national award before finishing grammar school.

During the war years of 1943 and 1944, Kristens's father taught at the Voss regional grammar school while the rest of the family stayed in Oslo. In 1946 he invited some of his former pupils, now students in Oslo, to a party at his home. Among them was Johanna Ur, who was studying to become a teacher. Kristen, who had reluctantly stayed at home for the occasion, immediately fell in love with her and after a while it became clear that his feelings were being

returned. Ever since, Kristen insisted that they were meant for each other although on this point, for once, the statistics expert was not able to produce convincing data.

At that time a full university degree in Norway required two topics taken to medium level and a main subject. Kristen's medium-level topics were astronomy and physics while he majored in mathematics, writing his thesis on Monte Carlo methods, and receiving exceptionally high marks for it.

In 1951, Johanna and Kristen got married. They moved to Lillestrøm, a town just outside Oslo, when Kristen started his work at the Defence Research Establishment at Kjeller. Later, Johanna started to work as a teacher. In May 1951, the twins Elizabeth and Marius were born. Another boy, Johan, followed in 1953.

Political work

As mentioned above, politics were often discussed in the Nygaard family. Kristen started to read political literature as a teenager. Like most people in his generation, he was also influenced by the fight against Nazi occupation and oppression during the war. Kristen loathed misuse of power, positions or titles. He was easily moved and inspired when he heard about people who had instinctively made the right choices when thrown into turbulent situations.

At university (from 1945 onwards) Kristen soon became involved in political activities. He was a member and later leader of the student branch of the social-liberal party Venstre. His initiative to establish systematic studies of politics and organizational work was one of many that were received with enthusiasm by party members.

In the 1960s, Kristen was a member of Venstre's National Executive Committee and its Strategy Committee. He took part in the modernization of the party programme, which contributed to Venstre's success in this period. Kristen and Johanna were also involved in municipal politics on the Nesodden peninsula south of Oslo where they lived from 1961 to 1970. Kristen and a group of party sympathizers teamed up with a well-known architect, Torbjørn Rodahl, to work out an alternative to traditional high-rise blocks of flats. They put forward a radical proposal showing stepped terraced housing on a steep hillside by Oslo fjord.

Since the early use of Simula in production planning, Kristen had been concerned about the consequences of advanced planning and control systems for industrial working conditions. Starting in 1967, he participated in the discussions on these themes within the trade unions. Kristen was impressed by the professional and political knowledge of the people taking part and felt at home in this new environment. The cooperation evolved and branched out, leading to significant results. A series of research and development projects was established, and they in turn initiated a new approach to systems design. New legislation was proposed and implemented, securing information, participation and influence for employees when new planning and control systems were to be developed and installed. Kristen's move from social-liberal to socialist points of view was strengthened. He joined the Labour party in 1971 and stayed a member until 2001.

In 1969, a commercial "Teenage Fair" aimed at young consumers, was planned in Oslo. The majority of the large organizations for young people regarded this as provocative in view of the political agendas of the times: environmental protection, protests against the war in Vietnam, democracy at schools and universities. Kristen played an active role, first in stopping the "Teenage Fair" and then in organizing an alternative fair, together with the youth organizations, called "Et sted å være" (A place to be), held in a vacant school building in Oslo. This turned out to be a good spot also for homeless alcoholics when they found out that they would not be thrown out. Kristen and the other organizers suddenly had a new and very

acute problem at their hands. Temporary arrangements were made that gradually evolved into a permanent, experimental institution, developing new ways to create humane living conditions for socially outcast alcoholics.

In 1970, Kristen took part in the protests aimed at preventing the large Mardoela waterfalls from being utilized for hydroelectric power production. Later, he was chairman of the Environment Protection Committee within the Norwegian Association for the Protection of Nature.

During the intense political battle before the 1972 referendum on Norwegian membership of the European Common Market, Kristen was coordinator for the large majority of youth organizations that campaigned successfully against membership. From 1988 to 1994, he was leader of the "Nei til EU" (No to European Union Membership for Norway) which disseminated critical information on the EU and coordinated the efforts to keep Norway outside. "Nei til EU" grew to become the largest political organization in Norway. In the referendum on 28 November 1994, Norway voted "No" for a second time. It is widely accepted that the mutual respect between Kristen and a wide variety of people and organizations was essential in keeping the "No" front together. A strategy for internet-based communication was implemented, which gave the large "Nei til EU" organization an advantage. Kristen's focus upon spreading information and shaping public opinion at local and regional level was not taken seriously by the elite in the media and the political parties. The predominantly pro-EU papers wrote him off as not being charismatic. They forgot to take into account his understanding of Norwegian politics, his skills as an inspiring team builder, his enormous capacity for work, and the credibility he achieved in face to face communication.

In November 1999 Kristen became Chairman of the Advisory Committee on Broadband Communication for the Norwegian Ministry of Municipal and Regional Affairs. Here, he focused on the role of high speed networks in regional development, and the importance of equal opportunities for access to new technology.

Kristen was a builder of teams, institutions and organizations. Some were scientific, and some were political. He had to use his political knowledge to fight for the scientific institutions and projects, and he used his scientific knowledge in the political work. He intensely enjoyed every quality of life, and opposed everything that takes these qualities away from people.

Oslo, August 2003