
Indigenous Law Bulletin 18

Sápmi – Becoming a Nation

by Ivar Bjørklund, Terje Brantenberg, Harald Eidheim, John Albert Kalstad & Dikka Storm
Illustrated colour / black & white, no index, 49 p.
Available in Sami, Norwegian, English or German
RRP: Nkr 50

Reviewed by Peter Jull

This remarkable little book is the catalogue of a remarkable political exhibition at Tromsø Museum on the Arctic coast of Norway. Controversy arose while the team was pulling the exhibition’s contents out from under beds, old cupboards and rotting files around Sápmi (Lapland). The controversy surrounded the inclusion of a bilingual Sami-Norwegian road sign – the Sami part shot up by retrograde locals – in the exhibition. It was one thing that such things occur, but quite another, in many North Norwegian minds, that the world should know about it! To the team’s credit, that sign is the back cover of the book. After all, as the project leader argued, the purpose of the exhibition should be to cause discussion and reconsideration.

The story and the exhibition are dynamic, tracing the contemporary political development of Sami (the Lapps) in Norway from the Nazi scorched earth retreat across the territory in late 1944 to the controversies of indigenous land, sea and freshwater rights today. The German withdrawal left nothing standing, so the whole north required rebuilding. Suddenly Sami who had long been pushed into the social margins were in line for new housing and other benefits, albeit often inhibited or humiliated by their lack of Norwegian literacy skills. The project team’s Harald Eidheim has already written Aspects of the Lappish Minority Situation on the aftermath of that rebuilding in which Sami, especially in the heavily Norwegian-settled coastal areas, struggle daily to deal with the cultural fall-out.

Sápmi – becoming a nation traces the evolution of policy relating to Sami. It does this against a backdrop of local feelings, often held by Sami themselves, that equality equals uniformity and that it is best to play down Sami background. Indeed some Sami notables today note wryly that while they never heard a Sami word in their childhood homes their parents now speak to grandchildren in Sami. As in Australia, Canada and other countries, it is no longer a cause of shame to be indigenous.

The intense political issues of the 1970s culminating in the Alta-Kautokeino River Dam conflict – and the Sami art it catalysed – are well covered and put in context by the book, as are the origins of the various Sami political and cultural organisations. The dam and related protests were the turning point of modern Sami politicisation, with the images it created unsettling thoughtful Norwegians (and also inspiring redneck letters to newspapers around the country which shocked editors).

For Australian or other non-Norwegian readers the book is almost the better for being about a little known region. It provides an archetypal capsule of the entire contemporary indigenous experience and will teach much to those who know no more than Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander issues at home. The point is that while indigenous peoples find their own way through obstacles to achieve their self-determination objectives, the pattern of resistance they encounter from governments and general public are much the same everywhere.

Recently Norway has seen the racist killing of a black youth in Oslo, with many anti-racist protests and the sort of shock that civilised societies feel at such novel events. However for my Sami and Norwegian friends, what the book calls the ‘everyday North Norwegian racism’ towards Sami[1] is an old story. Meanwhile in Australia political leaders from all parties and levels of government are outdoing each other shouting about ‘a fair go’. No English speaking country has any business mouthing such a phrase, let alone believing they have achieved it, until they see what Norwegians have actually done in ensuring for all their northern people living standards and opportunities which are the best in the world. Maybe someday an Australian study committee will go and have a look.

Peter Jull is an Adjunct Associate Professor at the School of Political Science & International Studies, University of Queensland.