

Careers, Kings and Consultants

By John Y. Jones

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If you walk the Carl Johan parade street in Oslo all the way up to the Royal Palace, you will have to climb the last 17 steps to read the epitaph on the most un-Norwegian memorial of king Karl Johan, a man on horseback. He had been through a grand career move from anti-royal Jakobite in the French revolution to King of Sweden-Norway. (It is said that on his back he had tattooed the words “Death to Kings”). But it is the epitaph on the column of the King on horseback that is the most interesting. It reads: “The love of my people is my reward.”

Like our 19 century king, today’s leaders aspire, if not for royalty, so at least for great careers. But unlike King Carl Johan they are not satisfied with the love and gratitude of the people that gave them top jobs in parliament and party. They are recruited from different political camps and colours: Swedish prime minister and social democrat Göran Persson does it, and onetime heir to the throne of the Norwegian labour party, Rune Gerhardsen does it, and international leaders Blair, Clinton and Annan do it. So why can’t Norway’s former health minister Hot-Dog Hanssen, youth politicians, right and left wing protégés gather in harmonious comradeship and form kingdoms free from the burdens of ideology and electorate accountability? Even Norwegian environmental icon Gro Harlem Brundtland was pulled down from the pedestal as she appeared on the payroll of Pepsi Cola Company and charged of tax evasion. Quite a fall from serving as Norwegian prime minister and head of the World Health Organization.

Our leaders and icons have turned their main capital, the trust, training and opportunity given to them by voters and parties, into commodities on the lucrative market of consultancies. Their career moves have changed from doing the right things to doing things right. Measuring, advising, and serving the customer that can pay. Their former colleagues, friends and networks in state bureaucracy, party and parliament are converted into possibilities to be exploited and influence to be sold. If you listen, you will hear that they have stopped talking of socialism, capitalism or liberalism. Pragmatism has become the only “ism” around.

In Washington it is a poorly kept secret that outgoing White House staff traditionally wrap up their careers by touring the Middle East to gather small fortunes as “advisors” and lecturers at the invitation of oil-sheiks and billionaire kings known for their oppressive practices, anti-feminist stance and brutal feudalist regimes. Consequently during their last year in power the president’s men are not likely to be criticising Saudi politics or wealthy harem owners. Not that they were overly eager critics in the first place. A delicate balance is performed on a tightrope stretched over the abyss of the Middle East conflict in all its shades. But politics is the art of the possible, and these people are real experts in surviving and news spinning, so they manage.

But the king of post careers is undoubtedly former US president Bill Clinton. Emerging successfully from the brink of impeachment for immoral sexual behaviour, Clinton has risen to become the most highly paid speaker of our time. With the dust the Lewinsky incident filling the air, such an elevation is no little achievement. Clinton is reported to gather hundreds of millions (Norwegian Crowns) annually for his private account and his fight-aids-campaign. When Norwegian students invited him to key-note speak at their annual

international week in Trondheim some ten years ago, Clinton enthusiastically accepted. But the fee of 500.000 Norwegian Crowns and expenses for Clinton's extensive entourage, brought in on a private jet, was more than what the students found morally acceptable for an evening with the world celebrity. They said thank you, but no thank you.

Tony Blair is said to reap some 30 million NOK annually on his touring and speaking, but archbishop Tutu's refusal to share rostrum with him is a reminder that not all legacies (in Blair's case that of the invasion of Iraq) can be successfully converted into material benefits.

Swedes have probably not forgotten the luxurious mansion their last labour prime minister Göran Persson erected after leaving office, as his consultancy at JKL started his career move to

“give advice to leaders of all types of businesses on how communication can contribute to business goals. We work with building and maintaining organisation's reputation. We guide you to fulfil your goals and ends. We are used as advisors in financial communication, introductions to the stock exchange, crisis management, media relations, opinion building and lobbying.”

Consultancy firms today contribute to achieving business goals, maintaining images and covering up cracks. Nothing wrong in that. The rest of us will only have to adjust our expectations towards those we choose to give our trust and political positions.

But it wasn't always so. India's Gandhi in the 1930ties and 40ties, Norway's Einar Gerhardsen in the 50ties and 60ties, and Sweden's Olof Palme in the 70ties and 80ties were icons who represented the best in us. They gave us grand speeches, grand ideas and grand legacies. But they belonged to another time. They generously returned the gifts of trust and service that had been handed to them back to their people and their electorates. Workers. Suppressed. Slaves. War victims. Heroically fighting women. They were leaders who built nations.

More than 20 years have gone since late king Olav passed away. Candles and flowers outside his palace, and words written in the snow reflected the epitaph from his predecessor on horseback “The love of my people is my reward.” Ages have passed since the love of a grateful people was a satisfactory reward for leaders and politicians, and feelings of fulfilment and gratitude were worth pursuing. Consultants may have replaced our politicians, our icons and our kings. Will anyone light candles for them or erect monuments when they are gone? What will be their epitaph? Will anyone make monuments or bother to climb 17 steps to remember them?

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