



King Christian VII.

## Norway

by Craig Kaczorowski

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Norway, officially known as the Kingdom of Norway, occupies the western portion of the Scandinavian Peninsula, and is bordered by Sweden, Finland, and Russia. It has a population of approximately 4.7 million. Oslo, the country's capital and largest city, is the center of Norwegian gay and lesbian life.

Since the mid-twentieth century, Norway has experienced rapid economic growth and has become one of the world's most economically competitive countries, with a fully developed welfare system. Every year since 2001 it has been listed as the "Best Country" in the United Nations Human Development Report, based on life expectancy, adult literacy rate, education, and Gross Domestic Product.

Norway, like most Scandinavian countries, is very liberal in regard to glbtq rights and Norwegians are broadly tolerant of homosexuals. In Norway, gay men and lesbians have the same legal status as heterosexuals. With the adoption of a new marriage law in 2008, Norway became the sixth country to permit homosexual to marry on the same basis as heterosexuals.

### History

Norwegians descend from the Germanic tribes that settled in the Danish peninsula in the fourth century B. C.E. The Norsemen emerged as a European power when Norway's first ruler, Harald the Fairhaired, led the sacking of Lindisfarne, a tidal island off the northeast coast of England, in 793 C.E.

Norway embraced Christianity early in the eleventh century. As a result of the Kalmar Union of 1397, Norway and Sweden merged with Denmark under Danish rule. In 1814, Denmark, which had sided with France in the Napoleonic wars, was forced by the victors to cede Norway to Sweden. In 1815 Sweden acknowledged Norway's independence "in perpetual union with the Swedish crown." In 1905, however, Norway's legislature deposed Swedish King Oscar II and declared its independence, with Prince Charles of Denmark ruling as Haakon VII for fifty-two years.

Norway was neutral during World War I and declared its neutrality at the start of World War II, but was nevertheless occupied by German troops from 1940 to 1945.

A founding member of the United Nations, Norway joined the NATO alliance in 1949 and the European Union in 1994.

### GLBTQ Rights In Norway

Although homosexual acts between men were illegal until 1972, homosexuals were seldom prosecuted, and a homosexual rights movement emerged (clandestinely) in the late 1940s and early 1950s.

In the sexual revolution of the 1960s and 1970s, homosexuality became more visible. Since then the Norwegian government has made a concerted effort to uphold gay and lesbian rights and to help

homosexuals live openly and without discrimination.

In 1972, Section 213 of the country's Penal Code, which prohibited sexual acts between men (but not women), was repealed. Following the repeal, the age of consent was changed to 16 for both homosexuals and heterosexuals.

In 1981, Norway became the first country in the world to enact anti-discrimination laws protecting gay men and lesbians under both civil and criminal legislation. The laws prohibit differential treatment in the workplace and discrimination in the housing sector on the basis of sexual orientation. The Equality and Anti-discrimination Ombud reviews complaints relating to violations of these provisions free of charge.

The Norwegian Penal Code also prohibits discriminatory statements or the refusal to provide goods or services on the basis of a homosexual orientation or lifestyle. These provisions are enforced by the ordinary courts.

In 1983, the Public Health Council in Oslo established a center to provide counseling for homosexuals. This service was greatly expanded in response to the AIDS epidemic.

Although Scandinavia has pioneered in sexual reassignment surgery, Norway's government has provided less support for transsexuals than it has for gay men and lesbians. Although Norwegian transsexuals over age 18 are offered professional assistance by a team of physicians and social workers in Oslo, the degree of pre- and post-surgical support is less than desired by many transsexuals. Little official support is offered children and adolescents who display variant gender behavior or identification.

### **Registered Partnerships**

On August 1, 1993 the Registered Partnership Act was enacted, making Norway the second country in the world, after Denmark, to recognize same-sex civil unions officially.

The Partnership Act enabled two persons of the same sex to enter into a registered partnership with one another. A registered partnership has the same legal consequences as marriage, with the exception of the right to adopt children jointly.

In recent years, there has been a strong movement by gay rights groups to repeal the provision against joint adoption by same-sex couples. Since 2002, registered partners have been able to adopt their partner's child. The same criteria that apply to stepchild adoption for heterosexual spouses apply to stepchild adoption for registered partners.

Although foster-care regulations favor opposite-gender foster parents, same-sex couples may be selected to serve as foster parents if the child welfare services find that this would be in the best interests of the child involved.

To be able to register as partners, at least one of the parties must be a Norwegian citizen, and one or both of them must be resident in Norway. Citizenship of Denmark, Iceland, Sweden, Finland, and the Netherlands qualifies on an equal footing with Norwegian citizenship. The couple must also have lived together for at least one year prior to registering.

To dissolve the partnership legally there are also necessary conditions, including making an official declaration of separation and issuing a release of financial responsibilities to each other.

Although the Partnership Act does not confer a right to a religious blessing by the state church, many

priests do perform blessings for same-sex couples entering into registered partnerships.

### **Equal Marriage**

In November 2004 a bill proposed by the Socialist Left Party was introduced to make the current marriage laws gender neutral. The proposed bill was rejected by the Norwegian Parliament, but a public-opinion poll conducted in 2007 by Synovate MMI (one of Norway's largest market research companies) concluded that 61% of Norwegians are in support of gender-neutral marriage laws.

Reflecting this sentiment, on June 11, 2008, the Norwegian Parliament replaced the partnership act with a new marriage law that allows homosexuals to marry and adopt children and permits lesbians to be artificially inseminated.

Although the Christian Democrats and the far-right Progress Party opposed the legislation, it was supported by the three parties that comprise the governing left-of-center coalition and by some individual members of the Conservative and Liberal parties. After a heated debate, the legislation was approved by a vote of 84 to 41.

When the new marriage law takes effect at the end of 2008 or the beginning of 2009, Norway will become the sixth country to grant homosexuals the right to marry on an equal footing with heterosexuals.

It has been estimated that about 150 same-sex couples registered their partnerships each year. It is expected that the same number is likely to marry.

### **Openly Gay Head of State**

On January 4, 2002, the then-Norwegian Finance Minister Per-Kristian Foss entered into a registered partnership with his long-term partner Jan Erik Knarbygg, a top manager in the Schibsted media conglomerate, becoming the first member of a Norwegian government to enter into a binding homosexual partnership. The two men have often been described in the news media as being among Norway's most powerful couples.

Foss then became the first openly gay head of state on January 25, 2002, when he was temporarily installed as acting prime minister when the Prime Minister and the Foreign Minister (who is second in the line of succession) were both out of the country.

### **The Church of Norway and Gay Clergy**

In November 2007, the General Synod of the Evangelical-Lutheran Church of Norway voted to permit the ordination of gay and lesbian priests in partnerships. The vote overturned regulations made in 1995 and 1997 that permitted those in registered same-sex partnerships to hold lay positions, but prohibited non-celibate homosexuals to be ordained as clergy.

The decision in effect ratified the controversial 2000 appointment of Jene Torstein Olsen, the first openly gay clergyman in a partnership hired to preach in the Church of Norway.

Following sharp and prolonged debate the Synod revised its canons, stating that ecclesial bodies responsible for clergy appointments may either appoint, or not appoint, persons living in same-sex partnership, without being in breach of Norwegian law.

In a statement released by its press office, the Church of Norway explained that while the Synod "confirms that there is still a basis in the church in support of not ordaining, appointing, or granting an episcopal letter of recommendation" to gay clergy, there was not the "same degree of consensus" on this point as in

prior years. Granting a "local option" recognized the "existing reality" that the authority to ordain clergy lay not with General Synod but with "the relevant bishops."

Although there is broad agreement in the Church of Norway on the usefulness of registered partnerships as a legal framework for homosexual persons living together, attitudes in the Church are deeply divided on the ethical issue of homosexuality itself. Responses to the vote were mixed and reflected the sharp divide within the Church, with some bishops declaring that the vote would "create peace in the church and security for homosexual clergy," while others believed the vote would be a "splitting factor" and "lead to many feeling homeless in the church."

The new marriage law, adopted in 2008, gives religious institutions the right to refuse to marry same-sex couples, but it is believed that many members of the clergy will agree to officiate at same-sex weddings.

### **Significant Norwegian GLBTQ Cultural Figures**

One of the most prominent figures in early Norwegian gay history is Christian VII (1749-1808), King of Denmark and Norway from 1766 until his death. Soon after his marriage in 1766 to Caroline Mathilde, daughter of Frederick, Prince of Wales, he apparently abandoned his conjugal duties and indulged in various debaucheries, including sex with younger men. He publicly declared that he could not love Caroline Mathilde, because it was "unfashionable to love one's wife."

He became progressively subservient to his physician, Johann Friedrich Struensee, who rose steadily in power in the late 1760s. The neglected and lonely Caroline Mathilde herself drifted into an affair with Struensee. In 1772, the king's marriage was dissolved and Struensee was arrested and executed in that same year. Christian died in 1808 from a brain aneurysm at Rendsburg, Schleswig.

Edvard Grieg (1843-1907), Norway's greatest composer, has long been rumored to have been bisexual. Although married in 1867 to his first cousin, Nina Hagerup, in his later life Grieg apparently became infatuated with the handsome, young Australian composer and pianist, Percy Grainger. Both men shared an interest in Scandinavia and folk music. "I love him like I love a young woman," Grieg was once quoted as saying.

One of Norway's most prominent authors of the late nineteenth century, Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson (1832-1910), who won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1906, wrote about same-sex feelings in his 1891 essay "Sin and Illness" ("Synd og Sygdom"), and about a romantic male friendship in the short story "Ivar Bye" (1894). He was a lifelong friend of the Danish critic Clemens Petersen, who was forced to emigrate to the United States in 1869 because of repeated rumors that he had affairs with boys at the school where he was a teacher. Bjørnson also openly supported the pioneering sexologist Magnus Hirschfeld in his fight to repeal the German laws that criminalized homosexuality.

The first major Norwegian writer to declare himself a bisexual was Jens Bjørneboe (1920-1976), whose work spanned a number of literary formats, including poems, plays, and novels, several of which contain themes of homosexuality. Many critics suggest his most significant work is the trilogy known as *The History of Bestiality*, which consists of the novels *Moment of Freedom (Frihetens Øyeblikk, 1966)*, *Powderhouse (Krutttårnet, 1969)* and *The Silence (Stillheten, 1973)*.

Feminist, activist and teacher, Gerd Brantenberg (b. 1941), is Norway's preeminent lesbian writer. Her first novel, *What Comes Naturally (Opp alle jordens homophile, 1973)*, is a gay coming-out story in the form of a sarcastic monologue. Her next book, *Daughters of Egalia (Egalias døtre, 1977)*, is a satire about the fantasy country Egalia, where the women are in power and oppress the men; the book became an international bestseller. Her trilogy, *The Song of St. Croix (Sangen om St. Croix, 1979)*, *At the Quay (Ved*

*fergestedet*, 1985), and *The Four Winds (For alle vinder, 1996)*, portrays a young woman who gradually comes to realize her love for other women. *Embraces (Favntak, 1983)*, tells the love story of a married woman and a lesbian. *Hermit and Entertainer (Eremitt og entertainer, 1991)*, is a collection of essays and lectures on feminist, gay, and literary topics. She has also been instrumental in the founding of the Lesbian Movement in Denmark (1974) and Norway (1975), and was a board member of Norway's first glbtq organization, Forbundet av 1948.

### **Norway's GLBTQ Organizations and Pride Events**

The country's leading glbtq organization LLH, which stands for "Landsforeningen for lesbisk og homofil frigjøring" (The National Association for Lesbian and Gay Liberation), works politically and socially at national and local levels to enable lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals to lead their lives openly, without fear of ostracism, discrimination, or persecution.

The organization had its early beginnings in 1949, when the Danish Forbundet af 1948 accepted two representatives in Norway. The Norwegian Forbundet av 1948 was formalized as a separate organization in 1952, but worked in secrecy out of concern for criminal prosecution and discrimination. In 1992, LLH was formed as a result of a merger between the Norwegian Forbundet av 1948 and Fellestrådet for homofile organisasjoner i Norge.

LLH focuses public and government attention on cases of discrimination against glbtq people by asserting political and diplomatic pressure, providing information, and working with other organizations and national media. Over the years, the Norwegian government has substantially increased state funding for the organization, which is used for rights-based, organizational development and information activities.

Currently, LLH has about 2,000 members.

*Blikk*, Norway's largest magazine for gay men and lesbians, is published monthly and has a circulation of approximately 6,000. In 2006, state funding was provided for distribution of the magazine to all public libraries and to selected libraries at upper secondary schools in the largest urban centers.

Skeive Dager Oslo is the capital city's annual glbtq event and the largest pride festival in Norway. The Oslo Pride week takes place in late June and includes a film festival, concerts, workshops, exhibitions, and many other glbtq entertainment events, such as comedy acts, club nights, and sporting competitions.

The Bergen Pride Festival, held annually in May in Norway's second largest city, offers a full week of glbtq entertainment and events, culminating in a gay and lesbian pride parade.

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### **About the Author**

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