IT FORNEBU AND THE POLITICAL BATTLE THAT LED TO THE CREATION OF SIMULA

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Simula Research Laboratory was in many ways born of one of the biggest and bitterest industrial policy debates Norway has ever seen.

The formal grounds for the establishment of Simula came in the autumn of 1999 when the Norwegian Parliament discussed the government budget for 2000 and approved the establishment of a research unit at Fornebu. This unit, which was later given the name Simula Research Laboratory, was to form the research nucleus of a future IT and knowledge centre that had been the subject of investigation and discussion for many years.

But a huge amount had happened before the Parliament reached that decision—so much that the IT Fornebu case, as it became known, was brought before the Parliament as many as nine times. The decision to establish Simula had its origins in a debate that began almost ten years earlier, when the Parliament decided that the international airport at Fornebu west of Oslo should be closed down and replaced by a new, modern airport at Gardermoen, north of Oslo.
In November 1995 Statsbygg\(^1\) commissioned a report on the possible options for the future use of the Fornebu area. The task of drawing up the report went to Norsk Investorforum, a lobby organisation which at the time had about 45 members from among Norway’s most influential shipowners, entrepreneurs and investors. Norsk Investorforum’s representatives emphasised that theirs was an organisation for industry builders with proven track records, not for stock market speculators or largely unproductive financial traders. Statsbygg received its answer as early as January 1996 when Norsk Investorforum came back with a proposal to create an international IT and knowledge centre on the site of the former airport.

The technological future

If the idea of an IT and knowledge centre at Fornebu is to be attributed to one person, then that person has to be shipowner Fred. Olsen\(^2\). As early as 7 November 1991 he gave a lecture in Trondheim that was given in-depth coverage in one of Norway’s main newspapers the following day under the headline “Norges nye veiviser” (“Norway’s new guide”). The central thesis of Olsen’s talk was that Norway, like other industrialised countries, had entered a late industrial phase in which traditional industries such as the car industry, the aircraft industry and the ship building industry had reached their saturation point. The future lay instead with the new industries such as IT and biotechnology, and if Norway was to be able to enjoy its share of the opportunities—and avoid the pitfalls—that were to result from this paradigm shift, it was time for it to begin the transition to the new economy.

Between 1991 and 1994, one of the people with whom Fred. Olsen discussed his vision was Per Morten Vigtel\(^3\), who, at the time, was head of the Norwegian maritime industry’s lobby organisation, the Maritime Forum of Norway. Both men

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\(^{1}\) Statsbygg is a Norwegian government-run enterprise. It acts as key adviser to the government on construction and property issues and owns, manages and develops property on behalf of the Norwegian government. Statsbygg had been given formal responsibility for the subsequent use of Fornebu, and was due to report to an interministerial committee.

\(^{2}\) Thomas Frederik Olsen, better known as Fred. Olsen, (born 1929), Norwegian shipowner and investor. Fred. Olsen is a visionary businessman, who, as early as the 1960s, recognised the huge opportunities presented by the oil and offshore sectors. Amongst other things, he was chair of the board and a large shareholder in the Aker Group, which was for a time Norway’s largest industrial employer. Olsen also had a lot of international business activities including the well-known watch factory Timex in the Philippines.

Fred. Olsen has always been a controversial figure. A story still circulates that Olsen provided the inspiration for the villainous and scrawny capitalist C. Montgomery Burns in the TV series *The Simpsons*. The creators of the series have on several occasions stated that there is nothing behind this story and that any physical likeness is coincidental.

\(^{3}\) Per Morten Vigtel (born 1941) began his career in *Norges Industriforbund* (the former Association of Norwegian Industry, later consolidated into the Confederation of Norwegian Enterprise (NHO).) He then went on to the Norwegian Shipowners’ Association where he was the architect behind the establishment of the Maritime Forum of Norway, a powerful lobby organisation for the maritime industry. Vigtel was also head of the secretariat of Norsk Investorforum. Since 2000 Vigtel has been involved in the establishment of two further lobby organisations, one for the travel industry (*Forum for Reisefrihet*) and one for environmental technology (*Forum for Miljøteknologi*).