Passing of our dear friend and founding UArctic Board member ‘Erling Olsen’

Wed, Jul 27, 2011

The Owl and the “Northern Lights”
“Vi mistet verdens klogeste ugle”
“We lost the world’s wisest owl”
– Danish press headline

Our dear friend and founding UArctic board member, Erling Heymann Olsen, passed away suddenly in late June at the age of 84. A memorial service for Erling was held at the Danish Parliament with two large Danish flags flying at half-mast in respectful recognition of his extraordinary career, character and contributions. Danish leaders and friends paying tribute to Erling expressed their deepest admiration, fondness and sadness for a man considered to be among Denmark’s most important and respected politicians in the second half of the 20th century.

A Remarkable Life and Career of Service

The trajectory of Erling’s life was a remarkable one. As a teenager, he and his family had to flee to Sweden when Denmark was occupied by the Germans. At the end of WWII, he returned to Denmark, earned his doctorate in political economy at the University of Copenhagen, and ultimately became a highly respected professor of economics there. He was appointed the first Rector of Roskilde University during a very turbulent time, and he frequently found himself at odds with the many doctrinaire far left professors and students there. So, despite his illustrious career and many achievements thereafter, I know how very pleased he was to receive an honorary doctoral award from Roskilde University a year ago, 40 years after he had left the university.

There are few successful political leaders whose fundamental careers have been in the educational world, but, Erling was different in many ways. On one hand, he appeared to be private, even shy. Yet he thrived in his very public life. As his lovely daughter Ida remarked at the memorial service, Erling had a burning desire to help Denmark create a just society. And, no one ever misunderstood his calm, friendly manner as weakness. In fact, he loved a good fight, if it was on behalf of society’s weakest or for a cause he considered to be just.

He became one of the most important members of the Social Democratic Party, and successive Prime Ministers appointed him as Minister of Housing, Minister of Justice and ultimately the leader of the Danish Parliament.
The stories about Erling’s leadership style and dealings with the press are legendary; both have endeared him to all Danes. A visionary thinker and extremely intelligent, he had the ability to relentlessly pursue his innovative ideas, and to do so cheerfully and with a disarming humor that made it particularly difficult for his political opponents.

One of Erling’s many remembered accomplishments has been referred to as the “Olsen Plan” – a major organizational change in the Parliament which he introduced upon becoming its leader. It significantly strengthened the Parliament and had a lasting impact on the way in which Denmark’s legislators conducted their business. Erling was not just a visionary but also a very practical manager of people. He was more concerned with the successful implementation of innovative ideas and their ultimate long-term impact than with the early press and praise always associated with new programs when launched.

…Then, a transition back to the world of education

Other than continuing to provide guidance to younger political leaders, Erling largely stepped away from politics in 1998 at the age of 71. In addition to enjoying his wonderful wife, Annette, and very capable children and their families, he again focused on the development of unique international educational endeavors - as a Board member of the innovative United World Colleges, as Chairman of the Board of Trustees of the Scandinavian Seminar College, and, most importantly, as a founding board member of the University of the Arctic, a position he held for 9 years.

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When Minister of Justice, a reporter asked Erling..."Are you a dove or a hawk?"...Erling responded: "I’m an owl!" The reporter than said..."But, owls sleep all day long."...Erling responded, 'Yes, but an owl can see clearly in the dark, and that is when crimes are committed!"

Because of this exchange, and the fact that the owl is considered the wisest of birds, from that time forward Erling was frequently referred to the press as “the owl (ugle).

His autobiography is entitled “Fra Aeling til Ugle”... “From Duckling to Owl”

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The Owl and the Northern Lights

The pulsating, colorful beauty of the Northern Lights is a metaphor for the growth and potential of the University of the Arctic. Erling invested his prodigious talents to help build UArctic for reasons completely in character with his life and values. He recognized that the people of the North could be overwhelmed by the powerful government, corporate, military and scientific forces that are flooding these northern regions in their efforts to leverage the unique geography and resources there. He considered UArctic’s goal of increasing educational opportunities for people in the North, and strengthening their ability to better shape their own destinies, to be of enormous importance. Furthermore, he also believed UArctic’s unique, cooperative educational approach could be a model and shed light in many parts of the world where
indigenous and other peoples are faced with similar challenges.

Erling’s contributions to UArctic were many. Led by Erling, the Scandinavian Seminar Group was part of the small team of educators and institutions which began exploring the possible creation of the University of the Arctic in the late 1990s. Once the UArctic was formally established in 2001, Erling committed his full energy and persuasive powers to help ensure its success. His significant contributions to UArctic’s development were strategic and practical; spanning from strong leadership on fundraising and strategic planning to hands-on work on the development of UArctic’s administrative and programmatic structures.

**The “Olsen Plan”**

So, what would be the “Olsen Plan” to ensure UArctic’s continued success? Actually, we don’t have to guess, because he frequently shared his views with board members and staff. Like everyone involved in UArctic, Erling wanted to help make certain that UArctic continued to be able to attract the financial resources, retain the confidence and active support of all those participating, and develop the same kind of high quality staff that has made UArctic so successful in its first 10 years. Simply stated, Erling would encourage UArctic to pursue the path it has already chosen and improve the administrative and fiscal structures to continue to do it better.

Erling had complete confidence in UArctic and believed it would, like the Northern Lights, continue to illuminate the lives and minds of people throughout the world.

Erling’s unique career and legacy has touched all of us, and his memory will remain embedded in our lives.

With great affection,

**Bill Kaufmann**  
Chairman, Scandinavian Seminar

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**Other press headlines, comments and quotes:**

..."*His heart was always in the right place*"
Annette Unmack Larsen – Erling’s wife

..."*For lidt Erling Olsen i dansk politik*" = “To few ‘Erling Olsen's’ in Danish politics”
Mette Frederiksen - young Social Democratic leader

...“*Den populaere ugle er vaek*” = “The beloved owl is gone”
Danish press headline

..."*(Dad) was often guided by the principal that it is easier to ask for forgiveness than for permission....also, he was a little atypical as a Social Democrat - he always ate banana with a knife and fork.*” Ida Heiman Larsen – Erling’s daughter