

Open letter to Prime Minister Bondevik

What can we expect in the public sector in January 2000?

On 18 September, the Council of State approved the Ministry of Labour and Government Administration's Proposition No. 1 to the Storting [parliament]. Section 3 (pages 11 to 15) covers the handling of the Year 2000 problem in the State administration. This summary - if it is correct - should give the Norwegian people cause for great concern.

It has not done so. This part of the document has received little or no serious coverage by the media. And, as far as I know, little response from your office.

Pages 11 to 15 in the Proposition focus inter alia on progress in efforts to solve the problem involving government computer systems and the well-documented Year 2000 problem.

Mission-critical systems and systems critical to society are terms used to describe the systems that, if allowed to fail, would make it impossible for a government department to supply the service that it is intended to provide.

The Proposition's introduction to Section 3 states:

The transition to the year 2000 creates problems for a number of computer programs and a great deal of computer equipment. The problems may have serious consequences for society if they are not solved.

My concerns relate to what we have seen in many large IT projects in the public sector, where cost overruns and major delays are unfortunately not unknown phenomena.

First survey in the State - spring, 1997

Norway's Ministry of Labour and Government Administration started working on the Year 2000 problems in the autumn of 1996, when professionals in the field had been aware of the problems for two years. The USA, among others, had also started working on the issue in the public sector two years previously. One of the first results of the Ministry's work that we saw was the survey that it carried out in the spring of 1997. The conclusion of this report described a situation in the government administration in which the Year 2000 problem was well under control in the departments that were most affected by it. This conclusion has subsequently been attributed to lack of judgement in the departments involved, or low awareness of Year 2000 work among departments and government services, as we can read.

Second survey, spring 1998

A new survey was carried out in the first quarter of the year, also organized by the Ministry of Labour and Government Administration. This established that the departments were now more aware of the problem and its magnitude. These trends are in line with the commercial sector as well as the rest of society. At this stage, the Government seemed to have accepted that those who bore responsibility in the public sector did not know any more than most people, and I cannot see any steps to provide better information to the people of Norway.

Third survey, autumn 1998.

I have not yet seen the results of Survey 3 (deadline for replies 15 August 1998), but the above-mentioned Proposition to the Storting refers to it. The survey draws the following conclusions:

Most of the large government services (about 60%) and 90% of the smaller ones have not yet started the phase considered to be the most labour-intensive part of the work - that is, testing.

About 40% of the smaller departments have not yet started their Year 2000 programme at all, and half of these believe that they are not affected.

Very many departments still lack clear timetables and cost estimates.

Most departments have not yet developed risk analyses and contingency plans.

Forty to fifty per cent of the departments need further personnel resources (personnel resources that the business sector is struggling to find).

We also read that it is possible that all in all, the Year 2000 problems in the State administration will put some of the administration's functions at risk when the date changes to 2000. It is difficult to predict how many functions, and which ones, will be affected.

Wanted: information we can trust

With respect, Mr Prime Minister, this is not good enough. It must be possible to provide an overview and risk analyses of the problems in the State as well, along with the priorities that have been set, so that the Norwegian people can prepare for the Year 2000. If these problems are deliberately being played down to avoid panic in society, I believe the effect will be exactly the opposite. If the Norwegian people gain insight into the problems at an early stage, perhaps we will avoid creating panic and hoarding next year.

Our neighbouring countries have attached much greater importance to the need for information than we have at home. By the time Aksjon 2000 was established here in summer, Denmark's År 2000 Forum was fully operative with 45 participating organizations, holding regular meetings with the business, hospital, power supply and traffic sectors. In Denmark a Year 2000 secretariat has been established as well, and has received DKK 12 million in funding from the ministry. We do not hear much from our little Aksjon 2000 organization. All that I have noted was a statement in Adresseavisen [Trondheim daily newspaper] by Geir Jacobsen, Aksjon 2000's leader, that we are not late in starting to prepare for 2000. I also noted that Tor Alfheim (leader of the reference group in Aksjon 2000) said on 1 July this year that we have enough expertise in this country. This is exactly the opposite of what most other countries have concluded.

Most of the countries with which we compare ourselves have set deadlines for completion of Year 2000 work in the public sector. Sweden and Denmark have set 1 June 1999 as the absolutely final deadline, and have instructed the public-sector services to inform the Government by 31 March 1999 at the latest if they will not be ready in time. Sweden and Denmark also started their Year 2000 activities long before Norway. We might say that to be good is typically Norwegian, but we are not that proficient, Mr Prime Minister. We have not even come up with a list of the systems that are critical to society.

The USA and many other countries (including Sweden and Denmark) have produced such lists. This may be because they started long before us, but we have to operate with the same deadline. This problem cannot be postponed.

For the record, I should also mention that, in the same period, Statskonsult has invested considerable resources in completing their report on pitfalls and success factors for IT projects in the State, which appeared in summer. This was prepared as a result of all the computer scandals in the public sector in recent years.

If the above-mentioned section in Proposition No. 1 to the Storting is correct, action must be taken to ensure that these functions that are critical to society do not fail. If there is a shortage of resources (estimated at about 400 person-years as far as I can see), action must be taken to provide these. If this is impossible to achieve, it must be confirmed that these functions are not in fact critical to society, and they must be discontinued so that the Norwegian people avoid these unnecessary costs.

If the section is not correct, action must be taken to correct it. It describes a totally unacceptable situation. As it is described, it creates unnecessary worry and fear for the Norwegian people. Even though I understand that substantial resources are involved in internal negotiations in the Stortinget, the Norwegian people are entitled to expect functions that are critical to society to be carried out satisfactorily. If those who bear responsibility in the government services are incapable of honouring their commitments to society, these people must be replaced by leaders who are capable of carrying out these tasks.

Regardless, specific steps must be taken to clarify the situation so that municipalities, business and the public can prepare for what lies ahead. Only 13 months remain. It is easy to draw the conclusion that raising consciousness of the Year 2000 problem in the government services has improved significantly from last year to this year. The key question must be how much consciousness-raising remains. This should happen before the year-end. All of 1999 (at least) should be used to test the corrections that have been made.

Again, I would like to draw attention to the situation in the USA. They started work two years before we did, and so they have made more progress, but we have the same deadline. US Rep. Stephen Horn delivered his report on the situation of the American government agencies on 9 September this year. This describes the situation for each department. Here we can read that:

The US Department of Defence has 2965 mission-critical systems. These will not all be ready before the year 2001. This means that throughout the year 2000, the US military forces will not be able to carry out all their mission-critical functions.

The US Department of Labor has 61 mission-critical functions that will not be 100% complete before 2001.

The US Department of Health and Human Services has 298 mission-critical functions that will not be 100% complete before 2002.

The US Department of the Interior has 59 mission-critical systems that will not be 100% ready before the year 2027 (that is not a typographical error).

The US Department of Justice has 207 mission-critical systems that will not be 100% ready until after the year 2030. (They in fact have no idea when they will be ready).

As these examples show, at least the mission-critical systems and the estimated date of completion have been identified. In Norway, it still seems as though we are two years behind. We must not believe that we can make up for all of this next year. Our country may be smaller, but we have correspondingly fewer resources.

With all respect, Mr Prime Minister, the Norwegian nation has placed its trust in the public sector's ability to carry out such tasks adequately. There is no way for the people of Norway to understand the extent of this problem unless they receive such information. As long as the media are paying scant attention to the issue, the Government should ensure that Norwegians are informed about the problem and its possible and probable consequences.

The Government's Year 2000 follow-up plan of 21 April 1998 notes that the State has no direct responsibility in relation to the problems that may arise in the municipalities and the private sector. This cannot possibly apply to the responsibility to provide information.

Mr Prime Minister, the Norwegian people must clearly be entitled to know the exact situation of the country as far as the Year 2000 problem is concerned.

Hoarding has started.

According to the survey carried out by Cap Gemini Millennium Index on 1680 European and American enterprises, every fourth enterprise that is preparing for the Year 2000 has already started hoarding raw materials. Every third enterprise is looking for alternative suppliers and securing tools and machinery for resuming operations after a breakdown. Recently I spoke to people from a canning factory here, who said they were already stepping up production to meet the growing demand for canned products.

We need information we can trust.

In the light of this, I request reliable information on the situation for the systems critical to society. This is very important to enable Norwegian business and the Norwegian people to plan ahead.

Trondheim, 1 December 1998.

Yours sincerely

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