



## CONVERSATIONS WITH OLE K. SARA, RETIRED HEAD OF THE REINDEER ADMINISTRATION IN NORWAY<sup>1</sup>

*Robert Paine*

### Abstract

In these conversations of March 2001 and 2002, Ole K. Sara, the first Saami to head the national administration of Norwegian Saami reindeer pastoralism, reflects – candidly – on how crucial issues were handled: resolved or avoided? If resolved, to whose end? A crucial point here is how Sara was aware of how he had responsibilities to two constituencies simultaneously: government and pastoralists.

**Keywords:** Saami, reindeer pastoralism, administration, challenges, responses, retrospection

### Introduction

Ole K. Sara, born in 1936 into a reindeer pastoral family, has had a long and unusually important career in the affairs of Saami reindeer pastoralism: Lapp Bailiff (as it was called at the time: Nwg. *Lappfogden*) in Kautokeino; Permanent Secretary (Nwg. *Statssekretaer*) in the Ministry of Agriculture in Oslo; and finally, as the first Head of the newly-formed Reindeer Administration in Alta. We spoke in his home in Alta where he is enjoying retirement – when not busy with one Commission or another.

These conversations, then, are with the one person, more than any other, who, from the time of this first appointment in 1961 to his retirement forty years later, was at the centre of things regarding Saami reindeer pastoralism in Norway. They were years during which new government policy was formulated, put into practice, and perhaps changed along the way; they were also years during which the pastoralists now became more than simply recipients of government policy – they made their opinions heard, and not always in a unified voice.

Dominating the political agenda were issues (never a matter of a single issue) of numbers – numbers of reindeer, numbers of pastoralists. In the early years, all effort was directed to increasing both, but later, numbers' policy went into reverse.

The prime concern over numbers, throughout, was to improve pastoral family economy. The landmark event of the period was the Reindeer Act of

1978. (Proposed revisions to the Act are currently before the Norwegian Parliament.)

Ole K., as we all call him, recognised responsibilities to two constituencies: government and pastoralists. He had to be alert to contradictions or incompatibilities arising either within a constituency or between them, and warn of possible implications.

## **March 2001**

**Robert:** Thanks, Ole K., for agreeing to do this. We'll move around a bit between the specific and the general, the factual and the speculative. I am curious, for example, what may have motivated you in your career – and what code of convictions sustained you. But perhaps we should begin at the beginning of your life story?

**Ole K.:** Well, I grew up as a child in an active reindeer pastoralist family; and at that time we were fairly isolated – no roads to move around on; little contact with others outside pastoralism.

Now, just before my 14th birthday my father told me about the time when he was my age: On the one hand, he was the eldest son; on the other, he was unusually interested in books, and his hope was to go on to High School. But his father said: 'No, that's not possible. For you are our eldest son and when I'm old it is you who have to follow me.' So he didn't continue with schooling. But my father said to me: 'You have older brothers: I don't need you for work with the herd [laughs]! So, if you want, you can continue at school.'

I was 14 years old when I left my family and the pastoral cycle and my friends in Kautokeino. I left to go to High School in Alta [down on the coast]. And I must say that the change was quite a tough one for me; but it was for the best – and I knew that at the time. Naturally enough, my new school friends saw me as someone rather 'different,' but I didn't feel this in a negative way – quite the contrary. At the same time, I was drawn into thinking about the differences in lifestyles and aspirations and possibilities between Saami pastoralists and society otherwise, whether Saamisk or Norwegian; and how the differences may well turn into complications. Complications in general and especially for those persons directly affected.

I determined to continue my education which only the wider society could give me. On account of the limits to my family's economy, I sought the educational opportunities offered by the military. And, by the way, many of the Saami youth of that time took that route. So I was in the military for 5–6 years. But I soon realised that that really was not the life for me. What I was looking for was a position where I could work with reindeer pastoral matters and work on behalf of the pastoralists. The opportunity came in 1961 when the federal

Department of Agriculture opened a new position with the Lapp Bailiff's office (as it was called then) in Finnmark; I got the job. So that was the beginning ...

**Robert:** And with the job, where did you begin?

**Ole K.:** I began to look into what had been happening in the last years in reindeer pastoralism and in the lives of the Saami pastoralists. There had, indeed, been quite considerable changes after World War II. Notably, the engagement of all sectors of government, especially in the health sector, in the re-building – really the re-making – of Finnmark after the wholesale destruction the retreating Germans had left behind them ['scorched earth']. And with today's historical perspective one is immediately struck by the strong population increase in the early decades of the post-war years: presumably on account of improved health and, especially, reduction of the infant mortality rate. It is difficult to exaggerate the significance of this for the pastoral society in Finnmark.<sup>2</sup> An inevitable and immediate implication was the need to strengthen, correspondingly, the economic basis of reindeer pastoralism. Only then would a falling and failing living standard be avoided. The fact was that even 10–15 years later about 70% of those in reindeer pastoralism had an economy insufficient to their needs. They were, in other words, living in need: too small herds. The situation was further aggravated by the fact that society as a whole (excluding the pastoralists) was experiencing constant improvements in living standards.

So when I joined the reindeer pastoralist administration the overriding priority was to find ways of lifting the Saami pastoralists' living standard. And remember, at that time there simply wasn't much in the way of viable economic alternatives for those raised within reindeer pastoralism; or, at least, one didn't see the alternatives. Thus funds were allocated for the purchase of reindeer so that families would have sufficient animals to meet their economic needs. Also through the 1970s, there were several government-sponsored initiatives for improvement in the price of the product – but there were limits as to how far one could go with that.

Quite soon, however, perhaps already in the 1970s, one began to see that there was emerging a disequilibrium of another kind: too many animals in relation to the natural resources. One began to worry about what the future held if this process continued; that is, if it was *allowed* to continue. Even so, the official political position was that all pastoralist youth should be able to continue in their traditional way of life.

Of course, in my job I came uncomfortably close to this problem. I began to focus my attention on the unwanted implications that would follow from the pursuit of this policy: not least ecologic with socioeconomic after-effects. You can well say that I became politically engaged. This led to my appointment as the Lapp Bailiff (1968) for the Kautokeino area when, in the late

1960s, reindeer pastoralism in Finnmark was divided into two bailiwicks. In its turn this meant that at the behest of my employer, the Department of Agriculture, I became engaged in a number of policy committees and the like, beyond the ordinary routines and responsibilities of the Bailiff.

Now it was also at about this time that serious discussions were opened concerning a new Reindeer Management Act [Nwg. *Reindrifstloven*]. A principal issue here was how to approach and implement the long-standing request from the pastoralists themselves for a greater say, legally protected, in the determination and implementation of official decisions concerning reindeer pastoralism.

As is the case with all proposed changes to a law, the proposal was sent out across the country. This meant that it went, for the most part, to parties with little or no knowledge of reindeer pastoralism, and with little interest in it – except as a competitor for limited natural resources. Of course they didn't like the proposal! Historically, this has been the position held by non-pastoralists, and such attitudes die hard.

It was against this background that I was asked in 1973 to assume the office of Permanent Secretary, in Oslo, with responsibilities for reindeer pastoralism.

Well, the new law [Reindeer Management Act] came in 1978 and in its Preamble reindeer pastoralism was formally identified as an *occupation* [Nwg. *naering*] and not merely, as had been the case up to then, as a 'way of life' [Nwg. *levemåte*]. This recognition as an occupation meant that government was drawn into its support, as it is with all official occupations. ...

**Robert:** But it also brought it under state control, ultimately?

**Ole K.:** Yes, that's right. Now, the next item on the agenda was to establish a management administration that was relatively independent and with an executive committee in which Saami, the pastoralists, were in a majority. And that led to the arrangements that are in place today: a Reindeer Administration for the whole country<sup>3</sup> in which the pastoralists themselves compose the majority, and regional committees, six in all, in which, again, the majority membership are pastoralists.

In sum, the *raison d'être* behind this new structuring was the making of reindeer pastoralism into one unified occupation with an overarching administration, along with regional committees. This led to the new position of Head of the Reindeer Administration to which I was appointed in 1979.

Aside from finding my way in this new structure, the problem of the number of reindeer in relation to the natural resources pressed for urgent attention. And the situation – taken as a whole – wasn't made any easier (but all the more important) on account of the principle, politically endorsed, that all pastoralists had the right to remain as such, come what may. I had difficulties with that, as you may well imagine.

Look at it this way: on the one hand, as a dictum of cultural politics, Saami reindeer pastoralism had to be ensured continuity – without it what of the image of the Saami entity? This meant that the economy of pastoralism, as I said, had to be made secure (with which, of course, I agree). On the other hand, ensuring its economic viability would probably lead to an increase in the number of pastoralists, and the problem of carrying capacity of pastures would be further aggravated: there's the problem.

I had no choice but to try to persuade the politicians that the pastoralists had to be told that the future of pastoralism depends on some of you leaving the occupation in the near future: the reduced numbers will help to ensure that those continuing will have a sound economy. But this proposal was not well-received in government circles: the fear was that it would be seen as forcing people out of their occupation – an occupation that they, the Saami, regard as theirs exclusively; as an exclusive right, in other words.

However, the Department of Agriculture, after the matter had been debated in Parliament, promulgated a financial offer to pastoralists who would leave the occupation (this was while I was Permanent Secretary). Naturally enough, this 'bribery' (as it was popularly seen to be) was met by strong opposition from the pastoralists themselves. Very few took up the offer; and those who did were left relatively wanting. Then in the 1980s a revised programme of financial assistance was initiated with the same overriding intention: to correct the imbalance between numbers of animals, numbers of pastoralists and the natural resource.<sup>4</sup>

**Robert:** What are the criteria of the desired balance? Isn't that a problematic issue in itself and one of some uncertainty?

**Ole K.:** Yes, indeed. And one is made aware of just that when talking with the experts in government circles, for they don't necessarily agree among themselves; but nor, for that matter, do the other experts – the pastoralists themselves.

Meanwhile, I was convinced of the need to have put into the new law a paragraph concerning the number of pastoralists, which in effect meant a control on entry into the occupation. Given the emphasis on increased authority (in principle if not in practice) to the pastoralists themselves in determining issues affecting pastoralism – and of course with that goes increased responsibility for its future – it seemed quite in place to put this into the new law. But even before the proposal reached Parliament there was outrage. I was targeted as 'the Saami who betrays his own' (newspaper headline)! The proposal, as formulated at the time, had to be withdrawn. But at the same time, there were those among the pastoralists who recognised the need for decisions concerning the control of their numbers.

**Robert:** Some battle! But what, Ole K., of this issue in relation to the changes already introduced in the new Reindeer Law? As I understand it, before the

new law came into force *all* the children of a Saami reindeer pastoralist family received a reindeer mark and therefore had the right to practise pastoralism; I'm not too clear about the position taken, in this regard, by the 1978 Act with its introduction of 'production unit' (Nwg. *driftsenhet*) as the legal entity.

**Ole K.:** First of all, each member of a pastoralist Saami family is entitled to a reindeer mark.<sup>5</sup> The Act, however, did take away the age-old right to reindeer marks from people who, living in Kautokeino and other Saami villages, were not pastoralists themselves but, nevertheless, owned some animals that ran in the pastoralists' herds. There was an uproar over this and a case was actually brought against the state on its account. The case was lost.

But to return to your question concerning production units: with membership in such a unit comes considerable government support – principally through subsidies. Now, there was any number of families that were not economically viable. NRL [the reindeer pastoralists' national association] realised that something had to be done on their behalf. In fact, these families – along with those of sound economy – were accorded the status of production units.

**Robert:** I understand. But what of the practical problem arising – principle aside (if I may put it thus)? I'm referring to how from 1978 and to the early 1980s production units were liberally distributed, and then: stop! Government suddenly decided there were 'too many' – and many a young, would-be active pastoralist was left without one. And isn't that true to this day?<sup>6</sup>

**Ole K.:** Certainly there have been such cases but when you say 'many', that's not correct. The important thing at the time was that the new Act and the policy of subsidies gave a necessary boost to the pastoral economy. And remember, it was the official intention at the time to increase the number of animals overall. However, over a period of years this presented the problem of ratios: animals to pastures. So with hindsight, yes, one can say, perhaps, that fewer production units should have been established all at once.

**Robert:** Ole K., a question: Why was the name of the traditional Saami unit, *sii'da*, replaced with the Norwegian 'production unit'?

**Ole K.:** Well, the first word that came to mind was actually *sii'da*. But, as you well know, the *sii'da* is a herding unit that can include different families according to the pastoral season. So it was not the word we needed. Yes, we borrowed from the vocabulary of Norwegian agriculture – production unit. The important point is that it signifies the legal status of the family unit; thus the government subsidy is paid to the head of a production unit: for example, to the father rather than the son or to one of several brothers; it is left – conscious policy – to him to decide how the money will be distributed.

**Robert:** Yet I've heard complaints – from within production units, within families – about just that. Had you any knowledge as to how the subsidies were being distributed while you were in office?

**Ole K.:** I believe that, by and large, the subsidies were distributed equitably. At the same time, though, there were, undoubtedly, less than commendable instances. And, no, I didn't do much about that. What held me back was the lesson I learned from observing the bureaucratic world around me (beyond reindeer pastoralism); namely, that too many rules, too much control, can 'pacify' the recipients. I was determined that that would not happen.

**Robert:** Returning to the term itself: production unit; was it translated into Saami?

**Ole K.:** Actually there were two Saami translations of the whole of the Act of 1978. The first effort left a number of pastoralists dissatisfied – the translator wasn't from a pastoral background; this invalidated not only the translation but also the document itself. So a second translator who came from a pastoral background was commissioned, and that translation was well accepted.

**Robert:** Yet still today there's many a pastoralist who wishes to be quit of 'production unit.'

**Ole K.:** I know – 'a Norwegian concept foreign to Saami thinking', etc. And yes, from an ethnic-linguistic starting point, there is a 'foreignness' about it. So another word has to be found.<sup>7</sup> However, let me repeat, it wasn't something that one came upon accidentally; much thought was given to it. And let me add that there's many a Saami [pastoralist] who is satisfied with the word as appropriately conveying the necessary contemporary development of reindeer pastoralism as an occupation rather than 'a way of life.' The important point is that with the 1978 Act it was made quite clear that reindeer pastoralism is to be treated with the same legitimacy as any other professional livelihood in Norway; and this was taken into account when choosing the language of the Act. Many Saami pastoralists understood this.

**Robert:** Returning to the issue of numbers: has the state become interested in regulating the maximum number of animals individual pastoralists may own?

**Ole K.:** Yes, and there's been a great deal of debate about it. However, here the problem lies in the deceptively straightforward question: 'What limit shall be set: how many animals and no more?' The matter is further complicated on account of the presence of pastoralists themselves in the committees where the debate runs, for they are far from sharing a common point of view on this

matter. And the next question, which is also rather interesting: you can be a millionaire as an occupational fisherman; why, then, should that not be allowed in pastoralism? My answer is 'one must be careful.' Of course this opens the issue as one of care of the natural resource (and this applies to the fisheries too); here one must work to get the pastoralists themselves taking an active role in such decisions: decisions that they understand and can accept, in part or in whole; rather than having the state authoritatively deciding the issue.

**Robert:** However, I have the impression that the pastoralists – some? many? – haven't worked cooperatively among themselves towards solving the issue.

**Ole K.:** [laughingly]: That's certainly so. But then – if you and I were asked to divide between us what we each had in our wallets, I'm not sure that we would be in agreement about it! Yet I would say that over the years there has been a significant change here among reindeer owners: a growing awareness that they themselves must address the problem constructively. At the same time, the question of the distribution of reindeer wealth raises, again, that other question: how many practitioners? And here, too, there is a new awareness of the gravity of this pressingly crucial question.

**Robert:** Ole K., I want to take you back to a question that we hopped over: compulsory slaughter [of reindeer]? It must have been an enormous problem for you as head of the Reindeer Administration. After all, in the Norwegian Constitution private property is especially protected, yet the Reindeer Pastoral Law allows the state to undertake 'compulsory slaughter' of a pastoralist's private capital?

**Ole K.:** Yes, it's an interesting question. Towards the end of the 1980s the question ducked up of reducing the numbers of reindeer, both in respect of the aggregate number within a District and of individual owners. But if you set a ceiling to the permitted number of animals, there'll be some owners who exceed it, and you have to say to them: 'You must slaughter some of your animals so that your herd returns to a legal size.' And they say 'No, that I will not do.' So if you are going to play by the rules, you have to use force. This was a question that I discussed within the Reindeer Administration and, indeed, with several incumbent Ministers of Agriculture. They all said, 'that we will not do – we will not use force.' And thus far it hasn't happened. And I hope it never will for such action bodes ill both for the future of reindeer pastoralism, and, one must say, of society as a whole.

**Robert:** But open the newspapers and one reads how the heads of the Reindeer Administration and of its National Executive Committee (based in Finnmark and Oslo, respectively) are quarrelling exactly over this matter ...

[Ole K.: avoids being drawn into the current entanglement]

**Ole K.:** The basic question is, does force solve anything? Throughout history, anywhere in the world, one sees that force doesn't solve anything.<sup>8</sup>

**Robert:** Well, to move on. What of relations today between sedentaries – be they Saami or Norwegian – and pastoralists, especially along the coast? We know there can be difficulties, more so today than earlier when there was some mutuality of need between them. After all, the pastoralists come every summer to the coast and have 'free' use of the pastures out there. My question is: why haven't the authorities made an arrangement whereby part of the taxes that pastoralists pay as citizens – and pay only to their 'home' District in the interior, e.g. Kautokeino or Karasjok or Polmak – is handed over to the coastal Districts?

**Ole K.:** This has been up for discussion a number of times. It was even included in a Parliamentary Report in 1992–1993. But no decision has been taken. Not that it isn't important. It is. And, as you say, increasingly so today with the growing distance between pastoral and sedentary interests.

**Robert:** Not unrelatedly to pastoral-sedentary relations, there is now the Parliamentary Saami Assembly [since 1989]. Should the Reindeer Administration report to it, rather than, as at present, to the Norwegian Department of Agriculture, or, as one hears suggested these days, to the Administration of each province?

**Ole K.:** I don't see it in those either-or terms. The Saami Assembly is enormously important for the future of a Saami people in Norway – and there it has my full support. But when it comes to reindeer pastoralism, the pastoralists themselves, at least those in the north, have little confidence that the Assembly is the right forum for the protection and forwarding of their interests.

**Robert:** Of course most members of the Assembly are not pastoralists.

**Ole K.:** Yes. And the age-old opposition of interests between farmers and migratory pastoralists is, regrettably, still at play here in different ways. And your alternative choice: the provinces? No! Reindeer pastoralism should remain answerable to and protected by the state.

**Robert:** Thanks, Ole K. Until the next time ...

## March 2002

**Robert:** Here we are back again a year later! Ole K., you were saying to me just now how you firmly believe there are going to be significant changes emerging within reindeer pastoralism over the next 10–20 years. What do you have in mind?

**Ole K.:** Well, consider mechanisation. Already our pastoralism is strongly mechanised, and mechanisation is dependent on the availability of significant capital. And that capital, used to maintain technical capacity and not the living standard itself, accounts for a significant portion of an owner's reindeer wealth. I don't think much can be done in the direction of reducing the monetary outlay. Now, that's one side of the matter. The other is data technology. It has already arrived and will, assuredly, have a determining influence on the way reindeer pastoralism is handled as an occupation.

Now, the force of such developments is such, I believe, that reindeer pastoralism will be sustained by fewer and fewer people. Put the other way around – the political twist to it – there will be a significant withdrawal of people compared with today's numbers. The traditional, seasonal nomadic pattern will be altered on account of technology, and around the corner, so to say, is 'reindeer farming.'

**Robert:** And why not? It's already near the norm, I understand, in Russian reindeer pastoralism.

**Ole K.:** I agree. What is important is that it *might* (or might not) strengthen the possibilities for a continued life for pastoralism. Then there's the Saami perspective – the cultural perspective: in the move from 'nomadism' to 'farming' much of the Saamisk in reindeer pastoralism will be lost, inevitably.

**Robert:** But 'culture' changes – Saami were hunters before they were pastoralists.

**Ole K.:** Quite so. But in the political world, as well as in the world of the everyday, 'culture' is looked upon as stable.

**Robert:** Ok. But it's surely not always that way? The 1933 Act introduced the concept of 'common pasture' [Nwg. *felles beite*] for the winter pastures, and today, I keep hearing from pastoralists themselves how the notion of common pasture is being abused and hence a cause of strife. If the pasture is held in common, the reasoning goes, then one can go anywhere in the winter pastures – it boils down to being the first to reach a pasture. Am I right?

**Ole K.:** Yes, quite correct. But common pasture has a history that is widely forgotten – or more likely just unknown to most. It arose as an implication of the closing in 1852 of the Finnish–Norwegian border. Prior to that date, many Kautokeino and Karasjok pastoralists had winter pastures on the Finnish side of the border. Winter pastures were now reduced in area, and as a proffered corrective to this new situation, the remaining winter pastures in the interior of the tundra and adjacent to the Finnish border were designated as held in common on a District basis.

That's the history. But there's no escaping the fact that behind the problems that have come alive today regarding common pasture is that reindeer pastoralism in Finnmark today does not yield sufficient gross income to sustain present numbers in a reasonable economy: some must leave.

**Robert:** Common winter pasture is one issue; but then – a development in quite another direction – there's the proliferation of fences, outside the winter pastures of course. This is so different from what I recall from the early 1960s. And perhaps the serious difference is in the purpose now given to a fence. Earlier, fences – the few that existed – were to hinder the reindeer from leaving summer pastures too early, according to the pastoralists' schedule. Now, however, there are fences criss-crossing autumn pastures and their purpose appears to be to keep 'your' herd out of the way of 'my' herd?

**Ole K.:** You're quite right. But why the change – that's an interesting question. First of all, many pastoral families began to move into settled communities – permanent dwellings replacing tent life. Then, mechanisation, the snowscooter in particular, facilitating the now necessary journeys between home and herd. And so: one put up fences, as you described, that effectively privatises an area – note the irony vis-à-vis the problems with 'common' winter pastures. What is being prioritised here are not optimal pasture conditions but optimal work conditions.

**Robert:** The state, of course, has helped fund the fences.

**Ole K.:** Oh yes. It has been seen as a necessity. But I want to draw your attention to something else about fences. In my opinion what should have happened (with state initiative), even a hundred years back in time, was the construction of fences parallel to the winter–summer–winter migration routes of the reindeer. The animals wouldn't be crowded waiting until a fence is opened for them, as is the case today to the detriment of the pasture inside the fence. The deer would proceed according to their own schedules, even as they would be watched over.

**Robert:** Interesting indeed! Will it ever be implemented?

**Ole K.:** Who knows!

**Robert:** In your time, Ole K., you proposed fewer and hence larger reindeer pasture Districts?

**Ole K.:** Earlier, one had 47 such Districts in Finnmark. The proposal that I forwarded was that this number should be reduced to seven or eight: Kautokeino and Karasjok, for example, would each have three, perhaps. The point was to simplify and enhance the administration of pastoralism, in which, coincidentally, the pastoralists themselves have an increasing say. But where you had a District composed of no more than five pastoral units and three of those belong to brothers, then what 'voice' would the remaining two have in what should be a collective decision-making unit? Further, a District should have sufficient financial strength to enable it to initiate necessary remedial tasks, and that capability is directly related to the number of persons in a District. Then, of course, a larger District means larger and, in all likelihood, more variegated pastures; this, in its turn, makes adaptation to unpredictable changing natural conditions in any pastoral year easier and more efficient.

**Robert:** And how far has one come with this?

**Ole K.:** It is in place – if not in the precise detail as originally proposed. At first, though, it evoked opposition – 'too radical.' Then I would remind the sceptics that one hundred years ago we had no Districts at all: and was that what they wanted? No, it wasn't.

**Robert:** What you've been saying about fences and Districts, doesn't that also lead us back to the issue of reindeer farming? Perhaps you'd explain a little more about what you have in mind there?

**Ole K.:** It's all to do with going a step beyond the natural dependence of reindeer (and hence of the pastoral economy) on lichens and the like. Lichens take years to reproduce; there'll be years when there aren't enough lichens. An alternative? Feeding the animals with food in addition to that which they forage. In some periods of a year, perhaps one feeds them every day, at other times the feeding would simply supplement the foraging. But: feeding of reindeer bespeaks a competence of those who do it, and also, the deer themselves have to habituate themselves to it.

**Robert:** And it costs money! Reindeer have found their own lichens, now we will begin to pay for the 'lichens'!

**Ole K.:** This is a whole new culture that I have in mind. It's more of a business venture than anything earlier. But still, let us not forget that also in

reindeer farming the natural foraging of the animals is important, even beyond the economic factor where, as you point out, the foraging is 'free.' And remember, when the reindeer finds pasture momentarily bereft of nourishment, it moves on ... if allowed to. That's a crucial point. It means that we must get rid of all the fences that interfere with the natural, migrational movement of the animals.

**Robert:** Did you propose such a plan?

**Ole K.:** Yes. I put it forward in 1992–1993 and it was rejected.

**Robert:** By whom?

**Ole K.:** The pastoralists themselves. So I said, 'well, let's take time to think about it.' And later there was another meeting: the majority were still opposed but there were some who had begun to wonder whether there wasn't something to the idea after all. So, about a couple of years later, in Kautokeino, there was more discussion. However, it ran into a problem: the prejudicing of the rights of the individual owner (by a collective will). Of course this has been an important value but, in my view of the issue, we now have to think more in terms of 'ours' rather than 'mine' or 'yours.'

**Robert:** A propos mine vs. yours: I've been hearing talk (if only as a response to the unhappy situation associated with production units) about a proposal by which the hours a herder spends working with the herd will be in proportion to the number of animals he owns in that herd.

**Ole K.:** Yes, already in the middle of the 1990s we started to think about a work programme [Nwg. *driftsplan*] for each District along those lines; actually it was more ambitious in the direction of collectivisation – a production programme really.

**Robert:** But you didn't get much response?

**Ole K.:** Well, the process of recognising that some things about the traditional system – and yes, the existing one – are, perhaps, out of step with current and future developments; that process takes time. I used to say that it is not through ill-will that they turn their back on such changes but something in their soul!

**Robert:** Returning again to the question of numbers (one can't avoid them!) – numbers of Norwegians, numbers of pastoralists, numbers of reindeer and the relation between them. What do you think, Ole K., of the proposal currently under discussion concerning a minimum number of deer to qualify as a

registered pastoralist? For me, this is such an innovative move for otherwise what is debated interminably is the permissible maximum of animals per owner.

**Ole K.:** It's a good proposal – though not a new one. In 1982 or thereabouts we, the Reindeer Administration, sent a confidential memorandum on just this subject to the national committee that oversees developments in reindeer pastoralism. However, *Klassekampen* [the Norwegian newspaper of the farthest Left] got hold of it and promoted it as front page news – 'the Head of Reindeer Administration is proposing a means by which reindeer owners will be obliged to surrender their occupation!'

Of course other newspapers then began to ask me 'Is this true? Is it right?' Yes, I told them, it is, for as things stand at the moment it is all too easy for someone to be registered as a reindeer owner even though he has no animals – simply a reindeer mark. Nor need he contribute to the daily work of pastoralism; perhaps he's a lorry driver or taxi driver and that's where his labour is invested, nothing to pastoralism. Therefore a qualifying process must be instituted, I told the newspapers. But it got nowhere politically, it was rejected.

**Robert:** Still, isn't there another side that should be respected regarding any stipulation of a minimum number of deer? (The proposed number, I understand, is 200.) Consider the case of a young man whose ambition is to be a full-time and registered reindeer owner. But he has nowhere near the required 200 and his economic situation is such that he has to take other work, and that doesn't help in building up a herd. So he fails. It's a sad, even unjust, story. For despite everything, reindeer pastoralism is his culture – he has deer carrying his reindeer mark and in what free time he has he's out there helping with the herd. Am I being naive, sentimental?

**Ole K.:** No. I recognise what you are saying. No issue has only one side to it.

**Robert:** We agree, then, that while it is a proposal of theoretical merit it will need careful handling? For example, how long a time will that young man be allowed to reach the 200 mark? And what pay-back assistance might he be allowed?

**Ole K.:** Oh yes, we agree!

**Robert:** Ole K., before closing – what reflections might you have over your years in office? Regrets? Triumphs?

**Ole K.:** Being wise after the event? That really has no value if it is simply a matter of telling oneself that I did that right or I did that wrong; but it *is* useful

to reflect on *why* something went wrong or *why* I did this and not that. Now, if I look back over my 16 years as the administrative head and ask myself would I do it all over again in the same way if I started again, my answer is quite clear: no, I wouldn't.

There is a whole number of things that didn't come about as intended – and I have ideas about that. Yet, important for me are the changes which were set in motion by the new reindeer law and the new administrative system that followed in its wake: I firmly believe they were useful. At the same time, I don't think there's a person who could carry through those changes without making some mistakes. The really significant thing, for me, is that we (I with a team of great people) initiated administrative arrangements in which pastoralists themselves have important places. And there is a point worth stressing about that: they were given the authority to make decisions, and then, they were able later to assess, to evaluate, those decisions. *That* is one of the more important things that have happened.

For me, personally, those years were inspiring – to play a part in bringing a vision to life!

**Robert:** Thanks, Ole K.

## Notes

1. My thanks, first of all, to Ole K. Sara for agreeing to my publishing our conversations. They were conducted in Norwegian and tape-recorded. The translation is mine. Our conversations were of greater length than as now presented – too long for full inclusion here, so I have had to edit, selecting certain themes while omitting others, and I wish to thank Hugh Beach for his advice on this.
2. For West Finnmark (Kautokeino) alone, the increase is from 655 full-time pastoralists in 1950 to 1330 in 1990 (Sara and Karlstad 1993:19).
3. Notwithstanding the context and emphases of my conversations with Ole K., Saami reindeer pastoralism in Norway is not confined to Finnmark, the northernmost Norwegian province.
4. For both how the programme was envisaged and its unenvisaged effects, see Paine (1984: Chapter 13).
5. Reindeer marks, cut into the ears of the animals, signify ownership; they are not without cultural and political implications (Bjørklund and Eidheim 1999).
6. For one account of this untoward happening, see Paine (1999).
7. In the proposed revision of the 1978 Act, there is a return to the Saami key notion of *sii'da* (NOU 2001-35, kapittel 13).
8. Postscript, 2004: The state has declared that by April 2005 the reindeer in West Finnmark (Kautokeino) must be reduced by close to half its present number. Compulsory slaughter will be evoked where necessary.

## References

- Bjørklund, I. and H. Eidheim. 1999. 'Om reinmerker -kulturelle sammenhenger og norsk jus i Sabmi'. In *Norsk Ressursforvaltning og Samisk Rettighetsforhold*, ed. I. Bjørklund. Ad Notam Gyldendal.
- NOU 2001. *Forslag til Endringer i Reindriftsloven*. Oslo: Norges Offentlige Utredninger, 35.
- Paine, R. 1994. *Herds of the Tundra. A Portrait of Saami Reindeer Pastoralism*. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press.
- 1999 "'Reindeer theft?' Notes on how a culture is put at odds with itself', *Acta Borealia* 1: 63–82.
- Sara, A. and S. Karlstad. 1993. 'Reindriften i Vest-Finnmark. Nordisk Samisk Institutt, Kautokeino', *Diedut* 1.

Robert Paine's entry as an anthropologist into reindeer pastoralism dates from the early 1950s, so by the time Ole K. Sara entered into the Administration, Paine was no longer quite the marginal outsider. Sara, then, was a 'subject' of interest. Actually, the year of his first appointment, 1961, was also the year of Paine's intensive fieldwork with a Kautokeino pastoral group. Years later, when they were both officially 'retired', Paine took the opportunity of getting 'Ole K.' to reflect on those years of which Paine had some first-hand knowledge and during which 'Ole K.' was the prominent administrative person.