

In Left-Leaning Norway, Its Wealthy 'Fox' Gleeefully Swings to the Right

By STEVEN ERLANGER

The New York Times

OSLO — OLAV THON, at 90, is nearly as old as modern Norway, which became independent from Sweden in 1905. But today, having worked his way from being a poor farm boy in the mountains to Norway's wealthiest resident, he is not so sure independence was such a good idea.

Nazi Germany's swift occupation of Norway in the spring of 1940 might never have happened had Norway still been a part of Sweden, which was never occupied, he said.

"Nationalism in Norway was very strong in 1905, that we must be free of Sweden," he said. "But I must say I'm not 100 percent sure that was a wise decision. We had the war; we were occupied by Germans from 1940 to '45. And if there had been one Scandinavian country, then it would not have been so very easy probably to go ahead with the occupation."

The comment is a fine example of his pleasure at mixing things up and going against the leftish, leveling consensus here. Mr. Thon — pronounced something like "toun" — is a fabulously successful businessman who cheerfully supports the political right in one of the most wealthy, highly taxed countries in the world, where oil and gas revenues support a welfare system that makes working almost a lifestyle choice.

He likes bright, unsophisticated clothing, favoring loud plaids, a trademark knitted and knobby pink wool hat and bright green neckties, promoting his brand as a simple man of the soil who has made it among the city slickers.

He has always been critical of the



Of young Norwegians spoiled by the welfare system, Olav Thon says, "You can't feed a cat with cream and food in the kitchen and expect him to go catch mice." Kyrre Lien for The New York Times

large state and its tax burden, which he willingly pays, having chosen not to become a tax exile, and he is anxious about the impact of immigration on what was a small, essentially rural, monoethnic Norway.

But he caused a stir when he took out large advertisements in the newspapers supporting the anti-immigration Progress Party before September's elections, which brought the party into the government for the first time, as a junior partner to the Conservative Party after eight years of coalitions led by the Labor Party.

Mr. Thon, who is married but childless, made news again late last year when he announced that he was giving away the largest part of his fortune to a foundation, which would both preserve his large holding company and make millions of dollars of grants to charities, research institutions and medical science.

His fortune is estimated to be

about 25.4 billion kroner (about \$4.1 billion); he says he is putting around 90 percent of it into the foundation, which will be run by a seven-member board he will preside over. He said it would give out at least 50 million kroner a year, about \$8 million, in grants for scientific research and innovation.

SPEAKING a slow but fluent English, he acknowledges that part of his idea, being without an heir, was to preserve his business into the future. But he scoffed at the notion that he was setting up a charity just to save taxes, noting that the current government has promised to eliminate Norway's wealth tax in any case.

In an hour's interview that continued over lunch in his Thon group's first hotel, the Bristol, he was both witty and engaged, happy to confront any topic and even to mock himself lightly for his trademark dress, calling it "a publicity stunt."

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Mr. Thon was born to a farming family in the village of Al (pronounced "awl"), in the mountainous Hallingdal region northwest of Oslo. The village's name comes from the Norse word for "ditch" or "gully," and young Mr. Thon, having worked since the age of 7 as a shepherd above the tree line, quickly climbed out and made his way to the small capital of the newish country, Oslo.

A born businessman, he began trapping foxes, went to sell the pelts and got into the fur business, exporting Norwegian fox and importing fur like Persian lamb. It gave him his nickname, "the fox" — Norway's richest man, John Fredriksen, who lives in tax exile in Cyprus, is known as "big wolf" — and taught him valuable lessons, he said.

He has been criticized for selling furs to German soldiers during Norway's five-year occupation by the Nazis, something he readily acknowledges, shrugging. He had a fur shop and sales personnel sold "to anyone who came in the door," he said.

After the war, in 1952, Mr. Thon got a lesson in betrayal, he said. Customs duties on popular Persian lamb differed markedly depending on whether the curls on the pelts were tight, and he trusted a shipping agent who turned out to be bribing customs officials to charge the lesser duty on the more valuable pelts. The affair cost Mr. Thon, who insists he did not know of the bribery, a short stay in police custody, a conviction and a fine of 80,000 kroner.

He was not yet 30, he said. "For me it was very sad, but ever since I have been very careful; from this 80,000 kroner I learned, and it was a good thing," he said.

And he fiercely denied suggestions made by a sociologist and writer, Dag Ellingsen, who wrote a critical biography of Mr. Thon in 2008, that he profited from insurance coverage for fires in buildings he owned in Oslo, allowing him to rebuild more modern and profitable structures.

Mr. Ellingsen, whose book also pointed out some of Mr. Thon's dealings with the Germans, said he has moved on to other topics. "Thon is an ambivalent figure," he said in an interview. "He's built a picture of himself as a guy who gives away all his money and walks in the mountains to be healthy. But on the other hand he's been building malls all around Norway and Sweden, making people drive long distances to buy things."

Mr. Thon, looking at examples from the United States, began to build a real estate empire, buying and building hotels and shopping malls. The Olav Thon Group now has about 500 properties, including more than 65 hotels in four countries, and 90 shopping centers, with a pretax profit in 2012 of \$260 million.

BUT his views remain crusty. He thinks young Norwegians have gone soft with oil wealth and the welfare system: "You can't feed a cat with cream and food in the kitchen and expect him to go catch mice." And he worries about uncontrolled population growth: "Are we sure it's a good thing for the world that we should be 20 billion people?"

Erna Solberg, Norway's new prime minister, said that Mr. Thon reminded her of the famous Norwegian fairy tales about Askeladden, or the Ash Boy, "the clever guy who against all odds always wins the princess and half the kingdom and always has two dumb brothers," she said. "I think the image of Olav Thon

has always been a bit of that Norwegian fairy tale. And he still lives very simply."

She hastened to add, "Of course he's given good benefits to Norwegian society, and in the last 10 to 20 years he's given a lot of grants to various activities close to all Norwegian hearts, especially outdoor activities, walking and skiing in the countryside."

Mr. Thon gave some money to his relatives, but is famously without an heir. But then, presumably thinking of his own decisions about inheritance, he said: "I don't know how many companies I've bought in my life, and most of them I've bought from children whose father has passed away, and they say, 'Now we're free, would you like to buy it?'"

As for children, he said: "I think that life is so interesting for me I never missed them. From early morning to late at night it's such an interesting life, and I'm healthy and free, and that's not so easy with a family."

Henrik Pryser Libell contributed reporting.

A version of this article appears in print on February 8, 2014, on page A7 of the New York edition with the headline: In Left-Leaning Norway, Its Wealthy 'Fox' Gleefully Swings to the Right. For more, please visit www.nytimes.com.