

# Dialect would be welcome if I was minister for education

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When I become minister for education, I am going to issue a circular to all the schools in our country which will read as follows:

“It is the duty of teachers to show great respect for children’s spoken language, and they should ensure children feel and understand this. Teachers should help and encourage children to speak their local dialect and accent clearly, mellifluously and well. They should not attempt to have children abandon their native accent and dialect or have them speak the standard language in school. The school head must immediately intervene against any action of this type and instruct the individual concerned to adhere to this clear legal regulation.”

What this means is that, under my ministry, teachers won’t be allowed to tell Norfolk children that it’s “wrong” to say “I’m now a-comen” and “He play very good”.

On the contrary, children must be encouraged to say precisely those things if they are part of their local dialect. If Norfolk children pronounce hair and here, and pure and purr, the same, that will also be fine and to be encouraged. If they pronounce few as foo, teachers will be



■ Norway should not only be admired for its beauty, says our columnist, but also for its commonsense attitude towards language, dialect and accent.

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required to permit them to carry on doing so.

Do you think this is absurd? If so, you needn’t worry because I’m not ever going to be minister for education. But this is not a ludicrous fantasy I’m having. This is not just a scenario I have imagined. The above words are not my own. This “edict” of mine is a direct translation of a circular which was issued by the Norwegian Ministry of Church and Education to all the schools in Norway on February 27, 1923.

Under my ministry, just like in Norway, writing would be different from speaking. Teachers would be required to explain to

pupils that in writing, the forms to use will be “I’m just coming” and “He plays very well”. This is not because these forms are “right” as opposed to “wrong”, but because they are part of Standard English, the dialect which is conventionally used in formal writing in the English-speaking world.

Norway is a country which is to be admired not just for its mountains and fjords, and for the role of its government as a mediator in international disputes. It is also to be admired for being a place where commonsense about language, dialect and accent are more prevalent than ignorance, prejudice and unreason.