

SELF-RULE IN GREENLAND TOWARDS THE WORLD'S FIRST INDEPENDENT INUIT STATE?

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*Home Rule has been a process of nation-building. Self-Rule may put Greenland on the road to becoming an independent state. Sisimiut, West Greenland.
Photo: Mark Nuttall*

On 25 November 2008, 75.5% of the electorate of the world's largest island voted in favour of greater autonomy. Greenlanders, who became the first population of Inuit origin to achieve a degree of self-government when Denmark granted them Home Rule in 1979, have given their political leaders a mandate for significant and far-reaching change. There are many in the Home Rule government who dream that this historic vote will see Greenland move from being a semi-autonomous territory to an independent state within a generation – Greenland's Premier Hans Enoksen has expressed a desire for independence in 2021, a date marking three hundred years since Danish colonization. The realities of self-rule leave others – particularly those critical that the referendum was too early in Greenland's recent political history – unconvinced that independence is just over the Arctic horizon.

The referendum is non-binding on both the Greenlandic and Danish parliaments, but it gives the go ahead to negotiations between Greenland and Denmark over some thirty-two areas that Greenland could assume responsibility for if approved by both parliaments. Thirty years after it came into being, Home Rule will end on 21 June 2009 when the new political arrangement of Self-Rule will be instituted. Areas that could come under Greenlandic control include the justice system, police system, prison affairs and the coast-guard. Greenland will also be able to represent itself on the stage of international affairs. A debate will also ensue about making Greenlandic (*Kalaallisut*) the country's official language – linguistic distinctiveness and the construction of a national language perhaps being necessary for a vernacular-specific independence movement. Despite the challenges ahead, and irrespective of whether it means eventual independence, a vote for Self-Rule is a statement expressing growing cultural and political confidence in a country of only 57,000 people, over 80% of whom are Inuit (in terms of its geographical size, an independent Greenland would make it the 13th largest country in the world).

Greenland Home Rule has often been considered a model for indigenous self-government, but it has been a process of nation-building rather than an ethno-political movement. Its relevance goes beyond that of self-determination for indigenous peoples and says much about the aspirations for autonomy in small political jurisdictions and stateless nations. Although issues of ethnicity, culture and language played a major role in the debates leading up to the referendum – and while Canadian Inuit political leader Mary Simon has heralded the vote as important for all Inuit in the world wishing to assert their rights – the overwhelming vote

for greater self-government in Greenland is a vote expressed by a people wishing to determine their own political and economic future and to assume control over the institutions and processes that may make this possible. The vote for Self-Rule in Greenland is about a new politics of difference.

Overcoming dependency: sub-surface rights and a self-sustaining economy

So how will Greenland pay for the responsibilities it may eventually take over from the Danish state? The Greenlandic economy remains dependent for 60% of its budget revenue on a 3.5 billion DKK (around 470 million EUR) annual block grant it receives from Denmark, with the balance coming from local taxes. The main challenge to securing greater self-government is overcoming this reliance and replacing it with revenues generated from within Greenland. Oil and gas production and the mining of raw materials would ease this dependence, and much of the debate prior to the referendum centered on Greenland's ownership of lucrative resources.

The Danish-Greenlandic Self-Rule Commission, established in 2004 to negotiate the terms of greater self-government, considered Greenland's claim to mineral rights, its ownership of subsoil resources and right to the revenues from non-renewable resource development. The commission concluded that minerals in Greenland's subsoil belong to Greenland and that the country has a right to their extraction. Under the Self-Rule agreement, the income generated by sub-surface resource development would be administered by Greenland, with the level of the Danish block grant being reduced by an amount corresponding to 50% of the earnings from minerals and energy extraction once they exceed 75 million DKK. Future revenues from oil and mineral resources will then be divided between Greenland and Denmark, while the annual block grant is reduced further and eventually phased out.

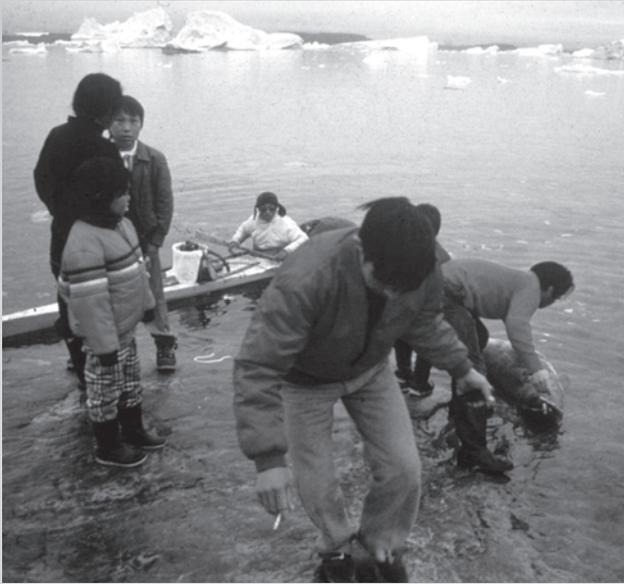
This, of course, depends on there being a rich seam of resources to tap in the first place. Geological mapping and reports on the potential for undiscovered and technically recoverable hydrocarbons serve to confirm the view that Greenland could be a significant source of new mineral and petroleum development. In 2007, using northeast Greenland as a prototype for its circum-Arctic oil and gas appraisal, the United States Geological Survey (USGS) estimated that the East Greenland Rift Basins Province could hold over 31 billion barrels of oil, gas and natural gas liquids (Gautier 2007). USGS estimates that the waters off Greenland's west coast could contain more than 110 billion barrels

of oil (roughly 42% of Saudi Arabia's reserves) have already attracted interest in the territory's potential. ExxonMobil and Chevron from the U.S., Husky and Encana from Canada, the UK's Cairn Energy and Denmark's Dong Energy are among the companies that have either already won or applied for exploration licenses from Greenland's Bureau of Minerals and Petroleum for acreage. Industry events and conferences profiling Greenland's resource potential, such as the Greenland Sustainable Mineral and Petroleum Development Conference held in Copenhagen on 6-7 May 2008, are becoming more frequent and are designed as platforms for international resource companies seeking to learn more about development opportunities in Greenland, and aim to attract international investors who are looking to gain more knowledge of potential projects in the region (Nuttall 2009).

For Greenlanders, sub-surface resources have long been part of their 'cognized environment', to borrow Roy Rappaport's phrase (Rappaport 1968). Mining is part of the story of Greenland's recent history. Coal mining, for example, was carried out at Qullissat on Disko Island in west Greenland between 1924 and 1972, and produced coal for the first power stations that were built in the larger towns. Cryolite was mined at Ivittuut in southwest Greenland, lead and zinc at Mesters Vig in northeast Greenland, and lead, zinc, marble and silver at Maarmorilik in the northwest of the country. But this mining has been part of its colonial history and, until recently, no extractive industries have been in operation in the last couple of decades or so. However, Greenland has granted a number of mineral exploration and exploitation licenses in recent years. The Nalunaq gold mine opened near Nanortalik in south Greenland in 2004, and an olivine mine north of the capital Nuuk has been in operation since 2007. Several more mines extracting gold, rubies, diamonds and other minerals are expected to open over the next five years. Despite a 1988 ban on mining uranium and other radioactive waste material, the Narsaq Business Council has expressed support for the development of a uranium mine at Kvanefjeld near the south Greenland town as a way of providing employment and of reviving a declining local economy. Greenland Minerals and Energy, an Australian-owned company that calls Greenland 'one of the world's last natural resource frontiers', argues that Greenland could surpass China as the world's leading exporter of uranium and, given the belief in the economic advantage of a mine that could be open for 40 years, the Greenland parliament is preparing to debate the consequences of repealing the ban on mining radioactive waste (a majority in parliament has already voted in favour of extracting urani-

Greenland's environment is viewed as a vast storehouse of mineral and hydrocarbon wealth. Recent discussions between Greenland and Denmark have focused on the ownership of sub-surface resources. Northeast Greenland.
Photo: Mark Nuttall





*From the largest towns to the smallest settlements, Greenlanders have voted overwhelmingly in favour of Self-Rule, Nutaarmiut, Northwest Greenland
Photo: Mark Nuttall*



*Travelling on sea ice, Thule, Northwest Greenland.
Photo: Mark Nuttall*



um as a by-product from the mining of other minerals). Local concern in Narsaq is being voiced in community hearings and in the national media, however, and the regional municipality is opposed to the planned venture, citing environmental, health, and social and cultural impacts. .

With or without Narsaq's uranium mine, some politicians are confident that mining will eventually overtake the fishing industry as Greenland's main source of income and they speak of their cornucopian vision of Greenland's nature. However, Canadian-owned Quadra Mining has recently put plans to open a molybdenum mine in east Greenland on hold due to falling prices for metal, indicating that the global economic climate may yet temper the enthusiasm of Greenland's leaders in Nuuk for a gold rush in the Arctic's new Klondike. Sharp falls in commodity prices in late 2008 have had major consequences for mining companies around the world, most notably for Rio Tinto which has announced 14,000 job cuts in its global workforce. Such economic realities give credence to those – most notably the Demokratit party (Democrats) – who opposed self-rule and who argue that Greenland's small population, and hence its economy, can never be self-sustaining.

The Alcoa aluminium smelter

In a previous article for *Indigenous Affairs*, I discussed the American aluminium company Alcoa's plans to build an aluminium smelter near Maniitsoq on Greenland's west coast (Nuttall 2008). With the goal of producing 340,000 tonnes of aluminium ingots annually, the smelter (planned for construction in 2012-2014) would require two hydro-power plants to supply it with energy (to be built between 2010-2014). Estimates suggest employment for between 2,000-5,500 people over the four years needed to construct the dams and smelter, with some 600 jobs available when the project is operational.

It is not anticipated that the construction jobs will go to Greenlanders. Premier Hans Enoksen has gone on record as saying that he anticipates the majority of workers will be foreigners, mainly Poles, Portuguese and Chinese. One of Greenland's main newspapers, *Sermitsiaq*, described how Maniitsoq could, like many of the world's large cities, soon have its own Chinatown. For a nation in the making, with aspirations of one day becoming an independent state, this would be a marker of cosmopolitanism that would turn it into Greenland's first multicultural centre because of the influx of the thousands of foreign workers who will come to Greenland to work on the Alcoa project.¹ Enoksen, however, has courted controversy by saying that

they will be isolated in a 'barrack-town' away from Maniitsoq and close to the construction site.² The idea is that local people should not come into contact with the incomers. A recent editorial in *Sermitsiaq* asked whether it was right to construct barracks for thousands of workers that Greenland 'will invite up to work in the cold'. The newspaper wondered whether the foreigners should integrate, or live geographically and socially isolated from the host population, and argued that many questions about the working environment and working conditions (including human rights aspects), environmental impacts, housing, infrastructure and carbon dioxide emissions remain unanswered.³

Missing from the reportage in the Greenlandic media is any comment on how the proposed smelter is a prime example of the global restructuring process the aluminium industry has been undergoing. Production has moved away from its traditional industrial heartlands of Western nations, such as the United States, to parts of the world where cheap energy and cheap labour can be accessed readily, and to places where environmental impact assessment and regulation procedures can be moved through swiftly. For Alcoa and other international multinationals, Greenland is a remote extractive periphery where the regulatory process and less than stringent legal requirements for environmental hearings make it an attractive place to invest. Although a Strategic Environmental Impact Assessment (SEA) has been carried out, concern has been expressed in Greenland about the lack of public consultation and hearing processes, land-use conflicts, and the absence of legislation dealing with industrial development projects (Lund Sørensen 2008, Nuttall 2008). The changing definitions of Greenland, its environment and its resources, provide a case study of what Paul Ciccantell (1999: 294), describing his own work in the Brazilian Amazon, argues is 'the essential nature of "definitions of society-nature relations": the political economy and ecology of the external imposition of definitions and uses on nature, rural communities, and indigenous peoples.' In this process of codification of the environment and the quest to develop its resources, Greenland is on the verge of capitalist penetration on the part of multinational corporations. Self-Rule may mean greater independence from Denmark but the beginning of new forms of dependency relations.

Towards Copenhagen 2009

Internationally, Greenland constructs an image of itself as a leading participant in global policy debate on climate change, as well as being on the front line of the



Impressions from Nuuk, Greenland's capital
Photos: Kathrin Wessendorf



negative experience of anthropogenic change, as evident in the reduction of sea ice and the melting of the country's massive inland ice sheet (Nuttall 2009). The Department of Foreign Affairs works closely with the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs on specific issues related to climate change within four main areas: the Arctic Council, indigenous peoples' issues under the auspices of the United Nations, preparations for the UN Climate Change Conference (COP15) to be held in Copenhagen in December 2009, and the European Union's Overseas Countries and Territories forum. Because of Denmark's ratification of the Kyoto Protocol, Greenland is obliged to reduce its carbon dioxide emissions by 8% by 2012, and politicians have spoken enthusiastically about reducing oil consumption and investing in hydro-power to produce renewable forms of energy as a means to achieve this. Domestically, however, there remains no policy in place on climate change, nor is there a climate change adaptation strategy formulated or defined.

Despite plans for a Centre for Climate Research in Nuuk, and while a new government department will be created to deal exclusively with climate change, the country's economic policies on resource development and extractive industries look set to establish Greenland as a significant contributor to climate change, developing industries that hasten the thinning of rapidly disappearing sea ice and accelerate the melting of the Greenland inland ice. The Strategic Environmental Assessment for the Alcoa smelter anticipates that, during normal operations, it will have an annual impact of 4,600 tons of sulphur dioxide and 450,000 tons of carbon dioxide emissions. An ambition to be a major producer of raw materials is pitting the Greenland government against the Danes as preparations step-up towards COP15. Greenland has indicated that it may seek exemption from any new agreement on CO₂ reductions.

Max Weber called a nation a 'community of sentiment' that can only really find its ultimate expression by striving to turn itself into a state of its own. Greenland may well be one step further towards a future as the world's first independent Inuit state. Greenlandic politicians widely agree that attracting foreign investment for the development of minerals and hydrocarbons is the key to financial, economic and eventual political independence, and that in doing so one consequence is a trade-off between environmental protection and environmental disturbance. Perhaps this is best expressed in the words of Josef Motzfeldt, an MP in the Home Rule government and former Minister of Foreign Affairs:

...climate change has already opened new areas for the exploitation of mineral resources as the ice cap is

retreating. And in combination with the political and economical control of our mineral resources it will open new opportunities for Greenland to gain more economical and political independence from Denmark..... We have to choose on the one hand between unrestricted exploitation of our resources in order to gain more independence, and on the other hand the protection of our nature, which is so dear to us in order to maintain our cultural heritage in the shape of a close interrelationship between human activity and changes in the environment.⁴

It is a Faustian bargain Greenland appears willing to strike, and it reminds us that self-determination is also about the right to development and, based on the rights of people to govern themselves, it is about the right to make decisions and choices that determine the path development should take. □

Notes

1. Kurt Kristensen, 'Maniitsoq får sin egen Chinatown/Maniitsoq Chinatown-eqalissaaq' *Sermitsiaq* 28 March 2008, p.3
2. Irene Jeppson 'Alocami sulisut barakkiniissapput/Aloca-arbejdere isoleres i barakker' *Sermitsiaq* 4 April 2008, p. 2
3. Editorial, 'Silatusaarneq/Sund fornuft' *Sermitsiaq* 28 March 2008, p.44
4. Josef Motzfeldt, 'Climate change in a Greenlandic perspective'. Presentation at the 'Trans-Atlantic Climate Conference', Torshavn, Faroe Islands, 7-8 April 2008

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