GREENLAND

With a modern and well-functioning welfare system, where education, pension, health service and unemployment benefit are taken for granted, the development of Greenland’s home rule is in many ways a model for other indigenous populations around the world. Home rule makes Greenland’s population self-governing in almost all domestic areas.

On the other hand, the country is dependent on a single resource, fishing. Its economy is closely tied to fluctuations in the fishing industry and price developments on the global market. It also still has close cultural, political, social and economic ties with Denmark in the form of annual subsidies of over DKK 2,500m and the free provision of education, hospital and other services to Greenlandic citizens.

Further Information

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History

The first people migrated to Greenland across the Davis Strait from the American continent more than 4,000 years ago. The first links with Europe were established with the Norse settlements in 985 AD and lasted until the mid 15th century. The flourishing European whaling industry in the 16th century restored regular visits to Greenland, but a permanent link was not established until the settlement of the Danish-Norwegian priest Hans Egede in 1721. This formed the basis of Danish sovereignty for the next 258 years, where the establishment of the trade monopoly the Royal Greenland Trade Department, the KGH (Kongelige Grønlandske Handel), was particularly significant.

Until the Second World War, Greenland was a closed country with a very low standard of living. During the Second World War, the German occupation of Denmark meant that all contact with Denmark was suspended and officials in Greenland and Washington, D.C. maintained contact with the USA, which agreed to defend Greenland; in 1951-1952 an American military base was established at Thule. After the war, a popular movement arose in favour of modernisation of the country and the basis of the welfare system which today characterises Greenland was laid in the 1950s.

Political Life

As early as 1857, Greenlanders were involved in the decision-making process and the 1908 Statute intro-
duced municipal and provincial councils with democratically elected representatives. In 1953, Greenland became a country, in principle on equal terms with the other Danish counties. Greenlandic opposition to Danish administration contributed to the introduction of home rule in 1979.

In accordance with home rule, Greenland retains extensive powers of self-government while remaining sovereign to the Danish Crown. The Folketing (the Danish parliament) has transferred almost all legislation to the Landsting (the Greenlandic parliament), which also enjoys some judicial control over some areas of government. Greenland’s home rule elects two representatives to the Folketing. At least every four years, there is a general election to the Landsting. The Landsting nominates the president of the Greenlandic Parliament (the Greenland executive) and approves the nomination of its members, who act as ministers under the government. Each member of the Landsting serves as minister of a particular government department.

Greenland is divided into 18 municipalities, each led by a local council and a mayor. Among other things, the municipalities are responsible for education, which in turn gives access to a larger number of jobs. Although the economic significance of the traditional way of life is steadily decreasing, hunting is still a crucial part of Greenlandic identity.

Language

The official languages are Greenlandic and Danish. Greenlandic is closely related to the languages spoken in the Inuit in Canada, USA and Siberia. Greenlandic comprises East Greenlandic, West Greenlandic and Polar Eskimo. Greenlandic is the language used in schools and dominates in most towns and settlements.

Resources

Greenland has considerable mineral deposits. Formerly cryolite was mined in Ijuitt, coal near Qullissat, marble and later, zinc, lead and silver near Maarmorilik and zinc, molybdenum and lead near Mestersvig. There are also a number of minerals which may prove to be of economic interest, including offshore and onshore coal beds. Jameson Land in East Greenland as well as deposits of gold, niobium, tantalite, uranium, iron and diamonds. Greenland’s first major hydropower plant is situated near the Bukefjord south of Nuuk.

Hunting

In the traditional sealing community the marine mammals are essential for survival and every year around 160,000 seals, 50,000 walrus and limited number of whales are killed. The meat of the animals is traded locally where it fetches considerable sums, but the over exploitation of the seals is the cause of the sale of sealskins to the tannery Great Greenland in Qaqortoq. Due to the difficulties of selling the skins on the global market, the Home Rule Government generously subsidises the sealskin trades. However, in recent years, this market has been so unprofitable that it is considered as unprofitable. Every year, some 150 polar bears are killed. Only local residents whose main occupation is hunting may hunt polar bears.

In addition, the island’s rich bird life is exploited and the reindeer in West Greenland and the musk ox in North East Greenland and around Kangerlussuaq are also hunted. Hunting continues to play an important role for the population in North and East Greenland, though it is no longer the dominant occupation. On the other hand, hunting has gained a strong new role as a subsidiary occupation or leisure activity in towns as well as settlements.

Sheep Farming

The more fertile areas of South Greenland are suitable for sheep farming and fields have been cultivated on the southeastern winter fodder during the summer. As there is no private right of ownership for land in Greenland, the sheep farming is only generally responsible for agreeing the terms of the right to use the land. Some 20,000 lambs are slaughtered annually in Narsaq and in addition, large numbers are slaughtered on the farms.

Fishing

The nutrient salts from the melting snow and ice during the summer months together with the long, light summers encourage abundant plankton growth, which feeds more than 200 different species of fish, crustaceans and mussels. In addition to 5,000 dophings, the fishing fleet consists of around 300 cutters and some 25 trawlers. The cold-water prawns is by far the most important fishing product. Formerly, cod played a central role, but today Greenland halibut is particularly important. Fishing of Norway haddock, catfish, Atlantic halibut, salmon and char is of local importance.

Fishing Industry

The majority of Greenland’s fishing industry is managed by Greenlandic A/S, which is owned by the Home Rule Government. The main product is peeled prawns, which are sold on the northern European market. The company’s trawlers are provided unpeeled, cooked or raw, frozen prawns. The company is the world’s largest retailer of cold-water prawns. A total of almost 6,500 people are employed in fishing and the fishing industry.

Services, Trade and Sales

Much of Greenland’s wholesale and retail business is managed by the publicly-owned company KNI (Ka-Laallit Niuerfiat, Greenland Trade). The company is divided into two separate units, Piniik A/S, which operate in the ten largest towns, and Pilersuisoq A/S, which supplies settlements and smaller towns. KNI handles approximately half the total trade in Greenland.

Infrastructure

There are roads in the towns, but the towns are not connected by a network of roads. Shipping is still the main element in Greenland’s infrastructure. A well-developed freight system handles transport between Greenland and Denmark and increasingly also between Greenland and Iceland and Canada. Part of the local passenger transport within Greenland is by ship, but most people travel by air. Local traffic is by helicopter, while the transport between the districts and the major towns is by plane. In recent years, aircraft traffic has been developed and runways have been established near to most major towns. The main air traffic junction remains Kangerlussuaq.

Social Services and Education

Greenland has a well-developed but also costly social safety net. In 1997, the state contributed around DKK 1,400m to the social system. The main social benefits include old-age and early retirement pensions, educational grants, social security payments in connection with unemployment and family allowances.

The Home Rule Government strives to ensure that Greenlanders do not have to leave the island for their education and a number of regional training centres offer a broad range of vocational training. In addition, there are secondary schools.
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Greenland is divided into 18 municipalities, each led by a local coun-cil and a mayor. Among other things, the municipalities are re- sponsible for education, the running of primary schools, cultural and leisure activi-ties and a range of social services. Political life is very active and dominated by three parties. Siumut is the largest party with a policy seeking extensive independence within the framework of Danish sovereignty and the largest is Ataqatigiit, which advocates close co-operation with Denmark. The party Inuit Ataqatigiit pursues independ-ence for Greenland.

**Links with the Outside World**

Greenland is isolated and cannot control the exploitation of mineral resources whereas foreign policy, the police service and the judicial system as well as the surveillance of Greenland’s waters are handled by Den-mark. The Danish state is represent-ed by the High Commissioner. Greenland is linked to the Nordic Council and has close links with the other Nordic countries. Greenland’s economy, settlement structure, education service and wel-fare system have much in common with the Scandinavian welfare state model, but there are also links with the North American context. The international organisation ICC, In-uit Circumpolar Conference, has been particularly influential in de-veloping Arctic co-operation, which has for instance manifested itself in the establishment of the Arctic Council in 1996.

**Population**

Just over 56,000 people live in Greenland. More than 49,000 of these were born on the island. With a rate of natural increase of around 12 per thousand, the population is steadily increasing.

The central parts of West Green-land are the most densely populated. Most of the population – around 35,000 – live in the towns, of which Nuuk is the largest. 60% of West Greenland’s population live in the six largest towns, the rest in more than 120 settlements, trading posts and sheep stations.

The settlements have only one shop with relatively few goods and few opportunities for public entertainment. Conversely, many of the larg-er towns offer a rich choice in terms of both shopping goods, schools and health care which gives access to a larger number and variety of jobs.

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**Exports (1999)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Product</th>
<th>1,000 tonnes</th>
<th>DKKm</th>
<th>% of total export</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Prawn</td>
<td>45.7</td>
<td>1,238</td>
<td>64.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greenland halibut</td>
<td>13.5</td>
<td>386</td>
<td>20.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crab</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cod</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>2.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sealskin products</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>0.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In 1999, Greenland’s total export revenue was DKK 1,932m.

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**Fisheries**

The nutrient salts from the melting snow and ice during the summer months together with the long, light summers encourage abundant plankton growth, which feeds more than 200 different species of fish, crustaceans and mussels. In addition, large numbers of freshwater and saltwater invertebrates are grazed by migratory birds.

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**Sheep Farming**

The more fertile areas of South Greenland are suitable for sheep farming and fields have been cultivat-ed by forcing the necessary winter fodder during the summer. As there is no private right of own-ership for land in Greenland, the sheep farmer is primarily responsible for agreeing the terms of the right to use the land. Some 20,000 lambs are slaughtered annually in Narsaq and in addition, lambs and sheep are slaughtered on the farms.

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The town of Nuuk in South West Greenland. Photo: Nuuk Foto.

Greenland

Greenlandic art has always been closely associated with nature and natural materials. Soapstone and bone are important materials for carving figurines and sculptures, notably by artists such as Christian Rosing (b.1944) and Aka Hæghe (b.1947). Aka Hæghe is also known as one of Greenland’s great graphic artists, whose work like that of artists such as Jens Rosing (b.1925), Kristian Olsen (Aaju) (b.1942), Ki-stat Lund (b.1942) and Naja Abels- sen (b.1964), is inspired by man’s meeting with Greenland’s magnifi-cent nature.

Story-telling was formerly a key feature of Greenlandic culture, but with the introduction of writing in the 18th century and the establishment of the South Greenland Printing Press in 1857, the written word became an important element of cultural life. The Danish-Greenlandic explorer Knud Rasmussen (1879-1933) wrote fiction inspired by the Greenlandic tradition and was at the same time probably the most important documenter of Greenlandic legends and stories and the way of life of the Polar Eskimos. Many poets, such as Mathias Storch (1883-1957) and Otto Sandgreen (1914-1999), have dealt with the great changes which the Greenlandic society underwent in the 20th cen-tury. This is also a central theme in the work of poets such as Aqqualuk Lyngé (b.1947).

Traditional drum song is still practiced, but vocal art is dominated by the polyphonic singing introduced by the Moravian Brethren and performed by for instance the Greenlandic choir Mik. The music scene is dominated by rhythm music with rock bands such as Sume, G-60 and Zikaza as well as Ole Kri-stian (b.1965) and Rasmus Ly-berth (b.1951).

Traditional drum dance has large-ly been superseded by the more con-temporary approach of amateur the-atre groups which incorporate tra-di-sonal modes of expression using masks and face painting, while fo-cusing on contemporary problems. The theatre group Silamitut plays a key role.

Rasmus Ole Rasmussen
Senior Lecturer, lic.scient.

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POLITICAL LIFE

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