

# Northern Development: Modernization with Equality in Greenland<sup>1</sup>

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## INTRODUCTION

Over the past few years, northern development has become a major issue in all countries whose territories extend beyond the Arctic Circle. This fact is in part a result of the discovery of new resources and the technological means of developing them, but also reflects the aspirations, expectations and growing self-awareness of the native peoples concerned. Though each northern area is different from every other in regard to available natural resources as well as ethnic character and cultural traditions, some common characteristics of northern development may be identified.

Most natives in the North desire *modernization*, i.e. some form of adaptation to the conditions prevailing in the southern, developed parts of their respective countries, which may be referred to in brief as the "southern model". There is no northern model for development; natives see their forms of society in relation to the past, not the future, and therefore regard change as a threat and endeavour to preserve their own values and culture in the process of adaptation to the southern model. The natives, however, desire parity of material condition and esteem with the peoples in the southern areas, and modernization is seen by them as a means of achieving this *equality*. The desired modernization with equality must, of course, be sought in relation to some compromise between *centralization* and *decentralization* of government and employment.

The foregoing concepts are discussed in the present paper with reference to Greenland, the development of which has for over a hundred years been the subject of considerable documentation — albeit until quite recently mostly in Danish — and so is amenable to systematic studies such as are not possible in respect of other northern territories.

## THE POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC BACKGROUND

Whereas until very recently most of the development that took place in the Canadian North was either fortuitous or else the response to urgent needs as they arose, the Danes began raising questions about choices and policies for development as early as by the middle of the nineteenth century. By that time, they had more than a hundred years of colonization behind them. They had gained some

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<sup>1</sup>Adapted from a paper presented at the 1975 conference of the Canadian Political Science Association, Edmonton, Alberta, 4 June 1975.

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experience from their northern as well as their West Indian possessions of how to run outposts with all-native populations. However, in regard to Greenland, they acted differently to the British, French, Dutch and other contemporary colonizers in their own territories in that they allowed economic exploitation to be of only minor consequence in the policies they adopted. Their original incentive was certainly economic, but during the eighteenth century and part of the nineteenth, Danish trade with Greenland was only moderately profitable. Due to the increasing emphasis on state-run missionary activities and the relative insignificance of the economic gains, cultural, social and other non-economic motivations became predominant. The economic objective was no longer to maximize net profits, but to recover the expenses of administration and development.

The Danish government decided to institute what in terms of the general concepts already discussed might be called a northern model of development without modernization. In practice, it meant that the native society in Greenland should maintain its separate identity to the greatest extent possible, though provided with facilities for educational advancement. To this end the Danes instituted a general educational system in the Eskimo language as well as in Danish, and in 1846, they established two teachers' colleges for the Greenland Eskimos, based on a six-year training programme. In 1861, they even initiated the publication of an all-Greenlandic newspaper, *Atvagagdliutit*, later merged with a Danish-language paper into the bilingual *Grønlandsposten* which is now a major source of information on current affairs in Greenland.

This large-scale social and cultural experiment was based on the maintenance of a delicate balance between centralization and devolution. The Danish government was in charge of virtually all administration that did not deal with social matters. It held an absolute monopoly of all forms of trade. Other nations were barred from direct communication with Greenland or the Greenlanders. The Eskimos sold their furs and other products to the Royal Greenland Trade Department which in turn provided them with everything they needed at very favourable prices. The cost of social services and welfare were covered by a tax on all products sold by the Greenlanders to the Department. The more furs, etc. a man sold, the more he paid in taxes. This meant that the better hunters in the community provided for those who were unable to take care of themselves, much as they had done on a communal basis before the Danes came.

To counterbalance at the local level, the highly centralized structure of their colonial government, directed as it had been entirely from Copenhagen, there was instituted between 1857 and 1863 a system of limited self-government based on "boards of guardians" (*forstanderskaberne*), the members of which were elected natives, except for a few appointed representatives of the Danish authorities. In the beginning, only those Greenlanders successful at seal hunting — considered to be the most demanding and difficult form of hunting — were eligible to be elected to the boards.

Over the period 1908-11, a further development in local self-government took place. Two advisory provincial councils (*landerrådene*) were set up, one for each of the two existing provinces (North Greenland and South Greenland) covering the west coast. The boards of guardians were replaced by municipal councils

(*kommunerådene*) on which Danes were not eligible to serve. It is worthy of note that the decision to have no Danish appointees on the municipal councils was at first heralded as a victory for the native cause; but the all-native councils quickly discovered that their influence vis-à-vis the Danish authorities was diminished in the absence of any representatives of the latter with their first-hand knowledge of local problems.

In 1925, yet another change took place. The municipalities were increased in number, and Danes again became eligible to serve on their councils. The same municipalities were grouped into 13 districts, in each of which a council was formed — to supervise the administration of schools, etc. — which included the chairmen of the municipal councils, and all Danish officials, in the district. The two advisory provincial councils remained unchanged.

The Danes made a determined effort to keep their own and the native societies apart as two separate civilizations, each based on different sets of values and traditions, yet it was doomed to fail because of a large number of factors, of which two were particularly important. First there were the cumulative effects of coexistence. Over the period of 200 years since the Danes first became involved in the government of Greenland, inter-marriage had proceeded at a greatly increasing rate with the result that a number of families of mixed origins had emerged to assume positions of leadership in political, social and cultural affairs. They spoke both languages equally well, and knew both worlds at first hand. This was a contributory factor to the wrecking of the social and political experiment which the Danes had initiated. The distinctions they had sought to maintain between the two societies began to seem artificial and meaningless. The second and decisive factor was the Second World War.

Greenland became totally separated from Denmark in 1940, and for the next five years served as a strategically important base for Allied air and naval activities. The United States became its centre of influence and, released from the tight economic regime of the Royal Greenland Trade Department, the native communities were able to enjoy an abundance and variety of American consumer goods. Existing political and administrative bodies in Greenland remained unchanged throughout the war, but a new feeling of openness and mobility developed, and it was obvious to most observers in 1945 that a regime based on the concept of the coexistence of two separate Greenlandic societies, one native and traditional and the other Danish and modern, was no longer acceptable and would have to be radically changed. After much largely inconclusive deliberation concerning the future of Greenland, the prime minister of Denmark went there in 1948 for a joint meeting of the two provincial councils to discuss choices of future policies. A commission was appointed before the end of the year to investigate all Greenlandic problems. At the beginning of 1950, it produced a comprehensive report with some important recommendations.

As a result, the two existing provincial councils were combined. Their 13 members were from then on elected by the votes of all adult residents, Greenlandic and Danish alike, of the newly-created district of West Greenland — as were the members of its 16 new municipal councils. Some years were to pass, however, before the new districts of East Greenland and North Greenland were brought

within the new electoral system. The trade monopoly was abolished to the extent of Greenland being opened to Danish — but not foreign — private enterprise; all major aspects of development, however, continued to be centrally controlled from Copenhagen.

The culminating act of the post-1950 legislation took place in 1953 when, under a constitutional amendment, Greenland became an integral part of the Kingdom of Denmark with the right to send two members to the Danish parliament (*Folketinget*) in Copenhagen.

#### PROBLEMS OF ADJUSTMENT

The decision to make Greenland an integral part of Denmark not only ensured its modernization, but also aimed at removing the main uncertainties about the status and rights of its inhabitants. Since 1953, Greenland Eskimos and ethnic Danes, whether living in Denmark or Greenland, have been citizens of the same state. The decision also implied that full political integration was to be achieved in the course of development.

The question arises: could equal status for Greenlanders have been sought on any other basis within the kingdom of Denmark? There were certain precedents in Danish history of a national group being granted a degree of home rule — the Faroese, for example — but in all such cases the group had an independent economic base such as Greenland does not provide. It took another twenty years for the concept of home rule to appear in Greenland. In the meantime, equality for Greenlanders meant a joint relationship rather than ultimate separation.

What, however, are the criteria for equality? Can two societies, two cultures, rank equal without necessarily doing the same things, measuring up to the same standards and accepting the same values? Or, if they have different standards and values, on what basis can they be equal? In principle, it would seem obvious that they could. If the criteria were moral, ethical and basically non-materialistic, a set of requirements could be met equally well regardless of economic circumstances and cultural background. In that sense, the attempt made by the Danish authorities back in the nineteenth century was fundamentally sound. Through education and the provision of means for cultural development, it would seem that the Greenlanders have reached levels of dignity and self-respect equal to those enjoyed by European Danes without giving up their traditional way of life.

This is in fact what many native groups argue today as a basis for their land claims: is it possible to continue the hunting and trapping which their forefathers had done, with some improvement of equipment, etc., without accepting the social and economic changes which are the outward symbols of the southern model of development? It should be kept in mind that the Danish experiment was an approach toward equal standards. It was really assumed that the end-result would in a foreseeable future lead to full and absolute equality. Even so, the proposition seemed reasonable on certain pre-determined conditions: first, that the two cultures were kept isolated indefinitely in a closed condominium, and secondly, that the Greenlanders took sufficient pride in their native way of life to resist the temptation to modernize in economic terms. The assumption was that the native people

would see their own traditional way of life as not being inferior to that of the Danes. The former and the latter would each take the same pride in the products of their respective societies.

A general and crucial lesson has emerged from this experiment. A decision to work simultaneously towards modernization and full equality between two ethnic groups really leaves no choice: *the society which is the more developed and modernized in material terms will set the standards towards which the less developed will strive*. Whether formally recognized or not, the result in practical terms is likely to be the full adoption of the southern model. The problem then becomes that of *how to reconcile the differences of economic and social development*. Its solution is not the sole responsibility of the most developed of the two groups; it depends just as much on the personal qualities of the leaders of the native group who must have the ability to advocate patience, moderation and restraint, with all the risk of identification with the white provider, which could easily lead to their becoming estranged from their followers. This difficult balancing act has been, and is, the touchstone and dilemma of native leadership in all areas of development.

While this political dilemma is causing socio-political problems, the recognition of equality as an objective to be aimed for in the course of development has served to emphasize the problem of the choice between *centralization* and *decentralization* as administrative and economic means of achieving it.

Each of the two approaches has merits and drawbacks depending on various criteria. Yet, the choices would be less invidious if they could be made on strictly rational grounds, which is not entirely possible. As colonial rule was in most cases highly centralized, development policies based on centralization are often met with accusations of neo-colonialism and autocracy. For corresponding reasons, the decentralized approach may appear more democratic and therefore more acceptable, irrespective of the outcome in terms of efficiency.

Some difficult problems arise, therefore, for those who are charged with the responsibility for bringing about modernization with equality at a rate which satisfies rapidly rising expectations. If equality is defined in terms of standards of living and levels of economic gain, centralization or concentration are necessary. If one gives priority to other definitions and criteria, this is not necessarily so.

While politicians, writers and researchers can talk about equal rights and principles in fairly loose and detached terms, planners of northern development will have to spell out in concrete terms how these broad principles can be applied in practice. This holds for all the major fields of social and political activity. While most people would agree that there should be equal opportunities for education, housing, social services, political representation and other major areas, they may differ on how to achieve modernization.

The difficulties rise in Greenland as in other northern areas from the fact that, although the southern model is representative of the standards of the white society as a whole, there are many groups of people in the South whose standards of living are far below average — closer indeed to those of native society at the present stage of development. To meet such standards would not be too difficult. But once the goal of equality is recognized, nothing less than the average standard

enjoyed by the white people becomes acceptable. For the native groups to settle for anything less would imply consent to a perpetuation of conditions of social and economic inferiority.

When the objectives for development are thus determined by a model that cannot be the subject of discussion, but must necessarily be achieved within reasonable limits of time and cost, it is imperative to approach the centralization-decentralization issue with care and consideration. Gains in one area might easily be invalidated by losses in another.

Ideally one would hope to raise standards of education, housing, social and medical services, etc. to the southern average, while at the same time allowing for a continuation of the traditional native occupations in existing villages and outposts. There is, however, a general agreement among those responsible for development that the costs of maintaining a decentralized society in the North, which meets the demands for modernization within an acceptable time frame, would be prohibitive.

Thus, centralization is resorted to as a short-cut to modernization-with-equality — a compromise between the desired and the possible. This situation is not peculiar to the North. It has existed for many decades in less developed areas of white society in the South where, however, because no ethnic considerations exist, the issues involved do not give rise to the same emotional and political conflict.

The Danish authorities have faced the problem squarely and accepted the implications of their equality-with-modernization decision of 1953. Realizing that modernization could not be achieved in the outposts within the limits of available resources — in particular, trained personnel — they started to draw the native population away from the scattered villages and settlements along the coast of Greenland into larger centres of population, which over the years have become almost urban in character. In the process they have constructed large numbers of modern Danish-style apartments in huge blocks of four or five storeys which meet all the sanitary and other standards of southern housing. With such a degree of concentration attained, ample social and medical services can be provided as economically as possible.

The same policy has been adopted in the field of education. Through a system of large centralized schools, augmented by dormitories or hostels for students living too far away for daily travel, it has become possible for native children to receive the same basic opportunities for education as white children. The question of language of instruction in schools has, however, many facets and is, therefore, difficult to relate in simple terms to the main points at issue in the present study.

In the field of employment, centralization has taken the form of a shift from small-scale fishing and trapping to industrial processing. This is less a reflection of preference than immediate necessity. Since payment of relief on a permanent basis into an indefinite future is not acceptable, equality-with-modernization must necessarily be achieved by some form of concentration of occupational activity.

As mineral resources, to the extent that they exist, are only marginally developed in Greenland, fisheries provide the only available major opportunity for large-scale centralized processing. The latter was embarked upon during the nineteen fifties and sixties, and close to 5,000 people are now employed in it. The cod catches

are threatened by climatic changes and over-exploitation in Greenland as everywhere else in the North Atlantic. Shrimp fishing is still profitable, but is endangered by foreign competition. These developments would not have been possible without government-promoted investment in a fleet of large ocean-going trawlers, together with refineries and a modern distribution system. Such concentration was necessary in order to replace the small-scale occupations which had enabled scattered settlements to survive at a level of subsistence not much above that experienced for centuries.

The new factor, which is not yet assessable in concrete terms, is the impact of off shore oil and gas resources on the Greenlandic side of the Davis Strait. Exploratory drilling started in April 1976 and, if the predictions of geologists are proved correct, oil or gas could be found before the end of the year. This would create a completely new situation, socially and politically as well as in economic terms.

Due to the remarkable progress which has taken place following the decision of the Danish government to plan for equality with modernization, the average Greenlander has a standard of living high enough to permit him to enjoy things which used to be reserved for Danish officials only; yet he lacks a feeling of satisfaction and fulfilment. The social, economic and cultural atmosphere one senses among the Greenlanders is not much different from that evident among native communities in the Canadian North. They have got so much of what is normally associated with modernization, but the frustrations remain. What went wrong?

Of the two major goals of equality and modernization, few Greenlanders complain about the latter. Most feel that material conditions have reached a sufficiently high level and, what is even more important, few express any desire to be rid of the services, appliances and conveniences which are the visible symbols of modernization. The general discontent, which is too widespread to be ignored, clearly does not stem from the results of modernization. The problems are very complex, but they may, at least in part, be related to the way modernization was planned and carried out — that is, by a highly centralized method. The great transition from a primitive to a modern society in the short period of a couple of decades has, in spite of the intentions of the developers, had an adverse effect on the other major and parallel objective of equality.

While centralization has been instrumental in bringing about rapid social and economic advances, the complex and integrated nature of the process has tended to weaken the native influence. The detailed planning and preparation necessary for the advances require a degree of expertise and special insight which few, if any, native leaders have; and the display of such capacities by white peoples has served to demonstrate to the natives how backward they are.

Does that mean that the natives in Greenland would have preferred less centralization, and therefore a slower approach to development? Some maintain they would have and still will, but there is little evidence to support that proposition. Indeed, the complaint is still that development does not proceed fast enough. The pressure for faster development comes from the Greenlanders, rather than from the Danish authorities. Thus, the question remains open. One needs also to keep in mind that many sides are involved in the choices. The real issue is not only whether the native community in Greenland would be content with a slower rate

and a lower level of modernization, but also how much more the Danish taxpayers in the South would agree to pay up in order to achieve the same results at a quicker pace.

Until about 1950, just before the policy of modernization was initiated, the cost to the Danish taxpayer of administering and developing Greenland was roughly balanced by the income which the Danish government gained from various enterprises in Greenland. Since then there has been a deficit which has continued to increase. At the moment it is about 200 million dollars a year, i.e. about \$4,000 per native inhabitant of Greenland. So far, there have been remarkably few complaints in Denmark about this cost, which the average Dane sees both as a continuation of a paternalistic responsibility of more than 200 years' standing and as a contribution to less developed countries. However, if the cost should rise sharply to meet a demand for rapid modernization without centralization, one would expect adverse political repercussions which, given the present political and economic situation in Denmark, could not be ignored.

With the alternative of a greatly increased subsidy on the one hand, and major political changes on the other, only two major options remain. One is continued centralization, which might cause the achievement of full equality to be postponed until the native Greenlanders have acquired, through the educational and other opportunities which are available, the ability to occupy positions of key responsibility. The other is a partial return to decentralization in which only as much modernization would be attempted as the local decision makers desire and the existing resources permit. Unanswered questions are: will there be a sizeable new development based on the exploitation of oil and gas; and to what extent can Danish society meet the growing demand of home rule for Greenland. The answers are likely to become known in the present decade.

#### CLOSED OR OPEN SOCIETIES?

A final question, which goes beyond Greenland and pertains to the whole circumpolar area, is what kind of societies Eskimos and Indians are likely to build in the next few years. The assumption, which is as fundamental to the native land claims in Canada as to home rule in Greenland, is that the traditional native societies can be preserved if their demands are met.

Few would question their intentions. In fact, most southerners would be happy to see Indian and Eskimo communities continue the way of life they have pursued for centuries, with some technological adjustments in communications and equipment. But on strictly empirical grounds, is it a realistic proposition? It should be kept in mind that these societies were narrowly built on and around hunting and small-scale fishing, mainly for subsistence. If these traditional occupations are not maintained, will there really be sufficient of the cultural heritage left for a self-reliant society to be maintained?

It is therefore understandable that the native groups cling to their occupations and particular uses of the land as a source of identity. But in view of what has actually been happening in the North over the past decade — direction of development, trends of behaviour, patterns of aspirations and expectations — the basic



assumption is not entirely credible. The native leaders are as little able as the government authorities to prevent the formation of personal preferences, when opportunities seem to be at hand. And with the development of natural resources in the North, other options will exist.

Even if it is now becoming a part of history, one can still learn from the Danish experiment in Greenland before the Second World War. The Danes assumed very correctly that the native societies, with their particular cultures intimately tied to the traditional occupations of hunting and fishing, could only be preserved if the whole area were closed off from the rest of the world. It proved impossible and, as most people would agree today, also undesirable. This means that the societies that are now emerging in the North must be *open* societies, for which access and opportunity does not depend on race or colour of skin.

There is an element of risk in any proposed action. A sincere urge exists to make good the errors of the past; but great care needs to be taken to ascertain the facts of the situations being dealt with and to make sure that the courses of action being considered are within the range of the fundamental principles that motivate the southern societies to which the respective northern areas are attached.