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**‘To See What State We Are In’: First Years of the *Greenland Self-Government Act*  
and the Pursuit of Inuit Sovereignty**

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**ABSTRACT** This article examines the implementation of Greenland’s self-government (commonly referred to as self-rule) through an analysis of the Greenland government in the first four years of the *Greenland Self-Government Act*. Greenland and its government are numerically dominated by the Inuit, one of the indigenous peoples of the Arctic. The article begins with an overview of Greenland as a country and its political development, from a Danish colony to the 2009 *Greenland Self-Government Act* (SGA). After explaining Greenland’s governance structure and the role of Inuit governance in Greenland’s parliamentary system, it analyses the implementation process of the self-government agreement. I argue that the SGA with its main focus on modern nation-building within the framework of western institutionalism, the SGA constitutes a unique means of implementing indigenous self-government. It revisits the norm of the right of indigenous peoples to self-determination understood primarily as a collective human right, and sets a precedent within the framework of indigenous rights in international law.

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## **Introduction**

Since 2009, Greenland has had extensive political and economic autonomy. The passing of the *Self-Government Act* (SGA) marked an end to three decades of limited ‘home rule’ autonomy and most significantly, the taking over of the country’s mineral and oil rights (previously co-managed with Denmark). With the introduction of greater self-government, Greenland was also granted the right to full independence from Denmark, should the country so choose in the future.

This article examines the implementation of Greenland’s self-government (aka self-rule) through an analysis of the Greenland government in the first four years of the *Self-Government Act*. Greenland and its government are numerically dominated by the Inuit, one of the Indigenous peoples of the Arctic. One of the main reasons for the expansion of Greenland’s autonomy was the desire for and the need to expand Greenland’s political and economic autonomy and to pave the way for possible independence in the future. However, there have been considerable challenges in expanding self-government in Greenland, including taking control of new areas of jurisdiction and building capacity in the administration of self-government. The main focus of this article is the extent to which the Government of Greenland has been successful in making expanded self-government a reality. Data is drawn from interviews with politicians, civil servants, leaders of institutions and organizations, educators and individuals working in media and culture, who were asked to reflect on the main significance of the self-government agreement and on the level of success the government has achieved in implementing self-government. Some of the interviewees requested to remain anonymous while others gave the permission to use their names.

The discussion in this article will proceed as follows: The first two sections provide an overview of Greenland as a country and its political development, from a Danish colony to the 2009 *Self-Government Act*. The third section outlines Greenland's governance structure and considers the role of Inuit governance in Greenland's parliamentary system. The fourth and fifth sections examine the self-government agreement and its main areas of significance. The sixth and final section provides an analysis of the implementation process.

### **Greenland: the Land and the People**

Greenland, or Kalaallit Nunaat in Greenlandic, is the world's largest island (over two million square kilometers), located in the Arctic Ocean east of Canadian Arctic Archipelago. Although geographically part of the North American continent, politically and culturally Greenland has long been associated with Europe due to its colonial ties to Denmark. In spite of its enormous size, Greenland's population is only 57,000, making it the least densely populated country in the world. Greenland is one of the few jurisdictions globally where Indigenous peoples are in a numerical majority: a total of 88% of the population are Inuit, the rest being mostly Danes.

Eighty percent of Greenland's land mass is covered by an ice sheet and only 15% of the coast is inhabitable. The largest towns are the capital Nuuk (population 15,000), Sisimiut, Ilulissat and Qaqortoq, all located on the west coast of Greenland. No roads connect the country's 22 towns and the 120 smaller settlements, thus travel is by air or sea during the ice-free period.

Greenland has significant mineral resources such as gold, copper, iron, uranium, zinc, gas and oil, some of which deposits are considered among the largest in the world. Until recently, these reserves were inaccessible due to the ice sheet. Climate change and the resulting warmer temperatures in the Arctic, however, have meant the melting of the ice cap and thus, easier access to natural resources in even the most remote areas. The implementation of self-government is inseparably linked to economic self-sufficiency, necessitating the development of the country's mineral resources. Currently fishing is the main and the only considerable industry, accounting for over 80% of total exports. Greenland continues to be highly dependent on annual subsidies, or block grants from Denmark which, in the past, were negotiated between the two countries every second or third year. With the *Self-Government Act* in 2009, the block grant was agreed at an annual level of DKK 3.4 billion from Denmark, or about 30% of Greenland's GDP. The freezing of the block grant has presented itself as a double-edged sword. On the one hand, since the block grant is now fixed and no longer negotiated, it cannot be used as political leverage by Denmark in other negotiations, which apparently happened occasionally "if we didn't behave" (interview with government official, April 3, 2013). On the other hand, a fixed annual subsidy has created great pressure for the Greenland government to pursue an aggressive resource policy, in an attempt to find new sources of revenue as fast as possible. For the first female premier of the country, Aleqa Hammond (the Siumut party) – whose 2013 election platform of fast-tracking mineral extraction and gaining independence from Denmark earned her the largest number of individual votes ever in Greenland<sup>1</sup> – the implementation of self-rule is first and foremost an economic matter:

Fully implementing the *Self-Government Act* would require us to become economically independent. In order to take control of all the new fields of jurisdiction requires us to become self-sufficient and self-governing in those areas. This puts a lot of pressure on us by ourselves. It is very important that the pressure comes from within and not from outside. The Self Rule Agreement is a fair agreement although achieving a full implementation is a very challenging task for us. If we are not able to do it, we also cannot achieve independence. The Agreement is an important undertaking for us. (Interview, April 11, 2013)

### **From Colonial Rule to Self-Rule**

Before the *Home Rule Act* was introduced in 1979, the people of Greenland were involved in running their own country and affairs only in very limited terms. Denmark maintained a monopoly on trade and investment in Greenland until the Second World War. During the war, Denmark was occupied by Germany and Danish control over Greenland was lost. As a result, the United States took over the defense of Greenland and the import of goods (Harhoff 1983). After the war, Danish governance was reinstated and Greenland became a ‘non-self-governing territory’ under Chapter XI of the *United Nations Charter*. In the period from 1945 to 1954 Denmark was required to report on Greenland to the relevant UN decolonization bodies. With the new Danish Constitution in 1953, status as an overseas colony was terminated and Greenland was integrated into the Kingdom of Denmark, with Greenlanders obtaining the same rights as Danish citizens (Greenland-Danish Self-Government Commission 2008). Although the legal status of Greenland as a colony was terminated in 1953, the colonial policy intensified in the form

of ‘economic neocolonialism and the immigration of a considerable number of Danes’ (Dahl 1986, p. 317).

Between 1950 and 1970, the number of Danes in Greenland rose from 4.5 to 20% of the population. This period also saw unprecedented economic growth and urbanization, built primarily around the fishing industry. By virtue of administrative intervention and economic investments by the Danish government, Inuit Greenlanders were relocated from traditional settlements to the towns in which state-owned trawlers were based. As independent hunters and fishers were not always willing to renounce their subsistence economies and relocate, schools and stores were closed down and construction was discontinued in the settlements, while loans in the fishing industry were made available only in towns. By the 1970s Greenland’s economy had been transformed into an export-oriented fishing economy (Dahl 1986, p. 317). In addition, this period was marked by the adoption of Danish institutions and practices. Aviâja Egede Lynge argues:

The post-war period up to the introduction of home rule was characterised by the creation of a modern economic society. Rather than becoming more independent from Danish conditions, they became even more dependent with a colossal adaptation of Danish cultural items and institutions – in the name of equality.

(Egede Lynge 2006, p. 3)

The era of the civil rights movement, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, marked the beginning of the mobilization of the Inuit in Greenland. The political elite emerged from the ranks of Greenlanders educated in Denmark during that time. A few leading events galvanised the politicisation of the Inuit in Greenland and the movement toward greater self-determination. First was the 1960s closure of the mining town Qullissat and

the forced relocation of its 1200 inhabitants. The reaction and resistance to this very heavy-handed colonial action was expressed in music, poetry and political manifestos (Harhoff 1983). The cultural summer festival Aasivik was one of the main forums for emerging creative and public expressions by the new generation of politically active Greenlanders (interview with teacher, April 6, 2013).

The second event that bred strong anti-colonial sentiments was the permission given by the Danish government for offshore oil drilling near the coast of West Greenland, between 1973 and 1977. This involved consultation with neither the people of Greenland nor the Provincial Council of Greenland, which in 1975 passed a unanimous motion stating that ‘the land and its resources belonged to the resident population’ (cited in Dahl 1986, p. 320). It took more than 30 years before this statement became a reality and Greenlanders’ rights to their subsurface resources were recognised.

The third and arguably most significant event involved the question of Greenland’s membership in the European Economic Community (EEC; the present-day European Union). In a Danish referendum held in 1972, the vote in Greenland was 70% against membership. However, as part of Denmark, Greenland did not have an independent voice in the matter and was forced to join after the Danes voted in favor of participation. This was seen by many Greenlandic politicians and others a blatant example of colonial control (Dahl 1986). An internal Home Rule Committee was created in 1973 with the intention of considering the establishment of a home rule arrangement within the Danish realm. The Committee submitted a proposal for negotiation to the Danish government in 1975 and the joint Greenland-Danish Home Rule Commission was set up that same year (Greenland-Danish Self-Government Commission 2008). During



this period, the political party Siumut ('Forward') was established, which gained widespread and long-lasting support in most towns and settlements among hunters, fishers and workers. Siumut became the leading voice in formulating the political propositions of the Home Rule Commission (Dahl 1986). The final report of the commission suggested a *Home Rule Act*, which was approved first by the Danish Parliament in 1978 and in a referendum in 1979. The same year, home rule was initiated in Greenland (Harhoff 1983).

The overarching principle of the Greenland *Home Rule Act* was the devolution and delegation of legislative and executive authority from Danish to Greenlandic authorities, within certain areas of jurisdiction. These included domestic affairs, taxation, fisheries, planning, trade, church affairs, social welfare, labor market, education, cultural affairs, health, housing, supply of goods, transportation and environmental protection. According to past president of the Inuit Circumpolar Council (ICC)<sup>2</sup> Aqqaq Lyngé, the most controversial topic in an otherwise fairly smooth negotiation process was land and resource rights. At the end, a compromise was reached 'in which the Greenlandic people were given fundamental rights to the land, whereas the management of raw minerals became a joint Greenlandic-Danish concern' (Lyngé 1993, p. 98). The areas that remained under sole Danish jurisdiction included the constitution, foreign policy, currency, the judicial system and defense. Home rule was funded through block grants from Denmark, annually decided on the basis of current home rule expenditure (Foighel 1979).

At the turn of the century, after two decades of home rule, the Home Rule Government or Landstyre had assumed the responsibility of practically all areas of

jurisdiction stipulated in the *Home Rule Act*. Recognising the need for a reform of Greenland's political and legal status within the Danish realm, the Landstyre established the Greenland Commission on Self-Governance. As expressed by a Greenlandic government official: 'we knew we had to take another step from home rule. ... The *Home Rule Act*, and the framework that it represented was [sic] becoming too tight. So the leading politicians were saying that the "Anorak" was [getting] too tight' (interview, April 3, 2013).

In its 2003 report, the Commission recommended expanding Greenland's autonomy. The following year a Danish-Greenlandic Commission was set up to develop a framework for a greater self-governance in Greenland. The joint Commission concluded its work in 2008 and submitted its report to the Danish and home rule governments (Greenland-Danish Self-Government Commission 2008). On November 25, 2008 a referendum was held in Greenland on expanded self-rule on which 75% voted in favor. As the result, the *Greenland Self-Government Act* replaced the home rule arrangement on June 21, 2009.

### **Greenland Self-Government**

The *Greenland Self-Government Act* is an extension of the powers enacted in the *Home Rule Act* of 1979. It establishes new political and legal opportunities for Greenland to gain extensive self-governance and ultimately, independence (if the population of Greenland so chooses in the future). The Act contains 33 areas of jurisdiction, including mineral resources, fisheries, environment, justice and policing and law. Under the *Self-Government Act*, Denmark retains control of the constitution, citizenship, Supreme Court,

foreign affairs, defense and currency; however, Denmark is expected to involve Greenland on foreign affairs and security matters that affect or are in the interests of Greenland. Moreover, since home rule, Greenland has been permitted to have missions in countries of special interest to Greenland.

Greenland is a multi-party parliamentary democracy and the party system has played a vital role in the Home Rule and Self Rule institutions. Political parties have long shaped Greenlandic politics and they emerged in the mid-1970s before the establishment of Home Rule as the well-educated Greenlandic elite was ‘eager to use the party system to take power from the Danes’ (Loukatcheva 2007, p. 56). The dominant social democratic party Siumut, supported by hunters, fishermen and workers especially in settlements and smaller towns, had a leading role in the process leading to Home Rule and it has formed the government since except the first term of the Self Rule era (2009-2013) when the socialist Inuit Ataqatigiit (IA, Inuit Community) with its support base mostly among urban educated Greenlanders, won the elections for the first time.<sup>3</sup> Greenland has also had the right to two seats in the Folketing (Danish Parliament) in Copenhagen since 1953 currently held by one Siumut representative and one IA representative.

Through the *Home Rule Act* and the *Self-Government Act*, Greenland has the right to elect its own parliament and government, the latter with executive authority over the areas of jurisdiction included in the *Acts*. The Inatsisartut (the legislative assembly) consists of 31 members, who are elected by the population of Greenland for a four-year period. The Inatsisartut approves the Naalakkersuisut (the government), which is responsible for the central administration, headed by a premier with a cabinet. The

Inatsisartut appoints the premier, who nominates the ministers for the cabinet. There are currently eight ministers, all of whom are Inuit Greenlanders.

Since home rule, Greenland's governance structure has been a Nordic-style cabinet-parliamentary system. The home rule administration was adopted from Denmark 'element for element and law for law' (Nielsen 2001, p. 232). There were no changes to the governance structure in the *Self-Government Act* except a cosmetic name change: the Danish terms for the parliament and the government were replaced with Greenlandic ones. Unlike Nunavut, the other Inuit jurisdiction, Greenland has expressed no intention of establishing a government based on Inuit values and governance principles (see e.g., White 2006). In negotiating the self-government agreement, there was no discussion of Inuit values or governance; there was no public or political discourse on the topic before self-rule and has been none since. According to a civil servant, considering 'the Inuit' separately from the category of 'the people of Greenland' would have been regarded as undemocratic during the negotiations, which instead focused on voting rights and eligibility. With Inuit constituting a large majority of Greenland's population, it was firmly believed that the self-rule government would have an Inuit character and that it would constitute de facto Indigenous governance (interview with government official, April 3, 2013). Only some individuals today express criticism of the adoption of 'Western' or 'European' governance system. In the view of one ICC Greenland representative, for example, Greenland self-government is unquestionably 'a Danish model' (interview, March 25, 2013).

The 'institutional inertia' and the lack of interest in developing specifically Greenlandic institutions can be explained by Greenland's 'organizational dependency' on

Denmark (Jonsson 1997). Yet in Greenland the framework of Western institutionalism seems a given and is not discussed, let alone challenged, because to do so would be considered undemocratic and divisive. When asked about the inclusion of Inuit views of governance in the agreement, the government official responded: ‘I think it should be for the government itself to decide what they think is the most important thing to focus on’ (interview, April 3, 2013).

In spite of the lack of *explicit* governance principles based on Inuit values, for many self-rule *represents* Inuit governance based on Inuit values for two reasons: because of the central role of Inuit Greenlanders in drafting the self-government agreement and second, because of the overwhelming Greenlandic support the agreement received in a referendum. For politicians in particular, Inuit governance is a question of representation. Strong cultural traditions in Greenlandic society in general were also mentioned as a reflection of Inuit values in self-rule. The recognition of Greenlandic as the official language was considered especially significant, as well as it being quite widely spoken by the members of the Inatsisartut. The strong presence of the Greenlandic language may represent a central, yet limited way of incorporating Inuit values into the institutions of governance. As argued by Graham White in the context of Nunavut: ‘the opportunity for Inuit [Members of the Legislative Assembly] to express themselves and place their ideas in a conceptual framework rooted in Inuit worldviews and traditions cannot be underestimated’ (White 2006, p. 18). Yet, he points out, ‘it may be that the use of Inuktitut [the Inuit language spoken in Nunavut] is a necessary but not sufficient condition for imbuing Inuit values in the operation of the Assembly’ (White 2006, p. 18).

For former premier Hammond, the self-government agreement unequivocally reflects Inuit governance because of the strong Inuit involvement in the drafting process:

Absolutely, absolutely, because it's formed by us, and adopted by Danes. ... When I say "by us," that's the members of the Commission for Self-Governance, and the Joint Commission between Denmark and Greenland. So yes, I'm fully happy about the agreement and I don't think we could have got a better agreement than we have today, in all respects, to all parties that have been working with us, for us.

(Interview, April 11, 2013).

Other politicians consider the question of Inuit governance complex because of internal variance among Greenlanders. The idea of pan-Inuit values was seen as particularly complicated. As Naaja Nathanielsen, a member of the Inatsisartut representing the IA party noted:

[F]or me it's very difficult to generalise the Inuit feeling, as well as if you asked me to make a definition of the Greenlandic point of something. We are different, the Inuit, I think we have a lot in common, and I think we make good sense of standing together on a lot of issues, but we are also different. And as for me, as a Greenlandic Inuit, and for say a Canadian or American Inuit, we have some very different cultural background as well. But I still think that as a society, as Greenland, I think, in other Inuit communities, are perceived as very lucky, very privileged. And I think we should maybe think on that more. We are very privileged... we have a good level of welfare, compared to any other Inuit societies. Does it reflect the cultural understanding of self-determination? Well, what is that? I wouldn't be sure what to tell you. I think the Russian Inuit would

just be happy that they were not being oppressed. So, so yes, they would probably think this was the highest level, something worthwhile. But for me, of course I would like, it would have been nice to get a broader or wider deal with Denmark. That's going to be next time. The movement is toward independence in some form or another. (Interview, March 19, 2013)

Discussing 'Inuit governance' risks generalizing Greenlanders' views about their country and society rather than considering the qualitative and normative differences between Western and Indigenous institutions, practices and traditions of governing. For the above parliamentarian, Inuit governance implies, if anything, a question of a high level of social services, a lack of oppression and the prospect of independence, not a set of principles based on Inuit values.

### **The Significance of the Self-Government Agreement**

The balance of the article examines Greenlanders' views of the self-government agreement and its implementation. In March and April 2013, the author interviewed 17 Greenlanders about their experiences and views of the agreement and its four years of implementation. Most interviewees were women (14) and the age range varied from the mid-20s to mid-60s. The semi-structured interviews were conducted on a not-for-attribution basis and lasted between an hour and two-and-a-half hours.<sup>4</sup> They took place in Nuuk right after the second national self-government elections.

When asked to evaluate the main areas of significance in the *Self-Government Act*, one or all of the following three issues were mentioned by all interviewees:

recognition as a people, the right to independence, and mineral resources. Each is discussed in detail, below.

### *Recognition as a people*

A number of participants mentioned the recognition of the people of Greenland as a people in international law as the main aspect of the agreement. As Mariia Simonsen, instructor in journalism at the Ilisimartusafik (the University of Greenland) put it, ‘it is in *Self-Rule Act* [sic]<sup>5</sup> that we are a People, so we are seen as a People, not just a group of Danish citizens on an island’ (interview, April 8, 2013). The government official elaborated this point:

Because in the *Home Rule Act*, we were called ... I don’t know if it’s the correct translation, but a “unique people’s society,” and if you look that up in international law, you won’t find anything that is called that. And therefore there are no rights attached to that. A new thing within the self-government process was that we have to streamline the concepts and the recognitions, so that we can recognise these within international law, and thereby get the same rights, through international law, as, as we want, and the rights we want. So that is why we’ve been recognised as a People in our own right, with the right to self-determination according to international law. And that’s mentioned in the preamble, and that’s important. (Interview, April 3, 2013)

The recognition of peoplehood, however, is not limited to Inuit Greenlanders, although there is considerable conceptual confusion even in the self-rule administration. The official term in the *Self-Government Act* is ‘people of Greenland,’ encompassing the



entire population, but it is often conflated with the term ‘Greenlander,’ which is understood to refer only to the Inuit in Greenland. The *Act* does not recognise the Inuit as a people and consequently, does not deal with the question of the self-determination of the Inuit. ‘People of Greenland’ is a new term introduced by the *Act* and is unclear to many. As an example, even bureaucrats may incorrectly use the term ‘Greenlandic’ when discussing the controversy:

when the agreement and *Self-Government Act* was presented, this had to be explained to the people also, the population, that when we say recognised as a people, in its own right, well this actually also includes the Danes that live here for, or have only lived here for six months. And that is perhaps a bit counter-intuitive, to, to some, that those who only live here for two or three years, are also Greenlandic, part of the Greenlandic people. (Interview with government official, April 3, 2013)

Only one interviewee, a representative of ICC Greenland, linked the recognition in international law to the Inuit right to self-determination. Yet the representative also discussed the right of Greenland’s people to nationhood and independence: ‘people living in Greenland have now rights to self-determination, so it’s up to us to decide if we want to declare ourselves independent from Denmark. And that right is something that should have been recognised earlier; many, many years earlier’ (interview, March 25, 2013).

### *Independence*

Recognising the population of Greenland as a people in international law paves the way for the future independence of the country. The *Self-Government Act* explicitly

recognises the right to an independent Greenland by stating that the ‘decision regarding Greenland’s independence shall be taken by the people of Greenland’ and that ‘independence for Greenland shall imply that Greenland assumes sovereignty over Greenland territory’ (*Act on Greenland Self-Government* 2009). According to the government official, the article on independence in the agreement may not necessarily mean much to ordinary people yet it creates clarity for the process if and when the people of Greenland decide to actively embark on it:

There is the independence chapter, which has created some clarity on what the process will be when, once that decision is taken. It doesn’t mean so much in daily life, but it’s something that we all know of, that we have, and gives a kind of confidence that we can always look at this. Not that it’s something that we do now, but we know it’s there, and you can say with that chapter there were some questions that were answered in how do we do this if we take that decision.

(Interview, April 3, 2013)

A preeminent municipal politician considered the *Self-Government Act* important not only because it has brought Greenland closer to ‘being a free nation’ but also because of the pride and self-confidence it created it among Greenlanders. In the same vein, former premier Hammond maintained that as a result of four years of self-rule, ‘a lot has changed mentally in the population.’ In her view, the way in which people understand self-determination has been publicly debated and people have been given ‘tools to talk freely about independency which we couldn’t [do] before.’ Thus, the *Self-Government Act* has been ‘an eye-opener for many to see what state we are in, both in mind, and political and cultural sense’ (interview with Aleqa Hammond, April 11, 2013).

Most Greenlanders hope to see their country become an independent nation in their lifetime. They echo the sentiment of another former premier, Lars-Emil Johansen, according to whom independence is a legitimate aspiration ‘deeply anchored in the Inuit soul’ (AFP 2008, np). ‘A full implementation’ of the self-government agreement referred to by Hammond above, implies gaining authority over all 33 areas of jurisdiction included in the agreement, and is a necessary step toward the ultimate goal: full independence.

### *Subsurface rights*

Nearly half of the respondents cited the right to mineral resources as the most undeniably significant aspect of the *Self-Government Act*. As Naaja Nathanielsen, a member of the Inatsisartut put it: ‘Without a question, the fact that we are now in control of our minerals and oil resources; without a question, that is the single most important thing’ (interview, March 19, 2013). Those who elaborated on this point maintained that the land and resource rights are of utmost importance not only because of the prospects of income and economic self-sufficiency, but also because now ‘we own our, the ground we walk on’ (interview with Mariia Simonsen, April 8, 2013). A civil servant in the municipal government noted how ‘there were a lot of debates on what [the agreement] would mean for us as a people but it was primarily in the focus on the right to the land, because that’s also in colonies a big issue, the right to the resources in the earth’ (interview, March 16, 2013).

Yet with the right to mineral resources has come the pressure to begin developing these resources as a main means of achieving greater autonomy and implementing self-

government. In fact, given the constraints of the agreement, expanding the economic base and becoming more financially self-sufficient is the precondition of expanded self-government. Not surprisingly, then, the first four years of self-rule have been dominated by the political debate and public discourse on mineral exploration and the entry of multinational corporations. The warming Arctic and the melting of the ice sheet has enabled more extensive explorations both on the land and off-shore, which led former premier Hammond to announce:

We have mountains with uranium content. We have mountains with gold. We have mountains with iron. We have mountains with zinc and lead. We have mountains with diamonds. We have mountains that are there for us to use and bring prosperity to our people. (Faris 2014, np)

The dilemma for nearly everyone is the challenge of finding the balance between the pressing need for new revenue sources, for diversifying the country's struggling economy and engaging in resource extraction, while meeting high environmental and social standards so that the Inuit hunting and fishing culture (which is dependent on healthy natural resources) is not jeopardised. For example, the ICC Greenland has called for the Government of Greenland to develop a comprehensive resource extraction strategy based on renewable energy (ICC and WWF 2012).

While most Greenlanders welcome economic development and see mining in particular as inevitable, there is a substantial degree of unease with regard to the environmental, cultural and social changes that would follow large-scale resource extraction projects. The impact on Greenlandic life and culture is potentially immense and many referred to the insufficient consultation – particularly with regard to the

recently approved USD 2.3 billion iron-ore mine by London Mining, known as the Isua Project, located 150 kilometers from the capital in the Nuuk Fjord.<sup>6</sup> A widely-shared sentiment is that in spite of four public hearings and environmental and social impact assessments (London Mining 2012), the speed of planning of the Isua Project has been such that ordinary Greenlanders have not been able to follow the development and thus, feel anxious about if not oppose this and other development projects.

For the Inuit Circumpolar Council, '[r]esource development in *Inuit Nunaat* [the homeland of the Inuit] must proceed only with the free, prior, and informed consent of the Inuit of that region' (ICC 2011, Arts. 2.1, 2.3). Yet public engagement has been low and criticism has targeted the lack of consultation and transparency, by the government and the multinational companies, regarding the social, cultural and environmental impacts of resource extraction (Lund Sørensen 2008; Lyberth 2008; Nuttall 2008a; Hansen 2013). As pointed out by one ICC Greenland representative:

The level of people's involvement are minimum [sic]. And because we are asking questions in ICC, they think that we are here to stop the whole development. But we are here to ask questions because they are sending us their material, and asking, "What's your opinion?" And when we have an opinion, and we have experts looking at it, and there is a different approach from our side, then there is one single man over there, the head of the Bureau of Minerals and Petroleum, he's the only one that decides everything. (Interview, March 22, 2013)

## **Implementation of the Self-Government**

The first years of self-rule has not engendered considerable changes in Greenlanders' daily lives, beyond exposure to the relentless public debate and politics of developing extractive industries. Several interviewees noted that, internally, things have changed very little. Problems that plagued the functioning of the home rule administration – ‘underdeveloped infrastructure, financial dependency on Denmark, insufficient economic resources, the significant size of the public sector (which is a strain on the Greenlandic economy), a shortage of skilled and educated workers and social problems’ (Loukacheva 2007, p. 69) – have not yet been eliminated under self-government. The focus has thus far been almost exclusively on the economy and the development of extractive industries – or as Tine Pars, the rector of the Ilisimatusarfik (University of Greenland) put it, establishing contacts with Asian countries with regard to potential mining partnerships (interview, March 18, 2013). Some typical views:

‘I think [implementation] is a problem, problem where we stand right now, because the people don't know what does self-government mean, what does it require of me, what do I have to do differently?’ (Interview with municipal civil servant, March 16, 2013)

‘Self-government, I think is very much paper. It doesn't involve feelings. Home rule, when home rule was introduced in '79 it meant a lot.’ (Interview with Mariia Simonsen, April 8, 2013)

‘I think we have no realistic idea of... only by hard work you can move forward. So we thought that in a few years everything will change. And since we are a part of the rest of the world, thinking global means that we have to have... follow what’s going on with the rest of the world. And we are part of the whole world. ... We cannot just look inside ourselves, and have the idea that we can develop our country only of our own premise.’  
(Interview with senior municipal official, April 8, 2013)

‘For me self-determination is really taking responsibility for everything. And I can hear when people are talking and I can hear on the radio, that people are not there. They said yes, and voted yes, for self-governance, and probably they will vote yes again for self-determination without knowing what it really means.’ (Interview with Tine Pars, March 18, 2013)

For many Greenlanders, the implementation of self-government has not yet begun. Some recognise the need to pave the way for resource extraction in the name of developing economic self-sufficiency, as stipulated by the *Self-Government Act*, but many are frustrated by the lack of broader-based public debate on the implementation of self-government and on the meaning of self-government for ordinary people at the individual level (beyond the slight prospect of increased employment and improved social services in the distant future, as the result of revenue-sharing with new industries). The prospect of jobs, however, has been overshadowed by the debate on the importation of several thousand temporary foreign workers, mainly Chinese, in the construction of mines.

The importation of foreign labour was raised by several interviewees, especially in relation to the Isua Project near Nuuk. As many pointed out, thousands of foreign workers is a lot in a sparsely inhabited country with a population of 57,000 and can have an impact, for example, on the status and use of the Greenlandic language. Another problematic issue was the lack of perceived priority on training greater numbers of Greenlanders to construct and work in the mine, since London Mining intends to hire no more than 10% of workers locally. Interestingly, while the opposition, Hammond's Siumut Party expressed a concern about 'an influx of foreign workers'; something which according to Siumut 'could depress wages and disrupt the Inuits' way of life' (Matlack 2013, np). Yet another Siumut member, former premier Enoksen, and a few years later former premier Kleist (the Inuit Ataqatigiit Party), both controversially brushed aside such concerns by stating that temporary foreign workers would be living in isolated barrack communities with minimal interaction with Greenlanders (Jeppson 2008; Matlack 2013). Important questions regarding integration, working conditions, housing, infrastructure, and environmental and social impacts have been raised for quite some time but answers remain pending (Kristensen 2008). Only the question of foreign labourers' wages seems to be settled: in May 2014, a bill relaxing a number of regulations, including a minimum wage for foreign workers, was approved by Danish and Greenlandic lawmakers. Originally passed by the Inatsisartut in 2012, the bill guaranteed foreign labourers 'standard' Greenlandic wage and working conditions. In the new version, however, that guarantee has been replaced with an 'acceptable' minimum wage (McGwin 2014), confirming many people's fears about setting a precedent for lowering the minimum wage in Greenland.



Needless to say, the implementation of Greenlandic self-government depends to a great extent on the competence of the self-rule administration. There is an increasing number of Greenlanders in the administrative apparatus, especially in the areas of language and culture, but many key positions continue to be occupied by Danish professionals. These are often young Danish men who come to Greenland to start their careers, build their resumes and make money. They stay in these jobs for only a couple of years, resulting in high staff turnover, which gives rise to a lack of continuity and inconsistent political goals (interview with municipal civil servant, March 16, 2013). There is also a tendency for the Danish administrative staff to import consultants from Denmark and to direct trade to Denmark and Danish companies (see Jonsson 1997; Loukacheva 2007, p. 69).

While possessing the appropriate education for the job, during their brief stints Danish professionals do not acquire an understanding of Greenlandic culture, values or language, which is widely seen a considerable problem. Dependency on Danish expertise and civil servants who lack cultural competence may impede the implementation of a more Greenlandic version of governance and erode the sense of ownership, among Inuit Greenlanders, toward the process of self-government. Henriette Rasmussen, who has previously been involved in politics including at the ministerial level and who now serves as the Cultural Editor of the Kalaallit Nunaata Radioa (Greenlandic Broadcasting Corporation), maintained that the Inuit ‘are still not in charge. Our whole administration ... is done by outsiders. ... if you look at the structure of the law making, for example, ... the laws are *not* borne out from the parliament, they are borne out from the

administration. So it seems anyway - and the citizens cannot keep up' (interview, March 21, 2013).

The self-rule government represents successful implementation of Indigenous self-determination in that Greenlanders are now practically in control of nearly all of their own affairs. They have sole authority over their resources and have chosen their political mode of organization, even if it is largely a model directly adopted from Denmark. Yet arguably, and as pointed out by several interviewees, indirect, subtle colonial control continues in the presence of a large number of Danish civil servants who come with mainstream, Western institutional and cultural practices and priorities.

Nonetheless, under self-government, Greenlanders have achieved one of the most far-reaching self-determination arrangements of all Indigenous peoples worldwide. Greenland's self-government has great significance for a global Indigenous rights movement focused on achieving self-determination in various forms. In his celebration speech on the inauguration of Greenland self-government in June 2009, former premier Kleist referred to the *UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* (UNDRIP) and mentioned Greenland's active participation in the process leading to the adoption of the declaration in 2007. For him, the Greenland self-government agreement represents a leading example to 'Indigenous peoples everywhere' (Kleist 2009a, p. 1). Later in the same year, Kleist maintained that the 'new development in Greenland in the relationship between Denmark [sic] should be seen as a de facto implementation of the Declaration and, in this regard, hopefully an inspiration for others' (Kleist 2009b, p. 249).

Unquestionably Greenland serves as an inspiration for Indigenous peoples worldwide, especially for other Inuit in the Arctic. Duane Smith, the president of the ICC

Canada, saw the enacting of Greenland's *Self-Government Agreement* as the pursuit of Inuit sovereignty. In his congratulatory letter to former premier of Greenland, Hans Enoksen (Siumut), Smith acclaimed:

We in Canada see this event as a major step by a circumpolar region of people gaining significant control of its rights and livelihood which is now seen by other groups and Inuit throughout the circumpolar Arctic as hope and opportunity for their chance to gain better control of their own destinies. Your fight is our fight and although you may be a public government, it is made up primarily of Inuit to govern an area inhabited by Inuit for Inuit. (Smith 2008, np)

Like its predecessor home rule, however, self-government is a delegated authority. It has been argued that self-government with delegated authority is not Indigenous self-determination but merely self-administration under colonial control (Monture Angus 1998; Green 2002; Cornell, Curtis et al. 2003; Coates 2004). For example in Canada, Aboriginal self-government agreements have been criticised for allowing self-administration, not genuine autonomy. In self-government arrangements,

Colonial structures remain in place and policy frameworks don't shift. [Self-government arrangements] are not given the resources, power and freedom to make real and substantial changes in the management and direction of local government. Self-government amounts to little more than the downloading of poverty and marginalization to local administrations with no resources. (Coates & Morrison 2008, p. 116)

Compared to Aboriginal self-government arrangements in Canada, Greenland's *Self-Government Act* is not nearly as restricted. It has granted Greenlanders the resources,

power and freedom to make decisions about the management and direction of their government. Greenlanders, however, have not made real or substantial changes to the existing colonial structures and policy frameworks.

Like the expanded self-government, home rule was sometimes considered a leading example of Indigenous governance. Mark Nuttall is wary of such interpretations:

Greenland Home Rule has often been considered a model of 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. (Nuttall 2008b, p. 65)

Comparing home rule to the *Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act* and land claims in the Canadian Arctic, Jens Dahl has argued that the former was always characterised by its state-like structure and its efforts to build a state apparatus by copying the institutional model directly from Denmark. ‘The Greenlandization of the political and bureaucratic power structure,’ an area of major focus for the home rule government, focused on filling up the newly established administration with Greenlanders (Dahl 1986, p. 322), not on considering the appropriateness of the framework of a Western parliamentary governance structure.

*The Greenland Self-Government Act* provides a benchmark and represents an example of successful self-government negotiations between Indigenous peoples and states. However, the fact that the final agreement remains silent on Indigenous or Inuit rights and governance may be seen as a considerable shortcoming and thus, the precedent it sets has a limited utility. Greenland’s arrangement of a parliamentary system run by an

Indigenous people is neither attainable nor attractive for the large majority of the world's Indigenous peoples, who are numerical minorities in the countries in which they live. Greenland's aspiration for modern nationhood and independence is not widely shared by most Indigenous peoples, for whom self-determination implies internal decision-making and autonomy, control of their own affairs and participation within sovereign states. Greenland's *Self-Government Act* has great symbolic significance by establishing a new norm of Indigenous self-determination, but little value as a model for negotiating or implementing Indigenous self-government arrangements elsewhere.

As a new norm, Greenland's *Self-Government Act* extends the scope of the UNDRIP's central article on the right of Indigenous peoples to self-determination. Article 3 affirms that, 'Indigenous peoples have the right of self-determination. By virtue of that right they freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development' (United Nations General Assembly 2007). Not surprisingly, Article 3 was one of the most difficult to agree upon during the negotiations of the UNDRIP and remains controversial for several states, due to differing interpretations of the right of self-determination in international law.

As conceptualised and defined by a majority of Indigenous peoples globally, Indigenous self-determination differs, in terms of both its source and its content, from the Western (Westphalian) concept of sovereignty vested in the nation-state. A widely shared view is that Indigenous self-determination is a human right deriving from a fundamental principle in international law: the right to self-determination of all peoples. As a (collective) human right (Anaya 1996), it extends and challenges conventional interpretations and conceptions of self-determination that are limited to a right to

secession and independent statehood. UNDRIP's Article 3 has been interpreted in this light by the majority of Indigenous peoples, who have consistently maintained that they are not seeking secession. For all that, Article 3 does not itself bar independent statehood. By claiming the right to independence and engaging in modern nation-building, Greenlandic Inuit are – regardless of the predominance of the view of non-secession among Indigenous peoples – pushing the boundaries of the norm of the right of Indigenous peoples to self-determination.

## **Conclusion**

Greenland is undergoing a significant transformation as the result of the 2009 *Self-Government Act*. The new self-government era signifies much greater autonomy and decision-making for a country with an overwhelming Inuit majority. It has also meant accelerated economic development in the extractive sector, as this is considered the main condition of implementing Greenlandic self-governance. The Greenland Inuit are no longer subjugated by a colonial state and the constitutional protection of the rights of the Greenland Inuit exceeds that of most other Indigenous peoples in the world.

Three issues stand out when discussing the most significant aspects of the *Self-Government Act*: the right to mineral resources, the recognition of Greenlanders as a people in international law, and the prospect of independence. Nonetheless, many point out the challenge of implementation particularly at the individual level, where the meaning of self-government may remain obscure as the political and public discourse focuses on economic development. Many have serious reservations about the process and speed of planned resource extraction. This all leads the country to uncharted territory, as

reflected in several interviewees' sense of ambivalence about the future of their country.

As an example of a successfully negotiated self-government agreement, Greenland's self-rule serves as an inspiration for other Indigenous peoples, especially other Inuit in the Arctic. With its main focus on modern nation-building within the framework of Western institutionalism, the *Self-Government Act* constitutes a unique means of implementing Indigenous self-government. It revisits the norm of the right of Indigenous peoples to self-determination understood primarily as a collective human right, and sets a precedent within the framework of Indigenous rights in international law.

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<sup>1</sup> In the 2013 national elections, Hammons garnered well over 6000 votes. In spite of her popularity, her premiership came to an abrupt end on October 1, 2014 when she first was granted a temporary leave of absence and then resigned after allegations of misusing public funds. The new elections were held on November 28, 2014 and were won by a narrow margin by her Siumut party. The current premier is Kim Kielsen.

<sup>2</sup> The Inuit Circumpolar Council, representing the Inuit across the Arctic with regional offices in Greenland, Canada, Alaska and Chukotka, Russia, has long been at the forefront of the international advocacy for Indigenous self-determination. Since the inception of the organization in 1977, Inuit rights and self-determination, together with the protection of Arctic environment, have been the organization's key policy areas.

<sup>3</sup> The other main parties include the liberal conservative Atassut (Solidarity) emphasizing interdependence with Denmark and centre-right Democrats. Recently Greenland's political party system has seen the phenomenon of splinter groups forming new parties; the left-wing separatist Partii Inuit, split from Inuit Ataqatigiit in 2013, and centrist Partii Naleraq, split from Siumut in 2014.

<sup>4</sup> Some of the interviewees waived the anonymity and gave permission to use their names.

<sup>5</sup> Greenland's *Self-Government Agreement* is often referred to, especially colloquially, as the *Self-Rule Act*. In the same spirit, the concepts of 'self-government' and 'self-rule' are often used interchangeably, both contrasting with the country's former 'home rule' political arrangement.

<sup>6</sup> As of writing this, the future of the Isua Project is in doubt as the result of the plummeting cost of iron-ore and the financial struggles of London Mining's only other operation in Sierra Leone (Martin 2014).