

Problems of Greenlandic Society: Report on a Symposium

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The following commentary is based upon ten papers on Greenland which were presented at the fourth international congress of the Fondation Française d'Etudes Nordiques held in France in 1969. The papers, two in French and the remainder in English, which appear in the published proceedings of the congress² under the collective title "Greenland Today and Tomorrow", constitute a unique symposium on the affairs of the island. Although he attended the congress as a member of the United States delegation, the writer has relied on the published proceedings rather than personal recollections which have become diminished with the passage of time. The authors of the papers are all referred to below in their capacities at the time the congress was held.

The initial contribution is that of Erling Høegh, member of the Provincial Council (*Landsråd*) of Greenland. It is entitled "The historic development of political institutions in Greenland". Høegh describes how, over the first 130 years following the colonization of western Greenland by Hans Egede in 1721, a gradual disintegration of the traditional Eskimo society occurred as the populace became concentrated in larger and few communities. During the mid-nineteenth century, under H. J. Rink and Samuel Kleinschmidt, an administrative liberalization and programmes of aid were initiated. The progressive Rink was succeeded as Inspector for South Greenland by Hugo Horring, a man who held to the old philosophy of absolute autocracy in the administration of Greenland, and who saw the Greenlandic people as an immature race, incapable of accepting even a modest degree of self-administration. Under legislation passed by the Danish parliament in 1908, Greenland was placed on the path of political development. The establishment of provincial councils (*landerrådene*), one for North Greenland and one for South Greenland, as then known, and of municipal councils (*kommunerådene*) was completed in 1911. In 1925, under new legislation, an intermediate level of local government, the district councils (*sysselrådene*) was created which was dominated by civil servants. This represented, in effect, a setback for democratic administration. The Second World War, however, brought in its train the opening of Greenland to the outside world; the die was cast for irreversible political change. Women's suffrage was voted for at a joint meeting in 1945 of the two provincial councils, and in the following year women were declared eligible for election to council positions. In 1950, the two separate provincial councils were finally merged to form a single Provincial Council, which at first represented only the newly-formed district of West Greenland. After several years of consideration, Greenland finally achieved the status of integral part of the Kingdom of Denmark in 1953, with

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the right to elect two members to the Danish parliament. Constitutionally at least, Greenland was now on a par with all other Danish political subdivisions. In 1961, remote and sparsely populated districts of North Greenland (Thule) and East Greenland (Angmagssalik and Scorsbysund) gained representation in the Provincial Council. Until 1967, the Council was presided over by the chief appointed civil servant in Greenland, the Governor; but since then it has elected its own chairman. The year 1964 saw the establishment of the Greenland Council, consisting of a chairman appointed by the King of Denmark, five Danes (each representing one of the five largest political parties in the Danish parliament), three members of the Provincial Council and the two Greenlandic members of the Danish parliament. The Greenland Council sets broad guidelines for central planning, and serves to coordinate various activities in Greenland. Its major functions are to advise, and make recommendations to the Minister for Greenland on any matters of basic concern to the province. Experience has indicated that the Council's views are generally followed.

Claus Bornemann, of the Ministry for Greenland in Copenhagen, contributed an economic survey, paralleling that of Høegh on political development, entitled "Economic development and the specific aspects of society in Greenland". He divided Greenland's economic history into two eras: that before the Second World War ("The colonial period") and that since the war ("The reform period"). Prior to 1953, the Danish government's stated policy was to protect the Greenlandic population from "undesirable influence from the outside world, so as to preserve the Greenlandic culture and secure a harmonious development." Circumstances and events of the war-time period rendered this policy untenable and obsolete. Over the period from 1945-67, the population of Greenland increased from 21,400 to 43,800, and the percentage of persons born outside the province increased dramatically — from under 3 per cent in the late nineteen forties to 14.7 per cent in 1967 — reflecting the marked acceleration in the pace of social and economic development under way in post-war Greenland. The population is rapidly becoming concentrated in the larger towns. Fisheries continue to be the principal productive activity of the province, though the greater proportion of the catch is still dominated (90 per cent in Davis Strait) by non-Greenlandic vessels. With larger fishing craft coming into use and local labour being trained in modern skills, this situation should be rectified. Fishing as a basic economic activity is, however, inherently unreliable. Increased hopes are being placed on development of the mining industry and tourism, but they too have major limitations. Large capital transfers and the increasing numbers of people sent out from Denmark have created social problems; the basic issue of whether Greenland is to be culturally Danish or Greenlandic remains a subject of debate. Bornemann sees any aspirations for Greenland becoming self-sufficient as unrealistic; indeed, he feels that many Greenlanders may in the future need to migrate to Denmark for work, just as within Denmark poorer people are drawn toward centres of economic opportunity. Throughout the period of its involvement with Greenland, the motives of Denmark have been primarily social, not economic. Ultimately, the converse policy may very well emerge as the political climate changes and the Danish taxpayer reaches his limit of patience concerning the massive one-way flow of funds

to Greenland.

Angmalortok Olsen, a native Greenlander who was educated in Denmark and became a businessman there, contributed the paper "Processes of the dissolution of Greenlandic societies and necessities and possibilities in rebuilding a new Greenlandic society." He criticizes the policy of classification which is being attempted in spite of basic geographical differences between Denmark and Greenland, urging instead that Denmark should be helping the Greenlanders to develop their own society. Pointing to the Danish governmental institutions existing in Greenland, Olsen sees a fine structure but decries the lack of native participation and declares: "Nobody is showing any initiative; nobody is feeling the pioneer spirit." Administrations have, in his view, not prepared the people for future development. He exaggerates somewhat, however, when he states that planning has been done entirely by the Danes; that housing, factories, harbours, roads, nurseries, education have all been organized by outsiders. In what he regards as the likely event of the educational system, as at present constituted, leading to the wiping out of the Greenlandic language, Olsen believes that "the Greenlanders will cease to exist as a people, and history will accuse the Danes of having committed genocide, even though it may have been unwittingly and with the best of intentions, which in my eyes makes it so much the worse." The alternative policy to the present, which Olsen proposes, is one based upon "the highest degree of self-determination." (Though he does not define the term, he implies that it does not mean sovereign nationhood — at least in the foreseeable future — for Greenland). He would make Greenlandic the language of instruction, although Danish would be taught also. Recognizing the dearth of Greenlandic teachers today, he argues that their numbers could be expanded significantly, and any Danes hired to teach should be required to undergo intensive language training. Education would be made relevant to small places as well as to large, and stress placed on vocational instruction. A multi-faceted programme of industrialization based on improvement in transportation, the promotion of activities independent of climate, and the use of mobile fishing units, are advocated. The amount of publishing in Greenlandic should be intensified, and interchanges with other polar peoples increased. The role of the Danes in all Greenlandic life should be that of adviser, not executive.

The article following that of Olsen is in sharp contrast in nearly every respect. Mogen Boserup, Professor of Economics at the University of Copenhagen, sees the economic condition of Greenland as one of regional imbalance, and compares the province's status within the Kingdom of Denmark to that of Corsica within France or Northern Ireland within the United Kingdom. An annual subsidy passes to Greenland which represents a considerable augmentation of the average income of the province's inhabitants. In "The economic future of Greenland society as a problem of regional policy", Boserup suggests that there is no turning back on the well-advanced political, social and economic revolution under way in Greenland. For its native people to achieve a true equality with other Danish communities, the policy of population concentration must be continued, and serious consideration be given to the possibility of resettling people from East Greenland in the western towns. Boserup does not believe that mining and tourism are capable

of solving the economic problems of Greenland. The language barrier he sees as one of the greatest impediments to social and economic parity, and he expresses the belief that the Greenlandic language should be gradually abolished as the teaching medium, and that Greenlanders should become Danish-speaking, "even at the risk that this means their own Eskimo language will gradually fall into desuetude". It is his contention that danification is the only way of overcoming the Greenlanders' status of inferiority so that they may achieve real equality. Boserup advocates an intensification of the current policies for the development of Greenland, rather than any retreat into the past. He concludes with the remark: "Greenland society is in an uneasy, often ugly, situation of transition where the harmony of the old society has gone and no new balance has been found. Since there is no way back, it seems logical to shorten this period of painful transition by unfaltering pursuance of the policy of modernization, including concentration, increased influence for the Greenlanders in matters of public spending and, last but not least, a policy of linguistic reorientation as a means of raising the Greenlanders to true equality with the Danes."

"Bilingualism in Greenland and its resulting problems" is the subject of Jorgen Pjetterson, a bilingual (Danish-Greenlandic) teacher in the West Greenland settlement of Umanak. He describes the hundred or so Danes in this community of 1,000 as being almost totally unilingual. They are portrayed as having almost no contact with the Greenlandic majority outside of their employment. A special group within the community, those of mixed marriage, sometimes found themselves isolated from Danes and Greenlanders alike. Pjetterson notes a typical feeling of inferiority among Greenlanders due to their language: when dealing with Danes they regard themselves as fools until an interpreter can be found. The Education Act of 1967 has the purpose of making Greenlanders of the future bilingual. It provides that parents are to decide, subject to teacher availability (a real limitation on its effectiveness), the language of early instruction of their children. In small settlements, however, the only Danish a child ever hears is that of his teacher. The question might be asked whether it pays to learn Greenlandic or would it be preferable to eliminate Greenlandic from the curriculum and teach only by means of Danish, or perhaps even English. Pjetterson's response is emphatic: "I feel that it is wrong from an educational point of view to teach all kinds of children by means of a language which has no connection whatever in their daily life." Danish should be offered as a matter of course, he believes, but not at the expense of other subject matter. A simplified orthography for Greenlandic should, in his view, be devised, and improvements made in language instruction for both languages; for Greenlandic is the only means by which the members of the native community can express themselves in a natural way, and any effort to promote the use of Danish too vigorously will inevitably cause one or two entire generations of Greenlanders to drop out of society — a price he and many others consider too high.

Hans C. Christiansen of the Royal Greenland Trade Department outlines the history and present status of commerce and exchange in Greenland in his paper "Le monopole commercial et le développement économique au Groenland." In 1950, the trade monopoly which had existed since the earliest days of the Danish

presence in Greenland was officially discontinued. The Department is still, however, a dominant influence in Greenlandic life. It retains many important functions in provisioning (including fuels), processing, and the transportation of Greenland's exports (with the collaboration of private interests); is involved in sheep raising and domesticated reindeer husbandry, and operates an experimental farm; controls sea transport and has a partial interest in the domestic airline (*Grønlandsfly*); operates hotels and arranges accommodation in major settlements and at Sondrestromfjord airfield; conducts the Greenland postal service; and administers the protective pricing policy of Denmark in Greenland. It employs a large labour force of some 4,600 in Greenland, 90 per cent of whom are native Greenlanders. Private commerce has, in spite of severe handicaps, grown steadily since 1950. Cooperatives have been established; and many private specialty shops have come into being, and now number over one hundred. Private business now accounts for between 30 and 40 per cent of the total revenues in Greenland — as high as 80 per cent in some communities. There is some private activity in the production field, such as in the freezing plant at Godthåb. No customs or taxes are levied on goods private traders bring into Greenland, but the export trade is still controlled by the Trading Department which in return guarantees sale. Policies of the Department, including programmes of development in the harsh environment of Greenland, have always been designed to foster the welfare of the native people. The means exist in today's world, Christiansen feels, for solving, with the full collaboration of the native population, all the attendant problems.

Fisheries, when available, present one of the few economic opportunities in the Far North today. Since 1920, this has been the case in Greenland. In the "Future of fisheries as a basic resource for Arctic communities with accent on the Greenland case", Paul Adam describes the intense international competition for the fish resources off Greenland. After a period of steady increases in catch, particularly of cod, from the early nineteen twenties until the first years of the sixties, a decline — quite possibly due to overfishing — has been experienced. As Greenlanders continue to make greater use of larger fishing vessels, their dependence on inshore operations is reduced, and their ability to secure an increased proportion of the offshore catch increase. High-value shrimp fisheries continue to expand, following some contraction in cod fisheries, and so total revenues have not diminished. For the development of fisheries in remote, underdeveloped regions, local consumption at low prices is indispensable. Such is the case in Greenland where seal meat and fish are widely used. The addition of a higher value product (Greenland has this in shrimp) enhances the chances for success. Adam states: "the very fact that Greenlanders can find locally their animal protein supply at cheap prices might perhaps briefly explain the solidity of this Eskimo community which shows a strong desire to keep its individuality". Continuing in this note of optimism, he remarks: "A population which finds in its environment the bulk of its food is already standing on its own feet." Time alone can tell, however, whether the economic stability implicitly predicted by Adam will prevail in Greenland. A great many Danes and Greenlanders devoutly hope it will.

Henning Broensted of the Greenland High Court was the only jurist to participate in the conference. In his paper "Ruling Greenland and forms of integration

into Denmark: the established legal components", he demonstrates the parallel legal development of Greenland with its political, general social and economic metamorphosis. Prior to 1950, Danes and Greenlanders in Greenland were subject to separate procedures. Cases involving Danes were tried by the chief local administrative officer for the district (a Dane) unless the offence was a major one, in which event the accused was sent back to Denmark for trial. Greenlanders were tried by a local court, presided over by the Danish head of the local settlement, assisted by two or four lay assessors appointed by himself, Danish and Greenlandic in equal numbers. Under both procedures, the judge also served as prosecutor in criminal cases. Traditional Greenlandic law was not specific as to punishments, which included banishment, restriction of movement or compulsory work. The present legal system in Greenland is the result of a series of enactments which followed the report of the Greenland Commission in 1950. Under an act of 1951, courts were established to which both Greenlanders and Danes were subject and in which the judicial and prosecuting functions were separated. A special Criminal Code for Greenland came into effect in 1954. In spite of Greenland now being an integral part of the Kingdom of Denmark, its special circumstances are recognized in the modern legal system. Natural conditions, transitional problems and Greenlandic legal traditions are all taken into account in the determination of to what extent laws passed by the Danish parliament should apply to Greenland. The Provincial Council of Greenland has the prerogative of reviewing and commenting on prior to enactment all parliamentary bills dealing exclusively with, or of major interest to, Greenland. The council also sets legal precepts for Greenland, which however require approval of the Minister for Greenland (of the Danish government). It retains legislative powers regarding all those matters over which the local administration had authority prior to 1953 when Greenland became a part of Denmark, unless and until the Danish parliament concerns itself with one or more of them. Each of Greenland's nineteen municipalities has its own council of elected members with powers to pass by-laws covering such local matters as protection of fish and game, regulation of fire arms, control of liquor (subject to the Governor's approval) and general maintenance of peace and order. It is impractical to have trained judges at the local level in Greenland. The magistrates are community leaders who are, incidentally, often difficult to recruit for these part-time positions. Danish police officers act as prosecutors. Defenders, appointed for certain cases, are also non-lawyers who are selected from a list of people in the community and paid for serving. The High Court in Godthåb is the court of appeal, and also serves as the court of first instance in complex cases. In the larger towns, the magistrates are provided with Danish clerk-secretaries who generally have far more training than the magistrates, though they are expected to carefully avoid influencing magistrates in the making of decisions.

Father Finn Lynge, an Oblate priest stationed in Godthåb, although not the only clergyman participating in the congress, made the only presentation ("The principles and main characteristics of missionary activity") that dealt primarily with religious activity in the Far North. He contrasted Lutheran Greenland both with Alaska, where the early Orthodox missionaries were succeeded by various

Protestant and Roman Catholic groups after 1867, and with Canada and its Anglican, Roman Catholic, Moravian and, more recently, Pentacostal missions. It was a Lutheran clergyman, Hans Egede, who founded modern Greenland in 1721. He was soon to be joined by the Moravians (1732) whose controversial missionary endeavours were finally ended by expulsion in 1900. Greenland's present population is virtually one hundred per cent Lutheran, although since 1955 the country has again been officially open to other denominations. After stating that the Christian faith and western culture are two different things, Lynge observes that many missionaries have been as crude in their impositions as imperialistic colonizers. Conversion to Christianity does not of itself imply or presuppose assimilation to "western standards" of the Eskimos. Yet northern history is sprinkled with examples of missionary zeal, including most unfortunate denominational squabbles. The Moravian Brethren, known in Greenland as the Herrnhut missionaries, made the tragic mistake of forcing the consolidation of Eskimos around their Greenland missions. Father Lynge, a native Greenlander himself, sees advantages and disadvantages in both pluralism and religious monopoly. In the latter there is "peace and unity", but also complacency and a danger of authoritarianism, and overdependence on the state. He also sees among the Greenlanders an increasing tendency to emulate white people in their casual approach to religion. Looking to the future, Greenland's only Catholic priest sees the day possibly coming when the state church will become a thing of the past and all churches will need to rely on the resources of the community they are serving. To be able to survive the future, the churches will have to pursue a policy of greater social involvement today, for even in welfare states there exist problems to which the religious institutions must devote more attention.

The last paper was contributed by Odak Olsen, a native Greenlander and chairman of the Union of Greenlandic Workers (*Grønlands Arbejdersammenslutning*). In his contribution "Politique syndicale du Groenland," he describes the nature and status of the organization and traces its development from the time of its foundation in Holsteinsborg in 1953 as a local union. The trade union movement spread to other communities, and three years later the present confederation was formed. The stated purpose of the comprehensive organization is to "defend the political and economic interests of its members and to assemble all local workers, including those on the sea." It is financed by the dues of its members. A number of labour agreements have been concluded, and the principle of equal pay for men and women — at the time of the congress still an issue in Denmark — accepted. Productivity is recognized as a central factor in establishing or increasing wage rates. Special concerns for the unskilled, which includes the majority of Greenlandic labour, are central to the interests of the organization. Cooperation is maintained with Danish national trade union organizations, a number of whom have provided technical assistance to the Greenlandic labour movement. The Union of Greenlandic Workers recognizes the disparity of wage rates paid to Danes and Greenlanders on the island for the same work. Although parity has not yet been achieved, the Union is working toward it as a major objective. Another major thrust of the organization is in the political arena, campaigning as it does on behalf of labour candidates at both the local and provincial levels.