

Recent Trends and Issues in the Political Development of Greenland¹

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BACKGROUND

During the nineteen seventies there has occurred in Greenland an upsurge in political participation, demonstrated in the results of general elections, which indicates that the Greenlandic population has gained a new faith in the possibility of influencing the course of future events, and so gaining control of its own destiny, through the electoral machinery. In 1973, Moses Olsen, a Greenlandic former member of the Danish parliament likened the new development to a spring thaw.

In seeking to understand these unfolding events, one needs to be aware that from the time Greenland became part of Denmark by a change in that country's constitution in 1953, right up until the late nineteen sixties, political discussion remained based on the conviction that the equality of Danes and Greenlanders was a fact that could not be questioned (Kleivan 1969-70). It was, therefore, very objectionable to many people, when the criterion of place of birth was introduced by legislation in 1964, as the action caused a sharp economic boundary to be drawn between Greenlanders and Danes in Greenland. A new political party, known as the Inuit Party was formed to combat the alleged discrimination — and, curiously enough, a Dane was to become its first and only representative in the *Landsråd* (see Note 1). This party and a few organizations formed earlier with the object of promoting the idea of equality as the only popular basis for political thought have all died off.

It was increasing Danish immigration and economic dominance during the nineteen sixties that caused the political scene in Greenland to change. In 1965, 52% of the income of the province went to the group of just over 11% of the population born outside it, and the disproportion has been growing ever since. The conflict of interest represented by these figures is reflected in a debate between *Greenlandic conservatives*, who accept the assumptions of equal status for Greenlanders and Danes, and *Greenlandic radicals*, who oppose the way the idea of equality was put into practice. The radicals are not opposed to the objective of equality between the ethnic groups, but they stress that equal rights cannot be obtained by granting identical rights to Danes and Greenlanders.

The conservatives tend to work in favour of a *danification*, to be brought about by extending to Greenland the laws and standards in force in Denmark. The radicals, in contrast, work for a *greenlandization*, regarding the natural environ-

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ment and cultural heritage of the Greenlanders as basic factors in the development of an acceptable society. Paradoxically, therefore, the radicals lean to the traditional values of Greenlandic society, while the conservatives seek in effect to revolutionize it. This polarization, and the terms used to describe it, are not readily reconcilable with Danish political groupings, the names of which are therefore, in the interests of avoidance of confusion, not referred to in the present paper.

It is against this background that one should view the question of the Greenlandic identity. The "melting pot" approach has never become acceptable in Greenland, and whatever sympathy there had been for the Danish model of society diminished to very small proportions when it was realized that the degree of the Danish dominance was in inverse relationship to the relative size of the Danish part of the population of Greenland, in spite of the constitutionally guaranteed equal rights.

The radical politicians therefore advocate that the natural and cultural identities of each of the three ethnic groups within the state of Denmark, i.e., Danes, Faroese, and Greenlanders, be recognized through their being accorded "parallel status". Under this, equalization of material conditions would not be achieved at the cost of disrespect to true national identities.

The renewed interest of the Greenlanders in their own identity and heritage can be seen in the light of their changed attitude towards the Greenlandic Criminal Code. This was built up on the basis of the attitude of traditional Greenlandic society towards deviators, and its aims at rehabilitation of the offender rather than long term imprisonment. When the Code was adopted in the mid-nineteen-fifties, the great concern of the most influential members of Greenlandic society was voiced by *Atuagagdliutit/Grønlandsposten*, the bilingual newspaper with Greenland-wide circulation, edited by Jørgen Fleischer. The latter considered that the Code might be appropriate to a primitive hunting society, but in a modern industrialized community the great leniency of the laws comprising it would only result in a marked increase in crime. The Code remained, however, and within the last couple of years Fleischer has changed his mind; formerly one of the keenest critics of the law, he now considers it very suitable because it is based on ideas natural to Greenlandic society (Chemnitz and Goldschmidt 1973; Fleischer 1974).

It is difficult to establish exactly when political discussion in Greenland began to be Greenlandic in terms of reference. Moses Olsen must, however, be regarded as a catalyst of the "spring thaw". In 1969, while chairman of the Young Greenlanders' Council in Copenhagen, he described "the generational change in Greenland politics", and the same year he examined the subject "Greenland - Denmark, uniformity or equality?" (Olsen 1969a, 1969b).

VOTING PATTERNS

In 1971, there took place two elections that came to be decisive for the development of alternative Greenlandic politics. In the election to the *Landsråd*, a 24-year-old, hitherto-unknown school teacher, Lars Emil Johansen, became representative for Godthåb; Jonathan Motzfeldt, a minister from Julianehåb, defeated the

former chairman of the *Landsråd*, Erling Høegh, in that municipality — the home town of the latter; while Moses Olsen, running in his own home town of Holsteinsborg, came a very close second to Jørgen Olsen, who had served four terms as its representative. In the ensuing general election for the Danish parliament, Moses Olsen unexpectedly defeated Nikolaj Rosing, who had represented the South district of Greenland since 1959; while Knud Hertling, the first Greenlander to take office as Minister for Greenland, was elected in a no-contest election in the North district (see Fig. 1).

The results of these elections of 1971 provoked many comments. Among the more thoughtful were those of Frederik Nielsen, a Greenlander and former head of Radio Greenland. He considered that three factors were decisive in the election of Lars Emil Johansen: the considerable number of young voters wishing to see new and young blood; the presence of many in-migrants (see Note 2) with an insufficient knowledge of the candidates; and the inclination of the large proportion of Danes in the population (of Godthåb) to give support to new ideas. Discussing the surprising election of Moses Olsen, Nielsen was of the opinion that either Nikolaj Rosing or Erling Høegh could have won, had they joined forces. In his review of the events of 1971, Nielsen concluded that, although some young newcomers had been elected both for the *Landsråd* and for the Danish parliament, the fact that they did not have any established political party or similar organization to support them would make it easier for other new candidates to displace them; for to be alone or independent was not conducive to political longevity in Greenland (Nielsen 1972). This observation is surprising in view of the fact that lack of ideological platform has been the principal reason for the failure of political parties to survive for long in Greenland (see Kleivan 1969-70). The real significance of the results of the elections in 1971 was that it had become possible to formulate a definite political programme; and Moses Olsen and Lars Emil Johansen started a fruitful cooperation to that end (Gulløv 1971).

The fruits of this cooperation were harvested one year later (1972) in the form of the emphatic (over 70%) vote by the population of Greenland against membership in the European Common Market; though since the inhabitants of Greenland and Denmark voted collectively in favour of membership in the referendum, Greenland was drawn in willy-nilly. Membership had been opposed by the Association of the Hunters and Fishermen in Greenland (KNAPP) and, somewhat hesitatingly, by the *Landsråd* (its chairman, Lars Chemnitz, was in favour of membership); Knud Hertling, representative for the North District in the Danish parliament and Minister for Greenland, supported membership. The result of the referendum served to emphasize the degree of support for the natural and cultural bases of Greenlandic society and constituted, in effect, a strong rejection of Danish formalism (Gulløv and Heilmann 1973).

In 1973, for the third year in succession, the people of Greenland were able to express themselves through their votes. In the election for the Danish parliament in December of that year, there were two candidates in each of the two voting districts. Moses Olsen and Lars Emil Johansen, running in the South and North districts respectively, had the same radical programme, while Knud Hertling (North) and Nikolaj Rosing (South), though of opposite political views in Danish

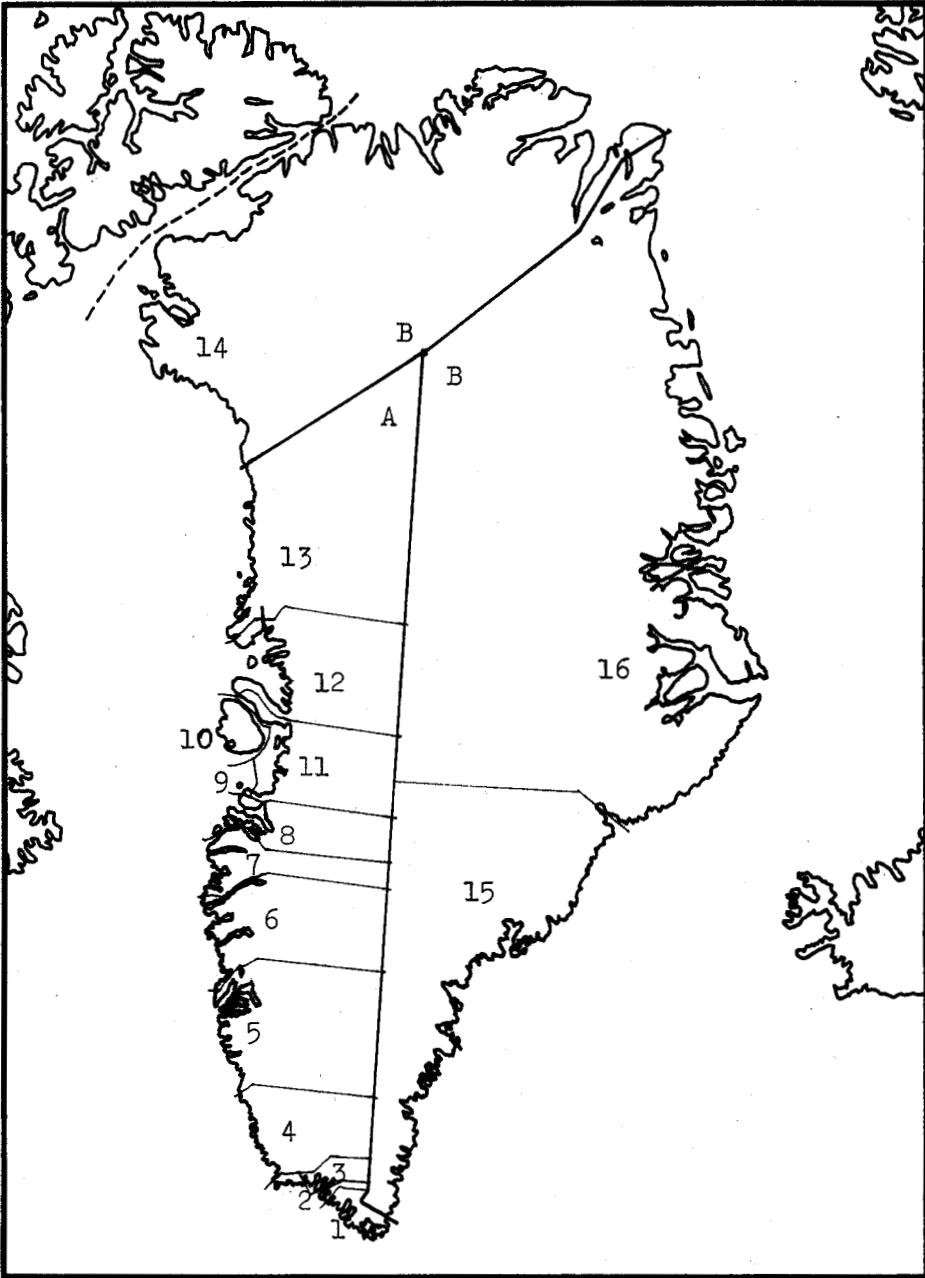


FIG. 1. Voting districts in Greenland. For elections to the Danish parliament: A (South district) covered West Greenland, and B (North district) covered North Greenland and East Greenland; but since 1975 Greenland has been one combined voting district. For elections to the *Landsråd*: 1. Nanortalik; 2. Julianehåb; 3. Narssaq; 4. Frederikshåb; 5. Godthåb; 6. Sukkertoppen; 7. Holsteinsborg; 8. Kangatsiaq; 9. Egedesminde; 10. Godhavn; 11. Diskobugten (Christianshåb and Jakobshavn); 12. Umanak; 13. Upernavik; 14. Thule; 15. Angmagssalik; 16. Scoresbysund. In addition, since 1975 one representative of the Union of Greenlandic Workers has sat in the *Landsråd*.

terms, figured together on a one-page political advertisement in *Atuagagdliutit/Grønlandsposten* (no. 26, 1973) paid for by the Association of Greenlandic Employers and the Association of Businessmen in Greenland.

The results not only served to confirm the polarization of political views in Greenland, but also amounted to a vote of confidence in those advocated by Moses Olsen, though he himself was not re-elected. He and Johansen, who was successful, obtained 8,074 votes together against the 7,022 of Rosing and Hertling. Almost 71% of the eligible voters cast their votes in the South district and 62% in the North district (average for both combined 67.6%). This degree of participation was the highest since the first election for the Danish parliament in Greenland in 1953, when the percentages were 70.4% and 66.8% respectively, with a combined average of 68.6%. The average for both districts combined increased to 68.7% at the general election in 1975, when Johansen and Rosing (who died in August 1976) were both re-elected. Percentages of eligible voters participating in Greenland in all elections to the Danish parliament from 1953 to 1975 are indicated in Fig. 2. The results of the general election of February 1977 are discussed briefly in the Appendix.

An analysis of election returns for 1973 from the South district reveals that Olsen received the majority of votes in the villages, while Rosing was dominant in the towns. This circumstance gave rise to speculations in *Atuagagdliutit/Grønlandsposten* (no. 28, 1973) as to whether the influence of the Danish minority of the total electorate might have been decisive, a possibility that Rosing himself, writing in the same issue of the paper, did not exclude. If it can be proved beyond all doubt, then it may well work to the joint benefit of Johansen and Olsen in their political cooperation (see Janussen 1974).

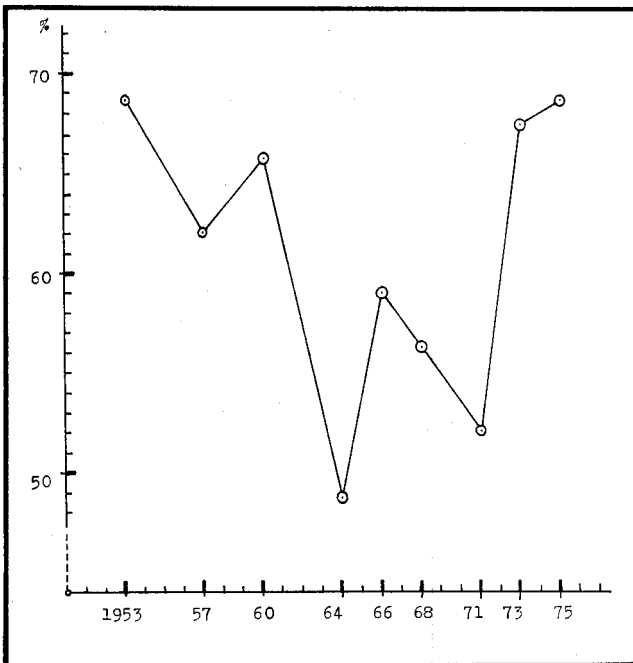


FIG. 2. Percentage participation of eligible voters in elections to the Danish parliament. The absolute numbers of eligible voters were: 9,356 in 1953; 5,194 in 1957; 13,005 in 1960; 17,238 in 1964; 11,289 in 1966; 20,766 in 1968; 14,104 in 1971; 24,215 in 1973; 24,838 in 1975. In 1957, 1966 and 1971, contested elections took place in one voting district only. For the 1977 election, see Appendix.

In his maiden speech in the Danish parliament Lars Emil Johansen made it clear that he would continue to advocate the policies supported by a majority of the voters of Greenland, and expressed the hope that his hearers would not try to hinder in any way the political development and awakening of Greenland that had given rise to those policies, including support for home rule (see *Folketingstidende* 1974).

During the period when he was a member of the *Landsråd*, Johansen started a political discussion group, now being continued by Moses Olsen who is becoming well known in the municipalities. Such initiatives, previously unknown in Greenland may serve to allay the notion that it is the Danish part of the population which tends to interest itself in novel ideas. As the discussion group consolidated into the *Sujumut* (Forward) movement, a bilingual publication of the same name was launched, in the spring of 1975, in order to further expand the political base of the group. Finally, in the spring of 1976, it was announced that the formation of a political party was under way. It may be expected to have a profound influence on the course of politics in Greenland in the future.

CURRENT ISSUES

Home rule

Following a request from the *Landsråd*, a Home Rule Committee was set up by the Minister for Greenland in January 1973. It was something new that the persons appointed to it were all native Greenlanders: the two Greenlandic representatives in the Danish parliament, five members of the *Landsråd* and, later, a representative from the League of Greenlandic Municipalities.

In its preliminary report, published in February 1975, and considered to be the basis for further negotiations, the Committee recommended that the internal administration of Greenland should be the responsibility of the *Landsråd* and that the latter should be granted the power to legislate for Greenland previously vested in the Danish parliament, instead of having a purely advisory function.

In their discussion of the need to obtain some kind of home rule, the Committee members brought out the vast differences between the native Greenlandic population and the Danish population. Furthermore, the Committee mentioned the great length of the line of communication between Greenland and Denmark and the difficulties created by the language gap. "This easily gives the Greenlandic politician a feeling of lack of influence, a feeling of standing outside the door, when decisions are made" (Committee 1975).

The members of the Committee did not suggest total independence for Greenland. That must be up to the next generation, as Johansen stated in a comment. According to the report, certain areas, particularly foreign relations and defence, but also some internal affairs such as police, the Greenlandic court system, communications, and health care are to be exercised jointly in the future, and funded by the Danish state.

As its general recommendation the Home Rule Committee suggested to the Danish parliament that a legislative framework be drafted which would allow a gradual take over of authority by the *Landsråd* in the areas of: economic policy

and development, education and cultural affairs, hunting and fishing within territorial waters, tourism, certain areas of civil law, criminal law, and finally control of mineral and oil resources.

The Committee envisaged that the internal government of Greenland would be financed through revenues already controlled by the *Landsråd*, namely a tax on certain luxury items and income taxation (the latter was introduced on 1 January 1975). Such revenues being, however, insufficient to sustain the present level of activity, the subsidy from Denmark should be continued — though transformed into a general grant to be administered by the *Landsråd*.

In response to the preliminary report of the Committee, a Home Rule Commission was set up in the summer of 1975. Its principal task is to examine all existing administrative functions in Greenland and Denmark in order to determine how they can be reorganized in conjunction with the transfer of new powers to Greenland in such a way as to give the greatest measure of influence and authority to the *Landsråd*. The Commission consists of a chairman from outside the political arena, seven Danish members of parliament and, as in the case of the 1973 Committee, two Greenlandic representatives in the Danish parliament and five members of the *Landsråd*. The Commission has publicized some preliminary recommendations in a pamphlet intended to further public discussion as to the kind of home rule to be introduced on 1 April 1979 (Commission 1976); and a picture of the basic working conditions of the Commission is beginning to emerge (Brøsted and Gulløv 1976).

Mineral and oil resources

Many Greenlandic politicians have, in recent years, pointed out that, if revenues derived from the exploitation of the oil and other mineral resources of Greenland were at the disposal of the *Landsråd*, the latter would be far less dependent on the Danish state. However, this attitude is one of non-commitment and ambiguity, for the harvest of Greenland's renewable resources in the traditional hunting and fishing occupations is also considered to be the future economic basis of the island, and the two might not be compatible. For both these reasons, the *Landsråd's* control in this area is believed to be of critical importance.

Exactly because of the importance attributed to this area, it might also prove critical to the political ability of the Greenlanders to exercise home rule. There exists no private ownership of land in Greenland where land is considered to be vested in the "community", though it is not clear what the latter constitutes. The state makes a claim of ultimate ownership which may, however, be disputed.

At present the right to issue permits for home owners or businesses is vested in the municipal councils. It is unlikely, however, on the basis of individual decisions taken to date, that the Danish parliament will be willing to approve of the devolution of other rights in the land and thereby transfer to Greenlandic control potential sources of income that might serve to overcome a good number of the heavy economic problems that have beset the Danish state for many years.

Thus it is worth mentioning that neither of the two Greenlandic representatives in the Danish parliament have been given a seat on the parliamentary committee which considers concessions for the exploration and exploitation of Greenland's

mineral wealth. Likewise it was only recently that the *Landsråd* was granted funding to add to its secretariat one expert in the multitude of complicated problems surrounding the exploitation of natural, non-renewable resources, and this took place only after the Ministry for Greenland had done all the basic work towards the development of a legal and political framework for the granting of concessions and approval of operating procedures. Parallel to this, however, the Ministry for Greenland has established a division for coordination and regulation and, in doing so, created within itself a pattern of double loyalties. An unusually sharp reminder of this circumstance was given in the spring of 1976, when in the course of a research project concerning the socio-economic impact of the mining project at Marmorilik in northern Greenland, it was demonstrated that the Ministry for Greenland had failed to sufficiently protect the rights of the local population. The project, sponsored by the Ministry for Greenland, was prematurely stopped when this failure was publicized, even though the bargaining position of the local population was enhanced as a result.

This was not the first time the conflict became manifest; even more fundamental conflicts evolved during 1975, when the new Danish government, formed after the general election of January 1975, approved the granting of some thirteen oil concessions off the coast of West Greenland. The concessionnaires were seven groups of nineteen foreign companies, and one consortium of eight larger Danish corporations (see Watt 1975 and maps issued by the Geological Survey of Greenland in 1975). The concessions were granted with the approval of the all-Greenlandic executive committee of the *Landsråd*, though opposed strongly by other representatives of the Greenlandic interest who requested a stay of action. This was not granted, and the first exploratory drilling commenced in the summer of 1976.

The *Landsråd* did, however, pass unanimously in the fall of 1975 a resolution claiming ownership of all subsurface resources in Greenland on behalf of the population permanently resident in Greenland.

It is ironic that home rule is coming to Greenland at a time when the stakes are so high because of the existence of oil and mineral resources there that the Danish state is not inclined to relinquish control of them.

NOTE 1. Greenland's highest elected body will continue to be known as the *Landsråd* until the formal introduction of home rule, planned for April 1979, when it will become the *Landsting*. "Provincial Council" has in the course of time become the term most generally used as an equivalent for *Landsråd* in English-language texts; but, in anticipation of the change in 1979, "National Council" has recently been used by some branches of the government and public service in Denmark and Greenland.

NOTE 2. The term "in-migrants" has been used here for the Danish-Greenlandic term *tilflytter*, which refers mostly to Greenlanders moving from the smaller "outports" and smaller towns into the cities designated by planners to bear the impact of the policy of population concentration. The term in-migrant, then, is in contradistinction to another new population element in Greenland: the Danes and other foreigners immigrating to Greenland. An impression of the relative importance of the two population groups' role in the growth of Godthåb can be gained from the figures below:

	1951	1960	1965	1971
Greenlanders	1,189	2,537	3,585	5,401
Danes and other foreigners	200	642	1,280	2,573

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APPENDIX

At the general election for the Danish parliament of February 1977, the trends both of increased polarization in political views and of growing voter participation were maintained. Before the election, however, a series of political events had occurred which had greatly influenced both Danish-Greenlandic relations and political organization in Greenland. In the fall of 1976, the question of aboriginal land title in Greenland had come to a head in the course of the negotiations toward home rule, and culminated — after debates in the Danish parliament — in the threat of the prime minister to seek a severance in Danish-Greenlandic relations, should Greenland persevere in the claim to ownership as expressed in the resolution passed by the *Landsråd* in the fall of 1975. As a reaction to these events, a new political group *Atassut* (Mutual Connection) was formed by Lars Chemnitz, chairman of the *Landsråd*, Otto Steenholdt, a member of the *Landsråd*, and Ole Berglund, who acted as substitute for Nikolaj Rosing in the Danish parliament after the latter's death. *Atassut* proceeded to stress the positive elements in Danish-Greenlandic relations, playing down the importance of the Greenlandic land claims.

In the 1977 election, Lars Emil Johansen, representing the *Sujumut* interest, was reelected, while Otto Steenholdt became the representative for *Atassut*. Altogether, 8,383 *Atassut* votes were cast (47.6% of valid votes) and 9,215 *Sujumut* votes (52.4%). Of the 25,691 eligible voters, 70.0% participated in the election (information based on preliminary returns).