

Greenland: northern rights

After 300 years of Danish rule, the world's largest island wants to go it alone

Why is independence now an issue?

In two words: climate change. Greenland – an island ten times the size of the UK, but with a population of just 57,000 (slightly less than Tunbridge Wells) – is often chosen as the poster-child of global warming: its vast ice sheet is melting twice as fast as it was five years ago and threatens rising sea levels for the rest of the planet. Glaciers are tumbling into the sea at an alarming rate. But what is bad for the rest of the world could prove a boon for Greenland. Rising temperatures are allowing farmers to grow crops such as broccoli and potatoes for the first time, and driving lucrative fish catches – such as shrimp – into Greenlandic waters.

And what about oil and gas?

Nothing has been drilled as yet, but as across the rest of the Arctic, receding ice is opening up access to energy and mineral resources. According to the US Geological Survey, Greenland holds around 10% of all the oil and gas in the Arctic region and could make territorial claims for more. Greenland's Bureau of Mines and Petroleum awarded its first oil and gas leases for its west coast this year and similar leases for the east coast are expected to go on sale in 2012. The prospect of riches has encouraged many Greenlanders to believe that the island can finally become an independent nation.

Why is Greenland ruled by Denmark in the first place?

It was first colonised by Europeans in 982AD, when the Viking Erik the Red was banished from Iceland for manslaughter. For several hundred years, two Viking colonies existed alongside the Inuit peoples, the Saqqaq and the Thule, who came to Greenland from what is now Canada. (Being part of the American continental shelf, its capital Nuuk is just 420 miles from the nearest Canadian town, but 2,000 miles from Copenhagen.) Denmark's claim dates from 1721, when the country (then linked to Norway) sent Lutheran churchman Hans Egede to see if any Viking descendants were still on the island, and if so, to convert them. There were none, but Egede established contact with the Inuit and fur trading soon began. When Norway and Denmark separated in 1814, Greenland remained a Danish colony and in 1953 joined the Danish kingdom, with two seats in the Danish parliament.

Has the relationship with Denmark been a happy one?

Not entirely. Denmark has had no qualms relocating Greenland's Inuits – 89% of the population – for its own purposes. In the 1950s, Inuits were driven from their lands in the north west to make way for a US military base at Thule. Meanwhile, Denmark's policy of coaxing traditional fishing communities to the six main towns has resulted in high levels of alcoholism, unemployment and HIV/Aids. The island also has a poor education system (70% of Greenlanders don't finish school) and a frighteningly high suicide rate – more than double that of Lithuania, the country with the world's highest suicide rate. And for all the 300 years of Danish influence, few Greenlanders feel affinity for their European administrators. As finance minister Aleqa Hammond puts it:



The town of Ilulissat, Greenland

“We don't look like Danes, we don't think like Danes, and we are not Danes.”

Then why put up with them so long?

Most Greenlanders think it lucky that they were colonised by Denmark rather than being swallowed up by the US or Canada, but a few independence activists have been looking for a way out for decades. They got their first chance after Denmark joined the EEC (as it then was) in 1973. Fearing the impact of European regulations on fishing and trade with North America, 70% of Greenlanders voted against joining the bloc, a protest vote that led to Greenland being given its own parliament in 1979. In 1985, Greenland voted to leave the EU altogether, but Denmark still retained control over the island's foreign affairs, justice system, defence and natural resources.

So why didn't they break away completely?

Because of the \$600m subsidy that Copenhagen sends every year. The money, accounting for more than half the island's income, works out at \$10,000 per head, an umbilical cord of cash Greenland has felt unable to sever. (With such a thinly spread population, most of whom still work in subsistence fishing, almost everything on the island, from beer to lavatory paper, has to be imported.) But with climate change of increasing concern and the Arctic now a region of huge strategic importance (*see box*), many Greenlanders feel they can play an important role in world affairs and have the potential to go it alone.

So what have Greenlanders done about it?

On 25 November this year, 75% voted “yes” in a referendum demanding more autonomy: among other things this will make Kalaallisut the official language, and will give the island control over its criminal justice system, lighthouses and vet services. Crucially, the referendum also lays out Greenland's future financial relationship with Denmark. Today they each get a 50-50 share of profits from Greenland's natural resources. Under the new plan, the rules are adjusted in Greenland's favour (though what it gains in profits, it loses in subsidy). In this way, it hopes gradually to wean itself off Danish subsidy.

And will it eventually be able to buy complete freedom?

There are plenty of hurdles still to overcome. Crucially, there's not yet any agreement on how revenues from oil and gas will be shared should the subsidy ever reach zero. Politicians in Greenland insist that most of the profits belong to the island; Danish right-of-centre politicians argue that, given the decades of subsidy, Copenhagen is entitled to its share. Greenland's Prime Minister Hans Enoksen hopes to achieve full independence in 2021, the 300th anniversary of colonisation by Denmark, but much will depend on the timing of the oil and gas boom – if there is one. Harvesting Greenland's oilfields is a long way off. Experts say it could be 15 to 20 years before any oil is found, and 30 or 40 years before the huge investments required begin to pay dividends.

The race to grab the Arctic

Denmark, via Greenland, is one of the major players – along with Canada, the US, Russia and Norway, the four other countries that border the Arctic Ocean – in the quickening race to control the vast energy and mineral resources of the Arctic. The Arctic is thought to contain up to a quarter of the world's oil, and untold reserves of gold, diamonds, zinc and lead. As climate change melts the ice, opening sea routes and lands previously inaccessible for oil and mineral exploration, each country has been making ever larger claims of sovereignty. Russia got the world's attention last summer by planting a flag on the seabed under the North Pole, while scientists from Canada, Russia and Denmark are all compiling geological evidence to prove that the Lomonosov Ridge, a 1,240-mile underwater mountain range, actually belongs to them. One factor that may militate against complete independence for Greenland is that, if this were granted, Denmark would presumably have to forsake all its claims to the riches of the Arctic.