Greenland, Iceland and the meltdown of the old order in the North Atlantic

The London School of Economics and Political Science, 6 May 2025, https://www.lse.ac.uk/Events/2025/05/202505061830/greenland

Dear guests

It gives me great pleasure to be here at this prestigious institution. We Icelanders are known to be a people of few words so let's get right to it. Greenland, Iceland and the meltdown of the old order in the North Atlantic. In this talk, I will look north, to the Arctic, a hot region in more ways than one these days. More specifically, and based on what I happen to know best, I will examine whether the history of Iceland, my home country, offers some valuable lessons for our good neighbours, the Greenlanders, as they continue on their rightful road to increased sovereignty within the Danish Realm, ultimately leading to full independence if they so wish.

First, a few caveats since comparisons can be problematic and only go so far. Greenland is undeniably an Arctic country. It lies mostly north of the Arctic Circle, and it is mostly covered in ice. Also, it was first inhabited by Inuits and they still comprise an overwhelming part of the population. Most of them speak various dialects of Greenlandic, an Eskimo-Aleut language.

But what about Iceland? Is that an Arctic country? To begin with, the Arctic circle – just like Arctic nature, society and geopolitics – is in constant motion. Its latitude depends on the globe's fluctuating axial tilt. Still, its moves can be calculated in advance, and one is tempted to quote here Isaac

Newton's quip; that he could "calculate the motions of the heavenly bodies, but not the madness of the people".

Conversely, no part of Iceland, the main island itself, lies north of the Arctic Circle. Still, the northernmost tip of Grímsey, a small island, is just inside the Arctic, according to this definition. If that is good news, the bad news is that quite soon, in 2047 to be precise, the circle will move north of this island. Then again, we will be left with Kolbeinsey, assuming that this skerry even farther north will not have vanished by then, through constant erosion by sea and ice. And as a final frontier in this regard, the last stand, Iceland's Exclusive Economic Zone goes well beyond the Arctic Circle.

Now, that artificial line cannot be the only determinant in this matter. It would be tempting to say that if you feel Arctic, you are Arctic. That, however, raises another question. In ancient times, humans did not reach Iceland from the east and north. There were no indigenous people there when Norse settlers arrived some 1200 years ago or so – only a few Irish monks according to written accounts.

Therefore, the Icelanders certainly did not want to be labelled an Arctic nation. They wanted to be Nordic and European, counted among civilized, cultured and advanced peoples, if you like. This escape from the Arctic could be heard in modern times when ignorant or innocent foreigners asked a silly question in the minds of Icelanders and got this reply: "No, we are not Eskimos and we do not live in igloos."

The distinction between us and them entered popular culture as well. Take, for instance, the song "Greenland" in 1983 by singer Bubbi Morthens, Iceland's version of Bruce Springsteen or Billy Bragg, or even Denmark's Kim Larsen:

Þegar vitund þjóðar þinnar er að vakna,
horfir þjóð mín í aðra átt.
Húðlit sínum hún hampar,
sem er hvítur, þú veist við hvað er átt.

When you are rising up
we look the other way
We cherish our colour of skin,
it is white, you know what I mean.

In Iceland, Greenlanders could meet prejudices like those that they constantly encountered in Denmark; that they were backward and uneducated, unfit to run their own affairs and could largely blame themselves for serious social ills in their country like alcoholism and sexual abuse.

Furthermore, well into the latter half of the twentieth century, interest in Greenland in Iceland sometimes centred on selfish claims to that large island. After all, Eiríkur rauði (Eric the Red) and other Norsemen sailed from Iceland and settled there. Eric it was who gave the island the name Grænland in Icelandic or Grønland in Danish (the official name in Greenlandic is Kalaallit Nunaat). Therefore, some Icelanders argued that Greenland should belong to Iceland, not Denmark. Such considerations never reached official levels but for a while they garnered fair support or sympathy among the population.

In geographical or anthropological terms, Iceland is not an Arctic country. However, other determinants can also be taken into consideration.

Geopolitics matter. Iceland is a founding member of the Arctic Council, a consultative body that will celebrate its thirtieth anniversary next year. And the Arctic Circle – the annual conference in Reykjavík – is a well-known main meeting point and melting pot for deliberations on Arctic affairs, generating great interest among all players great and small who want to influence developments in this part of the world, directly and indirectly.

Furthermore, global warming and the incessant meltdown of Arctic ice affects Iceland – it affects the whole world, but proximity is an important factor here. Finally, the line between Arctic and non-Arctic has always been artificial and blurry, and the Greenlanders are making it more so. While they hold on to their heritage and unique connection with nature they are strengthening and developing their nationhood and relations with the outside world. Greenland will remain an Arctic country but today we should see better than before that it is also Nordic and western. In particular, Greenland is West Nordic, an ally, friend and neighbour of Iceland and the Faroe Islands, the other members of the West Nordic Council, a parliamentary body founded in Nuuk, the capital of Greenland, forty years ago.

Of course, the Greenlanders themselves can best describe themselves their nationhood and interests, their aspirations and plans. What I know well, still, is that we Icelanders are willing to work with them as they wish. That approach is both self-centred and altruistic. It is in our interest to see the Arctic and West Nordic region flourish in peace and progress. We can cooperate in healthcare, education and various other fields. Likewise, Iceland is an obvious partner for the Greenlanders as they become more independent in industry, trade and tourism.

And we have a roadmap. Iceland used to be under Danish rule. A one paragraph political history of Iceland could sound like this: Free Commonwealth from the settlement to the thirteenth century when the Icelanders became subjects of the Norwegian king. Later on, when Norway and Denmark joined in royal union, Iceland was included. Subsequently, the country was akin to a Danish colony, not formally but to all intents and purposes. The nineteenth century was a period of "national awakening" in Iceland as in so many other parts of Europe. In 1845, the old parliament, the Althing, was restored, and in 1874 the King of Denmark granted Iceland a separate constitution. In 1904 Iceland was given home rule, and in 1918, the authorities in Iceland and Denmark agreed on a Union Treaty, granting Iceland sovereignty but Denmark handled Iceland's foreign relations and the sovereign remained Danish. The King of Denmark became the King of Iceland as well. This agreement could be terminated after 25 years and in 1944, the Icelanders established a republic, severing all formal ties with Denmark.

Dear friends. That's how the old order collapsed in Iceland, step by step. Naturally, the change was not only political and constitutional. Economic and technological advances fuelled the independence drive, as did increased commerce and relations with the outside world. Education and social change must not be discounted either; the foundation of the University of Iceland in 1911, the formation of associations, the feeling that people could indeed stand on their own feet. In short, the nation grew in self-confidence.

Let me also mention a few milestones after full independence. Iceland was never a member of the League of Nations but joined the United Nations

in 1946, then by far the smallest state of the organization. During the Second World War, US forces were stationed in Iceland and after the end of hostilities, the US administration wanted to maintain a military presence on the island. As one of the country's leading politicians remarked in private, "the United States would probably get Iceland, no matter what we said, if they felt that this is what they need". Still, a compromise was found, with civilian forces running the vital airport on the island, and in 1949, Iceland became a founding member of NATO. Two years later, it entered a defence agreement with the United States and US troops returned, with a military base at Keflavík Airport and surveillance posts around the island. This agreement is still in force although the permanent presence of US forces on the island came to an end in 2006.

Iceland has no army, hence the need to work with and rely on others for military protection, should that need ever arise. Of course, this story is relevant to our friends and neighbours in Greenland. While we must remember caveats about the limits of useful comparisons, they are certainly on a similar journey. Greenland came under Danish rule in the eighteenth century. As late as 1953, it was formally a colony of Denmark. The Danish authorities then changed its status so that this largest island on earth was made a county within the Danish Kingdom.

Economic and social changes followed, as well as calls for increased autonomy. Arguably, Greenland's "national awakening" began in earnest in the 1970s. A good example would be the rock band Sumé and the release of its first album, Sumus, in 1973. As one of the band's members later said: "Our primary objective was to foster acceptance of our distinct identity and assert Greenlandic culture." After a referendum in 1979, the Greenlanders

were granted home rule, gaining more sovereignty after another referendum in 2009.

Just like we in Iceland before, the people of Greenland want to take increased control of their own affairs. Are they capable of that? Can they stand on their own feet? Do they have the resources, the know-how, the experience? Can they run a functioning society? Can they defend themselves? Such questions sound familiar to Icelandic historians and, I should think, historians of decolonization all over the world.

Again, the Greenlanders themselves will best be able to answer doubters about their future and their ambitions. Of course, they are not wholly united on aims and methods, they disagree in their risk-benefit assessments. But so did the Icelanders, for that matter, and so many others in similar circumstances. And, again, we are willing to help our friends and neighbours. I mention here the work of law professor Gudmundur Alfredsson on Greenland's position and legal rights. In office, I was also pleased to receive Greenland's constitutional committee in 2017, and I think it is safe to say that the overwhelming majority of Icelanders want to see the Greenlanders gain more control of their own affairs, if that is their desire.

That is not a big if. That process will hardly stop. A milestone was reached two years ago when the parliament of Greenland, Inatsiartut, was handed a draft constitution for further deliberations. According to that document, Greenland would become a sovereign state, maybe similar to Iceland's status between 1918 and 1944.

So, what happens next? President Donald Trump's determination to increase American influence and presence in Greenland has dramatically influenced all future scenarios. His offhand but repeated remarks of

purchasing the country are preposterous. We do not live in an age where mighty states should be able to buy and sell islands, countries and peoples. Furthermore, a treaty between the United States and Denmark, the Greenland Defence Agreement, is in place, made in 1951 just like in Iceland's case. Under that arrangement, the US administration has been able to safeguard its perceived security interests in Greenland and there is no reason to believe why that would not continue to be the case.

Naturally, Trump's comments – expressed most recently just a few days ago – jolted both the Greenlanders and the Danish government. On the one hand, I am reminded of a remark by a leader of indigenous people in one corner of the world who said: "Our problems really began when other people started having an interest in us." On the other hand, the Greenlanders can possibly benefit from the shock waves that hit their shores – and the Danes as well, for that matter.

A body like the Kingdom of Denmark, Rigsfælleskabet, can not remain static. It must develop, in line with the will of its citizens, not subjects but citizens. Furthermore, views on its past must change as well, in an honest manner where mistakes or misdemeanours are admitted and accounted for.

Denmark was a colonial power. Incidentally, the last time that the US administration purchased land from another government was over a century ago, in 1917. The Caribbean islands of Saint Croix, Saint John, and Saint Thomas where then bought for 25 million USD, equivalent to a little over 600 million dollars today. They became known as the US Virgin Islands and the seller was Denmark. Danish rule in what became known as the Danish West Indies was established in the mid-eighteenth century, around the same time that Danish control was established in Greenland.

In office, I sometimes remarked that if we Icelanders could have chosen a “colonial power”, we might as well have opted for the Danes. It could have been much worse, they were not really that interested in us and once we had gained independence, they gave us back the lion’s share of our national treasures, the old manuscripts of the Icelandic Sagas, Iceland’s main contribution to world civilization. That’s not something that can be said about all states and treasures, stolen or otherwise taken.

Yes, Denmark was a colonial power. While its rule may compare favourably with other, more brutal regimes, the colonial episode in Danish history contains chapters of inhumanity and injustice. Danish rule in Greenland in recent decades includes the uprooting of families, forced child removals and a sterilization program which affected thousands of women in the 1960s and 70s. An honest assessment of these wrongs is a prerequisite for a continued, positive relationship between Greenland and Denmark.

Fortunately, steps have been taken in that direction and let us only hope that more will follow. We cannot change the past, but we can change how we perceive it, for our own benefit and that of future generations. And we can try to learn from the past. One lesson might be that old orders come to an end at some point and another that it is usually better to see that happen in an ordinary, mutually agreed manner.