

## WORLD'S LARGEST ISLAND CLOSER TO INDEPENDENCE

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Queen Margrethe II of Denmark handing over power to  
Joseph Motzfeldt, Greenland's Prime Minister

Adding to the ignorance many Republicans display about global warming, party chairman Michael Steele recently pontificated that Greenland got its name because it was once just as green as Iceland was. When Iceland was settled in the 9<sup>th</sup> Century, glaciers covered only 10 percent of the land mass, but Greenland's ice sheet extended over 80 percent of the island. Fugitive Eric the Red told tall tales about verdant landscapes in order to get people to settle there. Greenland was heavily forested one million years ago; and, come to think of it, Early Pleistocene would be a good way to describe many GOP personalities and policies.

The Norse emigrants (5,000 at their peak) eked out a living in the warming period before the "Little Ice Age" cooled the Northern Hemisphere during the 15<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> Centuries. Ice eventually blocked the fjord to the Western Settlement and all the people there died by 1350. The last recorded event in the Eastern Settlement was a wedding in 1408. Because of extensive sea ice, Norwegian ships could no longer reach the island. In his book *Collapse*, Jared Diamond describes the demise

of the Greenland settlements as "the most richly documented pre-industrial collapse" in human history.

Following a Scandinavian tradition, the Norsemen insisted on raising cattle in an environment that had very limited pasture land. Although the poor did eat seal and caribou, they never, for some unknown reason, took advantage of the teeming fish stocks. During the summer months precious manpower that could have been used to cut and store fodder was diverted to walrus hunting in the far north. The ivory was traded for luxury goods from Europe, including expensive items for St. Nicholas Cathedral, larger than any church on Iceland, which had ten times the population. Even when the settlements were in decline, the bishop insisted that the annual tithes to Rome be paid, as well as surcharges for the Crusades.

On orders from their bishop, the Norsemen were forbidden to trade with or learn from the Inuit. Rather than sewing warm clothing from skins, the settlers insisted on wearing the latest European fashions. The first recorded encounter found the Norsemen stabbing captive natives to see how they would bleed. Understandably, the Inuit fought back and the Norsemen, desperately recycling worn-out iron implements and weapons, simply could not defend, let alone, feed themselves. The bones found at the top of their garbage heaps were from their own dogs and rodents.

Denmark took over the island in the early 18<sup>th</sup> Century and ruled it until the Greenlanders were granted home rule in 1979. The Danish colonists survived primarily because they dressed, ate, and transported themselves as the Inuit did. Scandinavian farming traditions die hard, however, and sheep farming was reintroduced in 1924. About 20,000 animals were lost in the winter of 1966-67, and grazing areas have been severely degraded. Native sheep farming families are subsidized at the rate of \$14,000 per year.

The fishing industry, however, is booming, although the largest shrimp company is near bankruptcy. As soon as they had home rule, the Greenlanders opted out of the European Union (its first ever secession), because they did not want Brussels to regulate their fishing rights.

Greenland's oil and mineral reserves are massive, and Canadian, Danish, and Russian military ships are staking out new Arctic oil fields. It is estimated that Greenland alone may have 50 billion barrels. This exploration is now possible because global warming has made the Arctic more ice free, and retreating glaciers have exposed new mining opportunities. In the summer of 2008 the Danish ship *Peter Faber* made the first ice-free commercial transit of the Northwest Passage, opening up the possibility of major shipping across the top of the world.

In the November 2008 election, 76 percent of Greenlanders voted for independence, and last month the Danish government handed over control of everything except defense, currency, and foreign policy. Dressed in native costume complete with seal skin pants and boots, Queen Margrethe II of Denmark made it official in a ceremony in Nuuk, the island's capital. The country will now be called Kalaallit Nunaat (Land of the Greenlanders) and Kalaallisut will become the official language. The Danes will continue to subsidize the Greenlanders at the rate of \$11,300 per person per year.

The 2008 election also saw the turning out of Social Democrats, who had dominated the Kalaallit parliament for 30 years. Their members had lived it up a little too much in the bars and restaurants of Copenhagen. Just before the 2008 election, the leader of the Social Democrats was prevented from boarding a plane home. He was drunk and shouting that he was the "King of Greenland." He failed miserably in his bid for re-election, garnering only 91 votes.

The Socialist Party, led by people in their 20s and 30s, received 44 percent of the vote. American defense officials were relieved to hear that the new prime

minister Kuupik Kleist will allow the U.S. to stay at its base in Thule, which is now part of America's missile defense system.

In 2007 the increase in temperatures on Kalaallit, depending on the location, was a dramatic 2.3-4.8 degrees Fahrenheit. All of Kalaallit's glaciers are in major retreat and the largest, the Jakobshavn Glacier, has, according to Oregon State scientists, "nearly doubled its flow speed in the past decade." Sea temperatures around the island have risen two degrees over the past decade and small towns once ice-bound in winter are now ice free.

In 2007 24 cubic miles of the ice sheet broke off into the sea. The melting and breaking up of Kalaallit ice is responsible for a quarter of the increase in sea levels since 1996. A University of Alaska study concluded that the earth's oceans are "now rising more than 50 percent faster than the average for the 20<sup>th</sup> Century." Sea levels rise not only because of melting glaciers but also because of the thermal expansion of water due to global warming.

Global warming is both good and bad news for Kalaallit's people. In the north a life style that depends on hunting and traveling on ice has been severely disrupted, not only for Greenlanders but Arctic people all across the top of the world. On the positive side, the Danes are planning dairy and vegetable farms in the south, counting on long-term global warming rather the big chill that doomed their ancestors.

The Kalaallit government celebrated their partial independence by distributing two tons of whale meat. The island's Intuits have permission to take 200 fin and 19 minke whales each year, and like our own Makah tribe in Washington State, they insist that eating whale meat is an integral part of their native culture. Much more controversial, however, is the government's request before the International Whaling Commission that the Intuit be allowed to kill 10 endangered humpback whales per year for the next three years.

With 56,000 people Kalaallit will be the 9<sup>th</sup> smallest country in the world, but most of those in group (South Pacific and Caribbean islands, Monaco, and Liechtenstein) are doing quite well despite their size. We should wish the people of Kalaallit the very best in their new adventures in nationhood.