

**Symposium on “The Right to Self-Determination in International Law”
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Autonomy in Action: Inuit and the Case of Greenland

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It was an honour to be asked to speak to you on the topic of “Autonomy in Action”. I would like to thank the organizing committee for the invitation they extended to me.

Today, I would like to explore with you what variables, if any, contribute to an indigenous people freely exploring, expressing, and exercising its right to be autonomous. What preconditions, if any, exist before a people can claim that they are acting autonomously? Are there any prerequisites to freedom? Must the environment be exactly right before an indigenous people can – or feels it can – take the necessary steps towards self-government?

I will discuss these preconditions to autonomy through the Inuit experience found in the Arctic, and, more specifically, the Greenland example.

The preconditions, I believe, can be categorized into three areas. One, is the need for internal action. On the one hand, an indigenous people is often so beaten down, so fragile, and has suffered so interminably, that internal action is hardly possible. There must be a collective will to move towards autonomy. There must be sound leadership. Somewhere there must be a spark. There may be other internal factors leading to “autonomy in action”.

The second group of preconditions I would refer to as “tools”. Yesterday we spoke of international legal instruments. These are important and powerful tools. Knowledge is a tool. The ability to resist peacefully is a powerful tool. The ability to use violence, in my opinion, is a tool that rarely if ever is productive. There are many other tools such as national laws, constitutions, like-minded governmental officials, and NGOs. National and international courts are tools. Understanding one’s rights with respect to natural resources is a powerful tool. Other indigenous peoples’ movements are powerful tools and the ability to link to them internationally is vital.

A third category is the need for a negotiating partner. Now this is a tricky one. If one’s former colonizer is so violently opposed to recognizing the rights of indigenous peoples, success is rarely going to happen. And I think we all know that a negotiating partner is not always, *a priori*, a happy one. Sometimes using the tools of say, courts, or public opinion, or peaceful resistance, seeking international indigenous collaborators, or using international instruments are first necessary before a former colonizer becomes a willing partner.

Many examples I will discuss today may lead one to believe that financial or natural resources play a role in “autonomy in action”. While they play a significant role in the third category of negotiations, I would argue that they are not at the core of why a people strives to be free.

Greenland, for example, in 1985 voted to remove itself from the European Economic Community, or EEC, even though many cited the negative economic impact this may have on Greenlanders.

In summary then, I would put forward that some parts of all three of these preconditions need to be present: internal action; tools; and a somewhat willing negotiating partner.

Before I talk about who Inuit are and what their experiences have been, I want to state at the outset that Greenlanders, or Greenlandic Inuit, are perhaps not the best example of “autonomy in action”. In fact, I am unsure if there is an indigenous people anywhere that can claim true autonomy. What I would venture, however, is that Greenland finds itself in a process that is moving towards autonomy. And as I try to explain this process, sometimes called the self-government process in Greenland, I will try to extract various elements and together we can muse whether or not these they can be applied elsewhere, in another indigenous setting.

Inuit live in Greenland and the Arctic regions of Canada, Alaska, and Russia. We are 155,000 strong. We share the same language, the same culture, and the same environment. We are a people of the sea. While we hunt animals inland, most of us have grown up in a physical environment that includes water, ice, and land. We hunt and eat marine mammals such as seals and whales. We hunt and eat birds such as auk and ptarmigan. We harvest eggs. Muskoxen and caribou are often found on our supper tables or in our hunting camps. While most Inuit share aspects of other cultures that have through the process of colonialism been with us for several hundred years, we are very much sure of who we are, where we have come from, and where we want to go. Many of us live in well organized towns, whereas others live in small villages and hunting camps.

We are one people with one culture, but the fact that artificial borders have been cut through our homeland has given rise to different expressions of a desire for autonomy. While we are one, Inuit of Greenland have dealt with Danes on matters of self-government. Canadian Inuit have historically dealt with the British, the French, and since 1867, the Government of Canada. After Alaska was sold by the Russians to the USA, Alaskan Inuit have articulated their desire for autonomy through the American federal and Alaskan state governments. Inuit from the Chukotka Peninsula have been subjects of the Russian government for years, however since the end of the Soviet era, increasingly the Chukotka Government Administration is involving itself in Inuit matters.

All Inuit live on top of, or own, vast natural resources. Some of these have been taken from us, whereas others we still defend vigorously against governments and industries that wish them to be theirs. In Greenland, even prior to our current home rule, we had some control over our animal resources. As far back as the 1920s, we developed ourselves as a fishing nation.

The very first example of “autonomy in action” among Inuit is that of the North Slope of Alaska. An autonomous, or rather semi-autonomous, Inuit area was established as a direct consequence of a government giving away our resources without even attempting to talk to us first. The North Slope Borough, as it is now known, is located at the very top of Alaska. Inuit said no in the early 1970s and a struggle with both oil companies and governments ensued. A process of negotiations, abetted by court involvement and strong Inuit leadership, resulted in the first home rule area being established in 1973. These Alaskan Inuit, or *Inupiaq*, are now recognized owners of over 230,000 square kilometres of land, and share in revenues from oil that is piped southwards to an energy hungry country. The process also led to environmental protection of Inuit resources such as the animals they hunted and to the cultural protection of sacred sites. None of this was

contemplated until we stopped those that never even considered we had the right to exercise even a modicum of autonomy.

It was also this experience – a combination of others attempting to take our resources and threatening our environment – that led to the establishment of the Inuit Circumpolar Council.

Eben Hopson, Sr. who led the resistance against the governments and oil companies in Alaska in the early 1970s, was also the man who in 1977 invited Inuit from Greenland, Alaska, and Canada to discuss our common struggles, the need for Inuit unity across the four countries, and the importance of protecting the Arctic environment. In Greenland, even before our own home rule, we were cognizant of international cooperation to the east of us through the Nordic Council, and there were some proposals made back then to act collectively with other countries such as Norway and Iceland, and not necessarily through Denmark. Greenlanders always knew they were a distinct and separate people.

As a result of that historic meeting in Alaska, the ICC was formed. That ICC was not the International Criminal Court but rather the Inuit Circumpolar Council. Our ICC continues to be a strong and vibrant international organization that promotes and celebrates our unity, advocates for international instruments affecting indigenous peoples, not the least the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, fights for a clean Arctic environment, champions the need to do something about climate change, lobbies internationally promoting our hunting rights and tries to secure sustainable utilization of our resources. ICC helps Inuit from one region exchange experiences and ideas with another and it is perhaps through this process that other Inuit regions took it upon themselves to fight for their own forms of land claims or self government processes. ICC represents all 155,000 Inuit on matters of international importance.

Today's semi-autonomous Greenland government also views ICC as one of its paths to influencing foreign policy among other nations, and certainly across the Arctic.

Of course, it was not only an Inuit to Inuit exchange that moved the autonomy agenda forward. There were other actions and struggles of other indigenous peoples that provided some very important impetus to Inuit to move towards negotiating land rights and autonomy. There was a collective international movement of indigenous peoples that started to meet informally in the early 1970s, and then towards the end of the decade, in a more organized manner. Inuit and Greenlanders were part of that process and often, along with the Saami, took a leadership role.

Before I speak more specifically about Greenland, let me briefly touch upon “autonomy in action” in other Inuit regions.

In 1975, the Inuit of northern Quebec agreed with the Crees, the Naskapi, the Canadian Government, and the Quebec Government to the groundbreaking James Bay and Northern Quebec Agreement (JBNQA). Again, attempted resource theft by governments and industry, and the resulting peaceful, yet strong resistance (supported by various tools) led to reluctant and then finally willing negotiating partners. Today, the Inuit of Nunavik (or Northern Quebec) continue their self-government negotiations.

The Inuvialuit are the Inuit of the McKenzie Delta. In 1984, they negotiated with the Canadian government the *Inuvialuit Final Agreement* which provides for a measure of autonomy, including the right to hunt, fish, trap and carry out commercial activity. There are other significant cooperative management arrangements with respect to participating in the Canadian economy and

society. Eben Hopson from Alaska was invited to provide advice to the Inuvialuit, who contacted him and other Inupiaq even before the 1977 meeting.

Many of you have heard of another territory in Canada called Nunavut. This large area is home to over 25,000 Inuit and was established after decades of negotiations in 1999.

Ten months ago, a new Inuit government in Canada was established in Labrador. This government, known as Nunatsiavut, replaces the former Labrador Inuit Association. It is considered a regional ethnic government inside the Canadian province of Newfoundland and Labrador and has many of the responsibilities and rights of other governments, such as planning for sustainable economic development, protecting and preserving Inuit culture and implementing social programs on behalf of its people. Again, internal leadership and community involvement, along with the use of international and national tools led to an eventual negotiating partnership. That partnership led to the creation of Nunatsiavut.

Looking to the extreme western area of the Inuit homeland, there is a different story of “autonomy in action”. Chukotka inside Russia is home to about 2000 Inuit, or Yupik. Yupik there have not had a willing negotiating partner ever. Although there are sparks of strong leadership and the resolve to act, many Yupik are unable to make effective use of the tools at their disposal. Just recently, the Russian Federation voted against the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. The new Russia is different from the old Soviet Union, but poverty and lack of meaningful economic development is still very apparent in this western part of our Inuit land. And while the Russian Federation has supported some meaningful development of Russia’s 40 indigenous groups in the Arctic, the Yupik still rely on ICC to be their voice internationally, and sometimes nationally.

What about Greenland, the large island to the north from which I come?

Its 2 million square kilometres stretch 2, 700 kilometres from north to south and one thousand kilometres from east to west. Eighty-five percent of Greenland is covered by inland ice and our 57,000 inhabitants live in 18 municipalities scattered at its periphery.

Our colonial history began when a Norwegian Danish priest named Hans Egede came to Greenland in 1721. Following a tried and true method of colonization, Denmark worked closely with the Church in bringing the Inuit of Greenland under its control.

Whalers came from various parts of the world and in some cases decimated stocks so severely that they are still not hunted. The large Greenland Whale is one such example.

World War II cut us temporarily off from Denmark. In large part because the allies needed our cryolite – which is vital to aluminium production – we quickly established our own self-reliant trade and communications with the rest of the world, most notably Canada and the USA. However, after 5 years of non-involvement, the Danes came back. In 1948, the Danish Prime Minister Hans Hedtoft visited Greenland and, in 1950 a Commission’s report known as the G-50 recommended that Greenland be made part of Denmark. In 1953, Greenland was incorporated into the Danish Kingdom. We became a kind of “North Denmark”, but really never achieved equal recognition or rights. For example, the Americans and Danes at that time signed a treaty on the defence of Greenland without even talking to us. This so-called “defence of Greenland” was needed by the Americans in their cold war with the former Soviet Union. Among other things, they forcibly moved Inuit in northern Greenland to make way for an American Air Force base, which still exists today. When a US B 52 bomber crashed in 1968 off the coast of Greenland, we

were never told that a plutonium bomb was leaking into our waters. We did, however, in 1953, get two members of parliament to sit in Copenhagen. Sometimes they were heard. At other times they were not.

In 1954, Denmark went to New York and had us listed at the UN as a “non self-governing territory”. We achieved two members of parliament in Copenhagen, but all of a sudden we were on a global list which emphasized the fact that we were not to govern ourselves. Decolonization is a complicated process! In this very city, 73 years ago, Denmark and Norway fought over East Greenland. Norway claimed part of our country but due to an international court decision, Greenland is one entity today.

We lived as “northern Danes” until the late 1970s.

In 1972, Danes and Greenlanders voted in a referendum whether or not to join the EEC. In order to protect our fishing rights, over 60% of us said no, but the Danish vote meant that we were included. What an eye opener for us! Greenlanders were told because they did not have home rule, we had to come along for the ride. The Faeroe Islands, however, did not participate in the referendum because they, in fact, had a form of home rule.

After that wake-up experience, we developed our own *white paper* and in 1975 a *Home Rule* commission was established. Following the release of its report in 1978, and a Danish Act of Parliament in 1978, Greenlanders began a path of “autonomy in action” on May 1st, 1979.

What this Danish Act of Parliament provided for us was the ability to govern certain areas of our own affairs. Over the years, Greenland increasingly took over matters formerly administered by Denmark. In 1980, it was education, church, social services, and taxation. In 1981, we took over trade school responsibilities. In 1982 we voted to leave the EEC. In 1985, Greenland took over the management of our own fisheries and became a member of the *Overseas Countries and Territories* (OCT), which means we have a special relationship with a member country of the EEC or the European Union today. We took over the former Royal Greenland Trading Company, which deals mainly in fisheries, but also retail. In 1987, housing, infrastructure and other matters were administered by Greenlanders. Health became a Greenland matter in 1992.

Our home rule arrangement with Denmark includes some on-going financial support from Denmark for certain public services. But there was no agreement in 1979 on natural resources such as oil, gas, and minerals. There is a joint authority made up of 5 members of parliament from Denmark and 5 from Greenland that oversees this matter. As it now stands, we have agreed to equally share the revenues – if they ever materialize – up to an amount of 500 million Danish kroner. If it exceeds this minimum amount, we continue our negotiations.

This is about as far as the current Danish Act of Parliament will allow us to govern ourselves.

Our parliament has 31 members who are generally elected for a 4-year term. Internationally, Greenland participates in numerous bodies independently, whereas on others we sit on the Danish delegations, such as at the United Nations. Since 1984, two of our members of Greenland parliament have sat on the Nordic Council. This is equally true for the Faeroe Islands and the Åland Islands. Although we have also set up our own international affairs ministry, it is through ICC, for example, that Greenlanders often exercise its most independent voice internationally. It is often helpful for us that, through ICC, we are not obligated to have our international views vetted by the Danish Foreign ministry. In this respect, ICC is the unobstructed global voice of Inuit in Greenland.

In 2000, we set up our own Commission to study ways in which further autonomy might be achieved. This 4-year work led to the creation of a joint Danish-Greenlandic Self-Government Commission which is now studying ways in which further autonomy should be negotiated. The Joint Commission's work is expected to be completed by 2007. The contents of this report will, in my opinion, be precedent setting for not only Greenlanders but all indigenous peoples globally.

Greenlanders believe that they need full control of its oil. Greenlanders believe that they need full control over its mineral resources. Greenlanders believe that it should be able to negotiate international agreements where matters of great importance to us are central. Some Greenlanders want the process to be faster than others, but virtually all Greenlanders want further autonomy.

We shall see what the Commission recommends and what the governments of the day do with the recommendations.

Throughout the various negotiations and processes towards self-government, Greenlanders have always maintained that it is important to deal with Denmark in a peaceful and respectful manner, even though the Danes were the ones who colonized us. Our resolve is to continue with this approach. We continue to have activists and leaders who wish to move this agenda forward. We have support of the people. There are tools we know how to use. There are international legal instruments that affect indigenous peoples and which Denmark has signed on to. We use these tools in our negotiations. Finally, we have a willing partner that has agreed to sit down with us on a self-government commission. Both sides, at least for now, seem to have a willingness to see where this adventure takes us.

Thank you.