

Peripheries and Nationalism: The Faroes and Greenland

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The study of Nordic peripheries is dominated by an ironic paradox. Although the periphery is probably the most Nordic of all political science concepts, the most outstanding Nordic peripheries in modern times have been almost completely neglected in Nordic political science research. The Faroes and Greenland possess quite distinct political systems which are challenging the centre in Copenhagen with increasing strength. The Faroes enjoy a firmly-established Home Rule through which a strong nationalist party expresses demands for full independence. Greenland has in recent years shown increasing signs of a nationalistic campaign, and in defence the Danish authorities in Copenhagen have decided to grant Greenland Home Rule in 1979. Thus the modern peripheries of the Danish Kingdom display strong characteristics of the process whereby the periphery-centre division is transformed into nation-state building.

The Faroes and Greenland offer unique opportunities for a contemporary analysis of the periphery-nationhood transformation process. Such an analysis can be further strengthened by inclusion of two historical cases, the cases of Norway and Iceland, which demonstrate successful break-ups of the Danish Kingdom. If the idea of future independent states in the Faroes and in Greenland seems rather far-fetched to the sophisticated scholars of the Scandinavian centres, it is worth remembering – as a note of warning – the remark made by George Brandes, the most outstanding Danish intellectual of his times, when Iceland demanded a separate flag in the beginning of this century: ‘Why not a flag for Amager?’ To Brandes, Iceland was evidently as central to the Danish Kingdom as the Amager-area in Copenhagen. The lack of political science research on the Faroes and Greenland shows that despite the great popularity which the periphery concept has enjoyed in recent times, today the viewpoint of Brandes is still highly influential so far as academic praxis is concerned.

The process whereby a peripheral region is gradually transformed into a nation-state, the socioeconomic and cultural conditions and the necessary institutional setting, are perhaps the most interesting factors which tie together studies of the periphery and of nationalism. Such concerns are also of great relevance for the contemporary world, since the emergence of new nation-states and the problems associated with regional politics have far-reaching implications. The twentieth-century Danish Kingdom offers unique opportunities for a comparative analysis of this process with great theoretical possibilities and easy access to testing grounds. The politics of the Faroes and of Greenland provide material for contemporary monitoring of nationalist movements and opportunities for both historical and survey research. If the necessary funds and manpower are provided, these two North Atlantic territories will enable political scientists to observe the stages through which peripheral regions can approach statehood.

The nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century nationalist movements in Norway and Iceland and the institutional developments in these two countries from regional councils to sovereign assemblies are already considerably well-researched, and therefore Iceland and Norway can serve as 'control' cases for the analysis of contemporary developments in the Faroes and in Greenland. They can provide material for hypotheses concerning the relationship between the centre and the periphery within the Danish Kingdom, on the conditions for nationalist movements and the factors which either reduce or accelerate these movements. Together, the historical and contemporary North-Atlantic peripheries in the Danish Kingdom thus provide Nordic political scientists with a considerable challenge. In order to advance our theoretical and empirical understanding of peripheries and nation-state building, we should in the spirit of exploring Vikings establish stations in these waiting academic wastelands.

This paper is intended to illustrate the possibilities for a comparative analysis of peripheral and nationalist politics based on the contemporary cases of the Faroes and of Greenland, with historical references to the cases of Iceland and Norway. The paper is presented as a basis for discussion of the possibilities for a future project of this nature. The inclusion of three Scandinavian countries (Denmark, Norway, and Iceland) in this problem area and the relevance of future Faroese and Greenlandic developments for Nordic and European politics, especially with regard to the control of marine resources, should increase the possibilities for acquiring funds and institutional backing for such research. A project of this nature enables historians, political scientists, anthropologists, geo-

graphers, and sociologists to work together, and is thus an extremely good example of cross-disciplinary research. Furthermore, it provides opportunities for using widely different research techniques, ranging from traditional historical research methods through anthropological observations to the computerization of regular survey data, which could be obtained perhaps every other year to monitor popular attitudes, native elite transformation, and other factors in the Faroese and Greenlandic political systems.

Despite considerable theoretical and empirical research on the nature of peripheries and the conditions which produce nationalist movements, there is no overall consensus within the discipline as to which variables are the most important. This paper is not directed at the general debate which prevails in this subject area. Instead it provides a list of 13 factors, all of which can have significant effects on the nature of the periphery and the strength of potential nationalist movements. The list can indicate whether a particular territory is likely to serve as a breeding ground for conflicts directed against the centre which could ultimately lead to demands for a complete break-up of all ties and full independence. The list provides a rough test of the social, economic, and cultural conditions which have to be present, at least to some degree, if political demands for a separate institutional setup and exclusive rights are to have any significant support. If all or most of these 13 test factors show a positive response, then the stage is almost certainly set for a strong nationalist movement. If, on the other hand, only a few factors yield positive results, then the conflict will probably be restricted to mere periphery-centre tension without the implication of a possible break-up of institutional ties and the establishment of independent political status, whether within a new federal framework or as a completely sovereign body, as would be the case if the conditions for nationalist movements were strongly present.

In order to justify further research on the politics of the Faroes and of Greenland, the list of 13 indicative factors is presented for discussion.

List of Indicative Factors

1. Distinct geography and communications

The geographical conditions of the Faroes and Greenland dramatically underline their special situation. Their distance from Denmark makes all regular communications extremely difficult, and the existing communications network is primarily built to connect the small villages and towns within the Faroes and Greenland respectively. The main lines of communications with other territories consist of air transport to Copenhagen and

also to Reykjavík. The lack of economic means by which to sustain independent communications – the great distances make all communications very expensive – makes the Faroes and Greenland to a large extent dependent on the resources of the centre in Copenhagen. However, the geographical characteristics and the economic conditions they create for the inhabitants of the Faroe Islands and of Greenland have produced cultural developments and social systems highly distinct from those of Denmark. Taken together, the effects of the geographical distance from the centre will make it extremely difficult for the Danish Authorities to keep effective control over these two territories if the other pro-periphery/nationalist factors gain increasing strength.

2. Separate language

Although the Danish Authorities have in many respects made Danish the official language of these two territories, the native tongues of the inhabitants are very strong and quite distinct from Danish; Faroese is more like Icelandic. The uneducated among the Faroese and Greenlanders only use their mother tongue and in recent years young students, both in the Faroes and in Greenland, have claimed increased rights for their languages within the educational institutions and other official bodies. Although bilingualism is very widespread and a considerable proportion of the population in both territories are Danes, the existence of separate languages provides strong cultural backing for the potential demands of the nationalistic Faroese and Greenlanders.

3. Different Economy

Whereas Denmark has a highly modern industrial economy in which services of all kinds occupy a high percentage of the population, the primary occupations of fishing and sheep-farming characterise the Faroese and Greenland, and in the case of the latter there is also considerable mining. The extension of the economic zone to 200 miles has opened up a privileged access to very rich natural resources for the Faroese and Greenlanders, especially the former, which can make their economies considerably stronger in the future. The independent negotiations of the Faroese with the EEC have underlined their distinct economic position in a new way. These future prospects can strengthen claims that interdependence with the Danish economy is not an absolutely necessary condition for maintaining economic well-being in the Faroes or in Greenland. The economic distinction of the two territories may therefore become more pronounced.

4. Historical Heritage

Nationalist movements are greatly favoured if they have access to a separate historical heritage and communal experience on which the leaders of the movement can draw and which they can reinterpret in order to justify their claims. Although Faroese and Greenlandic historical scholarship is not greatly advanced, there is, especially in the Faroese case, a body of literature which can amply serve to support claims that Danish rule was created by separate historical circumstances and was in no way inevitable, as was argued by Icelandic scholars and politicians in the late 19th century. In the Greenlandic case the employment of history to invigorate separatist political movement is not at the moment supported by such rich material and is more tied up with possible research into the Eskimo culture.

5. Distinct culture

In these two territories, quite rich and distinct cultures have been fostered by the geographical and economic conditions together with separate languages and historical records. They are symbolized in unique dresses, songs, dances, and other festivities. These cultures enable the inhabitants to express themselves quite specifically as Faroese and Greenlanders, and thus separate themselves from other inhabitants of the Danish Kingdom. This cultural distinctiveness is further supported by the rural or small-town nature of all Faroese and Greenlandic habitations, which underlines the cultural tradition of fishermen and farmers.

6. Creative Literature

Although cultural distinctiveness and separate languages can offer fertile grounds for a unique Faroese and Greenlandic literature, this has only appeared on a minor scale. Modern literary talents, like Icelandic writers after the turn of the century, have been drawn to the more cosmopolitan Danish literary scene, not to mention the greater economic rewards of a potential audience of 5 million Danes as opposed to 50,000 Faroese or Greenlanders. Consequently, the most outstanding literary works by Faroese and Greenlandic writers in recent times have been written in Danish although the subject matter has in most cases been uniquely Faroese or Greenlandic. Despite these common characteristics the role of separate literature has been more pronounced in the Faroes, and there novels and plays do increasingly appear in the Faroese language only.

7. Separate Mass Media

The geographical conditions in the Faroes and in Greenland, especially the latter, and the small size of the population make it extremely difficult, both in technical and economic terms, to establish an internal network of modern mass media communications. A native radio station does exist, however, in each country, and in the Faroes it broadcasts exclusively in Faroese (the Faroese radio was modelled on the Icelandic station), but in Greenland it carries programs in both Greenlandic and Danish. Due to the previously-mentioned difficulties television has not been established, but there now exist plans for the introduction of television in these territories, carrying probably a great number of programs from Danish television. The distance, both geographical and cultural, from other territories makes it even more difficult for media centres of other countries to establish their influence in the Faroes and in Greenland, and therefore the Danish centre has been unable to dominate these peripheries through the media networks; perhaps this will change with the introduction of television. A quite impressive collection of native newspapers exists in the Faroes and in Greenland; they, especially in the Faroese case, occupy an important social and political position in the country. The Faroese and Greenlandic papers are among the chief symbols of the internal political system. Furthermore, the arrival of inexpensive printing techniques in recent years has enabled political groups with radical demands for separation from the Danish Kingdom and other organisations to make their case quite impressively on the Faroese and Greenlandic political scene.

8. Population Size

It is difficult, if not impossible, to determine the minimum size necessary for a population to be able to advance the institutional apparatus, undertake the multitude of functions, and establish the resources required for the operation of a nation-state. Despite the uncertainty surrounding this question it is likely that one of the strongest arguments which could be advanced against the future viability of independent states in the Faroes or in Greenland would involve the smallness of the population. In order to throw a historical light on such potential arguments, Table I provides the 1850–1975 population figures for the Faroes and Greenland and contrasts them with those of Iceland. The table shows that in the 1970s these two territories were approaching the population size of Iceland in the 1850s, when Icelandic independence politics commenced and the road to sovereign statehood was beginning to be paved in clear political terms. If Iceland, with a population of 59 to 79 thousand in 1850–1900 and with far

inferior economic resources at that time than the Faroes and Greenland have today, could develop in the 19th century an ever-stronger political system which at the turn of the century led to vigorous Home Rule, then the smallness of the population in the Faroes and Greenland, now ranging from 40 to over 50 thousand, can hardly be seen as an absolute barrier to the development of further conflict with the Danish Authorities which could ultimately lead to some kind of independent status. Given further population growth in the coming decades and increasing control over the significant natural resources in the sea, the population and economic arguments against further separation from the Danish Kingdom will probably become weaker.

Table 1. Population Growth in Thousands

	1850	1900	1940	1950	1960	1970	1975
Faroes	8	15	27	32	35	37	41
Greenland	8	12	19	24	33	40	50
Iceland	59	78	121	144	176	194	219

9. *Potential Centre*

The size of the population does not by itself provide the necessary information. It is also important to know how the population is distributed in different towns, villages and rural areas; especially, whether there is a town of sufficient size and characterized by the necessary features to become a potential centre through which the internal political system could evolve, and which could thus provide an increasing challenge to the cosmopolitan centre of the Danish Kingdom. On the Danish scale the main towns of the Faroes and Greenland, Torshavn and Godthaab, are mere villages, with only around 12,000 and 9,000 inhabitants respectively. Torshavn has about a quarter of the Faroese population and Godthaab nearly 20 percent of the Greenlandic population. From a Danish viewpoint these two villages undoubtedly do not look very much like threatening potential centres of independent states. The Icelandic viewpoint, however, offers a different angle. Today, Torshavn is just about the same size as Reykjavík was in 1910, when Iceland had enjoyed well-established Home Rule for some years and was already demanding full independence; Godthaab is considerably larger than Reykjavík was at the turn of the century. From 1900 to 1910 the population of Reykjavík increased from 6,700 to 11,600, which amounted to roughly 8–12 percent of the Icelandic

population. When compared to the period of Icelandic independence politics in the early stages of the Home Rule period, the main towns in the Faroes and Greenland are a little larger or similar in size to Reykjavík, but have already obtained a higher percentage of the total native population. The Reykjavík record could thus point towards strong centre-potential for both Torshavn and Godthaab.

10. Native Elite

The existence of a native elite, sufficiently educated and endowed with political training, seems to be one of the significant factors contributing to the transformation of the politics of the periphery into a nationalist campaign. This was certainly the case in Iceland, where native officials, journalists, scholars, enlightened farmers and later merchants contributed the necessary political leadership in the 19th and early 20th century. In the Faroese case a similar elite seems to have been in existence for a few decades and has increasingly gained in strength in recent years with the arrival of a new and better-educated generation influenced by the student politics of the late 1960s and early 1970s. In the Faroes, however, and even more so in Greenland, the administrative, economic, political, and social leadership includes a considerable number of very Danish-oriented members, and the proportion of native Danes is much higher than it ever was in Iceland. This Danish presence is particularly clear in the case of Greenland. The key question with respect to a more native and radical leadership is what will happen to the young student generation which is now being trained and subjected to ideological influence in the advanced educational institutions in Copenhagen. Will the centre continue to breed its own destroyers?

11. Educational Institutions

Although Copenhagen is still the centre for university and other types of advanced education, as it was for the 19th-century Icelanders, the level of general education in the Faroes and in Greenland has risen considerably in recent decades through native primary and secondary educational institutions. As in many other cases these institutions have fostered an increasing sense of Faroese and Greenlandic separateness by extensive usage of the mother tongues and other cultural influences. A few years ago Faroese students demanded the right to take their final examination from the secondary grammar school exclusively in the Faroese language, whereas Danish had up to that time been required for the final examination. After a considerable struggle the students won their case. Although the Faroes

and Greenland do lack educational institutions at the highest level, the existing educational institutions do provide nationalistic teachers with considerable opportunities to emphasize for the present and coming generations the importance and exclusiveness of Faroese and Greenlandic characteristics, and thus, directly and indirectly, lay the ground for growing nationalist demands. If the young radical students who are now in Copenhagen and who in recent years have actively demanded increasing Faroese and Greenlandic rights return in a few years' time to work in the native educational institutions, this process could be considerably accelerated.

12. Ethnic Characteristics

The socioeconomic, cultural, and geographical conditions which prevail in the Faroes and Greenland and offer fertile grounds for nationalist movements are reinforced in the case of Greenland by the ethnic characteristics of the Eskimo population. These characteristics underline forcefully the remoteness of the proper Greenlanders from the rest of the Danish and even the Nordic population. Although such clear ethnic distinction does not prevail in the Faroes, there are many signs which seem to indicate that the farmers and fishermen in the Faroes consider themselves to be more like Icelanders than like Danes. Their linguistic proximity and the cultural resemblance of two fishing nations in the North-Atlantic underlines this viewpoint, which in many cases has made the Faroese look more to Iceland than to Denmark for solution of the economic and political problems which prevail in the islands.

13. The Model Effect

The final indicative factor is somewhat more difficult to assess. The analysis of nationalist movements indicates that references to particular model cases of successful nationalism can play a considerable part in moulding ideology as well as individual demands, the course as well as the strength of a nationalist potential in a given peripheral area. It is here suggested that the establishment of a nation state in Iceland and the successful development of modern Icelandic society already serves as a reference model for Faroese nationalists, and perhaps to a lesser extent also for those demanding increased Greenlandic separation. The development of Iceland from colonial status to a sovereign republic in the course of one hundred years, despite the smallness of the population and the geographic isolation, provides the Faroese and Greenlandic national-

ists with a useful model by which to demonstrate the viability of a future break from the Danish Kingdom. The growth of nationalist movements in other parts of Europe as well as in the rest of the world can also contribute to the presence of a significant model effect in the future development of Faroese and Greenlandic politics.

Research Possibilities

A brief treatment of the 13 factors which can be used to indicate the periphery-nationalist potential of a particular territory shows that the Faroes and Greenland offer very fruitful opportunities for a study of the transformation processes whereby peripheral politics can change into a nationalist campaign. In the Faroese case these processes are definitely far more developed. This can be demonstrated, for instance, by the fact that for a number of decades there has been a major political party in the Faroes which demands full independence from Denmark. In the case of Greenland the period of distinct native political activity is considerably shorter. It has been only 14 years since the first political party, the Inuit-party, was established in order to awaken the population to some political consciousness.

The Faroese independence movement can be traced back to the beginning of the 20th century, when Joannes Patursson became the intellectual and political leader of the Faroese separatists. For decades a dispute raged concerning the status of the Faroese language in the schools, and in 1938 teachers were granted the right to choose between Faroese and Danish, although the latter language remained, until recently, the exclusive official language of the final examinations. In the 1930s considerable conflict arose concerning the existence and the usage of a separate Faroese flag. The occupation of the British during World War II and the consequent separation between the Faroes on the one hand and Nazi-dominated Denmark on the other considerably strengthened the nationalist case. In 1945 the Faroese assembly decided by a majority of only one vote to reject complete independence and support increased for Faroese Home Rule within the Danish Kingdom. In a referendum which took place in 1946 the result was also very close, a difference of 1 percent: 33 percent or 5,656 voters wanted to accept the Danish offer of continued association with increased Home Rule, whereas 32 percent or 5,460 wanted Faroese independence; a third of the population abstained from voting. Following the referendum one of the assembly members changed sides, which gave those demanding independence a majority of one in the assembly. The

Danish Authorities decided to reject the result of the assembly vote and demand new elections, in which victory was obtained by the Unionists and the Social Democrats who wanted to remain within the Danish Kingdom. Ever since, or for thirty years, Faroese politics have been dominated by the nationalist cleavage. A multiparty system now exists in the islands, based on both socioeconomic and nationalist cleavages. This is illustrated by Table II, which shows the 1974 election results.

Table 2. The 1974 Faroese Election

<i>Party</i>	<i>Votes</i>	<i>Elected Members</i>
Union Party	3,799	5
Independence Party	1,430	2
Social Democrats	5,125	7
People's Party	4,069	5
Republican Party	4,461	6
Progressive Party	487	1

In the past three decades, Faroese history has been characterised by various disputes of nationalist origins in addition to the nationalist and class conflicts within the party system. Thus the nationalist movement in the Faroes can already draw on a rich historical record of its long struggle, both defeats and victories, underlining the present tension concerning the Faroese place within the Danish Kingdom.

The history of distinct political activities in Greenland is far shorter than that of the Faroes. Modern Greenlandic politics are in fact a product of the 1950s and the early 1960s. The nationalist cleavage was well-established in the Faroes long before the Greenlanders began to show signs of any separatist tendencies. For nearly two centuries, from 1776 to 1950, Greenland was a colonial territory ruled by the Danish Trade Monopoly, and the Ministries in Copenhagen exerted all official authority over the population. For most of the 20th century the only political institutions in Greenland have been the ordinary organs of local government. After World War II, however, the Danish rule in Greenland was subjected to increased criticism; the colonial status of the territory, restriction on population movements, the extreme poverty and various diseases, and the inferior civil rights of the Greenlanders all amounted to potential trouble for the Danish government. Consequently in 1953 Greenland was given a separate constitutional status within the Danish Kingdom and the right to elect members to the Danish Parliament.

During the following two decades Greenlandic politics began to take on an ever more distinct form. In the late 1950s and early 1960s various unsuccessful attempts were made to establish a formal political party in Greenland, and finally in 1964 the Inuit-party was established. It had roughly 100 members of both Greenlandic and Danish origins who were willing to work together in order to arouse the political consciousness of the Greenlanders and agitate against the traditional obedience which had been shown towards the Danish Authorities. The demand for equal wages and civil rights for Greenlanders and Danes in Greenland was also expressed, and the need to preserve the uniqueness of the Greenlandic culture was emphasized. During the 1970s demands for Home Rule, similar in status to that in the Faroes, began to gain increasing strength and were reinforced by various protest actions against the prevailing situation. Consequently the Danish government has now decided to grant Greenland Home Rule in 1979. It is to be expected that the structure of party systems, which has varied considerably from the establishment of the Inuit-party to the present, will become more lasting with the arrival of Home Rule and the increased political functions brought about by such a change.

The purpose of this paper has been to arouse the interest of those Nordic political scientists who are concerned with the political and socio-economic processes whereby nationalist politics are created in a peripheral region. Hopefully the paper has shown that the cases of the Faroes and of Greenland offer extensive possibilities for research, especially if the two successful historical cases of nationalist movements within the Danish Kingdom, those of Norway and Iceland, are used as a comparative basis and background for fruitful hypotheses. The academic promise which the analysis of the Faroes and Greenland offers and the neglect which Nordic political scientists have shown towards these two political systems in the Nordic global setting makes it extremely important to find out whether a cross-disciplinary team of scholars can be established to undertake a comprehensive research project aimed at this area. Such a project could be divided into three main parts:

- 1) Historical development of the Faroese and Greenlandic political systems in the 20th century and their changing positions within the Danish Kingdom, with particular reference to socioeconomic and cultural factors.
- 2) Analysis of modern Faroese and Greenlandic politics and the social systems which prevail in these two territories; the distinction between the Danish and the native populations in economic, political and

cultural terms; a comprehensive mapping of the existing political systems and their operation.

- 3) The monitoring of future changes at regular intervals, e.g. every other year, in order to trace the potential stages through which the present political system can develop, and the nature as well as the course of the political changes which will occur.

As was argued in the beginning of this paper, such a project offers extremely interesting possibilities of cross-disciplinary research in the form of cooperation between political scientists, historians, sociologists, anthropologists and geographers. The relevance of these two territories for the future development of the Danish Kingdom in particular and Nordic politics in general, as well as the significance of the Faroes and Greenland for the utilisation of marine resources in the North-Atlantic, should make various institutions and financial bodies interested in helping to further such a research project.