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Organizing Hope

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Organizing Hope

Greenland has four municipalities and four Mayors. All four Mayors were invited to Ilulissat in February 2012 to meet with the Possible Greenland team. On the second day of the seminar the Mayor of Qaasuitsup Municipality Jess Svane had to fly up north to Nutaarmiut and assist the small community after a young man killed three family members and wounded four others.

Tor Inge Hjemdal and Boris Brorman Jensen met with the other three mayors: Simon Simonsen, Asii Chemnitz Narup and Hermann Berthelsen to discuss their hopes and concerns for Greenland.

BY TOR INGE HJEMDAL AND BORIS BRORMAN JENSEN

BBJ: Roughly speaking, you could claim that Greenland has inherited the Danish administrative system, a system that Denmark boasts is the best in the world—though this is not to say that it’s also the world’s best administrative system for Greenland! But be that as it may, Greenland has just been through a process of trimming and reorganizing its administrative system. A sort of centralization process has recently been carried out, and four large districts have been established—a structure that will probably be revised again in a few years. But the question is: if you did not have this recently reorganized structure adopted from Denmark, what would be the best possible system for you? If you could start over this Monday morning, how would Greenland be organized and managed then?

SS: People feel marginalized. They feel they are not part of the democratic system in Greenland. It’s probably more about getting used to the new system. Of course it’s annoying that having changed the municipal structure of Denmark, the same thing had to happen in Greenland. Because there are many people who think that this isn’t as it should be, because ours is a totally different society consisting of very closed-off communities with entirely different administrative needs. Perhaps you might change some of it, readapting it to Greenlandic society, but how much would you have to change? In all four municipalities actually there are people getting together and starting to talk about how we perhaps ought to return to the original eighteen local districts. But generally, I myself find that most of the population is happy with the structural change. There are many who find that service levels have increased and that the

service system has improved. But then there are things like communication and technology lagging a bit behind perhaps. **HB:** If the administration had to start over completely on Monday, then I’d say that today is Wednesday and I’d spend some time trying to find out what kind of administration practices would be best suited for the Greenlandic society. After all, our current administration system is something we’ve just been saddled with, without being able to change it. The latest example is the municipal mergers, a way of thinking we have adopted from Denmark. But the Greenlandic society consists of tiny little communities, and of course an administration system really ought to be based on their needs. But if I could turn back time, I would of course have liked to have been given a choice. Because if you’d been given the best administrative system in the world, you’d really think that that provided an excellent opportunity to look at ways of making it even better by looking at other things that other people have done in their way. We used to believe that everything coming from Denmark was the best in the world, but as we have grown wiser over the years, it turns out that this is not so—in a Greenlandic context.

BBJ: What do you say, Asii? **ACN:** It’s not even a Danish administration system. It’s German basically, based on Max Weber. In this system, what is good is that equality principle, that everyone should be treated equally. I think that’s a very important basic principle for a public administration system. So that’s the only thing I think is good about this kind of thinking. If I had to go to work on Monday and say, “People, let’s start over,” then

I’d challenge the current thinking. I’d say to all the employees, “You know what? You’re no longer authorities; you’re the servants of the citizens.” We would go from authority to servitude. I think it’s very important to tell people that, “We’re here for you.” Like, for groups of people to say, “We have this and that need, this and that problem,” well, fine, let’s sit down together and work it out. Delegate much more of the responsibility to the citizens themselves. That’s how I’d like my people—by “my,” I mean our employees—to work. I think that’s really interesting, and it makes more sense in relation to us wanting people to take more responsibility. I’d rather focus on empowerment. On saying, “Yes, how do we get on?” There are a number of departments—for instance, within the area of social services—that use a lot of resources, including financial ones. The notes always say a lot about what people can’t do, so I’d tell my employees that, “Every time you find that someone or another cannot do something, I want the same list stating five things that he or she actually *can* do.” In that way, you achieve a balance between problems and resources. We are far too occupied with finding faults, and of course there are very many very great problems in our society, but people also have very many resources too that we fail to see in our eagerness to help. So those are the two things that I’d say to them.

BBJ: I think that’s a very great statement, that we’re all equally entitled, equal individuals and that this assumption is the basis of democracy. It used to be an assumption of the Danish model that the wealth ought to be distributed as evenly as possible—also geographically speaking. That in principle, the welfare state should have a fractal



Mayor of Kujalleq Municipality Simon Simonsen (Siumut), Mayor of Sermerssoq Municipality Asii Chemnitz Narup (Inuit Ataqaṭigiit) and Mayor of Qeqqata Municipality Hermann Berthelsen (Siumut)

PHOTO BY BORIS BRORMAN JENSEN

” In this system, what is good is that equality principle, that everyone should be treated equally.”



structure. A system so finely meshed that it looked the same wherever you found yourself, meaning that even the smallest village, even the most isolated hamlet, regardless of its economy would get its fair share of the social institutions and services, etc. That principle has quietly disappeared in Denmark. We now focus on two growth centers. These are where we place the large hospitals. These are where we concentrate our infrastructural investments. These are where growth is taking place. I know that you have had the same discussion in Greenland. Could you comment on that?

ss: I think that that will depend a lot on how or what sort of industry emerges here. We are so few people here in Greenland that we will be dependent on how living patterns change with the arrival of the large industries. Because I also think that the fringes will become more and more depopulated in the future. So the centralization and the migration to the large towns will probably happen automatically in the future too. There's probably no getting around that. But that goes for the rest of the world too. I think that's the road we are going to take again, depending strongly on what kind of heavy industry will be introduced in the four districts. There'll be, perhaps, oil extraction here in Northern Greenland and then mines in Southern Greenland, too.

ACN: Herman, you were there back when people started talking about four centers of growth—they were in Ilulissat, Sisimiut, Nuuk and Qaqortoq—and you participated in that discussion, also on another level.

HB: There are fundamental needs that people have, for instance, what you very appropriately mentioned about hospitals. Should you have the same services if you get ill in a small town as you would if you were to get ill in Nuuk? And we don't mind admitting that that's impossible. So therefore regional hospitals have been established in the four or five major towns here. That way you

can be sure that in your district or region there's a hospital that can deal with most things. And then everyone knows that in case of more serious illness, you have to travel to Nuuk or, if it's even more serious, to the Rigshospitalet in Copenhagen. The principle of equality applying to natural things like falling ill is impossible. I think we have to admit that, regardless of where in Greenland you are. But I think of course the districts can succeed in practicing the equality principles within their own district. I think that that must be feasible in some way within certain areas.

ss: Asii actually asked what we talked about regarding the growth towns back before the merging of the districts, and I clearly recall the time when they started talking about those four growth districts. Our neighboring districts wouldn't hear of the possibility of one district becoming a growth district and not the others. There were already problems back then, and Hermann knows that very well. Four growth districts—what about the other fourteen then? Some of the districts were very much against it, I remember that clearly. It was difficult to get it to pass.

ACN: I'd like to say that I generally think that the idea of going back to that time and the talk of a few main towns is good, because the country is so big that it would be easier to create more equality within each district—taking some conditions and making them better. But then we were overtaken because we got autonomous rule, and boom, the oil companies and raw material corporations came knocking. On the map you can see how many there are. Now there's a lot of exploration going on and a few present and future extraction possibilities. So it's as if we'll have to rethink what we're going to do. This has come as something of a surprise to us. Here I was thinking that we would have many years to develop our districts, which

turned out not to be four equally sized entities but rather four very unequally sized ones. We haven't yet completed the task we wanted to complete, which was to have four districts of equal size with similar capacity models. We did not get that.

TH: Are you saying that the changed terms are the reason for the new priorities and structural changes in the district?

ACN: Well, as an entire society in general, I think that we have to pick up the discussion from there and say that given these prospects, given the experience that we have accumulated, what are we then going to do?

ss: We're undergoing changes here in Greenland, after all. Everyone is saying that we're the land of opportunities. And so we're working to spread that message to the great big world to get them to come because we need to develop like everyone else in the world. What have we got? How do we prepare for receiving these companies? What should we do? What demands should we make? And so on. I expect that the results from this project will be of a kind we can reuse later on.

TH: The changed terms are based on the challenging structural cooperation between the districts. Have you started working on that? Because those are quite big changes in terms of resources. What's the structural cooperation like?

ACN: I haven't reached any conclusive thoughts on that yet. But it's very important that all four of us find or are given niches so all four can be self-sustaining, because the unequal picture we see today is not okay. We must dare to think, "How are we going to distribute things so that everybody gets an equal share?" It's very tempting to just sit here in Nuuk and say, "Yes, we're just going to shovel in the taxpayers' money, and we can tell that there's growth, right?" But I don't think like that, and I probably wouldn't get re-elected if I did. I'm more interested in how we can distribute things. I think that's a very interesting discussion. That's why this

college of four mayors is a very important forum. The resources are actually located quite arbitrarily in our country. And it's also arbitrary whether they are handled by Herman, Jes, Simon or myself. We have to come up with some more comprehensive ways of dealing with that arbitrariness. It's completely coincidental, right? And where would extraction pay off and where wouldn't it, even though the same resources are present in several places. So there's some kind of exercise in showing complete solidarity with each other, even on a district level, if these districts are going to survive at all in the years to come. That's the next big question after all.

HB: The strength of Greenland has always been the fact that there have been people living almost all along the coast. That's why we can speak of Greenland as a whole today. Imagine if Greenland had developed into only the Nuuk, Sisimiut and Qaqortoq areas. We should be happy that there have been so many villages in Greenland, otherwise we would not be the united country we are today.

BBJ: Shell and the other big oil companies will hopefully help Greenland become independent of Danish subsidies. But what will happen when you go from being bound by a bilateral relationship between two democratic parties with strong cultural and historical ties to being dependent on multinational companies whose sole purpose is to make money? And who will shirk their responsibilities if they can? Multinational corporations have one interest only and that's to pay as little as possible and make as much profit as possible. What challenge does that entail for Greenland?

HB: We shouldn't become another banana republic like in South America in the early 1900s when the multinational corporations ran the countries based on who-knows-what principles. Today, we are run by the multinational corporation of Denmark, so to speak. Should we replace Denmark with another multinational corporation? Will oil companies or mining companies rule us because of their financial clout? That would be a challenge I think we should be wary of. I don't want us to be governed by a money machine over which we have no influence. Now there's a lot of talk about Greenland's resources, and we've almost already started counting how much money we're going to get, but there aren't all that many multinational companies who pay corporation taxes. We know all about that from Denmark. Should Greenland start focusing on getting them to pay corporation tax first once they start making a profit? I, for one, would like a share of the money they're taking out of my country from day

one. Because if Coca Cola and Nestlé don't pay corporation tax in Denmark, how can Greenland with its tiny little communities stand up to other multinational companies when we haven't even got the jurisdiction to do it? If Denmark can't do it, it's 100 times less likely in Greenland. If I were in charge, I'd drop all the talk about corporation tax. They're never going to pay us anyway. Start thinking about making them pay from their first day of operation in Greenland. Whether it's 1% or a tiny little amount, that's not the problem. Greenland has been exploited for so many, many years, and we haven't received any interest from the money that we've given to multinational corporations, including the multinational corporation of Denmark. Excuse the hard words.

BBJ: Don't apologize. I think it sounds quite sensible.

ss: We don't want to be like what has happened in other countries. In a way we're probably a bit more knowledgeable than them now, and that's to our benefit. So we can start making tougher demands when they come here and say, "This is what we want." Because I also think that it won't be a big deal to them. They're going to make a lot of money anyway.

HB: We must demand a big deal!

ACN: I'd like to say two things. If you think about what Hermann calls the multinational corporation of Denmark and the other multinational corporations, the advantage of the multinational corporation of Denmark is that it's a democracy. That's not true of the other corporations because, as you say, they have only one thing on their minds, and that's making a lot of money. They'll cheat whenever they can—they do it all the time. We shouldn't believe that it's a charity organization just happening to pass by. We know very well that there's great danger. And I think we need to talk about Greenland too. We were granted autonomy, but what does that mean? How fast should we move away and make ourselves independent of the subsidies? And what price are we willing to pay? I think we should return to that subject in the local debate in Greenland. Another scenario is to just open up the country for goodness sake and let everyone come here and hire many, many clever people, the best of the best, and then we'll be like Vancouver, for instance. That's a great place to live, I think. I'd like that. But I don't think I'd get re-elected for that either. I'm just stating my personal opinion now, and I'll stand by what I say. But it's not something I've discussed with the council, so I haven't got any official support. I'm just talking as a citizen of the

world. To me, these scenarios should ideally develop slowly, allowing us to heighten our own competence and gain even more knowledge. We can't match those big companies, we simply can't. So I hope that no one finds any oil. I'd much prefer small-scale mining. Small-scale we can handle [says something in Greenlandic].

HB: Of course there's democracy in Denmark, but we haven't even been granted autonomous rule on our own terms yet. We're not even a sovereign state yet because we have a "multinational corporation" (Denmark) controlling us.

ACN: But Herman, you can write Helle Thorning-Schmidt tomorrow and say that from the day after tomorrow, Monday, when we go to work, we'd like to be independent. Then she'll write, "Yes, my dear Herman, here you go." That's part of the deal. And it's not something we've been given. It's a political struggle that has taken place because—it's a political struggle, not a gift.

HB: Well, of course, that's not what I meant by it. I'm just comparing, saying that it's the people who have money who get to decide, even in a democratic society.

TH: How do you exploit the exploiters? How do you do that in a good and sustainable way? Like when you say that you'd like a slow pace because that allows you to acquire knowledge to get a sustainable development that will last after Shell and the others have left.

ACN: We should do like in Stavanger, which we visited with the finance committee in August. The outgoing mayor told us that he's been part of the process for many years. When the Americans arrived wanting to build, they said, "We have one demand: you must train us." I think that's the most important demand to make from everybody. They have to train us, because we're lagging severely behind. We must become even better than them.

HB: That's why these three districts, Asii and I, we've signed a cooperation agreement between the Cairn oil company and the government that training must be included. It plainly states that they can only extract oil on one condition, and that's training young Greenlandic people.