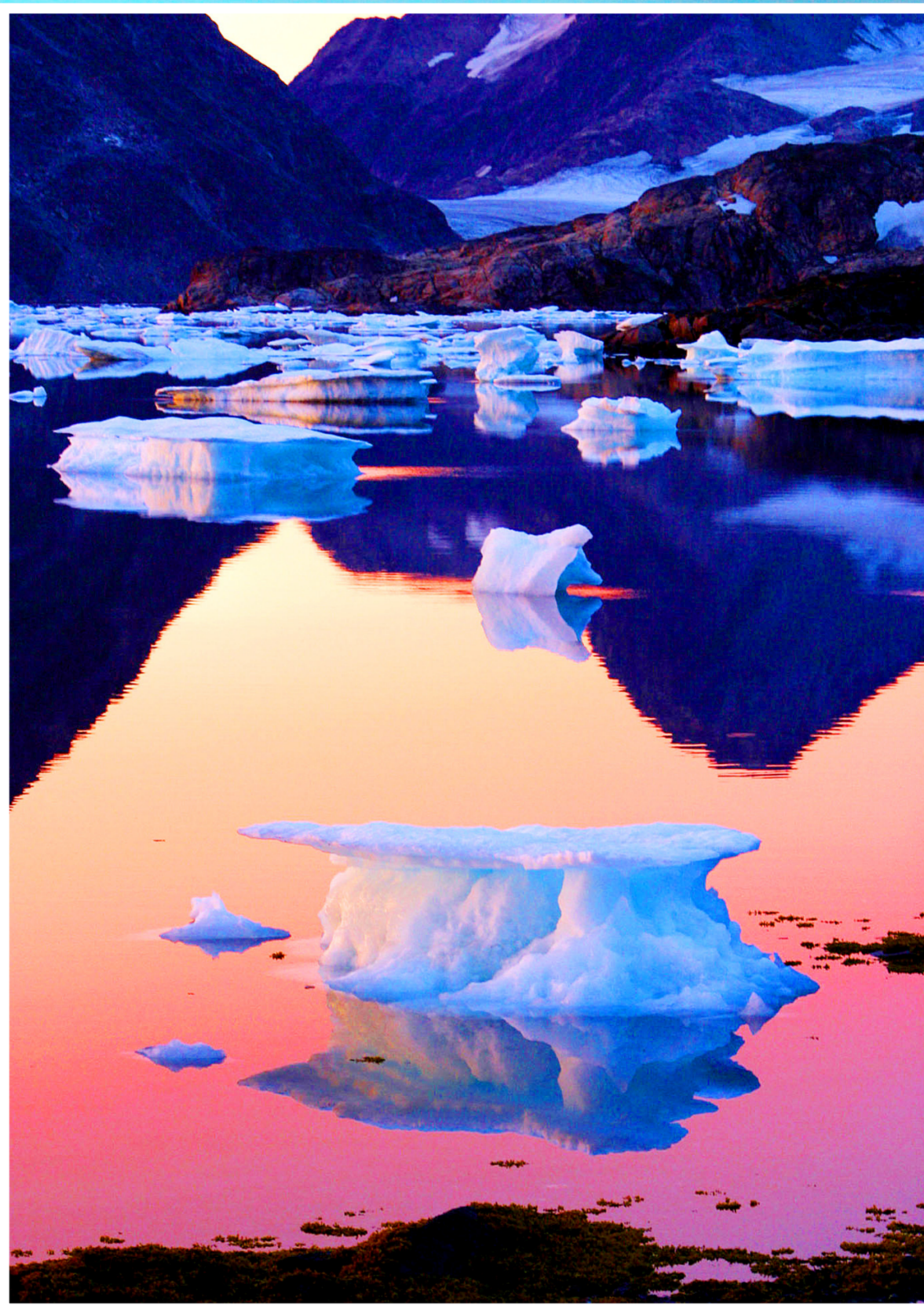


## Under the ice

*Greenland is four times the size of France, but with a population of only 57,000, and as its huge ice sheets begin to melt, it could find itself sitting on a fortune in oil and gems. Now, it has voted to cut all ties with its Danish rulers*

BY PATRICK BARKHAM  
THE GUARDIAN, NUUK, GREENLAND



An iceberg floats in the bay in Kulusuk, Greenland, near the Arctic Circle. Greenland voters overwhelmingly approved a plan to seek more autonomy from Denmark and take advantage of oil reserves that may lie off the glacial island, official results showed on Nov. 26, 2008. The Arctic island's election commission said 76 percent of voters supported the referendum, which sets new rules on splitting future oil revenue with Denmark. The vote was seen as a key step toward independence for the semi-autonomous territory.

PHOTO: AP

From the air, the largest island on the planet not to be its own continent, or even a nation, is so white and featureless that it resembles a soft cloud. On the ground, hard snow is driven into black rock, and the cold slaps you in the face. When people stomp indoors, icy air clings to them like a shroud.

In the past, the chill has killed off entire civilizations in Greenland. Even today, wrapped in fat rolls of designer polar wear or cosseted in climate-controlled SUVs, life is tough. Late last month, however, the 57,000 people who inhabit this harsh land took a firm step further into the cold when a decisive majority voted "aap" — yes — to seeking complete independence from Denmark, their colonial master for nearly 300 years.

Reverberations from Greenland's desire to go it alone will be felt far beyond this icy coastline. What happens here could have a bearing on the fate of the globe. As new seaways open, and melting ice exposes new farmland and valuable minerals, this emerging nation will be shaped, in the literal sense, by climate change. Its newly independent citizens will find themselves the custodians of a pristine Arctic land beneath which may lie oil and diamonds and rubies of stupendous value — not just to Greenland but to the rest of the world.

When it does shake off the last of its colonial shackles, Greenland will become the newest and the most extraordinary country in the world, as well as one of the most isolated. Although its remote northwest coast is little more than 150km from Canada's Ellesmere Island, it is some 3,000km from Europe. Four times the size of France, Greenland contains the longest fjord and largest national park in the world; 85 percent of its territory is covered with ice. Ten percent of the world's fresh water is frozen on Greenland's ice sheet; if it melts, sea levels will rise by 7m, sweeping away capital cities and countries around the world.

There are no roads to anywhere in Greenland but in the capital, Nuuk (population 14,719), all streets seem to lead to Aleqa Hammond. From old people buying hunks of porpoise at the market to teenage sports fans at the indoor handball game, everyone mentions the former finance and foreign minister. Like every Greenlander, her family is in the (slim) phone book so I call up and am invited round.

Some predict that Hammond, 43, will be the first prime minister of an independent Greenland. She lives in a fairy-tale wooden house overlooking the gloomy waters of Nuuk's old harbor. Inside her door, a wolfskin hangs from its head. On her living room shelves are delicate Greenlandic artworks set between two walrus jaws and a pair of polar bear skulls. Above her sofa is a pale spike that looks as if it was plucked from a unicorn's head: it is the tusk of a narwhal.

"My mother just called to say my brother is coming to town with a narwhal. So it's a happy time — whale is Christmas food in Greenland," she beams. Almost nine out of 10 Greenlanders are Inuit or Inuit/Danish. Hammond eloquently embodies the traditional and the modern: her husband is Danish, but the other members of her family are traditional hunters from Uummannaq, in the remote north, where thousands still live from hunting seals, whales and polar bears. Hammond's father died when she was 7. He fell through the ice on a hunt with his dog team. "I feel pride in being a Greenlander," she says. "I see possibilities in everything. This is a gift I think I can give to others — making impossible things possible."

## ROAD TO NATIONHOOD

Hammond went to university in Montreal and is fluent in Greenlandic, Danish, English and German — a legacy of six years backpacking. She became a member of Greenland's 31-person parliament (nearly half of whom are women) in 2005 and was instantly elevated to a ministerial position in Greenland's "home rule"

government, a local administration with power devolved from Copenhagen. "When I was 13, in 1979, we got home rule in Greenland. It was a gift given to me in my teenage years. The referendum is a new gift for the next generation and that is self-governance," she says. The referendum result now allows Greenland to gradually "take home" responsibility for policing, the judiciary and other aspects of society still under Danish control. When Greenland no longer needs Denmark's financial help, it will finally become a fully independent nation. Many Greenlanders think this could still be more than a decade away. "I believe that Greenland will achieve independence during the time I am still active in politics," says Hammond.

If Hammond represents the future, Greenland's past is vividly retold by Thorkild Kjaergaard, head of history and culture at the University of Greenland, a sleek new Scandinavian block set on a rough hill above Nuuk, close to a rocky golf course. (Soccer is Greenland's national sport but it can't join FIFA because it hasn't got a single grass pitch.)

Geographically, Greenland belongs to the North American continent. Nuuk is closer to New York than Copenhagen. Historically, it has been tied to Europe. Culturally, and linguistically, it is now unique. "When Christopher Columbus arrived in North America in 1492 there were hundreds of native languages there. Today all American heads of states address their people in Portuguese, Spanish, English and French. The only "head of state" who does not address his people in a European language is here," says Kjaergaard, a tall, intense Dane, who has worked in Greenland since 2002. "Greenlandic is the only American language that has been preserved."

The reason, he argues, is the Danes. For hundreds of years, they treated Greenland and its people with unprecedented respect; Greenlandic and Danish are both official languages. According to Kjaergaard, there

is no record of a Dane killing an Inuit in the 18th and 19th centuries; thousands were slaughtered in the US. Hammond agrees. "Thank God it was the Danes who colonized us, not the British or Americans or Dutch or Germans," she says. "The Danes respected our lifestyle and culture and that has made it possible for us to maintain our own identity as a people."

## MIRROR OF HISTORY

The reason for this exceptional colonial history, which thinks Kjaergaard, is not that the Danes were uniquely civilized (they were more typical colonial oppressors in the Caribbean) but because the Norwegian-Danish kingdom had a grand passion for Greenland. Nordic people traveled hundreds of kilometers beyond Iceland to first settle here in the 10th century. Some suggest that lonely Erik the Red jokingly named it "green" to fool his fellow Vikings into joining him, although southern Greenland was actually a lush color compared with Iceland. The Norwegians disappeared from Greenland during the 15th century but the Danish-Norwegian kingdom returned in 1721 to "recover" the old country. After the Danish-Norwegian kingdom broke up, Denmark inherited Greenland with a keen sense of duty.

"Greenlanders were treated like Danish citizens and their language was part of the pride of the kingdom. It showed the immensity of the Danish empire," says Kjaergaard. Danish missionaries also believed native people could only take the word of God to their hearts if it was in their own language. They helped turn Greenlandic into a written language in the mid 19th century. Greenland even launched a native-language newspaper in 1861, curiously one of the first in the world to have color illustrations. (Absent in the landscape, primary colors are big in Greenland; Nuuk's houses are painted bright yellow, red, blue and green.)

Today, Kjaergaard feels that Greenland's rejection

of its enlightened old master is equally emotional. Compared with indigenous Arctic people in Canada, the US and Russia, Greenlanders are financially well supported and have their own government. "Seen from a pan-American perspective, Greenland is a fantastic success," says Kjaergaard. Independence "is driven by passion, the idea of a self-sustaining Inuit nation. They are not satisfied with being what they are today — the king nation of the north, subsidized by Copenhagen." He believes Greenland is better off under the warm financial wing of Denmark, which gives Greenland 3.2 billion kroner (US\$5.5 billion) every year.

Some Greenlanders, however, experience the Danish influence less benevolently. At this time of year in Nuuk, the sun seems perpetually beyond the horizon. Where its weak fingers touch the land, it turns white peaks raspberry. Families hunker down indoors, hanging illuminated orange paper stars in their darkened windows. Further north, in Disko Bay, where linguist Nuka Moller grew up, families hunt in the perpetual night by sound, listening for the narwhals blowing before they strike with the harpoon. Rather than hunt whales, Moller is creating a Greenlandic grammar check for computers. He finds a lingering Danish elite can still patronize indigenous people. "A segment of society still has that mind-set: 'Are you really able to take care of yourself?' I felt like I was going back 30 years during recent debates over independence," he says. In those days, the colonial sense of superiority was explicit: he remembers his radio telegrapher father teaching Morse code to Danes, who would quickly become his boss.

## PASSION FOR IDENTITY

"We are hopefully growing out of our teenage years in Greenland and going into adulthood," says Moller — an analogy echoed by many people picking their way carefully across the ice in Nuuk. Torben Heckmann, a Danish police officer seconded to help Greenlandic investigations, finds local people very kind, but when it comes to independence, he pauses. "They are a little bit like spoiled children. They want it all but they don't want to pay for it," he says. "They are short of teachers, IT workers, bankers, doctors, police and dentists — they have to realize they can't do it all themselves."

Some young Greenlanders feel oppressed by the ongoing Danish influence. Lena Broberg, 21, is studying Greenlandic at the university. Only one of her lecturers is a Greenlander; all lessons are in Danish. "We can't really use our language in our own country. If we want to have an education it has to be in Danish. It's very sad," she says. "They use Danes and Greenlanders think is so different. We can't really understand each other. Our sense of humor is totally different. Danish people are more serious and they talk too much. They organize what they are going to do at 3pm the next day. We don't do that."

If a passion for identity is driving independence, colder financial calculations also play a part: there is money beneath the ice, and why should the Greenlanders share it with Denmark? But the treasure hasn't been found yet, and in the meantime the country is very much dependent on Denmark. Before Westerners arrived, the Inuit were self-sufficient, but now self-sufficiency for such a tiny population seems impossible. Greenland is not rich, and shrimping — vulnerable to climate change — remains its biggest industry and export (although several companies are looking at the unlimited potential of marketing melted ice water). Most food is imported from Denmark; 97 percent of its trade is with the EU.

In September Hammond resigned from the government in protest over the size of Greenland's budget deficit. She now makes light of the funding gap if the country lost its Danish subsidy. "Taking the future in your own hands has a fantastic psychological impact," she says. "It will free us from our dependency on Denmark. An independent Greenland is much closer than we think."