

Arctic Frontiers

Session III: Health, environment and society

Speech by Premier Aleqa Hammond – Greenland's way forward

Tromsø January 21st 2014

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

When I was asked by the organisers to be a keynote speaker at this year's Arctic Frontiers conference, I knew that the focus expected of me would be on the current developments within the oil and gas and minerals sectors taking place in Greenland these years.

However, I specifically asked to speak today in this session on health, environment and society, because although it is important to address the current perspectives and challenges Greenland faces in the minerals sectors, I think it is also important to place these developments within the larger framework of how to develop industrial sectors in Greenland – an Arctic country with a small indigenous Arctic population which to this day has always lived in balance with nature - while ensuring that the health of its population and the sensitive Arctic environment are not adversely affected.

I therefore hope for your indulgence, that I will not immediately give you the hard facts on Greenland's current perspectives in the oil, gas and minerals sectors. I will instead today focus more on the much more complicated challenge of how to deal with new developments in a wider framework.

A likely scenario for the future of Greenland is an economic growth supported by new large scale industries and oil and mineral extraction. This will profoundly affect our society, the environment and ultimately human health.

The Arctic environment has – contrary to the image that many outside the Arctic have - already been profoundly affected by industrial activity. And I am not only referring here to climate change.

The impact of industrial activity far from the Arctic means that Arctic marine and land-based mammals are bearers of large amounts of industrial substances, which not only endangers the long-term survival of some large mammals, but also makes the consumption of others, almost unsuitable as a staple food for humans.

This is a reality faced by Arctic populations already today.

The prospects for increased shipping and off-shore oil activities in the Arctic region also brings new risks of their own to fragile environments. An accident with environmental impacts in one Arctic state could easily impact one or more neighbouring states.

Overall, I expect the influence of industrialization on health in Greenland to be both positive and negative. The positive effects should not be overlooked; it comes from increased employment opportunities, increased income and increased wealth. Factors which throughout the recent history of mankind have shown to improve health. One must not forget that over the last 50 years, physical health measured by indicators such as child mortality and life expectancy, has improved dramatically in Greenland, amongst other things due to improved housing conditions, nutrition and health care.

The negative results on health from rapid industrialization, including social disruption, loss of traditional values, declining mental well-being and increased suicide rates are well known to us from our recent past, and from that of our Arctic neighbours. We must seek to understand the causes of these devastating developments and create and enhance social environments that counteract the ill effects of uncontrolled development.

The social development in our country has also had negative effects on chronic diseases such as diabetes and heart disease. This has been caused by the transition from the physically active life of hunters and fishermen and their families in the small towns and villages to the increasingly quiet life style of the urban office-worker. We must fear that our life style will continue along that path similarly to what we can see is happening to our neighbours to the south and west, in Europe and North America.

Over the last century we have also faced the inevitable force of urbanization. One hundred years ago all Greenlanders lived in small communities of a few hundred inhabitants. Now 25% of the population live in our capital, Nuuk, which by Greenlandic standards is a big town with its almost 15.000 inhabitants, and less than 20% today live in villages. This is a trend that may continue on our path towards economic independence, but how does this influence health? It is a popular belief that this kind of urbanization affects health negatively but we actually don't know.

If there is a negative effect, how can we counteract it?

We need to accept the fact that our society will change in the future, and ours has never been a static society. We have in the not too distant past faced colonization, devastating

epidemics, major climate changes, changes in the occurrence of natural resources, and most recently a forced modernization, and we have managed to come out on top. Our small society is vulnerable but we know how to fight and adapt.

We wish to tackle the challenges to our environment, our society and our health by increasing our knowledge base, so that we can take appropriate actions.

Of course, I want Greenland to take advantage of the new opportunities - which are also consequences of climate change - by utilising its mineral and oil resources which are now available to us. Greenland – in close cooperation with Denmark - has been preparing for these developments for the past 20 years.

Let there be no misunderstanding, that it is my clear political priority to ensure that the people living in Greenland should be the beneficiaries of developments within the oil, gas and minerals sectors in Greenland which are taking place these years, and that the traditional lifestyles and culture of Greenland should not be compromised by current developments.

Around 20% of the Arctic landmass is made up of Greenland. The ice-free areas of Greenland today, cover an area larger than Germany. But Greenland is very scarcely populated with its only 56,000 inhabitants.

With climate change, Greenland is changing. Currently boundaries between climate zones – of which Greenland has three – are being pushed almost 2 kilometres to the North every year.

I want Greenland to have a self-sustaining economy based on our own resources with a greater degree of integration into the world economy. Greenland's long-term political goal is independence.

With the Self-Governance Act of June 2009, adopted by both the Danish and the Greenlandic Parliaments, the people of Greenland gained a form of very extended autonomy from Denmark with the unity of the Realm intact.

The Self-Governance Act amongst other things recognised that the Greenlandic people are a people under international law and therefore have the established right to self-determination. Greenland is therefore in the unique position of being the only indigenous people in the Arctic, which has its own Government with a recognised and agreed right to independence.

Under the provisions of the Self-Governance Act, Greenland can take over competence in most areas. But not over security and defence policy. In 2010, Greenland took over the sole competence from Denmark over our own oil and gas and mineral resources.

For the past 4500 years, Greenland has been the land of the Greenlanders. My people understand and belong to this land.

Our new mining and oil activities are taking place in some of the vastest and most pristine environments anywhere in the world. We do not need to be reminded by others of the preciousness of nature's wealth, because it continues to feed us, clothe us and sustain us every day.

The Arctic environment is incredibly sensitive. Protecting nature and its living natural resources, has always been a priority for my people. My Government will apply the highest standards when it comes to environment and human health for all mineral and oil activities within its jurisdiction.

However, more is needed in terms of international cooperation.

The Arctic Council's Search and Rescue Agreement from 2011 and the Oil Spill Agreement of last year are only first steps. We need collectively in the Arctic to do much more to deal with the risks that new activities and pressures in the Arctic pose, in particular regarding maritime safety, mapping, oil spill preparedness and providing regional cost-effective solutions to surveillance, which are necessary for effective oil spill and search and rescue activities.

Present measures are inadequate.

Greenland has significant unexplored mineral, oil and gas resources, including the largest supply of rare earth elements outside China.

My Government has, since it took office in April of 2013, achieved important results and has also taken some difficult decisions.

On 24 October, the Greenlandic Parliament decided to abolish a "zero-tolerance policy towards uranium and other radioactive minerals", which had been in place for the past 25 years in Greenland. This decision has now paved the way for us to fully exploit our

rare earth mineral deposits, which are often in Greenland linked with radioactive minerals.

The Greenlandic Parliament has also during its fall session approved a revised version of the “Large-scale Projects Act”, which amongst other things will enable the use of foreign labour in Greenland while fully protecting labour rights - both for foreign labourers coming to Greenland and for the Greenlandic labour market as a whole.

Our relations with third countries are important for us, and this is more and more the case. In 2014, Greenland will be opening its second diplomatic representation abroad, in addition to our existing representation to the European Union in Brussels, this time in Washington D.C..

Our relations with other international partners remain important. In particular with our Arctic neighbours.

With the Self-Governance Act of 2009, Greenland represents itself externally in all areas over which it has taken over sole competence from the Danish state. This is important to us, not only for reasons of symbolism and pride.

It is a recognition of the unique relationship which Denmark and Greenland have developed over centuries of co-existence, which is probably unique to any relationship today between a former colonial power and its colony.

The agenda of my year is full of international Arctic events, but the Arctic Frontiers conference is one of the most important ones, which I value participating in. Here we

can come together among fellow Arctic representatives and discuss the most pressing issues, which affect us.

It is also an important opportunity to meet and hear the views of some of the countries situated outside of the Arctic, which you have also included in this year's programme.

I value their contribution to this and other discussions, as I value their contributions to the work of the Arctic Council, as observers with important Arctic interests.

However, it is clear for me that developments in the Arctic, should continue to be driven by the needs and aspirations of the peoples of the Arctic. Anything other than this would be wrong.

To those countries with important Arctic interests, looking to increase their Arctic engagement in these years, I would like to make a special appeal:

Please work to understand how your decisions – also apparently small decisions - will affect us in the Arctic, in particular the Arctic indigenous populations, which are small but with a huge impact in the Arctic region that we are part of.

New partners to the Arctic have an important role to play. I hope that together we can help “Demystifying the Arctic”, and make the challenges we face clearer.

Finally, I would like to recognise the important focus chosen by this year's organisers to look specifically at the role of humans in the Arctic. This focus is also key to how I see Greenland, and how I see the increasing role played by outsiders in our Arctic.

I hope that over the remainder of the conference, we will have productive discussions, and as the year is still at its beginning, I would like to take this opportunity to wish you all a Happy New Year - Ukiortaami pilluaritsi!