

Greenland

Last island of enlightenment

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'It is not widely known — except, perhaps, by our friend Roy Jenkins — that Greenland is the most civilised country in the world.' Thus an impromptu interview with Jonathan Motzfeldt, Prime Minister of the world's largest island, comes naturally to a close. We are still some hours short of Copenhagen; it has been an uncommonly unequivocal half hour — 'Hello, sit down, ask me whatever you like. . . ' — but he is obviously eager to enjoy the remaining deficiencies of the in-flight movie. So I thank him for his time and return to steerage.

In 1979 the Greenland Home Rule Act turned the country into a self-governing, overseas administration of the Danish realm. These days there are just under 60,000 people living in unconnected coastal towns and villages; transport is by boat or plane or not at all. The interior is uninhabited and more than casually chilly. Nuuk, the capital and the most populous city (14,000), is on the west and faces Canada. They all speak Greenlandic. There is one television station which nobody watches, only 36 miles of paved road in the entire country, no railways, no prisons, and continuous Arctic permafrost over the northern two-thirds of the island.

But of course Motzfeldt is quite right. Greenland is indeed the last island of enlightenment in an otherwise distracted world. While we poor and misled wretches giddy ourselves with the *méthode champenoise* of modern politics and culture, the Greenlanders are still cracking open the real thing. Indeed, if you yearn for a place where accomplishment is commonplace and the steaks are rare, then go to a travel agent *à toute vitesse*.

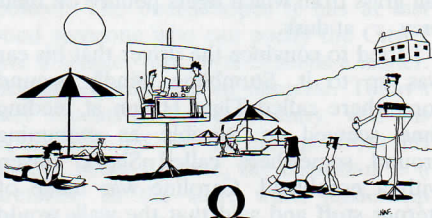
First of all, they are still concerned with the primary point of politics — in the *Concise OED's* definition 'a': 'a particular set of

ideas, principles or commitments'; rather than in our own exclusively 'b' approach: 'activities concerned with the acquisition or exercise of authority or government'. Their Prime Minister, for example, knows what he thinks, and will even go so far as to express himself cogently: 'You are welcome to disagree, but I cannot see the point of being in Europe. For the moment, we have only one resource: fish. And in my view Brussels is not the place to get decisions made . . . on such a matter.' He mingles unaffectedly with the people he represents, travels without any of the baggage of his office, and (almost uniquely among his peers) doesn't confine public discourse to grinning. 'The way we do things is simple — we take an issue, we inform ourselves thoroughly of the arguments, we debate them rigorously until we have a majority in favour of one view or the other and then we implement the new policy.'

Second, at this time of year, there are the compelling benefits of the expansive polar nights. A gentleman can rise at noon and still be successfully on show before the dawn. He is then required to busy himself only until 2.30 before gracefully retiring from the fray, well assured of having done a good day's work. In this way, his occupation can be confined solely to that most serious business of all, lunch. The long hours of idle darkness also ensure that the entire nation is properly read, which helps conversation immeasurably; and furthermore, television being universally scorned, the subject never comes up and there are no celebrities. (It is worth mentioning that the Greenlandic aptitude for innovation and style in the bedroom is second to none since even the most recessive individual will develop ancillary skills when faced with 22 hours of such enervating nocturnal cold.)

And third, what a lunch it is! Quiet without the asphyxiation of political correctness or the corsetry of dietary faddishness, the standard fare is often a nourishing cylinder of whale steak served up with an agreeable disdain for the claims of *légumes*. Naturally, the Inuit understand the rhythms and the cycles of their ancient way of life far better than those behind the clumsy imposition of (highly insulting) whaling quotas presume — no Greenlander is ever going to leave his descendants to starve. Sometimes, it is as extempore as this: a whale swims into a fiord and gets trapped; one of the boats out catching shrimp spots the beast and radios in; within half an hour the entire village is on the water; and, two hours after that, the whale has been divided among them and taken home. And when it arrives on your plate — upright, massive — it tastes exactly halfway between beef and tuna.

Then there is the edifying quiet. The Arctic is justly famous for its silence and, aside from the sporadic howl of a woeful



'And this is Julie and me at home having breakfast on a Thursday morning.'