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Marius Thomassen

Bond University, Marius.Thomassen@student.bond.edu.au

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# Who has heard of the Faroe Islands?

## **Abstract**

Extract: The Faroe Islands are one of the smallest countries in the world. In fact, the country is so small that its neighbours barely know of it, and hardly know anything about it. What is more, the Faroe Islands are not defined as an independent country, and therefore have limited access to the international society. The Faroe Islands are a self-governing region under the Danish realm. The current Danish government, as well as the opposition, have declared their support for an independent Faroese state, as long as the Faroese people themselves want independence. Thus, the only barriers for Faroese independence are psychological, where the population is more or less divided half and half into those who want independence and those who want unification with Denmark, though the Faroe Islands have become ever more autonomous. Furthermore, the Faroe Islands have all the qualifications of a proper independent state, such as their own language, culture, history, flag, national anthem, and geographically-defined territory. This leads to the question of how would an independent Faroe Islands fit into the current system of global governance?

## **Keywords**

Faroe Islands

## **Who has heard of the Faroe Islands?<sup>1</sup>**

*by Marius Thomassen<sup>2</sup>*

The Faroe Islands are one of the smallest countries in the world. In fact, the country is so small that its neighbours barely know of it, and hardly know anything about it. What is more, the Faroe Islands are not defined as an independent country, and therefore have limited access to the international society. The Faroe Islands are a self-governing region under the Danish realm. The current Danish government, as well as the opposition, have declared their support for an independent Faroese state, as long as the Faroese people themselves want independence. Thus, the only barriers for Faroese independence are psychological, where the population is more or less divided half and half into those who want independence and those who want unification with Denmark, though the Faroe Islands have become ever more autonomous. Furthermore, the Faroe Islands have all the qualifications of a proper independent state, such as their own language, culture, history, flag, national anthem, and geographically-defined territory. This leads to the question of how would an independent Faroe Islands fit into the current system of global governance?

This article suggests that it would flourish in certain areas, such as tourism, culture, and innovation. There are many reasons for believing that the Faroe Islands will become a tourist destination: they are clean, unspoiled and scenic. The attractions of Faroese culture – especially where food and music is concerned – are not to be forgotten. Innovation is also a possibility, especially in green technology. Their oceanic location has allowed research to be conducted in sea currents and wave energy.

However, there are problematic areas that need to be dealt with. These are mainly the issue of visibility and the problem of attacks from anti-whaling environmental groups. The problem with visibility is that the international community can do without the Faroe Islands. So every time the Faroe Islands want something or have something to offer, they must attract attention. The more serious problem, however, comes from anti-whaling environmental groups. These groups are difficult to deal with as they are economically powerful and have many times the manpower of the Faroe Islands (see further below).

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<sup>1</sup> The views in *The Culture Mandala* are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views, position or policies of the *Centre for East-West Cultural and Economic Studies* (Bond University). Bearing in mind the controversial debates now occurring in International Relations and East-West studies, the editors endeavour to publish a range of diverse, critical and dissenting views.

<sup>2</sup> The author is Faroese and wrote this article in August 2010 as a case study in issues of global governance during his Masters degree at Bond University.

If these areas are dealt with properly or at least reasonably, the Faroe Islands will be recognized as a responsible actor in the system of global governance.



The Faroe Islands: Natural Attractions

*(Used with permission of the photographer. Copyright © 2011 Bergur Ingemarsson Johansen)*

## **Historical Background**

The Irish Saint Brandon was the first documented visitor in the Faroe Islands in the seventh century. The people of the Faroe Islands are, however, mostly of Norwegian descent, but there are also traces from the earliest Irish settlements, as well as some Scottish. The Faroe Islands were Christianized in 11<sup>th</sup> century by the Norwegian King Ólavur Trúgvason, who is celebrated in the biggest festival in the Faroe Islands, Ólavsøka, which is held annually on July the 28th to 29th. In the middle of the 16<sup>th</sup> century the Faroe Islands came under Danish rule; before then various tribes fought for power on the islands. These battles have been remembered through the generations in narratives and songs, and now form the basis of the perhaps the strongest Faroese tradition, the chain dance. This is mainly performed during weddings and festivals such as the above mentioned Ólavsøka. Furthermore, already in the ninth century the formation of the first parliament took place, where all free men convened at the Løgting (parliament), which means that the Faroe Islands are one of the world's oldest democracies.

The period under Danish rule from the 16<sup>th</sup> century to the Second World War is mostly remembered with horror. The Islanders were poor and were treated poorly, where the little wealth there was went to the Danish officials. The Danish language was forced upon the Islanders, who were forbidden to speak Faroese in public spaces such as schools and the

church, where the argument was that God would not understand such a barbaric language. The Faroese people were isolated from the world; and when the Faroese language was documented by W.U. Hammersheimb in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century in a written form, it was classified as an extinct language.

The documentation of the language occurred at the same time as the independence movement was launched with a public speech on a Faroe Islands mountaintop in 1888. The Faroese were deeply dissatisfied with the Danish authorities and the formation of the Faroese identity started. The first official party was the Unionist Party, which was formed in 1906, and which wanted to remain with the Kingdom of Denmark. In 1909, the Independence Party was formed and since then they have seen the Faroe Islands becoming less dependent on Denmark, but not independent (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2010). The Faroese language has survived, and in the current era of globalization, it seems like the Danish language is being overrun by English, while Faroese grows ever stronger.

During the Second World War Denmark was occupied by Germany, while the Faroe Islands were occupied by Britain, who allowed the Faroese people to govern and use their own flag, which had been made in 1928. After the war it was difficult for the Faroese to go back under Danish rule and debate raged within the Faroe Islands as to whether they should become independent. The 1946 elections resulted in a marginal 'yes' for Faroese independence. However, the Danish prime minister did not recognize the elections and demanded a re-election, which resulted in a marginal victory for the Unionist and Social Democrats (who had been founded in 1929). These two parties then adopted the Home Government solution with the Danish government, which still is in effect today (Jensen, 2004).

Today's politics in the Faroe Islands have evolved much since the beginning of the Home Government. Where politics elsewhere can be measured on a scale from left to right, politics in the Faroe Islands also have a matrix that goes from pro-independence to pro-unionism. Thus, there are four major parties in each corner of the axis. The Republicans are in the upper left corner, which shows that they are politically to the left and want independence. The Conservatives are in the upper right corner, because of their pro-independence and even liberal views.<sup>3</sup> The Social Democrats are in the lower left corner, where they are a left-wing party who are pro-unionism. Finally, the Unionist Party is politically to the right and wants to be under the Danish realm. Furthermore, there can be added a third dimension, which is based on religiosity. There is a Christian party, who call themselves the Center Party, who have taken upon themselves the role of guardian of Christian values. Human rights debates, such as gay rights, sound very much the same in the Faroe Islands as they do in the United States, where Christian values are interpreted conservatively. Also worth mentioning is a sixth party, which is the second oldest. It is the above-mentioned Independence Party, which is politically at the centre and wants a step-by-step independence process.

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<sup>3</sup> It is a mixed party which comprises mostly conservatives, but also liberals.

There are 33 seats in the House of Representatives. The results from last election in 2007 gave eight to the Republicans, seven to the Unionists, six to the Conservatives and the Social Democrats, three to Central Party, and two to Independence Party. The current government is made up of a Unionist Prime Minister, a Conservative Foreign Minister, and a Social Democrat Finance Minister. As pointed out above, these parties are politically different and have had difficulty maintaining cooperation: in March 2010 they could not even agree on a first draft outline for the fiscal plan for 2011. The Opposition has claimed that the Prime Minister has only desperately tried to hold the government together so he could host the Queen of Denmark in July; and now when they are discussing the fiscal plan for 2011, it seems unlikely that agreement will be reached.

### **The Main Industry: Fisheries**

The Faroe Islands are highly dependent on the sea, where 95% of merchandise export and 20% of total GDP comes from fish products (Ministry of Fisheries, 2010). The sea environment is therefore especially appreciated and sustainable fishing highly valued. The Faroe Islands have developed a more sustainable fishing method. This prevents wasteful fishing, which has been the EU's problem for many years. The Faroese method is simple: instead of quotas in tons, there are quotas in days. This means that the fishing boats will take what they get during those fishing day; whereas within the quota system boats throw out unwanted fish. This solution with fishing days is considered preferable.

However, this year the Minister of Fisheries announced that the Faroe Islands will be assigned 85,000 tons of mackerel to itself, after failing to reach an agreement on quotas with the other North Atlantic countries. Fishing rights by proportion of shares are normally negotiated on the basis of circumstances such as fishing history, dependency on fisheries, how long the stock can be fished commercially in a nation's waters, and how much the country contributes to scientific research on the stocks (Ministry of Fisheries, 2010). But after Iceland decided to award itself 135,000 tons of mackerel, the Faroe Islands soon followed. Both the Faroe Islands and Iceland claim to hold evidence that the mackerel may be found in their sea much longer than earlier. They seem, however, to have been so eager to start fishing that they have overlooked the negotiation process. This has resulted in Norway having closed its harbours for Faroese and Icelandic mackerel fishing boats. Furthermore, Norway is negotiating with the EU to close all harbours for any Faroese and Icelandic vessels. This seems to be a drastic measure from these two major fishery actors. If Norway and the EU are to close their harbours, the result would be a national catastrophe for both the Faroe Islands and Iceland.

### **Secondary Industries**

The Faroe Islands have chosen tourism as a focus area, which is promoted as a secondary industry. In Northern Europe, beach holidays are by far the most popular type of vacation. After that come big city vacations. Thereafter are all sorts of vacations, including what the Faroe Islands have to offer, which can be defined as unspoiled nature, where there are green

mountains, an ever present ocean and the freshest air to breath. The Faroe Islands were voted the best Islands in the world by National Geographic Traveller. In a survey of 111 island groups, the Faroe Islands scored the highest on the basis of being “*authentic, unspoiled and likely to remain so*” ([www.visitfaroeislands.com](http://www.visitfaroeislands.com)). The National Tourist Office has set an agenda to target ‘nature loving’ people in a few key countries: Denmark, Germany, Britain and Italy. Here it could be smart to target Spain as well, for the Spaniards have beaches all year around, as well as cities like Madrid, Barcelona, Seville and Valencia, and would therefore likely want to spend their vacation elsewhere. What is missing in visiting the Faroe Islands is a highlight. An increasing number of exciting tours have been established in recent years, such as boat concerts in caves and adventure tours, but that one thing that everyone has to see and will bring visitors to the islands is missing.

The Faroese still remain hopeful of finding significant amounts of oil. There have been relatively few attempts to find oil, but they continue, for just south of the border in Britain where there are large reserves, the search for oil continued for some time before any was found. The same applies to Norway, the Faroese eastern neighbour, who is now one of the world’s wealthiest countries and has a petroleum stabilization fund with an estimated 120 billion dollars (Ali, 2009). This is a comparatively large sum, given that there are only about four million people living in Norway. In the Faroe Islands, there has been a debate for the past 15 years about what to do with the oil once it comes. However, as no oil is yet discovered, this debate has slowed down. Politicians and the public alike seem to be content with deferring decision on the issue until it arises. But with a population just under 50,000, a small amount of oil could have a big impact on Faroese society.

Culture-based industries have become more apparent in Faroese society. These industries include textiles made of Faroese sheep wool, and experiments with the export of foods such as dried lamb which is prepared according to a traditional method, similar to the Italian Parma ham. Music has become an export: the first globally recognized Faroese artist is Teitur. The next line of artists has started to export to Britain and Scandinavia. Moreover, there are more than 380 titles in the catalogue of the largest label, Tutl Records ([www.tutl.com](http://www.tutl.com)). These are all opportunities that could give an important diversification to the Faroese economy.

### **The Faroe Islands as a state**

There are 192 members of the United Nations as independent states, and the Faroe Islands is not one of them. However, there are several micro-state members in the UN, such as the Maldives, Malta, Luxemburg and Lichtenstein. Thus, it is not uncommon for the micro-states to be accepted as part of the international community. As described above, the Faroe Islands have all the qualifications to become an independent country, such as their own government, flag, language, culture, history and specified territory. However, the people do not agree on which course the Faroe Islands should take, where the barrier from independence is psychological, with fear as the major component. This is a fear of being unable to run such a small country economically, but mostly it is fear of losing the security provided by Denmark

- not so much security in a traditional sense, as the Faroe Islands are part of NATO (via Denmark),<sup>4</sup> but more as a safety net. Furthermore, Denmark has announced that if the Faroe Islands wish to be independent, the Danish state would support this prospect. This has made the Faroe Islands change somewhat in behaviour. Like a child for whom a desired toy was forbidden and therefore even more precious, actually being given the toy lessened its appeal. When the Danish government proclaimed its support for Faroese independence, Faroese eagerness abruptly disappeared. However, the Faroe Islands have taken over more areas of responsibility from Denmark: the establishment of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 2004 as a separate Office, where it used to be under the Prime Minister, has enhanced Faroese participation in international affairs. However, it has also made clear the limitations of operating without the authority of a sovereign state, as foreign affairs are still Danish.

### **Faroese-Danish relations**

The Faroe Islands and Denmark have a positive relationship. Few countries have enjoyed the privilege of their colonial power officially declaring support for their independence. Furthermore, the Faroe Islands are formally a part of the Kingdom of Denmark with two representatives in the Danish parliament. Moreover, there is a shared history between the two countries, and the Faroese people learn the Danish language in school. Many later use Danish when they go abroad to study, as most students go to Denmark. However, the relationship mostly goes one way: where the Faroese learn Danish and know a lot about Denmark, the Danish hardly ever learn Faroese and rarely know anything about the Faroe Islands.

### **The EU and EFTA<sup>5</sup>**

The Faroe Islands cannot join the EU; not as part of Denmark, nor as an independent state; or at least not as long as the EU has a common fishery policy, which in practise signifies that all EU members share fishing rights within the borders of the EU. This would mean that the Faroe Islands would have to share the resources that are the basis for 95% of the merchandise export and 20% of total GDP; and given the size of the Faroe Islands compared to the EU, it would not be long before Faroese fishing companies would be outmatched by larger EU based companies. However, the Faroe Islands do want closer cooperation, especially access to markets.

A permanent membership of EFTA would be desirable for the Faroe Islands. It would mean a much stronger negotiating stance in almost all areas. Though EFTA only includes four countries - Iceland, Lichtenstein, Norway and Switzerland - these are all economically strong; with Iceland as an exception after the financial crisis. Membership within EFTA, would give the Faroe Islands a forum where they could learn and practise diplomacy on the global stage. The Faroe Islands have vast experience in fishery negotiations, but this is a limited area and it is necessary for any country that desires to participate actively to be able to contribute to more than just one area.

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<sup>4</sup> Independence would require negotiating a new agreement with NATO.

<sup>5</sup> European Free Trade Organization, including Switzerland, Norway, Lichtenstein and Iceland.

The Faroe Islands and the EU have recently signed the FP7 research agreement allowing Faroese researchers to apply for grants on equal terms as those from the EU. This can turn out to be beneficial not just for Faroese researchers, but for the whole society, as there is much research being done in areas such as green technology tidal and wave energy. If fully developed, it can be exported and therefore it can become a strong industry, as the demand for sustainable energy increases.

### **Faroese Foreign Policy**

In the 2010 outline of Faroese foreign policy it is clear that the Faroe Islands are working from a constructivist theoretical perspective (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2010). This is of course evident, given the very nature of realism's power politics, where the small state of the Faroe Islands without an army would stand little chance against any attacking force. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs is therefore working hard to change negative views of the Faroe Islands through public diplomacy, and to create awareness of the existence of the Islands, as well as consistently building a positive image of the country. In this respect the Ministry of Foreign Affairs has incorporated the official Tourism Office to use their marketing expertise as a tool of public diplomacy.<sup>6</sup> Liberal institutionalism is also present in the formation of Faroese foreign policy, as shown by the aspiration to join numerous International Organizations, such as above mentioned EFTA and the World Trade Organization (WTO), where the Faroe Islands are included with Danish membership. There is a desire to be a separate member: Denmark as an EU member means that in effect it is the EU who represent the Faroe Islands, and EU interests are not always shared by the Faroe Islands (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2010). Furthermore, the Faroe Islands want to obtain separate membership on the International Whaling Commission (IWC), where Denmark currently represents the Faroese. Also on this issue Denmark sides with the EU, which generally is against whaling -- contradictory to the Faroese pro-whaling view.

There has been an expansion of networks and consulates abroad in the recent past, where the Faroe Islands today have consulates in Reykjavik in Iceland, London, Brussels and Copenhagen in Denmark. There has been talk of opening more consulates, but the danger lies in overstressing the administration's capabilities. The most obvious new consulate would be in either Moscow, which is already a Faroese partner on fishery areas, New York to get closer to the American market and the UN headquarters, or Oslo in Norway whose support is needed for Faroese membership in EFTA. However, it is common for micro-states to limit their representation abroad to its closest neighbours (Mohammed, 2008), and it might be some time before the next consulate will open.

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<sup>6</sup> Though the incorporation of the Tourism Office into the Ministry of Foreign Affairs has strengthened its 'nation branding' ability, it has weakened the tourism industry, as more time is being spent on nation branding and less on actual tourism infrastructure.

## **Current and Future Challenges**

The Faroe Islands face two major barriers: environmental groups' opposition to whaling and the fact that few people have heard of the country. It is said the Faroe Islands have only survived as a people because of sufficient whale stocks. It is a tradition, it provides food for large communities and the slaughter is limited to only a few non-endangered species. Yet there are several environmental groups that condemn the killing of whales altogether, which gives the Faroe Islands a very strong opponent. This is an opponent who does not sit down to negotiate and does not listen to arguments from the other side.

From a Faroese perspective, it is difficult to understand that people from countries like the United States, Canada and Australia, who identify themselves as meat-eating people, who farm animals in cages, who build highways and construct residential areas in animal habitats, can even start to criticise the Faroese who do not mistreat the whales in any way (though it shall be mentioned that some whales have been rather clumsily killed, which is regrettable, but extremely uncommon). Furthermore, the arguments are based on intelligence and attractiveness, which makes little reasonable sense. Firstly, it sounds like it is only acceptable to eat cows because they are not intelligent enough. Secondly, there are several 'cute' animals being eaten worldwide, for example, kangaroos and lambs.

The Faroe Islands do not whale commercially and the meat is divided among the local community. The Faroese almost only hunt pilot whales, which is a dolphin species. From 1990 to 1999 there were on average 950 whales caught, which is equivalent to 500 tons of meat and blubber - more or less 30% of all Faroese produced meat ([www.whaling.com](http://www.whaling.com)). It has been an unfortunate consequence for the Faroe Islands that Japan, Iceland and Norway keep pushing for commercial whaling even when there is doubt about the sustainability of the stocks of several species of whale. Pilot whales, whose stocks are estimated to be around 778,000 in the East and North Atlantic Ocean ([www.whaling.com](http://www.whaling.com)), could not be threatened by Faroese even if they wanted to. Furthermore, according to statistics kept since 1584, in only one year have more than 4000 pilot whales been killed; this happened in 1941 (Bloch, 2007).

However, the damage inflicted to the Faroe Islands from rumours and smear campaigns from international environmental organizations is massive. However, as noted above, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs uses public diplomacy as its strongest tool to try to elucidate the situation. However, there is a limitation on how much one can tell people who are not willing to listen. The second biggest challenge is to be known and recognized. Given the size of the Faroe Islands it is easy for larger nations to forget to include this micro-state. Thus the Faroe Islands have to work harder to be heard, and to build and maintain relationships. This seems to be the path of Faroese foreign affairs with its public diplomacy kept central and growing, which is a fundamental factor if the Faroe Islands are to find a place in the international community and make a positive impact.

## Conclusion

The Faroe Islands have all the prospects of becoming an independent state and are searching for a place in the international community. If the psychological barrier is broken it is very likely that the Faroese culture will flourish. This would mean that culture based industries would have the right framework within which to grow, thereby diversifying the Faroese economy. What is more, a stronger national identity would lead to stronger national representation, which would help to solve major challenges facing the Faroe Islands. These are opposition from anti-whaling organizations and international unawareness of the Faroe Islands. Thus, a stronger national identity would give better public diplomacy tools, where each Faroese is an ambassador for the Faroe Islands.

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TUTL Records: [www.tutl.com](http://www.tutl.com) ; The Faroe Islands largest record label

[www.whaling.com](http://www.whaling.com) – A page on whaling in the Faroe Islands