What did the Greenland Reconciliation Commission do? How do people feel about it today? How does it relate to other strategies for decolonisation in Greenland?

These are some of the questions I asked Greenlanders during my visit to Nuuk in October and November 2021. I found that while most people considered the process a good idea, it had not achieved as much as had been hoped.

The Greenland Reconciliation Commission ran from 2014-2017. There were around 5 commissioners at any one time though membership changed through the period. It held 33 open meetings and around 850 people took part. Its final report in 2017 included seven recommendations. However, there has not been any organised follow-up and its recommendations are not systematically implemented.

The Commission aimed to help Greenlanders "mentally decolonise". Mental decolonisation is a process for people who have lived under colonisation to change their thinking to remove ideas based on the superiority of the colonial power and the colonial culture. It allows people to recover their confidence in their culture and their traditional ways of doing things. It may have been too theoretical a concept and not well enough explained for many Greenlanders. This created some doubts about what the Commission was meant to do and how people could take part in the process. By contrast, the Canadian Truth and Reconciliation Commission focused on the residential schools system which was much easier for both Indigenous and settler Canadians to understand.

There were some difficulties for the Commission from the beginning as the Commissioners themselves had different ideas about what it should do and there were no clear terms of reference. The Prime Minister of Denmark said that Denmark would not take part in the process which led many Greenlanders to doubt whether it could work without Danish involvement. The Commission had such a low budget that it could not visit every settlement or collect all the historic evidence and therefore was not able to deliver stronger results.

Greenlandic politics also made things difficult for the process. The Premier (Aleqa Hammond) who had initiated the Commission and was personally very committed to its work was replaced by a new Premier (Kim Kielsen) shortly after it began. Kielsen was not supportive. Meanwhile, Hammond's political opponents considered the whole process

"tainted" by association. The media coverage of the Commission's work was also mostly negative.

Today, there is very little reference to the Commission's report in areas where we might expect it – for example, in the Constitutional Commission, the Human Rights Council or in the Parliament. The report recommends that free, prior and informed consent be implemented in Greenland. However, no one referred to the report in the heated debates regarding mining of radioactive materials where this recommendation would be very relevant. The Commission was often criticised as a waste of money in light of other immediate needs in Greenland. However, Eva-Luusi Marcussen-Mølgaard described this as a "self-fulling prophecy" in her prize-winning thesis. The failure to implement its recommendations also contributes to this argument.

The feeling I had was that it the Commission was a "missed opportunity". Reconciliation is an important step for a people seeking to heal from colonisation. However, the Greenland Commission had delivered only limited results because of these identified problems.

Lessons from the Greenland Reconciliation Commission can be useful for the processes now underway in Sápmi (the Saami homelands in Norway, Sweden and Finland). These new Nordic commissions can avoid some of the problems faced in Greenland.

However, I see the 2014-2017 Greenland Reconciliation Commission as only one step in the process of decolonisation. Greenland is continually negotiating with Denmark on its role within the Realm and seeking more control over its affairs. It is also drafting its own constitution in preparation for independence. There may be another reconciliation commission to follow, this time with Denmark. There might also be a process that looks at "internal colonisation" by elites in Nuuk of the Inughuit and East Greenlanders. We can see from Canada as well as from African nations that reconciliation cannot be completed in just a few years but takes generations.

—

Read more about the whole research project here