Introduction

The subject of this chapter is the interplay between constitutionalism and economic and political development in the Faroe Islands. This is a complex issue that touches upon the impact of Faroese constitutional and political history, not only upon the struggle for viable economic livelihood, but also more broadly on the collective destiny of the Faroese people. Unlike Iceland, neither history nor current circumstances suggest that the way to autonomous development will be as easy or unproblematic as it seems to have been for its North Atlantic neighbour. Yet change, in its own way and at a slower pace, has proceeded none the less in the Faroe islands, and may well move much more decisively over the next few years. Whether history in fact does catch up with and overcomes the indecisions and accidents of the past is an open question, but the story of the Faroes will always have its own lessons to tell islanders at home and abroad.

Historical background

The Faroe Islands, populated in the Viking era by settlers of Norwegian origin, began life, like the other Norse settlements in the North Atlantic from Orkney to Greenland, as a dependency of the Norwegian crown. However, following a royal union between Norway and Denmark in 1380, the Faroes found itself increasingly ruled from Copenhagen (West, 1972; Wylie, 1987). In 1814, following his defeat in the Napoleonic wars, the king of Denmark ceded the crown of
Lessons from the Political Economy of Small Islands

Norway to the king of Sweden, but retained what was left of Norwegian dependencies in the North Atlantic: the Faroes, Iceland, and Greenland. When, in the mid-nineteenth century, what Østergaard (1997) has called the ‘composite state’ of entities ruled by the Danish king began to disintegrate under the influence of nationalistic sentiments, the country began to form a democratic, ethnically (linguistically) defined Danish nation state. This left open the question of Denmark’s relationship with its three North Atlantic crown dependencies.

In the watershed Danish constitution of 1849, the question was whether the dependencies should be incorporated into the new state, or placed on a different constitutional footing. In the case of the Icelanders, having resurrected the Althing as Iceland’s parliament in 1843, they had the choice to opt out of integration with Denmark. Step by step Iceland gained more independence until its sovereignty was recognized in 1918 (in royal union with Denmark) and it finally emerged as a full-fledged republic in 1944. Greenland, after its ‘rediscovery’ in the eighteenth century, was ruled as a crown colony, until formally incorporated in the Danish state by the revised Danish constitution of 1953. It was not until 1979 that Greenland finally got home rule.

The Faroes fared differently. Against the advice of experts, as well as of prominent Danish politicians at the time, and without the Faroese people being consulted, the Faroe Islands were summarily incorporated into Denmark in 1850. By extending the Danish constitution of 1849 to the islands, the Faroese were permitted to elect representatives directly to the Danish parliament. The only qualification to integration was the 1852 reappearance of the Faroese Løgting, abolished in 1816, but not as a full legislative assembly, but rather as a mere ‘county council’ with advisory powers, chaired by the Danish governor (Harhoff, 1993; Thorsteinsson, 1990).

The rise of Faroese nationalism

In the 1880s a Faroese national movement emerged, at first mainly occupied with protecting the Faroese language and customs against increasing Danish influence. Around the turn of the century, the movement became political, as some Faroese lamented their incorporation into another people’s nation state in 1850, and demanded increased competencies for the Løgting (Debes, 1982). The issue of self government, however, caused a deep split between two political factions: the Home Rule Party (Sjálvstýrisflokkurin) demanded more local