

Borgen: Power & Glory

Does the Danish/Netflix television series get Danish/Greenlandic relations right?

When the political drama series, *Borgen*, first aired in Denmark in 2010, with an episode entitled “Decency in the Middle”, it soon became clear that its creator, Adam Price, had an uncanny ability to predict and, at times, influence political events on the real Borgen, Christiansborg Palace, the seat of the Danish parliament. *Borgen* began with the decent centrist Birgitte Nyborg (Sidse Babett Knudsen) winning the election to become the first female PM in Denmark – a feat that was “repeated” a year later in real life by the Social Democrat Helle Thorning-Schmidt. Airing on the public service channel DR1 in the Sunday prime-time slot just before the 9 o’clock news, it was at times difficult to tell the fiction apart from political reporting. Episodes that dealt with issues such as prostitution or industrialised pig farming went on to become hot political topics spilling into the news media and political debates.

Despite being produced by a new partnership between a Danish screenwriter-based production company (SAM productions) and the global streaming giant Netflix, much in the current fourth season of *Borgen* (subtitled *Power & Glory*), which first aired in Denmark on the 13th of February and globally on Netflix on the 2nd of June 2022, is familiar territory to the fan of Scandinavian television drama almost 10 years after season three ended in 2013. A now middle-aged Nyborg is a workaholic and principled Minister of Foreign Affairs in a coalition government led by the PM and leader of Labour Signe Kragh (Johanne Louise Schmidt), whose flair for down-to-earth Instagram snaps of food and sporting events will remind Danish viewers of the current Social Democrat PM Mette Frederiksen. Price has also maintained some of his ability of prediction, as when Nyborg in the first episode mentions the sanctioning of a Russian oligarch due to the recent invasion of Ukraine. Most likely written with the 2014 annexation of Crimea in mind, viewers should be excused for believing that *Borgen* is entangled in a geopolitical present, where Russia (a week later!) invades the independent nation of Ukraine.

A novelty of the new season is that it only has one major political topic as a narrative arch over its eight episodes: Oil has been discovered in Greenland, and the seasoned Nyborg rightly predicts that trouble looms when geopolitical superpowers such as the US, Russia and China rush to assert themselves in the Arctic, as economic interests threaten to trump the

environmental ideals of her own party and when the already tense relationship between Greenland and Denmark threatens to erupt in a bitter struggle over political power and profits from oil extraction.

Borgen reflects an increasingly more tense geopolitical reality in the Arctic where Denmark and Greenland both are small players dependent upon larger powers and their need for resources and transportation infrastructures. This is also a global reality where climate change has unequal impacts and different meanings to indigenous peoples living in vulnerable ecosystems with a need to develop also economically and to colonial powers whose extractions have driven anthropogenic climate change for centuries.

It is this “new” and very real transnational reality that, once again, opens old wounds in the Danish realm that includes the former colonies and current dependencies of Greenland and the Faroe Islands. A bit of history might be needed to appreciate the depth of the ensuing confrontations between Nyborg and the representative of the Greenlandic government the Minister of Foreign Affairs and Raw Materials, Hans Eliassen (Svend Hardenberg). Denmark colonised Greenland in the 18th century and almost lost the country to the US during the second world war when they set up air bases and later offered to buy it (as Trump famously would do many years later). In 1953, Denmark initiated a “decolonialisation” of the country by integrating Greenland as part of Denmark with representation in the Danish parliament. A growing independence movement led to the introduction of Home Rule in 1979, and thirty years later Greenland achieved Self-Rule, which included recognition of the Greenlandic people’s right to self-determination and an increasing local power also in questions of foreign affairs – an area that due to Greenland’s size and Arctic location has provided Denmark with geopolitical influence out of proportion with the country’s small size. Despite the gradual process of decolonialisation since the 1950s, Greenland has suffered many of the ills and abuses of colonialisation throughout its modern history resulting in various social and psychological traumas, lack of development but also a real concern for the loss of cultural heritage and belonging.

As a widely watched narrative, *Borgen* not only provides a dramatic framework for imagining the place of Denmark and Greenland in the current and future jostling for power over resources in a changing Arctic. The series also enables critical representations of the colonial relationship between Denmark and Greenland, which still suffers from silence and forgetfulness. As frequently in colonial relations, the responsibility for abuses and persistent

systemic inequalities in Greenland are only reluctantly and very recently being recognised more widely in Denmark, but it is not the first time that *Borgen* includes a storyline that touches upon the legacy of this colonial history. In an early episode in the first season, Nyborg, then the newly elected PM, is confronted with a whistle-blower story about the US military making secret and illegal landings in Greenland with prisoners bound for Guantanamo. Following the revelations, the whistle-blower takes his own life and the story is eventually buried by Nyborg; however, Nyborg travels to Greenland to meet with the PM Jens Enok (Angunnguaq Larsen) to find a resolution to the “case”, which, the Greenlandic premier reminds her, started 300 years ago when Denmark colonised Greenland and 60 years ago when Denmark forcefully removed the Inuit at Thule to make space for the American airbase. Nyborg presents the Enok with the often-aired Danish view that the Greenlanders somehow have themselves to blame for their inability to stave off corruption and improving social welfare. She adds, with what almost appears as a hint to the present season, that it feels as if the Greenlanders are just “sitting around waiting for the ice to thaw so they can strike oil and get rich”. Enok is, naturally, enraged but convinces Nyborg to stay another day so he can show her the extent of the issues his nation is facing. Nyborg leaves realising that Denmark has played a substantial role in Greenland’s ongoing suffering, and pledges to help improve the situation.

In the fourth season of *Borgen*, however, it is as if nothing has changed in Nyborg’s perception of Greenland. Again, she attempts to bully a Greenlandic delegation with suggestions that they cannot be trusted to run their own country, that they will jeopardize their fragile environment for oil money and are unable to negotiate with US and Chinese super powers. Therefore, the logic goes, Denmark has to continue protecting Greenland – against itself, it appears – while receiving a larger part of the oil revenue in return.

Nyborg’s “colonial” bullying is presented as expressing her increasing obsession with staying in power. No longer the decent centrist, she compromises her own green idealism and ally herself with an unscrupulous spin doctor to stay in power by any means. On the other hand, *Borgen* explains Greenland’s desire to pursue oil extraction in the voice of Jens Enok, who is now a Greenlandic MP. He explains to Nyborg (again!) the persistent colonial situation in Greenland – that Greenlanders are the victims of climate change and not its perpetrators. Denmark, he argues, should not stand in the way of Greenland wanting to enrich itself to achieve full independence from Denmark. The scene shows a Nyborg silent and persuaded by the logic of Enok’s argument, eventually enabling her to switch political standpoint and come

up with an argument for why drilling for oil in the Arctic could be considered a more “sustainable” practice of extraction. This, in the series largely unopposed representation of indigenous people as necessarily prioritising economic development and independence over the protection of the environment may have resonated more with the Greenland of a decade ago than the present – suggesting that Price for the present season has lost some of his foresight and currency and instead rehearses a Danish perception of Greenland as persistently less mature in global politics.

In 2021, Greenland got a new government elected famously on the promise to put a stop to a controversial Uranium and rare-earth mining project in Kuannersuit (Kvanefjeldet), considered to contain one of the largest deposits in the world. The same government under the leadership of PM Múte Bourup Egede also put a stop to further oil exploration for environmental reasons. Contrary to the assumption of *Borgen*, today’s Greenlanders appear to priorities environmentally sustainable development on its road to full independence. Furthermore, it has become near impossible to stay blind to the colonial abuses perpetrated by the Danish state in the period of decolonialisation. Earlier this year the Danish PM gave a public apology on behalf of Denmark to 22 Greenlandic so-called “children of the experiment”, who had been taken from their families in the 50s and sent to Denmark to be trained as a future Greenlandic elite. In June 2022, following a series of DR revelations of abuses against around 4000 Greenlandic women down to the age of 13, who were forced to use IUDs as contraception from the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s, the government in Copenhagen and Naalakkersuisut (the government of Greenland) have agreed to set up a commission to shed light on the historical relationship between the two countries. As *Borgen* would be the first fictional television series to tell you, there is still a need for investigative journalism and courageous politicians to deliver on environmental sustainability and uncomfortable but necessary confrontations with colonial pasts.