

# Scandinavian

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Nobody lives there. It's tiny and frigid, barren and inhospitable, and experts can't even agree on how it got its name.

But Hans Island, a 1.3-square-kilometer barren knoll in the high Arctic, located approximately half way between Ellesmere Island and Greenland, has recently seen more action than it has in years and is now the centre of a full-fledged diplomatic tiff between Denmark and Canada.

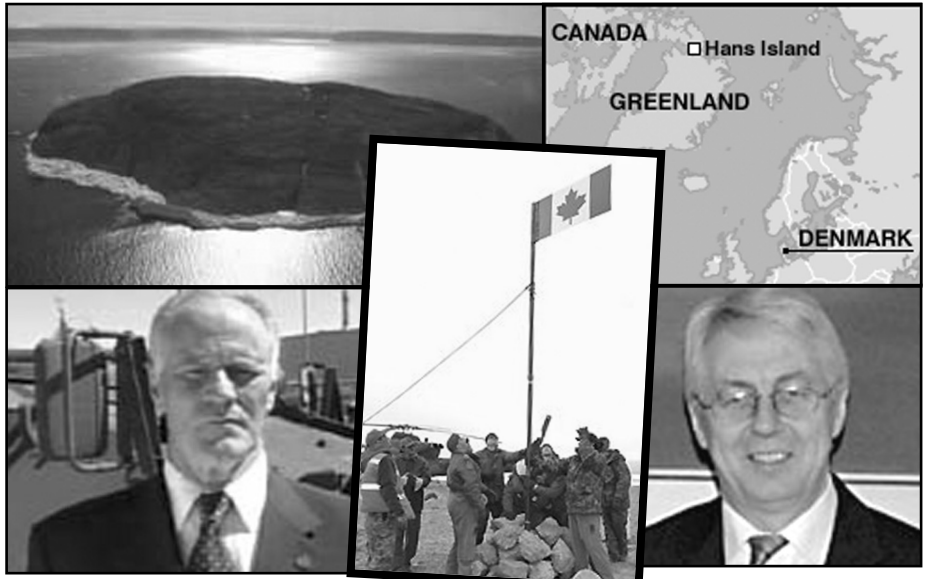
Normally host to nothing more than a great many rocks, the island was recently treated to a brief promenade by Canada's Minister of National Defence Bill Graham. The purpose of the visit was to harden Canada's claim over the island.

The action was labeled an "occupation" by Danish officials and Copenhagen promptly issued an official note of protest to Canada's ambassador after learning of the visit.

"We maintain the position that according to the normal principles of international law, this is Danish territory," said Poal Erik Dam Kristensen, Danish Ambassador to Canada. "We would like to maintain what was the *modus vivendi*, that if one of the parties visited the island, the party notifies the other party beforehand." Denmark's claim is based on the fact that the island is somewhat closer to Greenland than to Ellesmere.

A spokesman for Canada's Foreign Affairs Department said Canada does not need to inform Denmark of its intention to land on the island because officials consider it to be Canadian. The Canadian minister visited the island a week after members of Canada's military planted a Canadian flag there and erected an Inuit-style stone marker known as an *inukshuk*. Copenhagen retaliated by sending the Arctic patrol cutter *Tulugaq* to Hans Island to plant a Danish flag.

Danish officials have also in the past landed on the island, erecting their own stone cairns. In 1984, Denmark's minister of Greenland affairs, Tom Hoeyem raised a Danish flag on the island. He then buried a bottle of brandy at the base of the flagpole and left a note saying "Welcome to the Danish island." Danish navy ships have only been able to visit the island three times since 1988 because of the thick Arctic ice



## BATTLE OF WORDS OVER ISLAND

around it. The Danish navy patrols Greenland's roughly 40,000-kilometer-long coastline, equal to the length of the equator, using ships and dog sleds.

Denmark's claim is important for its relationship with Greenland. Failing to protect the territory of Greenland might cause political difficulties for Denmark among Greenlanders searching for more autonomy.

This area of the high Arctic remained almost completely unexplored by Europeans up until the early 19th century, although Inuit from both nations are said to have hunted there for many years. In 1973 Canada and Denmark agreed to create a border through Nares Strait, halfway between Greenland, a semi-autonomous Danish territory, and Canada's Ellesmere Island. Hans Island, which lies in the middle of a channel about five kilometers wide was excluded from the deal. The debate over its ownership has simmered ever since.

Strewn with boulders left behind by glaciers and, from a purely geological point of view, looking more like Greenland than Ellesmere Island, the frozen outcrop of rock has taken on increased importance in anticipation of global warming making the Northwest Passage more accessible to shipping, as well as opening the area up to min-

(Clockwise) Aerial photo of Hans Island, its position, Danish ambassador Poal Erik Dam Kristensen, Canada's Minister of Foreign Affairs Bill Graham and (center) Canada raising the flag on the barren island

ing, fishing and drilling for oil and gas. Canada and Denmark have now agreed to negotiations over the ownership of the small Arctic island. The foreign ministers of Canada, Denmark and Greenland will meet in September.

In the meantime one of the weapons used in the battle over Hans Island has been the Google website. While the issue was hot, a search of "hans island" revealed a paid advertisement with the banner headline: "Hans Island is Greenland. Greenland natives have used the island for centuries," and "Does 'Hans' sound Canadian? Danish name, Danish island." The ad was linked to a Danish government letter condemning the Canadian visit to the island. However, the paid advertisement was not a Danish government initiative and whoever placed it was acting alone, said Poul Erik Dam Kristensen, Denmark's Ambassador to Ottawa.

Now the Toronto author Rick Broadhead has bought ad space on Google that links to his Web page and helps assert Canada's sovereignty over the Arctic island.