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Arctic Circle Student Briefing

Arctic Circle Student Briefing Scotland – an Arctic nation?

October 2021

At this year's 2021 Arctic Circle Assembly, it was a surprise to see such a wide range of non-Arctic nations from across the globe represented, for example from South Korea, France and Japan.

A speech on the first day of the Assembly from Nicola Sturgeon, the First Minister of one of these nations – Scotland – got me thinking, is Scotland an Arctic nation? The First Minister described Scotland as “the most northerly non-Arctic nation”, with its most northerly point in the Shetland Islands being closer to the Arctic Circle than London. This is interesting food for thought when considering Scotland's place in the Arctic.

Scotland has many qualities shared with Arctic countries. It has a largely rural population while also experiencing rural depopulation and other issues like biodiversity loss. Local economies are likely to be based on similar activities to those in other Arctic countries – such as fishing, farming and energy, then 28% of its total exports also go to Arctic countries. Geographically, Scotland could be considered the gateway to the Arctic from Europe.

Moreover, the similarities are even stronger when considering the Faroe Islands and Shetland Islands. They are both groups of islands located between the Atlantic Ocean and the North Sea, meaning they are likely to have similar climates and wildlife. Often it is suggested that the Shetlands have more cultural ties to Scandinavia than they do to London, contributed to by the influence of Old Norse in the indigenous language of Shetlandic.

However, it is important to remember that the growing interest that some countries are showing in the Arctic may be for economical interests alone, not to strengthen the environmental protection in the region. As the Arctic sea ice melts with global warming, there is access to new, faster shipping routes to and from the East, as well as access to new oil and gas reserves, among other resources. This is attractive for many countries, therefore, Scotland must ensure that its intentions for becoming an Arctic nation must not conflict with those of the local Arctic people and their environments, but instead must protect and support these people and places.

Overall, Scotland's close proximity to other Arctic countries like Norway, Iceland and the Faroe Islands (Denmark), presents many opportunities for Scotland in trade, exploring and protecting the Arctic and finding solutions in the face of the climate emergency. Global warming is happening two to three times faster in the Arctic than elsewhere in the world, so Scotland will surely feel the impact of this, alongside other changes in the Arctic such as search and rescue, pollution and port developments, more than the rest of the UK and non-Arctic Europe.