

Åland

Neamhnaid anns a' Bhaltaig



Ruairidh MacIlleathain visits Finland's autonomous Swedish-speaking Åland Islands, where the question of language is central to commerce, culture and identity

Beinn a' Bhadhla le craobhan. 'S e sin aon tuairisgeul a Rinneadh de na h-Eileanan Åland ach 's dòcha nach eil am beachd sin cothromach do dh'àite seach àite. Tha coimeas eadar Åland agus na h-Eileanan an Iar air fad gu math inntinneach, ge-tà, nuair a thig e gu sluagh, cànan is riaghladh ionadail. Tha seachd air fhichead mìle duine a' fuireach an seo, mar a tha anns na h-Eileanan an Iar. Tha cànan eadar-dhealaichte ga bruidhinn le mòr-chuid anns na h-eileanan an coimeas ris a' mhòr-chuid air tìr-mòr. Agus tha cuibhreann math dhen t-sluagh a' fuireach anns a' bhaile as motha, no faisg air.

Ach 's dòcha gun ionnsaich sinn barrachd bho na h-eadar-dhealachaidhean eadar an dà àite, seach na th' aca sa chumantas. Tha fèin-ùghdarras làidir aig Åland. Tha e beartach agus tha an sluagh a' dol am meud. Tha cion cosnaidh air a dhol suas gu 2%, às dèidh a bhith aig cha mhòr neoni thar bhliadhnaichean. Chan fhaod coigrich fearann a cheannach. Chan fhaod feachd armailteach a bhith ann. Agus cha mhòr nach eil gach gnothach – riaghaltais is sòisealta – a' gabhail àite anns a' chànan dùthchasach, a th' air a cleachdadh mar mheadhan oideachaidh ann an sgoiltean Åland, ged a tha i na mion-chànan gu nàiseanta.

"Tha sinn a' fuireach eadar Tìr Nokia agus Tìr Ericsson – a' faighinn nan rudan as fheàrr bho gach dùthaich," a rèir Roger Nordlund. Is esan Labhraiche an Lagting, pàrlamaid nan eilean; bha e uaireigin na cheannard air Riaghaltas Åland. 'S e Suainis cànan nan eileanach agus tha iad dileas ann an iomadh dòigh don t-Suain a thaobh cultar, ach tha iad mar phàirt dhen Fhionnlainn. Ma tha iad eadar dà rud mòr, chan e clach is sgrath a th' anna. Tha an suidheachadh gu buannachd nan eilean.

Benbecula with trees. That's one description that's been made of the Åland Islands, although perhaps the comment isn't fair to either party. A comparison between Åland and the Western Isles is very interesting, however, when it comes to population, language and local government. Twenty seven thousand people live here, the same as the Western Isles. A majority on the islands speaks a different language from the majority on the mainland. And a large proportion of the population lives in and around the largest town.

But perhaps the differences between the two island groups are more instructive than the similarities. Åland has enormous autonomy. It is affluent and has a growing population. Its unemployment rate has recently risen to over 2%, having been almost zero for years. Outsiders can't buy land. No military presence is permitted. And virtually all business – government and social – is conducted in the native language, which is the universal medium of instruction in Åland schools, despite it being a minority tongue nationally.

"We live between Nokia Land and Ericsson Land – we get the best of both countries," is how Roger Nordlund sums up life here. Nordlund is Speaker of the Lagting, the island parliament, and a former head of the Åland government. The islanders are Swedish speaking and look to a large degree towards Sweden culturally, but they are part of Finland. If they are sited between two larger entities, they don't seem to feel any sort of squeeze. The situation is beneficial to the islands.

Shuas: Tha dàrna sùil muinntir Åland air a bhith air a' mhùir fad linntean, mar a chithear ann an Cala Mhariehamn far a bheil am Pommern (cli), a thogadh ann an Glaschu aig toiseach an 20^{mh} linn, na laighe ri taobh soithichean-aiseig mòra a tha a' frithealadh nan eilean gu làitheil, a' gabhail brath air an inbhe mar àite a tha taobh a-staigh an Aonaidh Eòrpaich a thaobh riaghladh, ach air an taobh a-muigh a thaobh chisean

"Tha cumhachd reachdail air a roinn eadar Helsinki agus Mariehamn (prìomh bhaile nan eilean a chaidh ainmeachadh airson Czarina nuair a bha iad fo smachd na Ruis)," tha Roger Nordlund ag ràdh. "Anns na roinnean far a bheil an cumhachd reachdail againne, tha sinn aig an aon ìre 's a tha a' phàrlamaid ann an Helsinki. Anns na roinnean sin 's e sinn fhèin a tha an urra ri rianachd – mar eisimpleir ann am foghlam, cultar, a' brosnachadh gnìomhachas, am post, na poilis, riaghladh ionadail, an àrainneachd, trafaig agus slàinte." Tha buidseat nan eilean air a mhaoineachadh le cnap airgid luach 0.5% de theachd a-steach nan cìsean ann am Fionnlainn, ged as iad na h-eileanaich a nì co-dhùnadh air mar a chosgas iad an t-sùm sin. Bithear cuideachd a' pàigheadh cìs ionadail do na 16 comhairlean Àlandach a tha an urra ri gnothaichean mar sgoiltean, cùram-cloinne agus cùram sheann daoine.

Bu mhath le Roger Nordlund gun gabhadh na h-Àlandaich barrachd uallaich airson cìsean a thogail. "Ma thathar ag iarraidh fìor fhèin-ùghdarras bu chòir a bhith comasach air dèiligeadh ri teachd a-steach," tha e ag ràdh, "is chan e a-mhàin na thathar a cosg." Chan eil a h-uile duine cho cinnteach. 'S e Bernt Randelin Àlandach le ùidh ann am poilitigs. "Cha chuireadh e dragh orm nam biodh barrachd cumhachd aig [an Lagting]," tha e ag ràdh, "ach dh'fhaodadh duilgheadasan a bhith ann nam biodh na cumhachdan sin ro mhòr oir dh'fheumadh mòran cho-dhùnaidhean cruaidh a bhith air an dèanamh an seo a dh'fhaodadh a bhith doirbh do luchd-poilitigs ionadail a tha a' fuireach anns a' choimhearsnachd seo."

Do Randelin, tha coimhearsnachd fhèin-ùghdarrasail Lochlannach eile – na h-Eileanan Fàrach – aig a bheil ceanglaichean bun-reachdail don Danmharq car coltach ri ceanglaichean Àland do Fhionnlainn – na mhodal dhaibh gu ìre.

Tha e a' mìneachadh beartas nan eilean dhomh. Tha e ceangailte ri tionnsgal nan Àlandach, gu sònraichte mar a tha sealbh aca air mòran luingeis anns a' Bhaltaig. Tha companaidhean mar Viking Line a' ruith sheirbheisean aiseig eadar an t-Suain agus Fionnlainn tro Mhariehamn le bàtaichean mòra ùr-nodha a' gabhail brath air inbhe shònraichte Àland anns an Aonadh Eòrpach a thaobh chìsean, cùmhnant a chaidh a rèiteach mus d' fhuair Fionnlainn agus Àland ballrachd anns an Aonadh ann an 1995 (chaidh reifreann fa leth a chumail ann an Àland). Bidh an t-uamhas de luchd-turais a' dol air na bàtaichean-aiseig airson brath a ghabhail air inbhe "saor bho chìsean" aig bathar a tha a' dol tro uisgeachan Àland. Tha seo a' cumail faraidhean aiseig saor, agus bidh na prothaidean

"Legislative power is divided between Helsinki and Mariehamn (the island capital named after a Czarina during a period of Russian rule)," says Roger Nordlund.

"In those sectors where we have legislative power we are at the same level as the parliament in Helsinki. In those spheres we take care of the administration – for example education, culture, promoting business life, post, police, municipalities, environment, traffic and health." The island government's budget is funded by a lump sum of 0.5% of the total tax income in Finland, although the islanders decide how to spend the money. People also pay a local tax, funding the 16 Åland municipalities which have responsibility for matters like schooling, child care and care of the elderly.

Roger Nordlund would like the Ålanders to take on more taxation powers. "If you want real autonomy you should be able to take care of your income," he says, "and not only

your expenditure." Not everybody is so sure. Bernt Randelin is a native of the islands with political aspirations. "I would not mind seeing [the Lagting] having more power," he says, "but there could be problems if it had too strong powers because then a lot of difficult decisions would have to be made here which could be difficult for the local politicians who live within this society."

For Randelin, another autonomous Nordic island society – the Faroes, whose constitutional links to Denmark parallel Åland's links to Finland – are something of a model for his homeland.

He explains the islands' affluence to me. It is, he says, linked to the Ålanders' entrepreneurialism, in particular their ownership of a significant tonnage of Baltic shipping. Companies like the Viking Line ply routes between Sweden and Finland via Mariehamn with massive state-of-the-art ferries, taking advantage of Åland's special tax status within the European Union, a derogation negotiated prior to Finland's and Åland's accession to the Union in 1995 (a separate referendum was held in Åland). Enormous numbers of tourists flock to the ferries to take advantage of the "tax-free" status of goods which pass through Åland waters. This keeps ferry fares low



Roger Nordlund, Labhraiche Pàrlamaid Àland. Tha bratach Àland ri a thaobh.



Togalach Pàrlamaid Àland ann am Mariehamn

a' dol do na h-eileanan. Am measg ghnòthachasan eile a th' air a bhith a' dol gu math anns a' gheàrr-ùine a dh'fhalbh tha bancaireachd agus àiteachas, agus na h-eileanaich a' reic tòrr ùbhlán agus glasraich air tìr-mòr Fhionnlainn.

'S e Jan-Erik Berglund fear-naidheachd, cleasaiche agus neach-poilitigs ionadail air Comhairle Baile Mhariehamn. "Chan urrainn a ràdh gu bheil Àlandaich toilichte a bhith anns an Aonadh Eòrpach," tha e ag ràdh. "Tha iad dhen bheachd gu bheil e ro mhòr agus tha na mion-riaghailtean a' cur dragh air daoine. Ach tha mi a' smaoinneachadh anns a' cheann fhada gur dòcha gum bi e math dhuinn." Tha na h-eileanaich air coiteachadh airson riochdachadh oifigeil fa leth a bhith aca sa Bhruiseil ach cha deach leotha thuige seo.

Tha ballrachd anns an AE air cur ri farsaingeachd na coimhearsnachd ann an Åland, a rèir Raibeirt Mhann, Albannach a thàinig a dh'fhuireach an seo ann an 1973 agus a tha ag obair do Chomhairle Baile Mhariehamn. "An-diugh tha iad mar phàirt dhen dealbh mhòr a thaobh na Roinn Eòrpa. 'S e nàisean cuantach a th' ann an Åland, le daoine a' fuireach air feadh an t-saoghail, agus tha mi a' smaoinneachadh gu bheil iad nas fhosgailte [do choigrich] na tha daoine ann am mòran choimhearsnachdan air tìr-mòr Fhionnlainn nach fhaic mòran choigrich."

Ach chan eil sin a' ciallachadh gum faod coigrich fearann a cheannach. "Airson sealbh fhaighinn air fearann an seo, feumaidh tu còir a bhith agad fuireach an seo," tha Roger Nordlund a' mìneachadh. "Bidh thu a' faighinn sin ma tha thu air do bhreith an seo no ma tha thu air fuireach an seo airson còig bliadhna, agus saoranachd Fhionnlainneach agad." Ach tha e ag ràdh nach eil na riaghailtean an-còmhnaidh rag teann, agus gum faod daoine taigh a cheannach ma thig iad a dh'Åland airson obair. "Tha e againn airson ar n-inbhe a dhìon mar luchd-labhairt na Suainis," tha Nordlund a' mìneachadh, "Can gun robh gnìomhachas mòr à Fionnlainn a' tighinn an seo [agus a' toirt a-steach luchd-labhairt na Fionnlainnis leotha], dh'fhaodamaid an riaghailt seo a chur an sàs airson stad a chur orra." Am bite a' cur stad air gnìomhachas mòr air eileanan Albannach air sgàth 's gun robh e a' cur na Gàidhlig ann an cunnart? 'S e ceist inntinneach a th' ann, ach tha e follaiseach gu bheil a' tomhas na Suainis mar riatanach do bheatha is fèin-aithne nan Àlandach ann an dòigh nach fhaicear (fhathast?) ann an Alba.

Tha an cànan air leth cudromach," tha Bernt Randelin ag ràdh. "'S e fear de na rudan as cudromaiche a th' againn agus cha leiginn seachad e." Ach tha e ag aideachadh gu bheil Suainis ann an Åland a' tighinn fo uallach, agus Fionnlainn a' fàs nas Fhionnlainniche a thaobh cànan, a dh'aindeoin am poileasaidh oifigeil dà-chànanach.

Tha fèin-ùghdarras a thaobh cànan cudromach," a rèir Raibeirt Mhann, a tha fileanta ann an Suainis. "Air tìr-mòr Fhionnlainn [far a bheil cairteal a' mhillein de luchd-labhairt Suainis] tha an uiread de choimhearsnachdan Suaineach a dh'fhalbh à fianais

and the profits flow into the islands. Other industries that have prospered in recent years are banking and agriculture, with the islands selling large amounts of apples and vegetables to mainland Finland.

Jan-Erik Berglund is a journalist, actor and local politician on the Mariehamn Town Council. "You can't say that Ålanders are happy to be in the European Union," he says. "They think it's too big and all the details irritate people. But I think in the long run it's maybe good for us." The islanders have lobbied for separate official representation in Brussels but have so far failed on that account.

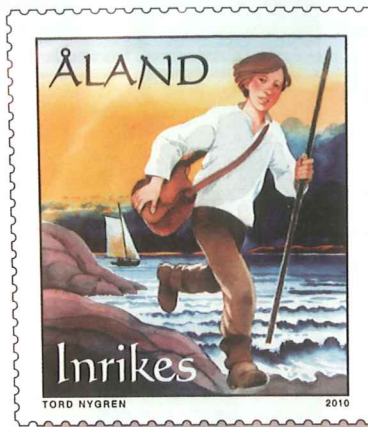
Membership of the EU has helped to create a more open society in Åland, according to Robert Mann, an expatriate Scot who came to live here in 1973 and who works for Mariehamn Town Council. "Today they're part of

the big picture as far as Europe is concerned. Åland is a seafaring nation with folk living all over the world and I think that tolerance [for outsiders] is higher here than in small communities on the Finnish mainland that don't come into contact with many foreigners."

But that doesn't extend to permitting outsiders to buy land. "To own land here, you have to have a right to domicile," explains Roger Nordlund. "You achieve it if you were born here or have lived here for five years and have achieved Finnish citizenship." But he adds that the rules are often relaxed, allowing people to buy real estate if they come to Åland for work. "We have it in case there were a threat to our linguistic status as Swedish speaking," explains Nordlund. "Say a big industrial concern from Finland were coming here [and importing Finnish speakers], then we could use this rule to stop it." Would an important industrial concern be refused permission to set up on Scottish islands because it threatened the Gaelic language? It's an interesting question, but it's clear that the Swedish language is seen as crucial to the life and identity of the Ålanders in a way that Gaelic is not (yet?) in Scotland.

"The language is very very important," says Bernt Randelin. "It's one of the most important things we have and I would not give it up." But he admits that Swedish on Åland is under pressure from a long-term linguistic Finnicisation of mainland Finland (despite an official dual-language policy).

"Autonomy regarding language is definitely important," says Robert Mann, who speaks Swedish fluently. "On the Finnish mainland [where there are a quarter of a million Swedish speakers] the number of Swedish speaking



Fèin-ùghdarras Åland: tha na h-eileanaich a' ruith na seirbheis puist aca fhèin



Jan-Erik Berglund

bho thàinig mise a dh'fhuireach an seo air a bhith iongantach àrd. Bidh cuid de luchd-labhairt Suainis à tìr-mòr Fionnlainn a' tighinn a dh'fhuireach an seo air sgàth 's mar a tha an cànan a' tighinn fo uallach aig an taigh."

Tha Jan-Erik Bergland cinnteach gum mair an cànan air sàillibh 's gu bheil i air a dìon anns an lagh. "Tha fèin-ùghdarras air a bhith againn fo Fhionnlainn airson naochad bliadhna agus tha [an cànan] air a bhith làidir fad na h-ùine sin agus chan eil mi a' faicinn gun searg i." Ach mhothaich e do dh'atharrachadh ann an tìr-mòr Fhionnlainn, gu sònraichte bhon a fhuair iad a-steach don AE. "Labhraidh Fionnlainnich òga Fionnlainnis agus Beurla a-nise – chan eil iad ag ionnsachadh Suainis mar a bha."

Air an làimh eile, tha nas lugha de dh'Àlandaich òga fileanta ann am Fionnlainnis. "Nuair a bha mi ann am foghlam, chaidh 80% de dhaoine òga a dh'Fhionnlainn airson foghlam aig Àrd-ìre," tha Roger Nordlund ag ràdh. "A-nise tha 80% a' dol don t-Suain. Tha seo na chomharra de dh'atharrachadh agus de rudeigin a tha a' tachairt nar cinn, tha mi 'n dùil."

Anns an t-Suain bithear a' dèiligeadh ri Àlandaich mar gur e Suainich a th' anna agus faodaidh iad foghlam fhaighinn an sin saor 's an-asgaidh. Bidh a' mhòr-chuid a' coimhead telebhisean Suaineach, ged a tha sianal Suaineis cuideachd a' craoladh à tìr-mòr Fhionnlainn. Ach tha guth làidir anns na meadhanan ionadail cuideachd; gu h-iongantach, tha dà stèisean rèidio agus dà phàipear-naidheachd làitheil (seadh, làitheil) ann an Àland.

Tha Nordlund ag ràdh gu bheil an conaltradh leis na h-ùghdarrasan ann an Helsinki a' fàs nas dorra, agus an àireamh de luchd-labhairt na Suainis ann an seirbheis chatharra Fhionnlainn a' dol an lughad. 'S e am fuasgladh aige tuilleadh smachd a thoirt do dh'Àlandaich air na h-eileanan aca. "Nam biodh barrachd fèin-ùghdarras againn bhiodh na bu lugha feum air conaltradh leis na roinnean riaghaltais ann an Helsinki," tha e ag ràdh. "Bhiodh e na b' fhasa dhaibhsan agus na b' fhasa dhuinne."

Tha Raibeart Mann ag ràdh gum faod dìth na fileantachd ann am Fionnlainnis obair a chumail bho eileanaich. "Tha e a' brosnachadh feadhainn dà-chànanach à tìr-mòr Fhionnlainn gluasad an seo oir faodaidh iad conaltradh le daoine air tìr-mòr." Ach tha e ag ràdh nach bu chòir dhuinn Àland a thomhas mar àite gun iomadachd cànan. "Tha 42 cànan eadar-dhealaichte air am bruidhinn taobh a-staigh sgìre Comhairle Baile Mhariehamn," tha e a' mìneachadh. "Tha iomadh in-imriche à Estonia, mar eisimpleir. Agus ceud duine à Thailand. Mar a dhearbhas an luchd-turais a thàinig do Gheamannan nan Eilean agus turas nan Long Àrda, 's e àite gu math eadar-nàiseanta a th' ann a chuireas fàilte mhòr air coigrich agus luchd-tadhail. Agus tha co-dhiù beagan Beurla aig a h-uile duine."

communities that have disappeared since I've been here has been innumerable. Some Swedish speakers from mainland Finland come to live here because of the pressure their language is under at home."

Jan-Erik Bergland is certain that the language will persist because of its statutory protection. "We have had autonomy under Finland for ninety years and [the language] has been strong all that time and I don't see it fading away." But he has noted a change in mainland Finland, particularly since accession to the EU. "Young Finns speak Finnish and English now – they're not learning Swedish so much."

And, conversely, less young Ålanders are fluent in Finnish. "When I was studying, 80% of young people went to Finland for Higher Education," says Roger Nordlund. "Now 80% go to Sweden. This is an indication

of change and of something that's happening in our minds, I think."

Ålanders receive equivalent treatment in Sweden to native Swedes and can receive free education there. Most of them watch Swedish television, although there is also a Swedish language channel

broadcasting from mainland Finland. But there is also

a strong local voice in the media; there are, quite remarkably, two radio stations and two daily (yes, daily) newspapers produced in Åland.

Nordlund explains that dealing with the authorities in Helsinki is growing more difficult as the number of fluent Swedish speakers in the Finnish public service diminishes. His solution is to grant Ålanders more control of their islands. "If we have more autonomy then we need less contact with the ministries in Helsinki," he says. "It will be easier for them and easier for us."

Robert Mann notes that a lack of fluency in Finnish can cost islanders job opportunities. "It encourages dual-language speakers from the Finnish mainland to move here because they can communicate with people on the mainland." But he adds that we shouldn't think of Åland as lacking linguistic diversity. "There are 42 different languages spoken within the Mariehamn Town Council area," he says. "We have many new immigrants from Estonia, for example. And a hundred people from Thailand. As visitors to the Island Games and the Tall Ships event will attest, it's a very international place and will readily take foreigners and visitors to their hearts. And everybody here has some knowledge of the English language."



Banca Åland: 's e bancaireachd fear de na gnìomhachasan a th' air a dhol am meud anns na h-eileanan anns na beagan bhliadhnaichean a dh'fhalbh. Gù ire mhòr, thuige seo, chan eil staing ionmhais an t-saoghail air cus buaidh a thoirt air a' choimhearsnachd seo

Tha fàilteachadh choigreach air a bhith cudromach ann a bhith a' gleidheadh sluagh, tha Roger Nordlund a' mìneachadh. "Tha an sluagh air a bhith a' fàs airson nan trithead bliadhna a dh'fhalbh," tha e ag ràdh, "agus tha sinn moiteil à sin oir 's e Åland an t-aon eilean anns a' Chuan Bhaltaig a th' air a bhith mar sin. 'S e as coireach gu bheil daoine a' gluasad an seo, oir chan eil ìre a' bhreith a' dol an àirde. Tha am fàs aig mu 300 duine gach bliadhna."

'S e dìreach 10% dhen t-sluagh a tha a' fuireach anns na h-eileanan beaga iomallach agus tha am beatha gu math goireasach, le rathaidean leathann tèarrte agus seirbheisean aiseig cunbhalach nach cosg sgillinn. Tha Nordlund ag innse dhomh gu bheil Riaghaltas Åland a' cosg 20% dhen bhuidseat aca air na coimhearsnachdan iomallach oir thathar gan tomhas mar chudromach do na h-eileanan.

Cha mhòr gu bheil bochdainn ann agus tha eucoireachd aig ìre ìosal. "Cha bhì mi a' glasadh mo chàir agus faodaidh mi an iuchair fhàgail anns an toll-adhnaidh gun duilgheadas," tha Bernt Randelin ag ràdh. "Cha do chaill mi riamh dad bhom chàr. Chan eil eagal orm uair sam bith a thaobh mo shàbhailteachd fhèin no sàbhailteachd mo chuid cloinne."

An e Suainich no Fionnlainnich a th' anns na h-Ålandaich, ma-thà? Leis an fhìrinn innse, 's e Ålandaich a th' anna air thoiseach air dad eile. "S e Ålandach a th' annam le cead-siubhail Fionnlainneach," tha Bernt Randelin ag ràdh.

"Tha dòigh-smaoineachaidh eileanach againn – tha sinn gu math neo-eisimeileach," tha Jan-Erik Bergland ag aontachadh. "Cha toigh leinn e nuair a dh'innseas daoine bhon taobh a-muigh dhuinn dè bu chòir dhuinn a dhèanamh."

"Ann an dòigh bhiodh e math a bhith mar phàirt dhen t-Suain," tha Randelin ag ràdh mun iarrtas aig cuid de dh'Ålandaich a bhith gan ceangal fhèin ri Stockholm seach Helsinki, "ach 's dòcha gun toireadh e ùine do na Suainich tuigsinn gur e àite fa leth a th' ann an Åland agus nach eil e mar phàirt dhen t-Suain. Cha bu mhath leam ar neo-eisimeileachd a chall."

Agus nuair a thig e don cheist mhòir mu Fhionnlainn a' cluich na Suain ann an hocaidh-deighe (smaoinichibh air Alba v Sasainn ann am ball-coise), tha Raibeart Mann ag ràdh gu bheil sgaradh anns a' choimhearsnachd a thaobh cò dha a bheir iad taic, leis na Fionnlainnich a' faighinn tòrr taice oir buinidh iad don dùthaich as lugha. Ach tha a h-uile duine a' taobhadh leis an sgioba bhall-coise ionadail, IFK Mariehamn. Tha an club – gu h-iongantach airson coimhearsnachd cho beag – a' cluich ann am Prìomh Lìog Fhionnlainn.

Faodadh am fuachd anns a' Bhaltaig ann an dùbhlachd a' gheamhraidh a bhith cruaidh, agus bidh ball-coise a' tighinn gu stad thar nam mìosan sin. Tha mi a' coimhead a-mach air uinneag air sràidean snasail craobhach Mhariehamn a tha fhathast gearhadail, tràth sa Ghiblean; tha a' mhuir fhathast reòite ann an cuid de bhàigh nan eilean. Tha Jan-Erik Bergland ag innse dhomh, ge-tà, mu fheasgaran blàtha samhraidh ann an camasan creagach gun sluagh, le coilltean sàmhach giuthais is beithe air an cùlaibh, agus iolairean-mara air sgèith os an cionn. "Thig air ais as t-samhradh," tha e ag ràdh le dealas. "Eadar an t-Ògmhios agus an Lùnastal – feumaidh tu fhaicinn an uair sin. 'S e neamhnaid anns a' Bhaltaig a th' ann!"

An acceptance of outsiders has been critical to maintaining the islands' population, explains Roger Nordlund. "The population has been growing for the last thirty years," he says, "and we are proud of that because Åland is the only island in the Baltic Sea that has had such a trend. It is due to the fact that people are moving here, because the birth rate is stable. Growth is about 300 persons per year."

Only 10% of the population lives in the smaller islands of the archipelago and they get a pretty good deal, with wide sealed roads and regular vehicular ferry services which are free of charge. Nordlund tells me that the Åland Government spends 20% of its budget on the outlying communities because they are seen as critical to the life of the islands.

Poverty is virtually non-existent and the rate of criminality is low. "I don't lock my car and I can leave the key in the ignition without a problem," says Bernt Randelin. "I've never lost anything from my car. I'm never afraid for my own or my children's safety."

So are Ålanders Swedes or Finns? Actually, they're Ålanders first and foremost. "I'm an Ålander with a Finnish passport," proclaims Bernt Randelin.

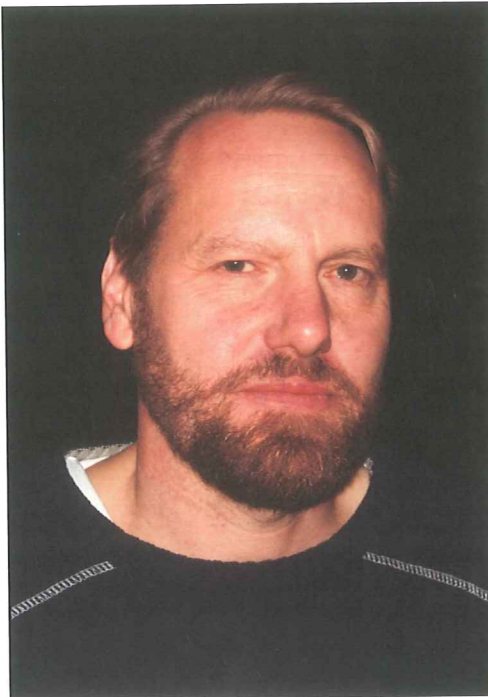
"We have an island mentality – we're quite independent," agrees Jan-Erik Bergland. "We don't like outsiders telling us what to do."

"In some ways it would be good to be part of Sweden," says Randelin of a desire of some Ålanders to link up with

Stockholm rather than Helsinki, "but it might take a long time for the Swedes to understand that Åland is special and it's not really a part of Sweden. I would not like to lose our independence."

And when it comes to the critical question of Finland playing Sweden at ice hockey (think of Scotland v England at football), Robert Mann says that the islanders are split down the middle in their allegiance, with the Finns getting a lot of support as underdogs. But support for the local football team IFK Mariehamn is universal. The club – remarkably for such a small community – plays in the Finnish Premier League.

The cold of the Baltic environment in the dark months can be severe, and football has a long winter shutdown. I look out the window to an early April landscape, with the elegant tree-lined streets of Mariehamn still in the grip of winter and the sea frozen solid in many of the islands' bays. Jan-Erik Bergland tells me, however, of warm summer evenings in uninhabited rocky bays backed by silent pine and birch forests and overflowed by sea eagles. "Come back in the summer time," he implores. "From June to August – you must see it then. It's a pearl in the Baltic!"



Bernt Randelin – "Ålandach le cead-siubhail Fionnlainneach"