

Opening statement

The 10th Conference of Parliamentarians of the Arctic Region in Akureyri, Iceland.

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H.E. Dr. Össur Skarphéðinsson, Minister for Foreign Affairs

Madame and Mister Chair, distinguished Arctic Parliamentarians, ladies and gentlemen.

It is both a privilege and a pleasure to welcome you in Akureyri today. Not least because we all are kindred spirits with regard to the Arctic, we all share a common passion for its wellbeing and protection.

Akureyri is the true capital of Northern Iceland. Apart from being one of Iceland's center for education it has in recent years risen to be a thriving center for Arctic research and education - hosting the University of Akureyri with its polar law programme, the Stefansson Arctic Institute as well as two Arctic Council Working Group secretariats, PAME and CAFF – not to forget the Arctic Portal. A welcome addition to this arctic cluster is a new international professorship in Arctic Sciences, commencing this year, based on an agreement made by myself, and the Norwegian Foreign Minister, Mr. Jonas Gahr Støre. It will bear the name of the famed Norwegian explorer, Nansen, who came to Iceland on his way to the legendary Greenland expeditions.

All of us gathered here today, live lives that in one way or another are defined by the Arctic. In Iceland - since settlement 1100 years ago - the natural riches of the Arctic have shaped us as a nation. When you travel in Iceland, almost all the communities you will encounter along the coast were established by fishermen trying to find the best locations with regard to the fishing grounds, or by entrepreneurs seeking fortune from whaling or the elusive herring.

The Arctic has also provided for the way we kept our history, and indeed financed our historical contribution to the outer world. The production of the ancient Icelandic Sagas – our cultural claim to fame, apart from Bjork – was very expensive, needing not only a lot of educated staff, mostly drawn from the monasteries at the time, but also a lot of expensive calfskins. As an example, one of the most famous manuscript, Flateyjarbók, needed 180 expensive calfskins. Our famous Nobel Prize winning author, Halldor Laxness, once

wondered aloud in an essay, where from our forebears had acquired the capital necessary to produce the Sagas.

It is now accepted, fx. by work by scientists such as Helgi Guðmundsson, that this capital was derived from the Far North. Icelanders, who at the time had also settled Greenland, caught and bought ivory from walrus and narwhal in the far north of the western coast of Greenland, brought home to Iceland, and shipped to Europe. Before the beginning of the Africa trade, when the price of arctic ivory collapsed, a pound of narwhal – the horn of the unicorn in European mythology – was the equivalent to a pound of gold. A polar bear cub, caught and tamed in Greenland, was said to be worth its weight in silver when sold to the kings of Europe. Shakespeare only wrote about the Icelandic dog with its curled tail but the main tourist attraction in London during his days was a tame polar bear in the Tower of London who amused tourists by diving for salmon in the Thames.

The Arctic has always been dynamic. It has always been prone to social and great environmental change. The latter we can read from the cores acquired by the drillings of the Greenland glacier. There we see, for example, that 12 thousand years ago an Ice Age came to an end in a shorter time than today is the average human life-span.

We are not witnessing such a colossal change today. We are, nevertheless, witnessing the greatest climate change in written history. Most certainly, this very summer we witnessed the greatest melting of ice in the Arctic since satellite records began some 30 years ago.

These changes are affecting our environment. They are already affecting the life of some of us. We fear they may affect the ecosystem of the Arctic in an irreversible way. For better or worse, they will also drastically change the way we develop and utilize the resources of the Arctic, be it the marine riches we already know, or the gas and oil that exists in the Arctic but we haven't dared, or been able to harness, not to mention the prospects of completely new routes of transport between continents across the Arctic Ocean.

To cut it short, the Arctic no longer is on the margins. It already has taken center-stage, whether we are discussing climate change, energy issues not to mention geopolitics.

In this context I elevated the Arctic to a priority of our Foreign Policy when I assumed my present portfolio. Alþingi, the Icelandic Parliament - not exactly famous for agreeing on anything in these last few years – nevertheless to a man embraced and accepted a resolution

on a comprehensive Arctic policy. Today, all political parties in Iceland regard the Arctic issues as a pillar in our Foreign Policy.

In the days when my beard was red - in fact before I had any beard at all - I started my working life as a fisherman on the trawlers that spent quite some time within the Arctic circle. I remember I could from afar sometimes glimpse the mysterious big Greenland Glacier, where to my wife later departed for far too many summers for research. It was during those summers I realized that mutual absences can make a strong marriage even stronger.

Hence, from early on I became enchanted with the Arctic. Shortly before the historic Rovaniemi declaration that laid the foundation to the Arctic Council, I became a Member of Parliament. Since then I have had the privilege to make the Arctic my political business in one way or the other. First as Minister for the Environment, later as Minister for Industry, which included oil and offshore development, and as Foreign Minister the Arctic has become one of two major focal points in my work.

So, apart from being a self-confessed political animal, I also consider myself – like the polar bear - to be an Arctic animal.

Very early on, especially when we started to realize the rapid rate of change in the Arctic, I became like many other politicians convinced that we, the Arctic nations, needed a well structured forum to formulate our common policy. But the Arctic Council was slow on its feet. It was a sickly child, suffered a difficult adolescence, and grew up slowly. Today, however, I feel the Arctic Council finally is coming of age. And I'll tell you why:

Firstly, there seems to be a strong and growing political commitment, by all Arctic States, for further enhancing Arctic cooperation. Because I see Senator Murkowsky in the audience, I have to say that one of the best things to happen to the Arctic Council is a renewed dedication and commitment from the United States. If the United States was a late-comer to the party they arrived in style last year in Nuuk, with Secretary Clinton, Secretary Salazar, not to mention Senator Murkowsky herself.

Today, all the Arctic Countries have made public their Arctic Policies. It is clear, that we share, for the most part, similar visions of how we would like the North to develop.

From my point of view, commitment for increased cooperation calls for stronger framework for the Arctic Council. In that respect, we have taken an important step together with a

permanent secretariat in Tromsø. We have to develop it further. Right now we are approaching the point where we should allow ourselves the luxury to engage in vibrant discussions on the positive and negative sides of developing the Council into a fully-fledged treaty based, regional organization.

In this respect I want to note as Foreign Minister of Iceland that I very much welcome - and strongly support - the idea, put forth by the Swedish Chairmanship, to draft a separate political declaration for the ministerial meeting in Kiruna next year. Such a document should highlight our shared vision for the future.

Secondly, together we have shown that through the Arctic Council we are now increasingly able to turn policy into concrete actions and programmes. This was symbolized with the very important signing of the SAR agreement. It was further underlined with the decision to develop a similar instrument on marine oil spills. It is important to continue along this path by mapping gaps in infrastructure and response capacity in the North. It is indeed, from my vantage point, a prerequisite for a wider economic development in the region.

Thirdly, by agreeing on a common criteria for permanent observers in the Arctic Council we shall have reached an important consensus on how to meet the growing interest of outside stakeholders, be it non-arctic states, NGOs or International Organizations, to observe and take an active part in the scientific work of the Council.

To sum up, the Arctic council is our strongest tool to cooperate as Arctic nations. It has proved its mettle in being a successful venue for shaping and preparing actions, such as the SAR agreement, that are vitally important for all the inhabitants, as well as the nature, of the Arctic.

So, if there is a conclusion from my relationship with the Arctic through my political work, that I could turn into a recommendation to you, distinguished Arctic Parliamentarians, it is to care for, support, and work for the increased strength and influence of the Arctic Council.

Thank you very much for a beautiful silence – and may you enjoy the land of ice and fire.