



**THE NEW NORTH  
AN INTELLECTUAL FRONTIER**

**A speech  
by  
the President of Iceland  
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at the Comparative Politics Conference  
SamPol  
University of Bergen  
Norway  
7 October 2009**

Distinguished scholars,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is with great pleasure that I return to the alma mater of my mentor, the late Stein Rokkan, a scholarly giant and a gentle man who influenced the course of my life more than many others, a scientist who brought the periphery to the centre of academic concerns.

I was privileged to be here five years ago to deliver a memorial lecture in his honour. On that occasion, I attempted to outline how, in the coming years, the New North, a term I used to embrace the Arctic together with the northern regions, would become one of the central areas of the world; politically, economically, environmentally and hopefully also academically.

This could be the most dramatic transformation of the periphery to centre stage – an intellectual challenge that I am sure would have thrilled Stein Rokkan. He would have been intrigued by how the most peripheral of all peripheries, the northern-most part of the world, the Arctic Region and other parts of Russia, the United States, Canada and the Nordic countries, were becoming interwoven into an evolving and fascinating political system which deserves extensive study, particularly by Nordic scholars, creating opportunities to make a strong academic impact in an arena which in the last 10-15 years has become an innovative laboratory

of political creativity, of new institutions and patterns of interaction, of new relations between nation states and regions and provinces in other states.

The New North is a testing ground for the new Russian-European and Russian-American relationship; a venue for a different look at human rights and the position of indigenous peoples, for bringing to the forefront many projects of critical importance: the utilisation of energy resources in the 21<sup>st</sup> century; the protection of the environment; the threat of climatic change; the transformation of international trade through the evolution of the Northern Sea Route and studies in many other significant fields.

I urged Nordic scholars to devote greater research efforts to the emerging New North and to lead the academic world into this new frontier. Only a few years earlier, I had initiated the Northern Research Forum, a regular gathering of scholars, academics, students, policymakers and regional and national leaders. This is a forum for research-based dialogue, inspired by my own experience as a young political scientist within the ECPR, which Stein Rokkan and others established in the 1960s and which helped significantly to mature European political science.

I called upon universities and research institutions in our countries to give high priority to northern issues, problems and concerns, and thus provide a substantial intellectual backbone for the new partnership in the North and at the same time pay homage to a unique scholar and a dear friend, a mentor and a founding father of modern social science. Such a journey would be in the true spirit of exploration which inspired Stein Rokkan and made him such a great man.

I outlined my vision that, in the first decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the Arctic and the Northern Regions, the New North as I called it, would potentially be the most important political theatre for the Nordic countries – Norway, Sweden, Finland, Denmark and Iceland, and also for Greenland and the Faroe Islands, with their growing degree of self-governance. In cooperation or conflict with Russia, Canada and the United States, the Nordic countries could, through the Arctic Council, other institutions and venues, and in bilateral and multilateral actions, have enormous influence with respect to some of the most critical global interests and concerns of our times.

The North harbours about a quarter of the world's unused energy resources, reservoirs of oil, gas, hydro and geothermal power. The management and utilisation of these resources is one of the most important future tasks of the North and is of great significance for the global energy economy.

The melting of the ice, regrettably caused by climate change, would allow the development of the Northern Sea Route to link North America, Europe and Asia in a new way, dramatically transforming commerce, communications and business relationships, creating a new dimension in the global economy, similar to what the Suez Canal did for world trade more than a century ago.

As we know, climate change is occurring three times faster in the northern regions than in other parts of the world. What happens in the North is of great consequence for every continent and for most countries. It is a paradox, but one that illustrates this point very well, that perhaps the greatest security threat that Bangladesh faces in the coming decades is not from the armies of India and Pakistan, but from the melting of the ice in Greenland and the Arctic.

It is therefore of the utmost importance, not just for us but also for the entire world, to strengthen circumpolar and cross-disciplinary monitoring in order to analyse environmental changes in the North, to integrate the observation of biodiversity and the assessment of pollution and other social and economic concerns. The North is not only the most critical arena of the globe where the threat of climatic change can be most effectively monitored; it is also where the possibility of a radical transformation of the ocean currents' conveyor belt can best be assessed.

This also relates to the importance of analysing human development in the North, establishing an overview of sustainable development and identifying the factors that affect the well-being of the population. A few years ago this was the main priority of the Icelandic chairmanship of the Arctic Council and led to the first Arctic Human Development Report, a landmark achievement in northern inter-disciplinary cooperation. It focused on social, cultural and economical progress and how they relate to sustainable development and the use of natural resources in the region.

When I spoke here five years ago, the North had already become a fascinating laboratory for political scientists. It was the scene of the evolution of new international councils such as the Arctic Council, the Barents Euro-Arctic Council and the Baltic Council; of active cooperation between nation states in the region and sub-state institutions such as provincial, local, regional and state governments in Canada, Russia and the United States. It was the place where a new role was developing for the various organisations of indigenous peoples, in which cooperation was opening up across the boundaries of old diplomatic protocols, providing a wealth of political innovation which leaders of regional communities and indigenous people in other parts of the world are now observing with keen interest.

The core of the institutional framework in the New North is the emphasis on open dialogue and opportunities for participation by people from far and wide. The New North is therefore, in global terms, uniquely democratic. The Northern Forum, the University of the Arctic and the Northern Research Forum allow citizens and scholars, students and activists in cities and regions to come forward with ideas, propositions, suggestions, projects and plans. And, through their connections to the formal councils of international cooperation – the Arctic, the Barents and the Baltic Councils – these democratic currents of reform reach the highest levels of decision-making. Political innovation in the North has – within a single decade – produced a framework for cooperation that offers many opportunities for initiatives and progress which are no longer hindered by the boundaries of the old diplomatic rules.

Within the New North, everyone can work with everyone else: Alaska can work with the Nordic nations; regions in Russia can work with independent states in Northern Europe; universities and research institutions can work directly with state representatives in the Arctic and the Barents Councils; ideas and proposals formulated in the open NRF process are presented to ministers and ambassadors. Organisations of the indigenous peoples are given formal access to the decision-making process. The Inuit Circumpolar Conference, the Saami Council and the Association of Indigenous Minorities in the Far North, Siberia and the Far East of the Russian Federation have a right to formal representation within the international framework of cooperation among the Arctic states.

All of this was evident five years ago when I gave the Stein Rokkan memorial lecture here in Bergen, yet in the previous years when I tried to alert others, both academics and political leaders, to the importance of the emerging North, I had mostly spoken in vain; my calls for a northern vision and a new northern intellectual and research activity to become the basis for informed and constructive international cooperation fell mainly on deaf ears.

In recent years there has, however, been a welcome and fascinating change, even what we could call a profound transformation; perhaps even transforming the North into “the latest fashion”.

Here in Norway, a new government came to power with a primary emphasis on formulating an active Arctic and northern policy. The Government of Canada, which for a long time had little interest in northern issues, decided a year ago to devote the opening section of the Throne Speech to these concerns and the role of Canada in the future of the Arctic. A few years ago, an agreement on northern cooperation was

signed between Russia, the European Union, Iceland and Norway, and the European Union is now formulating a broad policy in this area. Even the President of France has recently decided to appoint Michael Rochard, the distinguished former Prime Minister, as his special representative on Arctic and northern issues. Among the final acts of the Bush Administration was to issue a new US Arctic policy and the Obama Administration's officials are working on reformulating the approach to Arctic and northern cooperation. In the US Congress a number of Senators and Members of the House now take an active interest in these issues. Russia has of course come more and more into the forefront of the Arctic dialogue, and a few months ago a proposal which Thorvald Stoltenberg made to the Nordic foreign ministers, and which they consequently endorsed, emphasised that the Arctic should become one of the core areas of Nordic cooperation in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

All of this has transformed the field of Arctic and northern issues in a fundamental way. But we have also become acutely aware that there is perhaps no other area on the globe where there is such a lack of the necessary legal frameworks. The continents are dominated by national laws or regional treaties, the Law of the Sea has to a large extent defined legal principles with respect to the oceans, but due to Cold War tensions, the Arctic and the North remained to a significant extent an unknown territory, almost a taboo-part of the world, where little effort was made to lay the necessary legal groundwork for constructive cooperation and progress.

I would even go so far as to say that with respect to the Earth as a whole, the Arctic and the North is the new intellectual frontier in the sense that it requires scientific cooperation and research, discoveries and active scholarly participation in the same way as, in the 18<sup>th</sup> and the 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, exploration on frontiers in different parts of the world, such as the United States and the continent of Africa, produced significant academic input.

This new frontier must focus not only on research and intellectual cooperation, but also on new policy discussions between representatives of the countries that are formally a part of the Arctic and the North and representatives of the entire global community. We cannot conduct the dialogue of the future of the North and the Arctic in political isolation; it must also become a global concern.

Here, we can use the analogy of how, during the Cold War, there were think-tanks, conferences and academic and scientific dialogues in many different parts of the world, not only in the United States, the Soviet Union and Western Europe, but also in the non-aligned countries, in Asia

and Africa, dealing with the threat of nuclear confrontation and the arms race between the superpowers.

The work done in universities and other academic and research forums in the 60s and the 70s, and into the 80s, laid to some extent the foundation for the successful transformation from the Cold War over to our present times. It would hardly have been possible to conduct that transformation so quickly and so successfully if, in the previous twenty years or so, there hadn't been enormous activity within the academic and research communities. Similarly, successful cooperation in the North will have to be based on enhanced academic and scholarly cooperation in the coming years.

As an illustration of the types of issues that need to be addressed, we could list the following questions:

How will the Arctic Council develop? Will it remain limited to its original purpose, or will the member countries have the courage and the political willingness to expand its functions to allow it to deal with many highly relevant issues that have hitherto been deemed to be outside its scope of interest?

How will the European Union formulate and execute its new and active interest in the Arctic and the North, an interest stimulated by the energy resources, the new sea routes and the speed of climate change?

How will NATO come to view military cooperation and the strategic situation in the North?

How will the United Nations broaden its concerns to the Arctic in order to become relevant in this part of the world with respect to climate change, human rights and the position of indigenous communities?

How will regional challenges be met at provincial levels within the federal states of Russia, the United States and Canada, bringing into focus again the rights and position of the indigenous people all over the North and the Arctic who have been there for thousands of years, long before those states were created? All of us from the so-called enlightened western world – the Nordic countries, Canada and the United States – are only dimly aware of issues affecting the basic human rights of these people. There are many fundamental conflicts that remain to be resolved, issues that define the boundaries between the nation states and the communities of the indigenous people.

And how will the Nordic countries treat the new global relevance of the North,; a region which is increasingly becoming the primary pillar in our future global importance? There is I believe no other area where the

Nordic countries will be able to play such a significant role, directly and constructively, in the coming years.

It is also worth noting that people all over the world are closely watching how we handle this debate – on laws and human rights, economic developments, energy utilisation, the establishment of sea routes, and also climate change and the melting of the ice.

The situation in the Himalayan region closely resembles what has evolved in the Arctic. China and India, and a number of small countries, are the main players in the Himalayan region, just as the Arctic was dominated throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century by the Soviet Union, on the one hand, and the United States and Canada on the other, with the Nordic countries in between.

There are about 15,000 glaciers in the Himalayas. They are thinner than in Iceland or in Greenland. At the present rate of climate change, most of them if not all, will disappear completely within the next thirty or forty years.

These Himalayan glaciers are the great water reservoir of China and India, affecting the food production and the energy and economic systems of more than two billion people.

In the North, we decided at the end of the Cold War to form the Arctic Council, among other tasks to discuss environmental changes and gradually we started talking to each other in a constructive way. Consequently we have gained valuable experience in the last ten years. Like the Arctic, the Himalayas embrace many indigenous peoples, peoples of different races and religions who do not belong to the mainstream of China and India.

I have recently suggested that that it would be an interesting and valuable exercise to convene a joint forum on the Arctic and the Himalayas, inviting people not only from Russia and the United States, Canada and the Nordic countries, but also from China, India and the other Himalayan nations, to come together and talk about our joint experiences and possible cooperation. Most of the challenges that relate to the North and the Arctic are of direct relevance to the future of the Himalayas too.

I am therefore taking this opportunity here today to put forward a proposal that universities, policy institutions and other players look for opportunities within the next year or so to approach our colleagues and counterparts in China and India and other countries in the Himalayas in order to create a joint forum for dialogue and discussion, research and studies on the Arctic and the Himalayas.

Even though climate change threatens the livelihood of people in the North, the disaster caused by the melting of the ice in the Himalayas will be on a much greater scale than anything that will happen in our neighbourhood.

All of this brings me to the conclusion that what started ten years ago or so as a side-line discussion on the future of the North and the Arctic, as an interest of a few scholars and policy-makers in our countries, has now been moved to the very centre of global concerns. It has moved upstage in such a way that our discussion and dialogue will be of great consequences, not just for us, but for people all over the world.

In the approach to the end of the Cold War, academic discussions, research and scientific dialogue were an absolute prerequisite for success. The world is now on a dangerous path towards irreversible climate change that will dramatically change the lives of people everywhere and will be much more difficult to deal with than the threats posed by the Cold War.

Reagan and Gorbachev could meet in Reykjavík more than twenty years ago and lay the groundwork for ending the arms race. Now the issues are so complicated that no two leaders could come together and decide to execute a successful solution. We need the involvement of leaders from all over the world, from every level of our political systems.

The Nordic countries must shoulder the responsibility created by this new and unique challenge. Never before in our history have we been called upon to play such an important role.