



CAN POLITICAL SCIENCE KEEP UP WITH THE 21ST CENTURY?

**Plenary Lecture
by
the President of Iceland
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at the
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Distinguished scholars, colleagues, friends,

It is a profound personal privilege for me to welcome the ECPR to Iceland and pay tribute to the visionaries who founded this remarkable institution and aspired to change our knowledge of Europe.

Some of us were fortunate to work with Stein Rokkan, Jean Blondel, Hans Daalder and their colleagues in the early years of the ECPR, to witness their willingness to trust young people in the exploration of new intellectual ventures.

When military dictatorships were collapsing in Southern Europe, when the long winter of the Cold War was soon to give way to the first signs of spring, these entrepreneurial scholars sought to institutionalize cooperation within the emerging field of European political science and thus helped to further the intellectual transformation of our societies.

So young was the discipline, so enormous the need for academic exploration, that only a few years earlier, Stein Rokkan and Robert Dahl had instigated the Smaller European Democracies project, enlisting some of us who had only completed our first degrees, to study a collection of countries – Denmark, Ireland, Sweden, Finland, the Netherlands, Iceland

and a few others – and thus broaden the analysis of democratic systems, how they evolved, functioned and succeeded in solving challenging problems.

In the following forty years, political science grew into a multi-dimensional discipline, playing a dynamic and vibrant role in our academic and political worlds, training every decade tens of thousands of young people all over Europe who then entered and influenced various professions.

The development of political science in Iceland, from the time I was hired in September 1970, two weeks before the teaching was to commence, to the hosting now of this impressive ECPR assembly by a faculty which has become one of the largest at the University of Iceland, reflects what has also been witnessed in other parts of Europe.

When we started, the Icelandic language did not even have a recognized name for the discipline. The university library had only one book classified as political science. The entire terminology of the subject had to be translated into our language, adjusted to the heritage of medieval literature, poetry and sagas, a task which required every notion be tested for semantic transparency, measured against linguistic standards moulded by hard practical reality and life at the mercy of nature. This in fact turned out to be a blessing, since some of the most fashionable concepts, which sounded fine in French or English, failed to have a clear meaning when passed through the refining fire of the old Viking language.

During this early stage, involvement in the ECPR was our primary means of contact with colleagues abroad, enabling us to advance with others while fulfilling our duties here in Iceland. Thus, we could contribute in a small way to the progress of political science in Europe, while establishing the discipline in a new country and dealing with the cultural challenges posed by the traditional Icelandic view of politics.

In many ways, our story was typical of the development all over Europe, but recently Iceland has been subjected to experiences which in many ways serve as wake-up calls for our science, experiences which bring to the forefront these following questions: What can political science contribute to the understanding of the economic crisis, to the analysis of the transformations which are now shaping our world? How will the discipline be as relevant in the 21st century as it was for the European journey in the final decades of the 20th ?

In many ways, Iceland can serve as a laboratory for the testing of these academic challenges; the analysis of our experience and situation as relevant for Europe as it is for us.

When Stein Rokkan and Robert Dahl were my mentors, the pace of change was in line with previous times; their pioneering research linked to the philosophical texts of earlier centuries, the stability such that the relevance of the conclusions was directly linked to the questions posed at the outset.

This measured pace has now been displaced by turbulent uncertainty, radical upheavals, sudden shocks; the relationship between politics and economics in a continuous state of flux; previous frameworks suddenly outdated.

In sharing my views on these challenges with you here today, I feel a certain uneasiness regarding the future of our discipline, whether political science can gather the necessary intellectual strength, academic vigour and independence to exert an ever-growing influence on the European journey.

Admittedly my vantage point is now different from yours, somewhat removed from academic colleagues since different tasks have replaced my previous scientific endeavours, but maybe that is why I have become acutely aware of how we are facing new challenges which will radically test the relevance of political science in the years to come.

As an illustration of my reflections let us start with the collapse of the banks here in Iceland three years ago and the financial crisis which engulfed the Western World.

For decades, the politics of Europe and the United States were dominated by theories on market economics, claiming they would serve better as guides to a successful future than the study of democratic dialogues within established political institutions. The smaller the role of the state – and consequently of politics – the more successful we would all become; the climax of this gospel being perhaps the statement by a British Prime Minister: “There is no such thing as society!”

Then, in October 2008, Iceland became one of the first countries to be hit by a financial tsunami rooted in the fundamental fallacy that the market should reign supreme, that economics mattered more than politics.

Within a few months, the collapse of our financial institutions came to threaten the stability of our democratic system and the cohesion of our society. There were protests and riots; the police had to defend the

Parliament and the Prime Minister's Office. The inherent balance of our well-established republic was suddenly in danger.

Iceland had been one of the most peaceful and harmonious societies in the world. Yet the failure of the market system threatened the survival of our political and social order. It brought us close to collapse, a possibility which in the previous decades had been almost ignored by established leaders in economics and political science alike.

Thus, a crucial question for us and academic colleagues in Europe and the United States is: How did market economics become so dominant within the world of social science? Can we now gather enough strength to make the study of who governs and how the necessary counterbalance to that narrow view of our societies? Will we be better prepared next time?

These questions are not ephemeral, since the crisis is not yet over; witness the streets of Athens, protests in Spain, unrest in Britain.

Many seek solutions to the profound problems now facing Europe through economic and financial measures; almost every day the assertion is made that the supremacy of the market should continue to subject other dimensions of our societies to its needs. In this debate, will political science remain on the sidelines or enter the arena to challenge the dominance of economics in the analysis of Europe's fate and future?

Here again, Iceland provides significant guidelines, lessons of how economic measures and reforms did not by themselves succeed in bringing the nation out of the crisis. The political, social and judicial dimensions of our challenge were also important.

The government resigned in the early weeks of 2009, a minority cabinet was formed and parliamentary elections called to enable the nation to choose a new assembly. The leadership of the Central Bank and the Financial Supervisory Authority was replaced; a special prosecutor appointed to seek out those who had broken the law and within a year that Office had become the largest judicial entity in our country.

A special commission, headed by a Supreme Court judge, was established to examine the conduct of the banks, the operations of big corporations, the actions of ministers, the financial authorities, the media, the universities and indeed also the Presidency. Following up on this report, the new parliament voted into action a series of legislative and political reforms. A review of the Constitution was also set in motion; first by calling together a National Convention with members chosen randomly from the population, instructed to provide guidelines for

reforms to be considered by a Constitutional Council, which then a few weeks ago presented its comprehensive proposals for a new constitution.

All of this has enabled the nation to face its predicament, to gather strength and emerge from the crisis earlier and more effectively than anyone could have predicted. Consequently, in the discussions now taking place in Europe, against the background of dire forecasts about the futures of Ireland, Greece, Spain, Portugal, Italy and others, some people have asked how has Iceland managed to come so far on the road to recovery.

Many reasons can be given: The devaluation of the currency; fiscal austerity and budgetary reforms; private banks were allowed to fail; taxes have been raised. But a significant part was also played by the political and judicial dimensions of our response. No other European country has dealt with its financial crisis by combining, as we have done, reforms of its economic, legislative, executive and judicial institutions. Our experience thus illustrates the crucial linkage between the economy and the state, between democracy and the free market.

Which should be paramount in the resurrection of our societies: Economics or politics? This is the question which the recent financial crisis has brought to the forefront. It can no longer be evaded. There is simply too much at stake, as we saw in a nutshell here in Iceland and can almost every day be witnessed somewhere in Europe.

Political science therefore needs to move centre stage, cease to play second fiddle to the models of modern economics. It must assert, with strength and conviction, that democracy is Europe's greatest contribution to the world, that a new academic balance in favour of the body politic must be established.

Twice events brought this truth squarely to my table. First in 2010 and then again earlier this year, when I had to decide whether to submit the so-called Icesave laws to a referendum, to choose between the democratic right of the Icelandic people and the claim exerted by Britain and the Netherlands, supported by their European Union partners, that the interests of the financial market should be paramount in our decisions.

When all the complicated analysis had been swept away, my options were however crystal clear: The will of the people versus the force of the market.

To me it was self-evident that democracy had to prevail, even if all the governments of Europe, and powerful interests in my own country,

favoured the financial stakeholders. When our nations come to such crossroads, politics in its classical sense must carry the day.

I believe similar choices will be with us for a long time to come, and recent events in Europe seem to confirm such a prediction. Therefore the relevance of political science in analysing the solutions available to our societies will be of even greater importance. Not just because we are witnessing a fundamental shift of the tectonic plates of politics and economics, in the role of the state and the market, but also because information technology and social media are now empowering individuals to challenge established institutions in a way never seen before, bringing once again the classical notion, the will of the people, into the focus of our academic concerns.

In this respect, Iceland also provides a profound illustration, as did the crowds in Cairo and Athens. When the protests gained momentum in the autumn of 2008 and the centre of Reykjavík became every Saturday the venue of a street assembly, the Internet served as the rallying instrument. When, in December that year and in January 2009, rioters challenged the police, their mobile texting was the tool of action. When, last winter, the so-called barrel protests regularly reminded the authorities of their duties to the disadvantaged, the poor, the unemployed, Facebook provided the necessary contacts.

Demonstrations and protests which in previous decades would have required weeks and months of preparation involving networks of organisations are now an instant phenomenon; the new IT instruments have replaced more traditional means of political mobilisation.

This was also demonstrated when the wave of public opinion in favour of a referendum on the Icesave issue superseded the parliamentary process in our country. What would have taken weeks when my predecessors were in office now happened in a matter of days: a successful petition campaign conducted on the Internet, supported by almost a quarter of the Icelandic electorate, organised by a few individuals, without the involvement of political parties, trade unions or other associations, in fact without any old-style organised support.

This was people power in its purest form, challenging the actions of the Government and the Parliament, inducing the President to exercise his constitutional duty in favour of the democratic will of the people.

Last January I was privileged to attend the DLD Conference in Germany where the leaders of Google, Facebook and other advanced IT and social media companies gathered to analyse where their products would take our societies.

There I witnessed one of the most remarkable discussions I have ever encountered, illustrating how a fundamental shift of power is now taking place, akin to the transformation a few centuries ago from feudal structures and absolute kings to parliaments and popular elections.

What we experienced here in Iceland, what characterised the Arab Spring and was crucial to the Obama election, is in all likelihood just the beginning of a global political earthquake, a new era in which individuals are able to challenge not only institutions but even the state – their advantage also derived from how the old structures still follow slow and deliberate processes, whereas the new social media allow a multitude to assemble quickly or demonstrate opposition even before the President has finished his speech.

The DLD dialogue in Munich, the experiences here in Iceland and recent events in other parts of the world, have convinced me that the fast pace of change already created by the new social and IT media has gained such momentum that actions within the more traditional institutions of power could, in many instances, soon become almost a sideshow.

I know this is a strong statement, and a strange conclusion coming from someone who has spent a large part of his active life within those same institutions: the Parliament, the Cabinet, the Ministries and now the Presidency.

But if I am right – and let us remember that these revolutionary IT technologies are still in their early stages – there must be a fundamental shift in the focus of political science, a shift towards the cutting edge of modern societies, where the public will emerges and is magnified without any institutional framework, where the individual can challenge the state as never before, where technology can transform our democratic systems more profoundly than any institutional decision-making, the will of the people once again becoming the core of our scientific concerns.

Your arrival in Iceland thus comes at an historic juncture. The recent experiences of my country illustrate transformations which should profoundly occupy 21st century political science if the discipline is to have the same relevance for these new times as the ECPR had in the closing decades of the 20th century.

Perhaps what is needed now is a bold vision similar to the mandate that Stein Rokkan, Jean Blondel and their colleagues gave European political science when democracy was replacing dictatorships in the Mediterranean part of our continent.

Iceland can serve as a reminder of the changes we are now witnessing; a testing ground for the challenges facing political science; a laboratory which enables us to see more clearly, due to the small scale of our society, the transformations which are now spreading over the entire Western World.

But Iceland also allows us to witness how the global balance of power is shifting, manifested for example by the fact that during my Presidency I have received more high-level delegations from China than from the US, the UK, Germany, France, Italy and Spain combined, that almost every year since 2005 I have had productive meetings with either the President, the Prime Minister or the Vice President of China, that the Indian Embassy which was opened a few weeks after the banks collapsed has in three years joined those who are most active in the Reykjavik diplomatic community.

Furthermore, Iceland is an ideal location to discover how the northern neighbourhood has opened up new territories for academic exploration. Just as the explorers of the Arctic region in previous centuries broadened the understanding of human traditions, and of the harmony between man and nature, the Northern Regions have now become a fascinating theatre of political innovation, the venue of new international councils, of active cooperation between old nation states and provincial, regional and local institutions, of the empowerment of indigenous peoples who have lived there for thousands of years and are now determined to decide their own future; an arena where the commitment to human rights and social justice will be acutely tested.

It is a dramatic movement of the ultimate periphery to centre stage – an intellectual challenge that would surely have thrilled Stein Rokkan and now provides 21st century political science with yet another challenge: to examine the political systems now emerging in the northernmost part of the world, where about a quarter of the untapped global energy resources are harboured, where the melting of the ice will open new sea routes linking Asia to Europe and America like the Suez Canal did in earlier times, and where climate change is happening three times faster than in most other parts of the world, bringing challenges to the economic, social and political structures of the North which are a foretaste of what mankind might soon encounter.

The new wave of political change in our northern neighbourhood also embraces signs of growing nationalism, both to the east and to the west of Iceland. Greenland is already exercising self-government with assurance and pride, the Scottish Nationalists celebrated a majority in the Assembly and eagerly promote a referendum on independence, a

development which my esteemed teachers in the 1960s, Sammy Finer, Bill Mackenzie and Richard Rose, would have found astounding, since they all treated the votes then given to the SNP as a temporary blip on the British electoral scoreboard.

Their failure to see correctly the emergence of a major change in the political landscape is not a negation of their formidable academic achievements, but rather a reminder to us all that our scientific endeavours must keep up with the transformation of the world.

The 21st century has already proved to be full of surprises so the challenge for political science in the decades to come is indeed daunting.

On the journey ahead, the legacy created by the founders of the ECPR provides us with a model of scholarly excellence and creative cooperation, and as I welcome you here today I pay homage to them all. They were certainly great scholars who profoundly influenced my life and those of many others, succeeded in making political science a dominant force both in European research and in the evolution of our societies.