



The West Nordic Dimension in the Global Arctic

**A speech by
the President of Iceland
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at the 30th Anniversary Assembly
of the West Nordic Council**

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Prime Minister of the Faroe Islands
Premier of Greenland
Prime Minister of Iceland
Honoured Parliamentarians
Dear Friends,

The three nations in the North West Atlantic, the outposts of Nordic cooperation, are linked by firm bonds, with common roots going back into the history of past centuries and the struggle for existence that our people have waged for generations. Now, as all the leading countries in the global economy have gained formal places in the cooperative and decision-making process regarding the future of the Arctic, we find ourselves standing at a remarkable juncture.

The great landmasses in the North and the oceans that link them together have, in this new century, taken on an importance which even just a few decades ago would have been thought quite impossible. It is this new reality that brings us, the people of the Faroe Islands, Greenland and Iceland, great responsibilities, but at the same time a host of opportunities. But it is also up to us to proceed carefully and to make wise use of our friendship, our mutual trust and our joint experience so as to stand together more firmly, to understand the strength that lies in our

close bonds and mutual trust, particularly as the most powerful nations in the world, and their companies, governments and institutions, are now showing an interest in becoming players on our home field, the region that formerly ensured our isolation but is now at the centre of a new world vision.

The collaboration between our parliaments and the democratically elected representatives of our communities in the forum of the West Nordic Council for the past thirty years gives us a firm basis on which to meet these challenges and to embark on still more ventures; to analyse and comprehend our common interests and hammer out policies to serve the people who have given our parliamentarians their mandate.

But the West Nordic Council and collaboration between the governments of our three countries is based on more than democratic discussion: our history and the struggle for existence on the part of our people in the past, our engagement with the sea and the sometimes hostile forces of nature also give us a store of shared experience on which to draw as we face a new future.

We can trace our bonds back well over a thousand years to the voyages of the Vikings when they settled here in the Faroe Islands and in Iceland and then went on to Greenland and encountered the native people. I was deeply moved and felt our common history echoing down the centuries at the millennial celebrations in Brattahlíð in Greenland in 2000, gracefully directed by our friend Jonathan Motzfeldt. I also remember very vividly talking, just a few years later, to elderly seamen here in the Faroes who had fished from their boats in Icelandic waters, frequently visiting the West Fjords when I was a child there.

Also, our countries were for a long time part of the same kingdom, giving us as part of our heritage the language I am using for this speech; our own three national languages are also beautiful and distinctive, rich in nuances, with their poetry and prose. Each of the three nations has developed its system of governance based on particular laws and the authority of the people to determine their own future; this experience is an important model for others, particularly now when it is already clear that the future of the northern regions will have to be based to a large extent on greater autonomy of their inhabitants and the democratic rights of their people, irrespective of their formal status within individual states.

All of this is important as we tackle the challenges presented to us by the new profile of the North; it is material for collaboration that will be crucial if our small nations are to achieve permanent success.

In a way it is a remarkable situation in which our communities in the West Nordic region, the descendants of fishermen and farmers in the Faroe Islands, Iceland and Greenland, are now sitting down to take decisions along with representatives of the leading nations of Asia and Europe and must shape the futures of the Arctic together with the USA, Canada, Russia and other members of the Arctic Council.

A clear sign of this new international reality is the fact that more than 1500 participants from over 40 countries attend the meetings of the Arctic Circle which are held in Reykjavík. Now in October, President François Hollande of France will be delivering the opening address and both Xi Jinping, President of China, and Chancellor Angela Merkel of Germany will be commissioning their special envoys with presenting the views of these global leading states regarding the future of the Arctic. And just under three weeks from now, President Barack Obama of the USA is due to unveil his policy at a special meeting of the foreign ministers of the Arctic Council countries and other states which the US Secretary of State, John Kerry, is to host in Alaska.

We are witnessing the opening of a new chapter in history, with the northern regions taking on a new global role. Reports of new events and decisions come to our attention every month. We are seeing a new world coming into being in which the West Nordic nations have an important role. Our collaboration, which 30 years ago was perhaps intended primarily as something between ourselves, has now taken on a global value.

It is therefore vital to enhance the understanding of the West Nordic dimension – our own understanding and also that of the many other parties that are now becoming involved in the northern regions, and to raise awareness of the special position of our three nations, the West Nordic dimension in the future of the Arctic.

Firstly, the huge ocean region surrounding us in the North Atlantic, and the position of Greenland, Iceland and the Faroe Islands, has conferred on us a new global – geopolitical – importance; it has made us into a sort of centre in the New North, that part of the world that extends from Alaska across Canada and the North Atlantic, across our three countries, across northern Norway, Sweden and Finland, the Arctic Ocean and the vast extent of Russia, covering many time-zones.

To make this more clear, the circumpolar region can be divided into three parts: a western part, embracing Alaska and Canada; an eastern part extending across northern Scandinavia and Russia and a central part, formed by the three West Nordic countries and the seas that surround us.

Now that the entire circumpolar region has acquired a new status in terms of shipping, natural resources and climate change, the central position of Greenland, Iceland and the Faroes gives us a status that is important for us to grasp and define, a geopolitical weight that was previously completely unthinkable.

Secondly, the West Nordic nations have long experience in fishing and the utilisation of marine resources. The future of the fishing industry is a fundamental element in the formulation of policy for the nations of the North, whose natural resources are also attractive to states that are prepared to send ships over long distances to utilise them. The fish stocks of the North are becoming constantly more valuable, both because of the absence of pollution in our waters and because stock protection has proved difficult in other parts of the world; our special position in this regard is becoming ever more clear. The West Nordic nations' fishing industries, our experience in the field and our respect for the ocean and its resources play a vital role here, giving our position on conservation and fisheries management great relevance in the international debate. Unlike other nations that are now seeking a role to play in Arctic affairs, our culture, history and outlook on life have been moulded to a great extent by fishing. Above all, we are maritime people.

Thirdly, we have control over many other natural resources that will become ever more valuable in the economic system of the 21st century, even to such a degree that some of the leading players in the global economy regard them as something to which they urgently need to gain access. This is an issue that will call for further research and knowledge, and also for consultation on how small nations can hold their own against encroachment by larger ones.

Fourthly, the Faroes, Greenland and Iceland are examples of how increasing self-determination by the inhabitants of the northern regions has become a steadily stronger basis for democratic decisions, blazing a trail that indigenous communities and other inhabitants of these regions can follow in various ways.

The history of the West Nordic nations bears witness to the ability of small communities to take increasingly greater control over their destinies, and this democratic dimension is an important contribution to the successful future of the circumpolar region: it is relevant both to all those who live there now and to others who are expected to arrive in the near future.

Fifthly, respect for nature is interwoven into our history, consciousness and self-image: environmental protection has been inculcated in us by the experience and wisdom of our ancestors and has

roots that go deeper than the changing fashions of international politics. We must share this West Nordic vision of nature with all those who seek to play a role in the North and make it the mainstay of our dealings and decisions, as it is also a valuable contribution to the international movement against catastrophic climate change. In a certain way, this is a quality that can give the West Nordic nations and their parliaments an influential voice.

Sixthly, we trust deeply in each other. Collaboration between the West Nordic nations and their elected representatives is based on mutual respect, friendship and rapport, qualities that should be models for all those who wish to play a part in the affairs of the North, qualities that constitute a positive foundation for success.

The long-standing bonds between us are by nature different from the interests that generally join nations together. In a sense, we are the West Nordic family which will have to receive more and more new players in the years to come as they enter the Arctic arena.

All these elements, the complex West Nordic dimensions in enhanced collaboration in the North, have brought us a host of new ventures, opportunities and profound responsibilities. How we handle them will be of crucial importance, not only for our three nations but also for the position of the northern regions in the global future.

Our friendship and deep-rooted trust will be valuable sources of strength in meeting the challenges that lie ahead.

I congratulate the West Nordic Council on this anniversary occasion and wish it success and progress in all future endeavours.