



A
Keynote Lecture
by

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Humanities

THE NORTH:
NEW CHALLENGES FOR CREATIVE RESEARCH

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Distinguished professors,
scholars and other guests

It was with profound gratitude and pleasure that I accepted the invitation to be with you here today and share in the discussions on the future of research aimed at understanding the evolution and the future of the North.

Canada is a very special place for us Icelanders. A thousand years ago, Icelandic discoverers and explorers arrived here in search of a new world, and during the final stages of the 19th century Canada became the homeland of young men and women who desired to create a new Icelandic commonwealth around the great Canadian lakes and forests.

This year we celebrate jointly with Canada the discovery of this continent by Icelandic seafarers in the year 1000 and also the 125th anniversary of the Icelandic settlement in Canada. It is indeed remarkable that a thousand years ago the northern regions of the globe were brought together by the exploring Vikings who made the North the most pioneering part of the world. They created new democratic institutions and accepted Christianity, giving it an added humanistic dimension with the influence of the ancient Edda poems and other works of wisdom and culture. The Northern people journeyed not only across all of Europe and as far south as Turkey, the coast of Africa and the Canary Islands, but they also travelled deep into Russia and the Ukraine and across the Atlantic to Greenland and then on to what is now Canada and the United States.

The Icelanders and our Nordic relatives were, at the turn of the last millennium, perhaps the most discovery- and exploration-driven communities in the entire world. A few centuries later, Icelandic scholars and writers gave the accounts of these endeavours an eternal form by writing them down on calfskin, thus creating a literary heritage unique in all of medieval Europe.

I mention these ancient roots of my nation and our relations with Canada, not just to remind you that it took Christopher Columbus 500 years to catch up with us – although admittedly he was to have, in the Vatican, a better public relations agent than the Viking discoverers have ever had – but also to bring this history to our attention here today because it is important to bear in mind, when looking at the new dimensions created by the evolution of the northern regions, how deeply rooted our relationship and joint history really are.

My nation has for centuries been inspired by the wisdom that the truths that are woven into cultural heritage provide valuable insights when attempting to analyse what the present means for the future.

During the 20th century and even the centuries proceeding it, the centre of action was, however, the European continent; where two world wars paralysed the entire world; where the cruel regimes of fascism, Nazism and communism imprisoned and killed millions of people and created suffering and tragic losses beyond anything hitherto known to mankind; where the battleground of the Cold War was marked by strategic arsenals, missiles and nuclear warheads; where the evolution towards new economic structures and co-operation began; and where the end of the Cold War brought down the Iron Curtain and Berlin Wall and made many nations finally democratic and free.

It was inevitable that during this dramatic historical period the northern regions should somehow be forgotten. Their irrelevance could perhaps best be seen on the old maps that hung in our classrooms when we were young. On those maps the continent was clearly the heart of Europe and Britain just somehow managed to be in its proper place but the Nordic countries and other parts of the northern regions almost disappeared at the top, too inconsequential to be given any serious attention.

I use the term Northern Regions to embrace not only the Nordic countries – Iceland, Norway, Denmark, Sweden and Finland, and also the Faroe Islands and Greenland – but also the newly independent Baltic States and the north-western territories of Russia and the northern provinces of Canada.

Up to the decade which is now coming to a close there was very little interest in the course of events in these Northern Regions; they were primarily considered to be a status quo part of the world. The deep frost of the Cold War somehow harmonised with the colder climate up north, so the end result was as uneventful as the never-ending wilderness of snow and ice where monotonous whiteness covered everything in all directions to the horizon.

But just as the Summit Meeting of President Reagan and Secretary General Gorbachev in Höfði House in Reykjavík in the autumn of 1986 began the transformation of the entire world, and heralded the dawn of the new times which replaced the darkness of the Cold War, so the Northern Regions have experienced vibrant changes, similar to the arrival of spring which breaks the ice covering lakes and rivers; suddenly there is

movement everywhere and the newly released streams move forward with force and vigour.

New states and regional organisations have been created. For the first time in our history there now exists an interlocked network of organisations embracing the entire area from Russia across the Baltic States and the Barents Sea through the Nordic countries, over the Atlantic Ocean and Greenland into Canada and the United States of America.

Three regional organisations – the Baltic Council, the Barents Region Council and the Arctic Council – all of them created in the present decade and all gaining relevance and scope with each year that passes, are a clear demonstration of this political transformation; not only bringing into being new states and new territorial bodies within states, but also creating for the first time exclusive forums for co-operation between the Northern European states, Canada and the two most important states of the twentieth century, the United States of America and Russia.

Although the Baltic, Barents and Arctic Councils are all different in composition and purpose, they constitute together a new structural reality. They show how the end of the Cold War has fundamentally changed the political and economical landscape in the North and brought our regions into key positions, influencing strongly the success of the new Europe and the stability of the Russian – American relationship.

The federal structures of Russia, Canada and the United States have furthermore brought regional, provincial and state governments into significant co-operation with the smaller nation states in the Northern Regions. Thus an interesting form of regional and nation state co-operation in economic, social and political affairs is now being created. New entities have entered the framework of co-operation in the Northern Regions. In many ways the area can now be seen as a laboratory situation of how the old nation states and the regional, provincial and state governments within the federal structures can evolve intensive forms of international co-operation in the 21st century and thus transform the old traditional model of diplomatic exchange.

These structural innovations are further enhanced by the growing independence of both the Faroe Islands and Greenland, which, although formally parts of the Danish state, are increasingly taking more power into their own hands and dealing independently with their neighbouring countries, for example Iceland and Canada. In addition it will be interesting to witness how Scotland, which for the first time in more than

three hundred years now has its own parliament and its own regional government, will develop its relations with neighbouring countries and regions in Northern Europe and Canada.

The foreign policies of the USA, Canada, Russia and the European Union have in recent times acknowledged these new realities in the Northern Regions and their importance for the evolution of Europe and the Atlantic relationship in the 21st century. Thus the European Union has formally accepted the so-called “Northern Dimension” as a pillar in its policy framework for the 21st century. Canada has decided on a new northern policy, the US State Department has sought active participation in the new regional councils and in particular, Deputy Secretary Strobe Talbot has been very active in this area. The Russian Foreign Ministry has similarly paid increasing attention to these regional institutions and emphasised the need to successfully solve fishing disputes with neighbouring countries. Whereas the Northern Regions ranked fairly low on the priority scale of the USA, Russia and the European Union some years ago, we have in recent years witnessed a significant change which indicates a new set of priorities for the 21st century.

These new challenges call for active co-operation, especially in order to preserve the environment and prevent climate change and nuclear catastrophes. The Arctic area, the Barents Sea region, Northern Europe, Greenland and northern Canada, are highly significant for the entire global environmental system in the event of further climatic change. The motor that drives the world’s network of ocean currents, and thus the foundation for the global weather system, lies around Iceland. Its mechanism is created by the combination of warm ocean water generated by the Gulf Stream and the cold ocean water created by the melting of the Arctic and Northern icecaps. Excessive melting of the ice could stop the combination that drives the motor of the ocean currents, and consequently the entire global weather system would suffer disastrous effects.

In addition, the environmental relevance of the Northern Regions is enhanced by the presence of vast nuclear arsenals, submarines and military systems, especially in the north-western part of Russia, some of which are in a very bad shape as far as safety is concerned. Sustained international co-operation is therefore needed to maintain the safety of these weapon systems and nuclear installations in order to prevent global disasters. Furthermore, the biological systems in the North – the vegetation and the fishing stocks – are important global resources, and without intensive co-operation there is a significant danger of their extinction.

When all these developments are taken together, they demonstrate how the end of the Cold War has dramatically transformed the political and economic landscape in the Northern Regions and brought them into key positions, and will influence strongly the success and stability of the new Europe and the Russian-American relationship.

We all know how, throughout the 20th century, universities have been highly influenced by the forces of political, economic and social change, both in their choices of research and areas of teaching, and in the formulation of conceptual frameworks and academic boundaries.

The Cold War dominated international and strategic studies. The emergence of new states from the under the wings of the colonial powers changed the scope of economics and research into development, customs and conflicts. The protest movements of the sixties and the seventies brought critical perspectives to the studies of the environment, of the role of the women, of the rights of different races and indigenous populations.

There is now a pressing need for academic institutions in the North to give priority to research and teaching dedicated to furthering the understanding of the fundamental alterations taking place in our part of the world. These political, economic and social transformations now challenge scholars and researchers to describe and interpret the multitude of changes affecting the future of the Northern Regions.

Let me note some areas which urgently need more research and deeper understanding, areas where new questions need to be asked and new concepts and referential frameworks need to be formulated so our actions and decisions, views and conclusions can be directed by knowledge and wisdom.

First, there is the political innovation – we could even say the political creation – which in the last ten years has dominated the evolution of the North. New states have gained independence; increased rights have been given to local and regional institutions. The decision-making structures are in a continuous flux and the classical question – Who governs, where and how? – now requires new answers, bringing into focus the nature of democratic accountability in the modern world. We could even say that the North has become a working laboratory of new political institutions and relationships: local, regional, national and global.

Second, the relationship between environmental protection and sustainable economic growth is a crucial element in the successful development of the Northern Regions. How we treat this relationship is

not only of fundamental importance to ourselves but will also greatly affect the global environmental situation.

It is, for example, a sad reflection on the direction of modern scientific research that at present we lack international programmes focusing on the development and application of climate models for predicting future changes in the Arctic. Our regions harbour some of the most sensitive biosystems in the world; plants and species balance on the edge of extinction, our oceans and seas are homes to important fishing stocks which could be threatened by the failure of our political systems to reach agreements on the management of these critical ocean resources.

Third, we have the transformation of security structures and security arrangements following the end of the Cold War and the disintegration of the Soviet Union. Here there is a tendency to hide the new reality by still using in part old conceptual frameworks.

The expansion of NATO, the need to make Russia secure, stable and integrated into the western world, the failure of the European institutions to solve by themselves the civil war crisis in some parts of our continent – all of these developments have enhanced the role of the United States and Canada in European affairs. Scholars and researchers should explore how these developments have changed the security concept, the notion of alliance and non-alliance; how new forms of security co-operation have affected the thinking, the training and the culture of the armed forces; how applicable or redundant traditional security studies are to understanding these new realities.

Fourth, economic growth and income distribution in the North are issues of critical importance and will influence the growth of successful and stable political co-operation between central and territorial institutions. It is indeed an interesting question whether the successful model for balanced economic growth should be the integrated, centrally-directed European Union model or the more decentralised American model where the respective states and regions operate as independent actors in global markets, their success measured by the international trade of Texas, California, Utah, Tennessee and other states as separate entities. We face the challenging question of which of these two models is a better guide for the evolution of the northern territories and for dealing with different regions, for example of Russia and Canada.

These four areas and indeed many others, for example social disintegration, growing crime and narcotics trade, cultural transformation, education and human rights, would each be a sufficient challenge in itself.

Taken together, they constitute a transformation of the perspectives facing the universities and research institutions in Northern Regions.

We need an inter-connected network of sustained co-operation and dialogue among the entire community of scholars from the Northern Regions and those specialists from other parts of the world who are interested in sharing in our explorations.

Reflecting on how to create such an integrated community of northern scholars dealing with issues, projects and problems related to the future of our countries and regions, an academic network which year by year would deepen and extend our understanding and provide northern institutions with sound substance for the democratic decision-making process, I decided to propose in the opening lecture which I gave in 1998 on the 20th anniversary of the University of Lapland, the creation of an annual or biannual forum which would bring together in a systematic way the wealth of academic talent now existing in the North.

The creation of such a forum would provide regular opportunities for introducing research papers and holding workshops on significant problems, enabling young researchers and scholars to present their findings to audiences of distinguished and learned experts. It could also further co-operation between scholars from different parts of the Northern Regions and integrate new institutions of learning and research into the world of the more established universities. The forum could facilitate participation by outstanding scholars from other parts of the world and allow Canadian, American and Russian scholars in particular a convenient and regular entry into the academic world of the Northern European communities; thus furthering indirectly Canadian – American – Russian academic co-operation and opening up financial avenues to Canadian, American and European foundations which support research and academic co-operation.

In my lecture in Finland in the fall of 1998, I proposed to name this forum the Northern Research Forum and I called on the University of Lapland in Rovaniemi to study the proposal. I indicated that support would be forthcoming from the two universities in Iceland, especially from the University in Akureyri, which specialises in the Northern Regions in close co-operation with the Vilhjálmur Stefánsson Institute in Akureyri. That institute was founded two years ago and bears the name of the great Icelandic - Canadian explorer.

The next step was that in a special report, the University of Lapland endorsed the proposal for the creation of the Northern Research Forum;

an organisation committee was established consisting of leading scholars from the Nordic countries, Russia, Canada and the United States. I also initiated discussions with two leading American foundations, the Ford Foundation and the Carnegie foundation, and both have now agreed to provide financial support for the establishment of the Northern Research Forum. Some distinguished personalities have been approached to take a seat on a special honorary board with the aim of providing general support for the Northern Research Forum. Among those who have already accepted to take a seat on this Board are Martti Ahtisaari, the former President of Finland, Vaira Vike-Freiberga, the newly elected President of Latvia and a former professor in Canada, the great Norwegian explorer Thor Heyerdahl, to name just a few. The organisers of the Northern Research Forum have asked me to become the Chairman of the Honorary Board and I have gladly accepted that role.

The Northern Research Forum will be convened for the first time in Iceland next November and the University of Akureyri will be the host institution. Furthermore attention is already being given to the idea of holding the next meeting of the Forum in Russia.

I am especially grateful and pleased that the proposal for the creation of the Northern Research Forum has met with such enthusiasm and support and I hope that the Forum will serve the integration and advancement of research and policy dialogue in the Northern Regions.

I thank you again for inviting me to address you here today and participate in the workshops at your distinguished conference.

Canadian Universities and research institutions are uniquely well placed to become leading participants in the new northern dialogue and thus help both policymakers and the public in Canada to realise the importance of the northern dimension in Canada's vision of the 21st century.

I urge you all to explore these new opportunities. The first meeting of the Northern Research Forum in Iceland next November will be an excellent venue for the continuation and advancement of our dialogue.