



Address
by
the President of Iceland
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Distinguished participants
Ladies and Gentlemen

The Nordic countries are known the world over as a model of the open democratic society where the rule of law and a highly advanced system of welfare, based on the guiding principle of equality, grant citizens the right to lead a good and civilised life.

In recent years the process of European integration has suggested that these characteristics have also come to dominate the European experience. The institutions of the European Union and the Council of Europe are seen as the pillars that make their member countries the most progressive region for human rights in the world.

These Nordic and European perspectives often lead to the claim that other countries and continents should aspire to attain the European standards and the most advanced yardstick available for human rights should be based on the European experience, this vision being profoundly influenced by the legacy of European philosophers and the legal tradition which have so clearly influenced the evolution of our political systems.

It is often overlooked, however, that the history of Europe in modern times, especially the dramatic upheavals which dominated the 20th century, manifests some of the worst violations of human rights in world history. Two world wars, revolutions and civil wars, terror and torture, imprisonment and forced labour, the Gulag and the Holocaust are all reminders that our continent has witnessed the greatest oppression of human rights known to mankind, that millions of people lost their lives or

their freedom on the altar of the European leadership as represented then by the Führer, dictators and party secretaries alike.

The ideologies of communism, nazism and fascism which provided the theoretical blessings for these atrocities were all products of the European intellectual and political scene.

It is therefore with humility and modesty that we Europeans should approach the difficult task of judging others and setting goals and time-scales for countries and nations which in recent decades have been struggling to consolidate their independence, establish frameworks for economic progress and political stability and give their citizens the rights to master their destiny, exert their democratic will and freely express their views and aspirations.

The European experience in modern times is above all a manifestation of how extraordinarily difficult it can be to consolidate human rights over a long period of time and how strong the tendency is to violate these basic strands of civilised society in the name of other aims.

I have occasionally noted in dialogues with our European friends that during the first years of my life there were only six countries in Europe that were not the victims of totalitarian rule and which have remained consistently democratic to this very day: three Nordic countries, Britain, Ireland and Switzerland, all but one in Northern Europe.

These reflections on European history are worth consideration when we open the 21st century with a strong emphasis on good governance not only as the criterion of our own success but also as the yardstick for measuring the extent to which nations in other continents are worthy of economic assistance, development aid and full participation in international deliberations on the future of the world.

We should recognise that we are all in the same boat and on the journey forward we can all learn from the failures experienced on our own home ground.

Europe's contribution to the evolution and consolidation of human rights worldwide abounds in setbacks as well as progress and our heritage embraces both the excellence and the tragedies which have dominated this worthy human endeavour.

The vision of good governance as it was presented in reports, declarations and manifestoes towards the end of the 20th century was to some extent a summary of the most positive side of the European experience and made globally applicable by reference to some success stories among the developing nations; the continents of Asia, Africa and

Latin America were seen as the primary candidates for progress. Their performance was to be judged by criteria established with a strong European bias, with any reference to the time needed to produce positive change often left entirely out of the equation.

However, it is important to note that the concept of good governance is also changing in the light of the social, economic and technical evolution of our societies. In many ways the individual is now more powerful with respect to the expression of his or her will, the ways open to political participation are more numerous than ever and the activities of organisations dedicated to the promotion of human rights, the rule of law and the principles of transparency and the open society now provide a healthy balance to the operations of state institutions, influential corporations and interest associations.

In this respect the Nordic countries can continue to serve as an evolving model, changing our laws and regulations so as to secure the dynamic contribution made by the exercise of the human rights that have been granted to our citizens, demonstrating our determination to preserve the civilised foundation of our societies in the face of new challenges.

The strength of democracy in our societies will depend on how we cope with this transformation and the changes which in many ways could reduce the democratic essence of our societies and thus undermine the active realisation of human rights as the driving force of our evolution.

We should have the honesty to acknowledge that at the opening of the 21st century the democratic basis of our societies and the fundamental strands of our political system are being challenged in a number of ways.

At a special session of the Nordic Council, dedicated to the future of democracy and held in Reykjavík earlier this year, I attempted to analyse some of these challenges and advocated the need for an open discussion on these wide-ranging problems. Since the essence of good governance and the realization of human rights are so closely linked to the strength and structure of our democratic system, I take this opportunity to reiterate some of these challenges because I strongly believe that they will fundamentally affect the future of governance in our societies.

First, globalisation and market deregulation have caused the scope of political control to contract and democratic decision-making therefore plays a smaller role. An ever-growing number of factors affecting our daily lives, work, living standards, family affairs and opportunities for advancement and personal fulfilment are shaped by international trends, the interaction of market forces and activities of major corporations whose influence extends to many countries. We are increasingly led to

wonder how democracy can continue at such times to be an effective engine for change. What will happen to the will of the people, the essence of democracy, under such conditions? The fate of individuals and nations is increasingly determined by the management of global corporations rather than by the standpoints of democratically elected representatives in national assemblies.

It is increasingly the accepted ideology that economic growth is strengthened by more market deregulation and greater freedom for companies to operate at global level. Politicians have therefore relinquished substantial degrees of power and thereby reduced the scope of the representative democracy in which we live. On a growing scale, politics revolve around creating favourable conditions for global capital and corporations, increasing the importance of the market and reducing the number of democratic decisions made about the public good.

Second, the evolution of the European Union and thereby the European Economic Area, together with growing international cooperation on security, the environment and other issues, has transferred part of the power that was formerly vested in the democratic institutions of nation states to European and supra-national institutions which are not tailored in the same way to the direct democratic power of the people, but are based instead on a system of delegation formulated on the basis of international cooperation.

European integration and the institutionalisation of international cooperation have certainly engendered many positive developments, e.g. in the field of human rights, in the position of minorities and of the individual who opposes the powers-that-be. The European Court of Human Rights and the International Criminal Court clearly demonstrate these achievements. It is, however, clear that the growing scope of the European Union, and its impact on the economies and finances of member states is creating an increasing democratic deficit in European cooperation and this European democratic deficit is also a Nordic problem, by virtue of the Nordic states' membership of the European Union or the European Economic Area. But we have a tendency to discuss this solely as a European problem and in this way make it more remote, thus avoiding facing up to the change that has taken place in Nordic democratic systems with the growing transfer of decision-making to European institutions which are not as subject to democratic restraints as the traditional institutions of the Nordic states.

Third, there is much to suggest that the position of political parties, which are key institutions in the democratic system we have in the Nordic countries, will continue to weaken in the decades to come. Studies show

that their membership is declining and it is becoming increasingly difficult to motivate people to work for them and design their policies. It was even forecast in Sweden a few years ago that if party political membership continues to drop at the present pace, there will be no one left in the Swedish parties by the year 2013. While I doubt this prediction, it is clear that political parties are having trouble in maintaining the degree of influence which they held for the greater part of the 20th century. Their membership is dwindling, the media and interest organizations play more of a key role in discussions and policy-making, and greater opportunities for entertainment and creative leisure have weakened the appeal of political parties.

Fourth, it appears that the main institutions of the democratic system will be weakened because others – corporations, the media, financial institutions and the civil service – will triumph in the competition to secure people with the education, skills and talents to excel and take creative initiative. Young people today have far more diverse opportunities to satisfy their ambition for fame and fortune, exciting jobs and good incomes. The political parties, national assemblies and local governments – these key institutions of the democratic system – will have growing trouble in holding their own in the rivalry for human resources. This democratic problem has admittedly been taboo to some extent and there has been little in the way of proposals for countering it. If nothing is done to boost the position of democracy in this rivalry, however, there is a risk that these institutions will be weakened still further and power will gradually slip into the hands of others who are not subject to democratic restraints in the same way.

Fifth, new issue organizations have emerged, whose share in the democratic dialogue and the decision-making process is likely to grow in the future. Environmental organizations, human rights organizations, organizations associated with international issues and organizations of minority groups are some examples, many of them driven by very active involvement on the part of their members. These organizations have served to step up public participation in the democratic arena and thereby counterbalance the decline that has characterized the activities of political parties and labour unions. If the growth of these new organizations is to be used to strengthen the pillars of democracy, they must be given better access to the main institutions of authority in society – to ministries, national assemblies and local governments – because the powers-that-be often tend to confine their consultations to the older and more conventional organizations. Leaders of democratic institutions must thus demonstrate in practice that they applaud the impetus that these new organizations represent.

The grass roots and dissidence are possibly democracy's main sign of life, so relations with the movements that spring up there must not be neglected. Nordic societies enjoy stability and the democratic tradition has deep roots in the Nordic countries, so we should not fear allowing fresh winds to blow through the institutions of authority and decision-making.

Sixth, we need to ensure unrestricted and open access for all people to the new channels of information, and guarantee equality regardless of domicile, age or social class. Information technology must not become the privilege of any generation, education group or income group. Access to the Internet must be organized in such a way as to preserve democratic equality, just as public utilities were set up earlier last century for the public well-being. If we succeed in delivering IT in this way, it will give us a wealth of opportunities for renewing and strengthening the democratic system.

Seventh, there is much to suggest that opinions on major issues will increasingly not follow party political lines: different viewpoints will emerge among adherents of individual parties. We see examples of this here in Iceland in people's attitudes to the European Union, hydropower projects in the highlands and urban planning in the capital, to cite a few examples. This trend prompts us to wonder how the democratic system in the Nordic countries will tackle this challenge, being founded on organized and relatively unanimous political parties choosing a leadership which, in parliament and in government, implements a predefined policy. We may need, to a growing extent, to take into account divisions within parties on major issues, and ensure that the spectrum of views is reflected in parliament and even within the government, whose working procedures hitherto have above all been based on party discipline. It could prove a difficult test for the Nordic democratic system in the years to come to adapt to an intra-party spectrum of opinions on major issues and identify means for ensuring that under such circumstances too, our democratic systems can ensure that the will of the majority prevails.

The historical principle behind the Nordic democratic system assumes that a fairly like-minded nation is linked to government institutions along organized lines. In recent years, however, we have needed to tackle the challenge of giving minorities, whose roots lie in other cultures and who adhere to other creeds and customs, the chance to exert a democratic influence on central and local governments.

The final challenge that I shall mention here today is therefore how, in the decades to come, the Nordic democratic systems will create easy and secure opportunities for minority groups, immigrants and others who

are now a prominent presence in our countries' multicultural communities, to become valid participants at all stages and in all institutions of government which we have built on a democratic foundation. The Nordic people have acquired different levels of experience in this respect, but hopefully we can avoid the mistakes that have led to serious problems among other democratic nations. This will put our democratic integrity more to the test than at most times in the past, and the outcome will reflect how strong the humanitarian foundation of Nordic governance really is.

These eight factors in the democratic evolution which I have briefly touched upon are by no means an exhaustive list of the changes, problems or challenges which Nordic governance will have to tackle in the decades to come. Others can be named, such as changes in the power of national parliaments, and the increased influence of the courts through their tendency to pass rulings which serve as precedents and to interpret the nature of the constitution more extensively than before. Such a development could in turn prompt questions about the selection of judges and their position in the democratic system.

It is difficult to assess how extensive these changes may become or how they will impact the overall character of Nordic governance. We need to acknowledge the problems we face, have the determination to discuss the weakening of political parties and the democratic deficit which accompanies growing European cooperation, but also see the opportunities for boosting democracy which lie in the information revolution and in the growth of organizations dedicated to criticism of the status quo. We need to discuss these changes in the spirit of the revolutionaries and philosophers who paved the way for democracy in previous centuries and thus lay the foundations for better governance in our countries.

History shows that democracy has been continuously evolving and the form it took around the middle of the 20th century was significantly different from that of a hundred years before. Franchise had been radically changed, women and the poor had acquired full suffrage, organized mass political parties had emerged, the procedures of national assemblies had altered significantly, and interest organizations had become a crucial impetus in debates and policy-making.

Measured in decades and centuries, the development of democracy is really the history of continuous change. We should therefore be prepared to respond to the transformation that lies ahead, accept it as an enchanting challenge instead of greeting it with suspicion or fear, and not

clutch the image of democracy which took full shape around the middle of last century as if this is the only true model for all time.

Democratic governance in the Nordic countries has firm roots and is in many ways inextricably connected with our social structures and cultures. Unquestionably it offers enormous benefits, given what has happened elsewhere in the world. We can certainly congratulate ourselves on the unequivocal success of the Nordic nations in this respect, and for this reason we are also better equipped to tackle the challenges that lie ahead. We have less at stake and must have the strength to examine with frankness how to reform our system, how to respond to the challenges which democratic states everywhere will need to address in the years to come, challenges which will fundamentally affect the exercise of human rights within our societies.