



**LEADERSHIP IN THE NORTH
– THE CHALLENGE FOR ALASKA**

**A Speech
by
the President of Iceland
Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson
at
The Commonwealth North**

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Distinguished Alaskans,
Political and business leaders,
Scholars and scientists
Ladies and gentlemen

At the IASCP Conference yesterday I described how in the last decade an elaborate political system has been created which we could call “the New North” – an effective and broad framework of cooperation that has been institutionalised on four levels.

The first level consists of the three councils of international cooperation: the Arctic Council, the Barents Euro-Arctic Council and the Baltic Council.

The second level consists of the Northern Forum, which embraces representatives of regions, cities and provinces – and facilitates cooperation across national boundaries.

The third level consists of the University of the Arctic – a network of over 50 universities and research institutions dedicated to creating and training an academic community devoted to furthering knowledge of the North.

The fourth level consists of the Northern Research Forum, which first met in Iceland in the year 2000, then in Russia last year – and will assemble next year in Canada.

It is important for us to understand fully how this model of the New North offers us opportunities for effective cooperation and political innovation. It opens up new avenues for economic and social progress, as well as cultural enrichment and an inspired democratic dialogue. In this respect, the New North is unique in the world. No other part of the globe now enjoys such an elaborate and interconnected framework for cooperation – embracing regions that range from Asia to the Atlantic, from Alaska to the Nordic countries – bringing Russia and the United States together in a network of cooperation in the company of both new and old democratic states.

I furthermore emphasised that Alaska can in special and significant ways maximize the advantages created by the New North. Alaska is the standard-bearer of the United States in northern cooperation and through Alaska's active involvement, the President and the government in Washington are directly linked to the progress of the North. It is similar to how the Russian regions bring President Putin and Moscow into the decision-making process concerning the future of the North. Therefore, the New North framework is an important pillar in Russian-American relations in the 21st century.

Alaska has in many fascinating ways been a pioneering state. Your constitution and your vision of how to preserve and utilise the commons for the benefit of all the people are a fountain of new thinking, ideas and proposals.

Alaska is a prominent player in the New North in its own right and as the representative of the United States the predominant provider of leadership and responsibility.

Today I want to emphasise some areas where this leadership must be exerted in the coming years. Some of them are of special importance mainly to the North, to the Arctic regions, but others are also of global significance and will have a strong impact of many parts of the world.

Let me begin by listing briefly four potentials of the North, the utilisation of which would be of fundamental global importance.

First: The North is as we know extremely rich in energy resources. It is one of the world's largest reservoirs of oil, gas and hydro and geothermal power. The management and utilisation of these resources is one of the most important future tasks in the North. Here Alaska must offer both leadership and guidance, based on your experience and inspired by the way you have formulated both a philosophy and public policies of how to harvest the commons for the benefit of the people and in order to maintain the sustainability of the resources.

Second: The development of the Northern Sea Route would link North –America, Europe and Asia in a new way and dramatically transform commerce, communication and business opportunities and create a new dimension in the global economy. Alaska has already taken initiatives in exploring the potential of this project and I urge you strongly to provide the necessary leadership in the coming years so the Northern Sea Route project will maintain the priority it deserves.

Third: The establishment of permanent air routes and the necessary aviation infrastructures in the North could become a strong pillar in the

consolidation of the American-Russian relationship in the 21st century and here Alaska together with the Russian regions must take the leading role. There is also a strong interest in this potential in my country since Icelandic airlines have been pioneers in Atlantic-European passenger traffic and in global cargo and specialised air transportation. As a sign of the Icelandic interest the most prominent Icelandic entrepreneur in this field is a member of my delegation here in Alaska.

Fourth: The development of telecommunications and information technology in the North is an essential part of our future and here also Alaska offers a wealth of experience. During its presidency of the Arctic Council, Iceland has given special emphasis to this subject and next October we will host in Iceland, under the auspices of the Arctic Council, an international conference on information and communication technology in the Arctic. The main purpose of the conference is to examine the use of information technology in the North and suggest practical ways of moving forward. The conference will also concentrate on two aspects in particular, telemedicine and distance education. I would like to take this opportunity here today to urge you to have a strong Alaskan presence at the conference in Iceland this fall and thus follow up on our discussions.

In addition to these four areas which all are of fundamental importance for the future of the North and of great global relevance, areas which demonstrate the international significance of the North, let me also list briefly a number of other tasks and projects, issues and concerns where we hope Alaska will be strongly involved in the coming years.

Along with information technology, the main priority of the Icelandic presidency of the Arctic Council is the assessment of human development in the Arctic establishing an overview of sustainable development and identifying the factors that affect the well-being of the inhabitants. The focus will be on social, cultural and economical progress and how they relate to sustainable development and the use of natural resources in the region. The conclusions of this wide-ranging work will be submitted in the form of an Arctic Human Development Report and we hope that when it is issued Alaska will join us in strongly promoting its conclusions.

We also intend to use the Arctic Council to strengthen scientific and technological cooperation for sustainable development through increased networking between scientists and research institutions. The aim is to build on existing international organisations and programmes, working with issues such as sustainable agriculture, communications, tourism, construction and the use of natural resources. We will also promote

collaboration between funding agencies and research councils of the member states of the Arctic Council so as to facilitate joint financing of research programmes and projects. One focus will be to develop the existing cooperation between the European Union and North America in order to link educational and research institutions dealing with Arctic research. In addition, high priority will be given to strengthening circumpolar and cross-disciplinary monitoring to help us to determine and analyse environmental changes in the Arctic. The aim is increasingly to integrate monitoring of biodiversity and the assessment of pollution, climate change and other environmental and social and economic factors.

In the near future we should also give priority to the following:

- *Economic progress through business partnerships, facilitated by investments in information technology and communications networks.
- *The evolution of political systems in the North, including the strengthening of international councils such as the Arctic Council, the Barents Euro-Arctic Council and the Baltic Council, and extension of active cooperation between nation states in the regions and sub-state institutions such as provincial, local, regional and state governments in Canada, Russia and the United States. This cooperation across the boundaries of diplomatic protocol has provided a wealth of new opportunities in the North and in recent years has made the region a fascinating political laboratory.
- *Legal issues concentrating on the rights of indigenous peoples, cultural and human rights and land ownership.
- *The enhancement of cultural cooperation, including artistic exhibitions, musical events, film festivals, publishing and theatre, as well as the important task of language retention and the preservation of traditional patterns of social interaction.
- *The growing importance of human health and the need to address the problems of suicide, homicide and inter-family violence.
- *The impact of globalisation on the North, including the growing presence of multinational corporation and the critical role of the North for the global system.

The list could be longer, but these topics indicate a wealth of opportunities for constructive dialogue within the framework of the New North where the United States, Russia, Canada and the five Nordic countries – Iceland, Norway, Denmark, Sweden and Finland – have committed themselves to constructive partnership in the coming years.

This outline shows the great change which has taken place in the North since the end of the Cold War, when all contacts had been completely frozen and absolute stagnation had prevailed for decades. Now there has been a thaw, much of the political ice has been broken and the rivers are surging forth, bringing a wealth of opportunities that were once unthinkable.

Alaska has much to offer in all these areas and your experience in the fight for statehood, in the creation of your own constitution, and in the formulation of how to govern and utilize the commons for the long-term benefit of all, has endowed your leadership with special qualities and given your contributions both insights and vision which will greatly enhance the quality of the dialogue and cooperation in the North.

I have come all the way from Iceland, on the first visit by a President of my country to Alaska, to seek your partnership and lay the foundation for our wide-ranging cooperation in the future.

I have been tremendously inspired by our discussions and I sense among the Alaskans a strong pioneering spirit, the spirit which made America great and is akin to the spirit which brought my own country independence and progress.

The North now needs such a pioneering spirit. Let the Alaskans and the Icelanders provide it in abundance.