



IMAGES OF THE NORTH

**Address by the
President of Iceland,
Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson,
at the opening of a conference
held by
The Reykjavík Academy
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Distinguished scholars, experts
and ladies and gentlemen who have the future of the North at heart,

It is fitting, at the beginning of a new century, to initiate a broad discussion of the Northern Regions, their future, their nature and the threats they face; the culture and the customs of their peoples in a period of upheaval – a discussion of the riches of the North, its energy resources, its natural endowments and its value for the future of mankind.

Such a discussion would have been unthinkable a few decades ago. Then, the North was hidden from view for most people. It was virtually a forbidden area, locked in the stranglehold of the Cold War and its armaments race. International attention and concerns, interests and influence, were focussed on other regions: the Iron Curtain lay across Europe and world affairs were centred mainly on developments on the mainland.

Now all this has changed. The Cold War is over; energies that were channelled into the arms race are now directed towards attempts to dispose safely of atomic weapons; democracy and economic reforms are now blossoming in countries where, not long ago, tension and suspicion made nations into enemies. The United States and Russia are now linked by stronger bonds of co-operation.

These changes have freed the North from its shackles and created new opportunities both for governments and ordinary people, who have

welcomed the changes and set to work with a will to develop new and exciting patterns of co-operation and contact.

For more than ten years now, the North has been a sort of laboratory where new types of institutions and associations have sprung up. The result has been such that there now exist multiple opportunities to exert influence, to make oneself relevant and to play a part. These channels are open to all: governments and the public, associations and groups of enthusiasts, scholars who come forward with new ideas or interesting findings, the inhabitants of different regions and ethnic minorities.

The institutional network that has been created in the Northern Regions is very democratic, and differs from the co-operational structures in other regions of the world in a number of ways.

- The Arctic Council is blissfully free of red tape and formality, and gives the member country holding its chairmanship at any given time the chance of advancing new proposals and fresh ideas.
- The Northern Forum brings cities and regions together with the accent on the needs of people who are scattered far and wide across the Northern Regions.
- The University of the Arctic is a co-operative forum uniting about 70 academic institutions and providing a promising framework for the cultivation of skills and knowledge in many fields.
- The Northern Research Forum has become established as a meeting ground for scientists, specialists, elected representatives and leaders in business and cultural life, with an emphasis on giving young scientists an opportunity to devote their energies to Northern subjects.

I could name further examples, but these will serve to illustrate the growth and creative flowering that has characterised recent developments in the North. The new institutional network has welcomed participants and ideas from all quarters.

This powerful democratic dimension is a valuable asset at a time when the North is constantly growing in importance and a discussion of the situation and trends in the Northern Regions is becoming one of the most urgent topics in international affairs. There are two factors, in particular, that already make the North into a key region regarding the future of mankind, and its importance in this context will grow still further in the years ahead.

Firstly, there is the spectre of climate change. The North is the most important barometer indicating the real nature of what is happening. This is where the warming of the climate is taking place faster than anywhere else: the glaciers are melting and the changes in the ocean currents can transform conditions for life in distant parts of the world. Almost every day we see and hear media reports about changes in the natural environment in the North and the difficulties faced by its inhabitants. The North has become the leading symbol for the hazards of climate change – of the threat which the whole of mankind has to face.

Secondly, there are the energy resources that lie in the North: oil, gas, hydropower and geothermal energy – it is estimated that a quarter of the world's unexploited energy reserves are to be found in the Northern Regions. There are gigantic interests at stake here, not only as regards the future of the Northern peoples but for the entire world. We have only to consider the status and influence of the Middle East in our own times to understand how important the discussion of the utilisation of the energy resources of the Northern Regions could become in the years ahead.

While these two factors – climate change and energy reserves – place the North in the focus of international issues, there are also many other considerations that give it importance. For example, there is the polar sea route that could link Asia with Europe and America in a new way, transforming world trade in the same way as the Suez Canal did when it was opened. There are also aboriginal issues to be considered – the status of the native peoples in Alaska, Canada and Russia, for example – issues involving fundamental questions of law, of the relationship between individuals and the state; precedents that could have wide-ranging repercussions in other parts of the world. The same applies to the preservation of the cultures of various ethnic minorities and the protection of the languages and life-styles that are intimately connected with their cultural heritage: how the peoples of the Northern Regions respond to international influences undermining the values and customs that have for centuries been their special characteristics.

In a short time, the North has been drawn from the fringes of international affairs into the central focus of global events. It has become a sort of crossroads where major destinies will be decided, and the way in which these issues will be handled is bound to have wide-ranging consequences.

This historic transformation of the North gives us in Iceland new opportunities to make our voices heard and influence the course of events, to make contributions that others regard as crucial, to come forward with ideas and participate in developing new strategies.

What I have sometimes called “the New North” has opened up for us in Iceland, for the first time in our history, ways to have a say on matters of great value for the entire global community, enabling us to play a decisive role concerning the fortunes and welfare of all mankind.

There are only eight countries in the North: Iceland and the other Nordic countries, the USA, Canada and Russia. Northern issues thus give Iceland a host of new opportunities for collaborating with both the USA and Russia, and can also provide the Nordic countries with new areas of focus for their traditional collaboration.

Experience shows that, more and more, what matters in the international arena is being able to offer something that can be of advantage to others: ideas, innovations, knowledge, technology and experience.

In this, Icelanders have shown that we have much to offer, and our contribution to Northern issues has been greatly appreciated.

Two examples illustrate clearly what can be achieved when the guiding lights are professionalism, imagination and integrity and when no ulterior motives are involved.

Iceland’s chairmanship of the Arctic Council two years ago led to the production of reports of fundamental importance on climate change and human development based on collaboration between experts from various countries, reports which created new goals in co-operation between the nations of the Northern Regions. The leadership provided by Ambassador Gunnar Pálsson was significant in this respect and demonstrated convincingly the good results that a talented Icelandic can achieve in the new theatre of Northern development.

The Northern Research Forum is based on an Icelandic initiative, and the University of Akureyri has from the outset been the administrative centre of the Forum. The large community of participants from other countries consider that the interests of the NRF are best served by having the headquarters in Iceland; the international administrative committee has always been of the opinion that this arrangement will secure results and make it easy for other parties to be involved on an equal footing.

Iceland’s smallness has proved to be a great advantage in matters concerning the Northern Regions.

In the light of what I have mentioned here this morning, it is a cause for celebration that this conference has been organised to examine and

define the challenges that lie ahead in the Northern Regions, how or whether the images reflect the reality of the North.

In this, we are just setting out on an exciting journey, and in our quest towards the New North it is vital that as many people as possible should be able to make their own contribution.

The challenges we face are of various kinds, and in many cases our knowledge is inadequate. For this reason it is vital that scholars and experts with a wide range of backgrounds be involved. Our fundamental concern must be the quest for knowledge; innovation must be our guiding light and the order of the day must be that everyone be welcome to take part in this journey.

The future of the North must cultivate carefully the tradition of democracy that, more than anything else, has been responsible for the successes of recent years.

There is much at stake, not only for the North and its peoples, but for the entire world.