



LOOKING BEYOND THE INTERNATIONAL POLAR YEAR

**An Opening Address
by
the President of Iceland
Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson
at the University of Akureyri
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*The speech was delivered without notes.
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A few years ago when the widow of Vilhjalmur Stefansson, Evelyn Stefánsson Neff, came here, she reminded us through many fascinating personal stories how Vilhjalmur had in old age still been fascinated by his experience of discovering new territories in the Arctic part of Canada and bringing the knowledge of the existence of these territories and the customs and the lifestyle of their people to the so-called established world.

This reminded us how recently we in the western intellectual hemisphere have incorporated the Arctic and the Northern areas into our concerns. Even during the heyday of my life, for most of us who are here this morning, the Cold War so deeply froze this part of the world that it was almost a political and intellectual taboo to concern oneself with the issues of the Arctic and the Northern Regions. Honestly, most of us never really expected the Cold War to end in our lifetime. It was therefore perhaps a hopeless academic or intellectual career choice to decide to be active in the Arctic.

All of a sudden, with the end of the Cold War, the Arctic opened up in many different ways, but it has taken the international community a long time to realise how we must cope with these challenges, from the point of view of international law, policy making and cooperation between the nations which encircle the Arctic. As I have sometimes reminded Bill Clinton, even his enlightened administration with Al Gore

on board was hesitant, reluctant, even negative towards the establishment of a special Arctic Council to deal with these issues. In the end, he finally accepted that it should be established, but with no permanent secretariat, and only one short meeting every year.

Even these two global leaders, who have in recent years created names for themselves in the international dialogue and debate on climate change, had in the early 1990s little perception of the political and intellectual importance of the Arctic Regions.

I have also been reminded in my visits to the Northwest Territories in Canada and to Siberia and the eastern part of Russia, Chukotka and Yamal Nenets, how the intellectual and historical framework which we adopted in our youth and adult life has not taken into account the rights and the position of the indigenous people in these areas.

It was for me a startling discovery to visit the reindeer herders in Chukotka and to discover that for thousands of years, long before Iceland was discovered, the ancestors of these people had, as they were now, been living in harmony with the reindeer herds, deriving their food, their clothes, their tents, their livelihood entirely and solely from their animals.

I will never forget the meeting I had one evening in the Northwestern Territories in Canada with my friend Adrienne Clarkson, then Governor-General of Canada, with the elders, the leaders of the indigenous community. They didn't speak English, and definitely not French; their language was so far away from ours that when I spoke a few sentences it took a couple of minutes, even three or four, to translate them. After a while it became hilarious: I said a few sentences and had to wait for three, four or even five minutes for them to be translated. When I asked afterwards, I was told their language had no framework for concepts or ideas; it was entirely a language of concrete natural phenomena. The interpreter had to create the meaning of my words by referring to the experience in nature by these people.

But what really moved me most, was when they told me of their frustration for decades in dealing with the Government of Canada with respect to their rights, their land and their future. Now they were hopeful because one young man from their tribe had decided to go to university and study law. He was the first in the history of their tribe to do so. They were sitting there with their life and their problems on their shoulders waiting for this young man to come back from university to give their campaign, their vision, their hopes, a new strength.

It reminded me of the Icelanders before the middle of the 19th century who were brought up on farms, some here in northern Iceland,

and went as students to my residence, Bessastadir, which was then the only school in the country. They then travelled to Copenhagen to study law with the hope of being able to argue the case why this nation of poor farmers and fishermen living far away in the North Atlantic should gain independence.

So we come to this table of International Polar Law with a legacy which is filled more with hopes than with substance, with the humility that there is more which we don't know than we know. And also with the fundamental challenge of making the knowledge which we can, together, bring to the table politically and internationally relevant. All of a sudden, due to many different factors, the Arctic and the Polar Regions have become, potentially, politically the hottest regions in the first half of the 21st century. Apart from the Middle East, there is no area on the globe which will require as much new intellectual and juristic policy-making contribution within a cooperative framework on how to solve future challenges.

Climate change has fundamentally transformed the essence of this region. In Alaska, whole villages are disappearing into the sea. What are the fundamental rights of the inhabitants? Their homes are disappearing through the ice due to the actions of the rest of us in Europe and North America over previous decades. What are the claims that they can make on the international community?

In addition, the northern part of the world harbours about a quarter of the untapped energy reservoirs in the world. We only have to look at the relevance of the Middle East in recent decades to understand the significance of such resources, with their combination of gas, oil and hydro-geothermal power.

The melting of the ice will potentially open up new shipping routes, linking Asia to America and Europe in a completely new way, perhaps revolutionizing global trade in a way similar to the Suez Canal.

How is Russia going to deal with such commercial traffic along her northern coast? How is Iceland going to deal with potential environmental threats brought by increasing commercial shipping in our waters, and how are our towns and regions, including Akureyri, to use the opportunities which this new type of shipping will create?

I indicated before that the indigenous people in these territories have a much longer history and perhaps more fundamental claims than the descendants of those who came a few hundred years ago to those lands or those who now govern states that have only existed for, in the case of

Russia today, a few decades, less than two, or in the case of the United States a few centuries, just a little more than two.

Are we going to impose the legal framework created by these state structures on people who have existed in those lands and areas for thousands of years, long before anybody ever thought about the structure of modern states? Even those of us in the Nordic countries who tend to present ourselves as enlightened human-rights advocates, how are we going to treat the people in the northern parts of our countries, with similar claims to the lands and to livelihood beyond what our states have up to now recognised?

It was for me an interesting reminder of the global relevance of these issues far beyond the Arctic and the North, that only a week ago during my visit to Bangladesh, I learned from the Minister of the Environment in that poor country, that he was also the King of an indigenous tribe of 400,000 people living, as many other tribes do, inside the State of Bangladesh. Taking his position as the King of his tribe very seriously, he had familiarized himself in great detail with the situation, the rights and the political challenges facing the indigenous people in the Arctic and the North, for example the attendance of the indigenous association at meetings of the Arctic Council as a basis for claiming in the future a stronger political role for his tribe within the State of Bangladesh.

It brought home to me that what we are trying to do in the North, in the Arctic, and here today, to find our way among these new challenges and try to bring together the intellectual legacy and the framework of the rule of law to this part of the world, is of great global relevance for people in different continents.

How we succeed or fail in this endeavour will have an impact on people in Africa, Asia and Central and Latin –America, because those parts of the world are also populated by indigenous people who have to find harmony within the modern state structure in their part of the world.

It made me realize, as I have gradually come to conclude in recent years, that the Arctic and the North poses, for us in the eight countries that encircle the Arctic, an important and fascinating intellectual and political challenge.

It is in this spirit that I welcome you all here today and look forward to learning about about the conclusions of your discussions.