



Speech
by
the President of Iceland
Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson
at
Nordisk Forum
for Megling og Konfliktþáning
Reykjavík
1 October 2009

*The speech was delivered without notes.
This is a transcript of the recording.*

Ladies and Gentlemen,
Distinguished delegates,

Let me begin by apologising for not giving my opening speech in one of the three out of seven Nordic languages that are usually used in these conferences: Danish, Norwegian or Swedish. My fellow countrymen would have understood Icelandic, only the Finns would have understood Finnish and the language of the Faroese and the Inuits in Greenland would probably not be appropriate either. So in these gatherings we are left with three of the seven Nordic languages to choose from.

Unfortunately yesterday there were unexpected events within the Icelandic Government so the day that we were going to devote to transform what I was going to say over to one of these three languages had to be devoted to other things. I hope you bear with me to be here this morning without a written text and also for leaving you immediately after my speech because I have to go straight to the meeting of the State Council where we will change ministers in the Government in the peaceful and democratic way which we have long since established in this country.

Talking about all those Nordic languages, it is worth reflecting that when the roots of Icelandic democracy and the rule of law and peaceful solutions of conflicts were formulated more than a thousand years ago, the entire Nordic region was one language area. It was possible to travel from Iceland to Norway and Sweden and even into Russia and to the British Isles and speak the language of one's mother and father and expect to be understood by others. It was a common area of language, culture and experience.

Therefore it was somewhat extraordinary that the Norwegian Vikings who moved here together with Irish women decided in the tenth century to establish a unique system of law and conflict resolution, a medieval republic which became the foundation of the Icelandic nation. It was in many ways a remarkable example of how people who came from different directions and settled in a virgin land, divided it up between themselves, and then agreed, after a few decades, that they could not go on without having an established and comprehensive framework of law and conflict resolution.

They established a republic which was based on the rule of law and the peaceful resolution of conflicts, but without any executive power. The highest official of the country was the Speaker of the Law. There was not a single individual or office dedicated to what we have become to believe is an essence of a political system: the executive power. This system, established in Iceland in the year 930, lasted for over three hundred years. That is longer than the United States have been in existence so far.

This is an interesting example of human beings having within them the capability to conduct society, agree on laws, solve conflicts and live in reasonable harmony without having a systematic, comprehensive and powerful executive rule.

The kingdoms of the other European countries represented a different system, symbolised in the big palaces that are to be found all over Europe. There, the centre of the executive was the centre of the system. When you travel around Iceland you will see that there are no palaces in this country, no castles. There is only the rocky formation in Thingvellir, the ancient Parliament place where you can see the place where the Speaker of the Law recited the laws of the country every year.

Of course in those times people killed each other, as we can read in the Sagas. They had all kinds of disputes; they fought for years and decades and some were sent into exile. But it was a system which was able to solve its problems for over three hundred years without a centralized executive power. It was left up to the people, the individuals, both to agree on the laws and to solve their conflicts, to execute the

solutions or the verdicts which the judges had passed. In addition to the rule of law, there was also a system with elaborate system of courts.

This ancient republic became, through the literary heritage of the Sagas, the foundation of the Icelandic nation, of our image of ourselves, the justification when we fought for over one hundred years with our friends in Denmark for independence. Only after three hundred years were the Norwegian kings, who had for a long time wished to have some role in this country, gradually able to gain an entry, partly because the Icelanders realized that it was difficult for them alone to conduct trade between Iceland and the rest of Europe.

It is quite remarkable that although the King of Norway was accepted and although Icelanders became the subjects of the Danish King, following Norway into the Danish Kingdom, representation of the King in Iceland was always at a minimum. The officials did not really have any great strength or power. For centuries there was not a single soldier, either Norwegian or Danish, in this country. We only have one occasion, a rather operatic occasion, when it was necessary for the Danes to bring a few dozen soldiers into the country. This has given rise to various songs and plays in modern times because we celebrate that period in a rather funny way.

Not only was the medieval republic a system without an executive power; the entire period, many centuries of foreign rule, was without the presence of military forces or even elaborate system of officials to enact the power of the King within the Icelandic system.

In that sense we could say that the centuries up to modern times, up to the middle of the nineteenth century, were also a period where the inherent dialogue among the people continued to be the essence of the system. The Parliament continued to meet, and people continued to have regional discussions in different parts of the country. So when the Icelanders started their independence campaign in the 1840s, claiming similar rights within Iceland as the Danish Folketing was given in Denmark, they found it natural to conduct that campaign on the basis of the long-standing tradition of dialogue and democratic dispute, of peaceful solutions of conflicts, of exchange of views and a reasonable argument.

Admittedly, it was not very effective in terms of time. But we didn't move away from this fundamental method. It took us one hundred years from the first claims being put forward for a separate assembly in the 1840s until the Icelandic republic was established in 1944. One hundred years of continuous democratic and legal dialogue, assemblies, publications, periodicals, newspapers, delegations to Copenhagen –

always on the basis of the principle that the use of force was not an option, that the only way to solve fundamental conflicts was through a democratic dialogue.

Often during that period people cited how Christianity had been introduced into Iceland in the year 1000. We all know from European history that Christianity, the introduction of a new religion all over Europe, caused wars and conflicts, killings and tragedies. In this country it was done through negotiations, through deliberations and by finally agreeing in the Parliament to ask one distinguished elder to pass a wise judgement on how it should be done. This is, I think, the only example within Europe - there maybe others, but I don't know of them - when Christianity was introduced on the basis of the rule of law without a single individual being sacrificed or killed throughout the process.

So here we have a country which established in medieval times a separate political system based on the rule of law and the peaceful resolution of conflict, a system which lasted for three hundred years and was able to solve the most serious and fundamental problem of Europe in medieval times, the introduction of Christianity, through peaceful negotiations. We have a country which was able to acquire independence and establish a nation state (admittedly this took one hundred years), on the basis of the same fundamental democratic, legal and negotiating tradition.

As we all know from modern history, to establish a religion and to acquire independence and to establish a nation-state have been all over the world the most difficult tasks. It produced wars in Africa and Asia, it led to hundreds of thousands of Indians being killed and imprisoned by the British. The French and the Belgians fought against such attempts in Africa and Latin America and Central America were covered with blood because of such transformation.

Iceland is in this sense a very important example. I don't accept the premise that we are so unique that this could only be done peacefully and through dialogue here in Iceland, that somehow it was the most peaceful negotiation-oriented Norwegians who decided to leave Norway and come to Iceland, that the problem-makers stayed behind and therefore it was only possible in Iceland to go by the way of negotiations through these fundamental crises. I think it is a very important example that all people have within them the capability to solve even the most fundamental problems and crisis of our times and previous centuries through these methods.

It is also encouraging that in modern times we have examples of how Iceland became a symbol of how this can be done on an international

scale. Probably many of you remember the Cod War, when Iceland expanded the limits of its economic zone three times in order to make sure that the fishing stocks were not destroyed, that the economic foundations of the republic were secure; first to twelve miles, then to fifty and two hundred; every time the British Navy tried to stop us. We had only a few small coast-guard ships. Their captains used to quote the Bible against the captains of the British war ships when they encountered each other out at sea, used the Morse code to send texts from the Bible.

The essence was this: Mankind had to settle how the oceans should be governed. They were still open, and powerful empires of previous centuries still wanted to dominate them through their naval strength.

These events in Iceland and other parts of the world, through the 60s and the 70s, gradually lead globally to the establishment of the Law of the Sea; a comprehensive framework of how to regulate the affairs of the oceans, how to negotiate and solve conflicts.

Now when the Arctic is being opened, I say regretfully because of climate change, and suddenly Russia and the Nordic countries, Canada and the United States have to decide how to deal with the energy resources in the Arctic and how to solve conflicts over the new sea routes, the Law of the Sea, is the fundamental framework. Even the United States, which during the Reagan years refused to adopt to the Law of the Sea is now seriously considering becoming a full-time partner in this legal framework.

In modern times here in Iceland we have hosted international meetings. You all remember Reagan and Gorbachev who came here in 1986 when the Cold War was so deeply frozen that it was earth-shattering news that they were even talking, when most of us believed that the nuclear confrontation and the terror embodied in the nuclear weapons of the superpowers could potentially destroy the entire world.

Many people have forgotten that a few years before, a decade or so before, Nixon and Pompidou came to Iceland for a summit. It is kind of funny that at that time the conflict between France and the United States was so deep, so serious, so impossible that they couldn't meet in either Paris or in America. They had to find a middle ground. So when President Bush had the arguments with President Chirac a few years ago we here in Iceland said: What is new? It indicates that these kinds of crisis pass; they come and go.

With Reagan and Gorbachev it was a different meeting. There were threats to destroy the entire world; realistic and plausible threats. Here in Iceland they started to talk about a world without nuclear weapons. Many

people in America, even within the Reagan Administration, thought it was an absolutely crazy idea. They used to say that the old man had somehow got this foolishness into his head, that he was the only man in his entire Administration who believed that this was a real possibility.

Gorbachev agreed with this policy and they started talking to each other about how to create a world without nuclear weapons. The only stumbling block was the so called Star Wars Programme. When Margaret Thatcher realized a few days later that they had in fact come close to walking out of Höfði House declaring to the world that they had agreed to abolish all nuclear weapons, she became so furious that she flew to Washington a few days later, uninvited, to make her protest to Ronald Reagan. Only twenty years ago or so, it seemed such an impossibility that we could have a world without nuclear weapons, that it would be possible to negotiate ourselves out of the nuclear threat, that it would be possible to negotiate ourselves out of the mutual destruction of the world by nuclear war.

Last week at a meeting of the UN Security Council, the new President of the United States, Barack Obama, sat in the chair and together with the President of China Hu Jintao, the President of France Sarkozy, the President of Russia, Medvedev, the Prime Minister of Britain, Gordon Brown, and other members of the Security Council, agreed on a motion to start negotiations on a world without nuclear weapons.

If anybody had said twenty years ago that it would be possible to achieve many weapon treaties through negotiations, that the leaders of the nuclear countries would come together at the meeting of the Security Council and agree to a time-line for a negotiating process to get rid of all nuclear weapons, everybody would have said: Its impossible. But it has become a reality.

I have decided to mention these examples to you here this morning from our own history and from how Iceland is related to global history, because I believe that if it is possible to establish a new religion for a nation through negotiations and peaceful solutions of conflicts, if it is possible to acquire independence through negotiating process; if it is possible to establish a nation-state through those methods; if it is possible to establish a comprehensive legal regime for the global oceans; if it turns out to be possible to get rid of nuclear weapons that brought the world to the brink of complete destruction during the Cold War, then surely we can at other levels of our societies, in conflicts between individuals or families or companies and communities, have the courage, the imagination, the methods, the ingenuity , the intelligence to solve those

conflicts also. It only requires good will, the right methods, knowledge and an informed vision.

This is, on the other hand, also a country which likes disputes, which somehow admires individuals who are very good at keeping disputes going for a long time. We even have a word in the Icelandic language, "þrætubókarlist" which literarily can be translated as the Art of the Dispute Book: that there are always some methods to keep the dispute going if you have the intention to do so.

If you travel over Iceland you will meet farmers and fishermen, and other local leaders, who are extremely good at this business and have acquired regional reputation for their excellence in this area. We still tell stories of farmers and others who were able for decades to keep the dispute going with their neighbours about the boundaries of the land or where they could put their sheep or how they should herd them in the autumn.

Do not let me give you a too rosy a picture of this nation. Certainly, we can also teach you a lot about how to keep a dispute going, if there is a will to do so. But the fundamental lessons of our history and the inspiration that we can draw from the historic global events which were related to Iceland is that we have the capability, as human beings, to solve even the deepest of disputes, the most profound crises.

It is in that spirit that I welcome you to Iceland and wish you great success in your deliberations.