



The Arctic in the New World

For a long time, Icelanders used to describe the geographical position of our country – and the implications it had for the life and prospects of the nation – as being on the edge of the habitable world. This vision strongly influenced our way of thinking, our self-image and view of the future.

Looking further north, the Arctic was for centuries a remote and unknown region to all except the indigenous peoples who had made their homes in the kingdom of ice and snow and developed their colourful cultures on the basis of a demanding struggle for survival.

Now we are witnessing a profound change. The eyes of the world are increasingly turned towards the region which lies on our doorstep. All the major economic powers are now taking an interest in the Arctic: stepping up research and collaborating on policy, exploring resources, charting new sea routes and observing indications of rapid and potentially disastrous climate change; signalling a need for a global response.

This interest in the Arctic is clearly expressed by the high level of participation in the Arctic Circle, an international gathering that opens in Harpa at the end of this month. It will be attended by leaders from the United States, Canada, Russia and the Nordic countries, and also by scientists, specialists, politicians, environmentalists, and business executives from leading nations in Europe and Asia.

Iceland has thus become the location for a broad international dialogue on the future of the Arctic, and every autumn in the years ahead, Harpa will be the venue for democratic discussions on wide-ranging Arctic issues.

Our friends and neighbours in the Faroe Islands and Greenland have been invited to take part in this new forum, which may thus strengthen ties that have long proved their worth and lead to closer bonds between our three nations which, though small, now find themselves at the centre of global change.

The journey that has moulded the culture and vision of these three North Atlantic neighbours may also be of benefit to others; emphasising the need to focus on the environment, culture, and customs in the High North; signalling how the melting of sea-ice and glaciers will influence the climate in far-away continents.

The Arctic, which used to be a remote challenge, now brings to Iceland both new responsibilities and numerous opportunities.