



**A keynote speech
by
the President of Iceland
at the Nordic Political Science Association's Conference
Dinner
13th August 2005**

Distinguished political scientists,
Dear friends, old and new

It is indeed a pleasure to be among you here tonight, to be invited to address you at this festive dinner. I noted, however, that the organisers thought it better, in order to be on the safe side, to limit the invitation to the time when everybody had been lifted by fine wines to higher spirits; they clearly thought it profoundly unwise to let me speak when everybody was bound to be sober.

I have noted since I took up my present position that many people assume that I and most of my colleagues have suffered the fate of ceasing to think in an original way the moment we took the oath of office, that our participation in an intellectually challenging discourse is bound to be a disaster – and therefore presidents should preferably be restricted to the wining and dining part of any intellectual gathering.

By your invitation here tonight you have clearly attempted to enhance this view into a scientific principle and guide other academic communities in the same direction, to show that Nordic political scientists have at least managed to obtain one sure scientific principle: Never invite a head of state to address a gathering of sober academics.

I must admit however that the menu tonight is a vast improvement on my first political science meal, the dreadful lunch I had with Stein Rokkan, blessed be his memory, in a small, lower-middle class suburban restaurant in Manchester, England in the early 1960s. If you did not go to such places in northern England forty years ago I can assure you that they were not a culinary enjoyment, but Stein and I both had rural Nordic backgrounds fostered in remote fishing communities, so we were used to eating what was at hand.

This encounter, however, changed my life. It was one of those moments that mark you forever; without it, my career would certainly have taken a different path and you would have been spared this particular type of dinner entertainment here tonight.

Stein Rokkan was then already a legendary figure in the world of political science, both in Europe and on the other side of the Atlantic. I was only 21 years old, finishing my second year at the University of Manchester, studying a discipline which at that time did not even have a name in the Icelandic language. The Vikings and their descendants had preferred to practise politics and conflict rather than to be analytical in their approaches.

Although I was still an undergraduate and had never engaged in political science research, Stein offered to fund my next summer in Iceland if I devoted myself to gathering data on the political system.

This of course was a great offer because nobody in Iceland knew what I would be doing, since, as I said, the discipline had not at that time been recognised by the descendants of the early Viking discoverers. The offer also demonstrated some of Stein Rokkan's most notable characteristics, attributes which made him such an influential pioneer and leader at a crucial time in the evolution of European political science, his profound confidence in young people, his willingness to give them challenging tasks, to believe in their capabilities, to open avenues for their further learning, to galvanise the scientific field by bringing along a battalion of young researchers, devoting his time to helping them, encouraging them and tying them together into a lasting network of cooperation, and some of those he thus influenced are here tonight.

He created new frontiers in the evolution of the discipline, was always initiating new visions, providing fresh analysis and formulating concepts which gave us new directions. His legacy should in our times inspire the way that the elders in our discipline now treat the young.

When a few of us established the teaching of social sciences at the University of Iceland in the early 1970s we tried to be guided by his attributes, to model our humble endeavour on his vision.

Certainly it has been a stimulating and largely successful journey and now, thirty years later, a strong community of Icelandic political scientists enjoys, as your gathering demonstrates, productive ties with colleagues in other countries.

My responsibilities have regrettably in recent years removed me from the core of your endeavours but it has nevertheless been inspiring to

witness the world from a new perspective, to see how dramatic and profound the transformations indeed are, how challenging global realities and innovative technologies are testing our political systems in entirely new ways, bringing fascinating questions into the scholarly domain of modern political science.

When Stein Rokkan recruited me in that shabby little restaurant in a suburb of Manchester forty years ago the purpose was to facilitate a pioneering project dedicated to what he and Robert Dahl called The Smaller European Democracies, a study which turned out to be the first of its kind.

As President I have, however, had to occupy myself from a very different perspective. In the middle of May I undertook a State Visit to China, bringing along business leaders from more than one hundred Icelandic companies and also representatives from all the Icelandic universities. Then ten days later, within the same month of May, I welcomed the President of India to Iceland, the first such State Visit from the head of the largest democracy in the world to what we here like to call the oldest democracy in the world. To the best of my knowledge it is the first State Visit ever by the President of India to a Nordic country.

This shows how our perspectives have changed. The dialogue with Asia, Africa, Latin America and other distant parts of the world is now our everyday task and the information technology created in the last ten years has enabled Icelandic entrepreneurs, scholars, artists, and public leaders to have the entire world as their playing field.

Our societies are undergoing such dramatic changes that nothing since the foundation of modern political science can provide a suitable comparison.

My experience as a practitioner rather than an observer has convinced me that we now face political realities so profoundly different that the discipline of political science must face up to fresh challenges of enormous proportions if it is going to keep up with the ever-growing pace of change in a relevant way.

Access to information is fundamentally different now, empowering individuals to shape the content of decisions on a par with governments and international organisations and substantially diminishing the privileges that institutions of authority have hitherto enjoyed.

The contemporary democratic vision increasingly calls for direct participation of the people in the decision-making processes, reducing the

control that political parties and interest organisations have previously wielded.

The globalisation of information technology has given ordinary people power which before was only enjoyed by bureaucratic institutions and advanced structures of power.

The generation that is now reaching maturity in the Nordic countries is in fact the first in our history to have the whole world as its arena, able to choose where it wants to live and what it wants to do, able to move from one country to another with little effort.

There are no longer any guarantees that nation states, capital cities or regions can rely on that their inhabitants will choose to remain there forever, and even the Nordic states can no longer trust that the constitution, the head of state, the government or major corporations will ensure a solid foundation for progress. They have to face up to the reality that each and every young person can now simply decide to move elsewhere.

Observing this complex development has convinced me that, just as the economists some decades ago emphasised the importance of economic resources for economic advance, it is now necessary for political scientists, in order to cope with these new perspectives, to bring to the forefront the study of what I have called "political resources", the amalgam of attributes, entities and capabilities, customs and traditions, rules and legal structures, institutions and levels and forms of participation which enable states and communities to compete successfully in the modern world – political resources which determine success or failure in the international arena, perhaps more profoundly than any form of economic strength.

I have seen how after the end of the Cold War and with the growth of opportunities that globalisation and new technologies have created, the competition between states is now becoming even more critical for the well-being of our societies than the competition in the economic market place which hitherto has gained more academic attention.

I therefore believe that just as economists succeeded around and after the middle of the last century to make the study of economic resources a crucial component of economic and social prosperity, political scientists must now face up to a similar challenge, to make the study of political resources the key component in our contribution to the evolution of the 21st century.

There are now almost over 190 states within the United Nations. A half of them are smaller than the largest of the Nordic countries and nearly a quarter has less than 1 million inhabitants.. How indeed do such states, many of them poor and only recently having acquired independence, manage to survive and prosper in the face of this growing competition among states?

Will the success of Africa, the curing of its dramatic and pressing problems, not be more influenced by the availability and the use of political resources than by economic factors?

Will the future of Iraq not depend more on the evolution of the political resources now emerging within the country than on the military and economic forces at play in the region?

We could go on and cite other examples but above all if the evolution of democracy is going to be the guiding light of the 21st century, both with advanced democracy in our own societies and the gathering strength of democracy in different parts of the world, the analysis of political resources will become of paramount importance.

If I am right, political science will in the coming years be called on to make more significant contributions than ever before – and then I can assure you that there will be a number of fascinating banquets awaiting you in the not so distant future, a clear signal of how much the fate of our discipline has changed since Stein Rokkan recruited me in Manchester at the small and rather dirty table in the down-market restaurant where fish and chips and Yorkshire pudding were the only options available and rhubarb pie the sole item on the dessert menu.

We have indeed come a long way but I can assure you that if the political science community plays its cards right there are more appetising evenings in store – and maybe it might also be a wise move to bring the presidents from being the dinner entertainment and put them up front where the challenge of the academic dialogue is more exciting.