

## **Prosperity through Sustainable Identity**

Scholars of the High North, ladies and gentlemen,

The identity of the High North is directly linked to the reality of life in the High North. It is a conceptualisation of what the people in the High North stand for, how they live and what they do.

The contrasting images of the North reflect the contrasts in the environment and the life of the people who live there. How these images are cast into identity, reflects how the people of the High North see themselves and how they are seen by other people. This affects their attitude; how they react to various circumstances, and what other people expect of them, which is bound to be reflected in the success in their undertakings.

In other words, the fortunes of the people in the High North are influenced by their identities.

The contrasting images of the High North are exceptionally pronounced in Iceland, where volcanic activity adds an extra dimension to the contrasts in the High North, giving Iceland its nickname of “a Country of Ice and Fire”. This is reflected in the national flag with a white and red cross on a blue background symbolizing the “ice above and fire below in the middle of the ocean under the blue sky.

Throughout Iceland's history from the time of the first settlers, more than eleven centuries ago, Iceland's image has been characterized by two diametrically opposed views.

The story about Iceland's name, Ice-land, and its origin, is a good example of this. The Book of Settlement, Landnáma, one of the first books in Icelandic, written in the twelfth century, tells how a Norwegian Viking, Hrafnaflóki, went to this newly discovered country for the purpose of settling there. He had a marvellous time during his first summer, with plenty of fish in the lakes and grass for his sheep and cattle. But he was unprepared for the winter and did not have enough provisions so he barely survived. According to the story, he climbed a mountain in early spring and saw into a fjord full of drift ice. Upon this dismal sight he started calling the country "Iceland". When he returned to Norway he described this "Iceland" as an inhospitable place not fit for people to live in. However, one of his men by the name of Þórólfur told a different story. He said that Iceland was rich country "with butter dripping from each straw". He got a nickname for this positive description of the country and was thereafter called "Þórólfur smjör", which means in English: "Thorolfur Butter". A few years later a large scale migration started from Norway to this new country, which could have been called "Butter-land", but the name of "Ice-land" stuck, and we are still proudly using it.

These two opposing identities of Iceland have persisted: It has variously been depicted as a poor and hostile country in the extreme north, barely habitable; or it has been acclaimed as a prosperous place of piety and

high learning. I believe that this has also been the case to a great extent for the High North in general.

Actually, neither identity is true by itself, if it stands alone, but together they reflect the conflicting realities of life in the High North.

In the past, the natural conditions in the High North were indeed difficult. Thus, Iceland was for centuries one of the poorest countries in Europe. The population hovered between 40 and 70 thousand, which was the maximum number that could be supported in Iceland by traditional means. The main building material was turf for walls and driftwood for roofs, covered with turf and grass.

But there was another side to Iceland. During the first centuries of Iceland's settlement, ports in the Gulf of Breiðafjörður and elsewhere in west Iceland served as trading points in the North Atlantic. There, merchants traded in expensive products from Greenland, such as falcons, polar bears, hides, and walrus tusks. Many Icelanders studied abroad, and Icelandic monasteries became centres of scholarship creating a rich literary tradition culminating with the creation of the Icelandic Sagas.

Later on, when sea voyages to Greenland became few and far between, the trade dropped off. Still, some fishing was done with equipment bought from European fishermen, with dried and salted fish becoming a valuable export commodity. And the literary tradition continued with poor Icelandic farmers reading old scripts and making poetry in their pastime. I believe that the same holds true for many other communities in the High North.

Still the image persisted of Iceland as a poor and isolated country populated with people who were barely civilized, drank too much and lacked refined arts and high culture. We have always been sensitive about this side of Iceland's image, - possibly because there was some truth in it. When Iceland severed its links with Denmark and became a republic with its own foreign service in 1944, Icelandic diplomats became quite occupied with introducing Icelandic culture and Icelandic artists abroad, especially in Denmark and the other Nordic countries. Thus, they strived to prove that Icelanders did in fact have culture.

These days, the Icelandic Foreign Service is not as occupied, as it was in its early days, with introducing Icelandic culture abroad, even though we recognize the importance of cultural exchange. Icelandic artists are now quite active in culture exchange on their own, and some of them have had spectacular success without any assistance from the government. Bjork, the singer, and the band, Sigurrós, are two well known examples.

However, as I already mentioned, the Foreign Service still attaches great importance to how Iceland's image is presented abroad. There is still a lot of ignorance and misconception throughout the world about the High North. I remember a story; I heard when I was a kid. An Icelandic traveller in a large western country was asked if it was true that the people in Iceland lived in igloos. He answered that sure this was true; we built igloos two stories high with elevators in the winter, he said. And when they melted during the summer, we lived in the elevators.

Now, I doubt that many still believe, that Icelanders live in igloos, but there is still a lot of misconception about the High North.

It is of interest for the people of the High North that their identity should be firmly based in reality while stressing those aspects which we are proud of and want to cultivate. An identity or image which is detached from reality, presenting an unrealistic picture, can not be sustained. Such an identity is bound to collapse, and can even turn into its opposite. Instead of vibrant confidence, a sense of failure would set in with low expectations and regression.

One should be careful not to glorify the High North in an unrealistic and semi-mystical way, comparing it with ancient myths of the Atlantis or idealized versions of Ancient civilizations of the Romans or the Greeks.

The rapid development in some parts of the High North in recent times, including Iceland, has followed quite different pattern from the old civilizations around the Mediterranean Ocean.

It is closely linked to the advent of new technologies, which have improved the living conditions and made it possible to utilize previously inaccessible resources such as hydro- and geothermal energy in Iceland and oil and gas in other regions. The difficult living conditions in the High North and low population density make the people in the High North remarkably open for new technologies, which can facilitate their lives. The rapid spread of internet technology for education, medical services and other purposes, which we are now witnessing in the High North, is a good example of this.

**Indeed this constitutes an important component of the positive identity of a “cool” and modern High North, bolstering success and prosperity.**

Similarly, the people in High North are intensely aware of the importance of sustainable utilization of their resources. They would not have been able to survive through the ages without this awareness. The first settlers in Iceland committed some serious mistakes in this respect. They overexploited the local forests, leading to erosion, which we not yet been able to turn around. We had also some problems with over-fishing some decades ago, which made us realize the necessity of strict implementation of the policy of sustainable use of natural resources. This, of course, is the reason for Iceland’s whaling policy, which some people seem to have difficulty in understanding. Sustainable utilization is a basic principle, which does not allow for opportunistic exceptions for important factors in the ecosystem.

“Sustainability” is in fact a vital component of the positive identity of a prosperous and vibrant High North which is leading the way in the sustainable exploitation of the rich resources of the Arctic using the instruments of scientific knowledge and new technologies.

Modern industries have the power to destroy the delicate ecological balance in the northern regions, if they would be allowed to develop unchecked. The image of a civilized north would then crumble, and its antipode of uncivilized and barbarian communities would take over.

In conclusion, consistent adherence to the principle of sustainable development, using modern technology for exploiting the opportunities and resources of the north - that is the key to prosperity through sustainable identity in the High North in a new age.