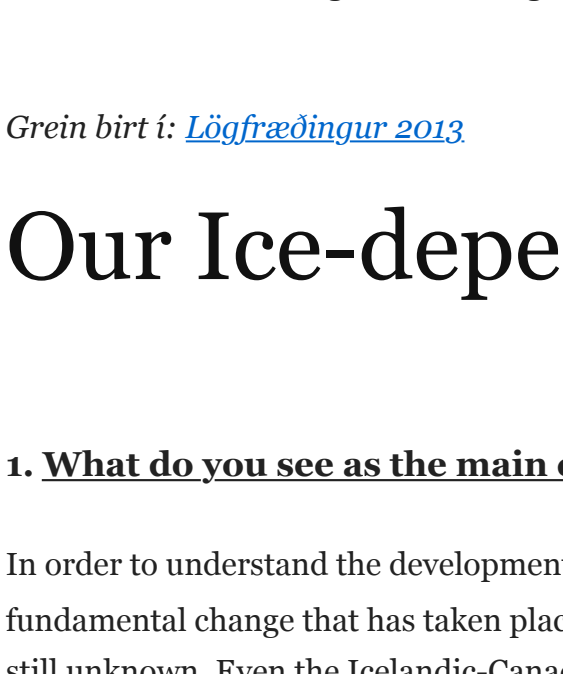


Lögfræðingur



Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson

What will happen to ice-covered areas of the Earth is of a more fundamental concern to future generations than almost anything else, according to the President of Iceland, Mr. Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson. Ólafur has been a vigorous advocate for peaceful and democratic evolution in the Arctic. He maintains that Iceland has a critical role within the cooperation of nations in the Arctic. Ólafur emphasizes that

the evolution of the Arctic must be fundamentally based on science. Lögfræðingur met the President on 7 February 2013 at his residence Bessastaðir to discuss Arctic issues, Arctic development and the nature of the management and legal framework that is the key to cooperation between the Arctic countries.1

Grein birt í: [Lögfræðingur 2013](#)

Our Ice-dependent World

1. What do you see as the main challenges facing the Arctic region in the coming 5 years?

In order to understand the development of the Arctic in the near future it is important to realize the fundamental change that has taken place. In the beginning of the 20th century, large parts of the Arctic were still unknown. Even the Icelandic-Canadian explorer Vilhjálmur Stefánsson discovered large parts of the Canadian Arctic that had not been explored by Europeans before his arrival. Then, in the last decade of the 20th century, the eight Arctic countries decided to come together and make it "our Arctic", symbolized by the creation of the Arctic Council.

Now, in the second decade of the 21st century, it has already become what I have called "the global Arctic," with nations from far away sending representatives, companies and scientists up to the Arctic. The requests by China, South Korea, India and Singapore to become observer states in the Arctic Council is simply one of many manifestations of how the Arctic has now become a global theatre, where not only the 8 countries that geographically treat the Arctic as their home, but also many more nations from every corner of the world, now attempt to justify that they should have a role in the future of the Arctic.

In addition, science has now demonstrated that the enhanced melting of the Arctic sea ice has profound implications for global weather patterns. The tropical cyclone Sandy in America and extreme winter weather in China last January are just two of many manifestations of this relationship. The melting of the glaciers in Greenland due to climate change will also have dramatic and global consequences. So, it is difficult for us in the Arctic to maintain that the Arctic is only our concern. Science, climate change, the inner relationship between global weather patterns – all of these demonstrate that what happens in the Arctic has profound global consequences.

When you add to that picture the rich natural resources in many Arctic countries and the possible opening up of the Northern Sea Routes and their profound implications for global shipping, it is absolutely clear that not only in the next 5 years but in the next decades, the Arctic will become even more of a global theatre. So for us, this is a great challenge. How do we maintain the rather harmonious cooperation which we have succeeded in creating in the Arctic? The involvement of the indigenous peoples in the decision making processes and the rule of law, with the Law of the Sea as the core, have been the guiding principles of the interaction between the Arctic states. How do we transform all of that into constructive cooperation with nations in Asia, on the European continent, in Latin America and other parts of the world? There is no road map for this; we will have to be creative; we will have to be responsible. But academically it is also fascinating because, as I have said in recent years, the Arctic is the last intellectual frontier in terms of Mother Earth. You have to go back almost 200 years to the time when Europeans were discovering Africa to find a historical analogy, although it is not entirely the same.

While these challenges are real and important, they are also an extraordinary opportunity for scholars, researchers, thinkers and activists to become involved. For young people who want to dedicate their career to Arctic issues, it is going to be a very promising field on many levels: with respect to law, social science, glaciology, natural sciences, engineering and almost every discipline. It will be difficult to predict where this will take us but what is for sure is that it will be a fascinating and challenging journey.

2. What role do you consider Iceland as having in the Arctic? Does a tension exist between the coastal States and the Arctic Council?

There was a possibility a few years ago that this conflict could perhaps become a fundamental division but I think it is less so now. The success of the Arctic Council has been so striking that every member state now sees a clear benefit in maintaining it as the main focus of cooperation. There was an attempt led by Canada to bring the coastal states into a subgroup within the Arctic family. There were also other countries which could make such groups. Iceland and Greenland could create a very interesting subgroup in the next 10-20 years. Once you start going down the road of creating subgroups, it is a risky journey. The Arctic Council has become the most successful example of post-Cold War politics in terms of regional cooperation.

I attended a discussion in Davos a few weeks ago at the World Economic Forum, where people from different parts of the world were discussing security challenges in the 21st century. It was interesting to be able to point out that for almost half a century, the Arctic had been the most militarized and conflict-based area of the globe. The Arctic had military bases linked to possible military confrontations from Alaska through Canada and to Greenland and Iceland, up to the northern part of Russia. It has now, in little more than a decade, turned into one of the most constructive examples of creative cooperation. The Arctic Council has become one of the most democratic international organizations through the involvement of the indigenous people and their organizations and also the involvement of scholars and academic associations, researchers, and others who normally do not sit at the high table of international organizations.

Arctic cooperation is also of fundamental importance for us in Iceland. It demonstrates that in the 21st century, the geographic location of Iceland is of crucial importance. The common view at the end of the Cold War, that somehow Iceland had lost its relevance and importance, has now given way to the central position of Iceland in the Arctic cooperation. And why do I say central? One reason is that you have "The Western Arctic" with Alaska, Canada, Greenland linking into Iceland. And then you have the "Eastern Arctic" with Russia, Finland, Sweden and Norway and also to linking into Iceland. Secondly, Greenland will have a fundamental importance in the Arctic in the 21st century. The short geographical distance and friendship between Greenland and Iceland gives us an advantage in this respect. Of similar nature is the growing cooperation between Alaska and Iceland. Although Alaska is formally a part of the United States, it increasingly has its own role within the Arctic and it is clear that Alaska seeks growing cooperation with Iceland.

The third dimension of Iceland's importance is that with the opening of the Northern Sea Routes, Iceland sits in the middle of this new ocean highway. Within Arctic cooperation, where you have two big powers like Russia and the United States, and strong countries like Canada, there is a role for a small country like Iceland, situated in the North Atlantic, within that cooperation. It serves the interest of the other nations to have Iceland involved in significant ways. And the decision to make an Icelandic the first Director of the Secretariat of the Arctic Council is evidence of the role that Iceland can play as a small country within Arctic cooperation.

For all of these reasons, the growing importance of the Arctic serves Iceland's interests in fundamental ways. That is the reason why Arctic issues have increasingly become one of the pillars of Icelandic foreign policy.

3. Do you see a growing role for the Arctic Council, and in what areas?

This is an interesting question. When the Arctic Council was founded, the view, especially of the Administration in America, was that it should be very limited, have no secretariat and there was a long list of issues it couldn't deal with. But it has grown in a relatively short time into an effective policy-making, even treaty-making, organization. The Search and Rescue Agreement signed by all the states and now the new oil spills agreement and the work of many subcommittees within the Arctic Council demonstrate that it has developed into a very effective policy-making and agreement-making instrument. In addition, it is clear that within the Arctic Council, there has emerged a culture of cooperation. International organizations do not only function on the basis of their legal framework. They also function according to the traditions and the spirit and the culture that arise within those institutions. Sometimes they become paralyzed because of a dysfunctional culture, irrespective of the legal framework. But fortunately, within the Arctic Council a constructive and positive culture of cooperation has developed. Clear evidence of this positive atmosphere is the speed with which the oil spills agreement was negotiated. There is a certain risk that by increasing the number of representatives this positive culture could be transformed. The prevailing view of the countries now involved is very positive towards the Arctic Council.

The next four years will be interesting because it will be the first time since the Council became an effective organ that the presidency will be in North America, now in the hands of Canada, and from 2015 held by the United States; this is interesting especially in the light of how constructive Russia has been within the Arctic Council. This is one of the fascinating stories of the past Cold-War era. Whereas many people were skeptical of the role that Russia would play, the fact of the matter is that Russia has been very constructive in its approach and in its operations within the Arctic Council.

4. What is your interpretation of the Russian decision to effectively ban the Russian Association of Indigenous Peoples of the North and make it impossible for them to participate at the latest meeting of the Arctic Council?

I have made it a policy not to make a direct comment on issues that are internal to other countries. There have been various views expressed in this case. In my view, the Russian leadership, as well as the leadership of every Arctic country, has played a very constructive role in Arctic policy making. I would be surprised if this would indicate a change in that respect. Every country within the Arctic Council recognizes that part of the success is the positive involvement of the organizations of the people who live in the Arctic and have lived in the Arctic for hundreds and thousands of years. At many of the Arctic conferences that I have attended in recent years, the inputs by the so called indigenous representatives have been the most valuable ones.

5. The Arctic Council aside, what other intergovernmental bodies do you consider as having the most important influence in the Arctic?

In terms of intergovernmental bodies, the Arctic Council has evolved into the crucial instrument. There are various other associations that are active within the Arctic, for example the University of the Arctic, which has grown into a cooperation between universities and research institutions. There is the Northern Research Forum, which I helped to establish together with the University in Akureyri thirteen years ago; also networks of conferences where policy-makers, regional leaders, scientists and scholars, as well as representatives of the different Arctic countries, have come together in very open and constructive discussions. What we can call the political system of the Arctic has at its core the Arctic Council, which is a regional intergovernmental fora, but around it we have a highly elaborate and effective network of dialogue and policy-making and inputs from scientists, activists, indigenous peoples, scholars, regional leaders and others. There is an ever on-going process of dialogue and discussions, a kind of moving theatre, from one Arctic country to another.

6. There is a general agreement amongst the Arctic 5 that the UNCLOS (Convention on the Law of the Sea 1982) is the most appropriate framework to govern the Arctic Ocean. Do you think it is adequate to protect the interests of Arctic peoples and the environment in which they live?

It is not just the Arctic five. There is a general agreement that the Law of the Sea is the legal basis for disputes between the Arctic countries. If we didn't have the Law of the Sea as well established as it is we would definitely be in difficulty. And even if the United States hasn't formally ratified it, in practice, it follows the essence of the Law of the Sea. Broadly speaking, one could say there is a sufficient legal framework in place. However, if we look at the activities on land within the Arctic, especially the relationship between the people who have lived in the Arctic for many centuries, even thousands of years, and the states in the Arctic, there is a need for a legal evolution of the rights of the indigenous people versus the rights of the states. Although the Law of the Sea is the fundamental framework with respect to determining the right to the sea resources and some of the disputes between the countries and how they should be solved, there are still many legal challenges within the Arctic. That is why polar law has evolved into a very interesting discipline. I have attended two such conferences held at the University in Akureyri. I also attended the 2011 polar law conference in Nuuk, Greenland. The Arctic is still a region of creativity in the legal dimension.

What I found fascinating is that I have met people from Asia and Africa who have followed the legal evolution within the Arctic, especially with respect to the involvement of the indigenous peoples and their rights. All over Asia and Africa you have similar situations of indigenous people who have lived for centuries, even thousands of years in different regions. Many of these indigenous peoples look on themselves, their languages, their culture and their traditions as being so independent that they should have their own rights irrespective of what the nation state does. The first time I was aware of this was some years ago in Bangladesh, where I was looking at the rising sea levels. The Minister of the Environment, who also happened to be a tribal king of over 400,000 people, started a detailed discussion on the rights of the indigenous people within the Arctic Council. It turned out that he had followed in great detail the legal evolution of the rights of the indigenous peoples within the Arctic because he wanted the same principles to to apply for his tribe in Bangladesh. It is important for us in the Arctic, especially for those who are leading Arctic law, legal research and legal debate within the Arctic, to realize that there are people in far away countries on different continents who are following very closely what form developments in the Arctic take to see if they can apply the same principles and/or the same legal solutions to situations within the African continent or in different parts of Asia.

7. Economically, Iceland might be more suitably compared to Arctic states, rather than more southern states. Do you agree with this statement and what are your main arguments?

It is difficult to understand completely the nature of this question because there are countries that only belong partially to the Arctic. You can take Norway as an example: what part of the Norwegian economy is an Arctic economy? On the whole it is not a big part. If you take Russia, however, there is a large part of northern Russia which is dominated by the Arctic. Then of course the economy of Greenland is more or less an Arctic economy. The evolution of the Icelandic economy will to some extent depend on the evolution of the Arctic, if we are successful in utilizing the opportunities that it offers us. In the next few decades, the Icelandic economy will be influenced by what happens in the Arctic. Interestingly, when Icelandair starts flying to Petersburg and Anchorage next May, it will be the first airline in the world to fly to all Arctic countries. The domestic arm of Icelandair flies to more destinations in Greenland than it does within Iceland, and Icelandic construction companies are increasingly participating in projects within Greenland.

The visits by the Chinese ice-breaker, the Snow Dragon, with over 60 scientists from the Chinese Polar Institute, to Reykjavik and Akureyri last summer, is evidence that our economic and academic reality is now more influenced by what is happening in the Arctic region than it was 10 or 20 years ago.

8. What about the European union, is it appropriate to compare Iceland to the economy in the European Union?

There is a great division between the Southern and the Northern European economies. Interestingly when you look at Northern Europe, our two closest neighbors, Norway and Greenland, have both decided to stay outside the European Union. Norway decided twice in referendums to say no and Greenland decided to leave the Union. Also, it is interesting that Finland is the only Northern European state that has adopted the Euro. In Southern Europe every country is a member of the Euro zone. We should study what our neighbouring states have decided. There are logical reasons for Norway and Greenland to stay outside the EU and there are logical reasons for the United Kingdom, Denmark and Sweden to stay out of the Euro zone. It would be good for the debate in our own country to examine why these states have decided to stay out of the EU or the Euro zone.

9. Have the Icelandic Parliament and government addressed the opportunities and challenges within the Arctic sufficiently, compared to what has been done in other Arctic states?

There is a much stronger will to be active on Arctic issues within our political system now, than there was, for example 5 or 10 years ago. In this respect I think we are better placed to take an active role in Arctic cooperation. The Icelandic business community has also woken up to the various opportunities. The University of Akureyri is no longer the only university looking at these issues; the University of Iceland has also entered the field.'

10. Do you believe that the Icelandic Parliament and government could or should address topics regarding the Arctic in a more direct way than by means of participation in the Arctic Council?

It is important that every political party in Iceland start examining Arctic issues in great detail. The Parliament should keep track of Arctic issues and give cooperation with parliamentarians in other Arctic countries a higher priority than it has been given so far. Traditionally, parliamentarians have put more emphasis on participation in the Council of Europe, Nordic cooperation and the NATO Assembly. The meeting of Arctic parliamentarians that took place in Akureyri last summer² made many people realize that it is important to increase the parliamentary cooperation among the Arctic countries.

If the evolution of the Arctic is going to have a strong democratic dimension, it is not enough to involve the indigenous people and their organizations: there also has to be a strong involvement by the legislative assemblies. Parliamentary cooperation must therefore be strengthened. If the Arctic is to evolve in a democratic way, which I believe it must, there is a strong case for enhancing cooperation between the elected representatives in the various Arctic countries and the various regions within the Arctic countries.

11. Recently you said in a speech "we live in an ice-dependent world" What do you consider to be the role of the universities in the ice-dependent world?

The role of the universities is absolutely crucial. Without science and research, and a profound understanding of the forces of nature at work, we will not be able to map out successful courses of action. In this respect, not only the evolution of the Arctic but also the whole climate change debate, must be based on science. The Arctic Council has given a strong lead in this respect. The Arctic Assessment Report, which was, together with the Human Development Report, the core of the Icelandic presidency within the Arctic Council some years ago, demonstrated very clearly the importance of science-based policy-making within the Arctic. That report was a wake-up call about climate change in the Arctic.

The melting of the Greenland ice-sheet, together with the glaciers in Antarctica, is going to have fundamental consequences for rising sea levels in coming decades and centuries. Most of the big cities in the world are built close to the ocean, so rising sea levels of many metres will have monumental impact. The melting of the Arctic sea ice causes extreme weather whenever events in USA, China and other parts of the world. Almost every month we are seeing, somewhere in the world, consequences of the climate change. Look at the Himalaya regions. Thousands of glaciers in the Himalayas are the reservoirs of the big rivers in China and India.

These three areas, the Arctic with Greenland at its core, Antarctica and the Himalayas which the Chinese call the "Third Pole", are so crucial that every country will have to plan its future on the basis of what is happening to the ice. That is why the phrase, "our ice-dependent world", is intended to wake people up to the fact that what happens to the ice is of fundamental importance to every nation in the world. And there, Iceland plays a very important role for two reasons. First of all, we have the largest glaciers in Europe and we have studied them for over half a century. The models that our glaciologists have developed in analyzing what is happening to the Icelandic glaciers can serve as a basis for discussing what is likely to happen in other parts of the world.

Secondly, as we have mentioned in this interview, our membership within the family of Arctic countries gives us a special role with respect to the Arctic sea ice and our ice-covered neighbourhood, consisting of Greenland and other Arctic regions. Scientists from other parts of the World, whether they are from China, India, the United States or Europe, are increasingly seeking cooperation with Icelandic universities and research institutions. All of this gives our scientific community and our universities and research institutions, as well as those who are selected to speak on Iceland's behalf, a very important responsibility in the global debate.

-Thank you Ólafur Ragnar.

The interview was conducted by Mellorka Mjöll Kristinsdóttir at Bessastaðir on the 7th of February 2013. Questions by dr. Rachael Lorna Johnston, Hinni Heðdar Halgason and Mellorka Mjöll Kristinsdóttir. Additional help from Eggert Ármann Ármannsson and Hjördís Olga Guðbrandsdóttir.

HEIMILDIR

1. [www.forseti.is](#), dagskrá forseta.

2. <http://www.arcticparl.org/conferences.aspx?id=5292>

1 ummæli Raða eftir Elst #

Bæta við ummælum...

Kristinn Ágúst Friðfinnsson Petta er merklegru texti og öllum hlutaðeigandi til söma. Takk fyrir.

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