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**OPENING OF THE 9TH CONFERENCE OF PARLIAMENTARIANS OF THE ARCTIC REGION,
EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, BRUSSELS, 13 SEPTEMBER 2010:**

**STATEMENT BY THE MINISTER FOR FOREIGN AFFAIRS OF DENMARK AND CHAIR OF
THE ARCTIC COUNCIL LENE ESPERSEN**

Mr. President, Distinguished Parliamentarians, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great honor and privilege for me as Chair of the Arctic Council to address this ninth Conference of the Parliamentarians of the Arctic Region today here in the European Parliament.

I believe this is the first time the Conference is held outside the Arctic countries and that is in itself – ladies and gentlemen - a clear example of the growing level of attention from the world community towards the Arctic region and the sweeping changes taking place there. In a minute, I will touch upon some specific issues that have generated this growing interest for the Arctic, but first allow me to briefly present some of Denmark's priorities in the Arctic Council.

The Kingdom of Denmark – Denmark, Greenland and the Faroese Islands – assumed the Chairmanship of the Arctic Council from Norway at the Ministerial meeting in Tromsø on 29 April last year. When we conclude our Chairmanship at the next Ministerial Meeting in Nuuk on 12 May next year, we will hand over the torch to Sweden, and by doing so, three Scandinavian countries will thus have chaired the Council in succession. Although far from being a Scandinavian take-over of the Council, this sequencing of the Chairmanship has allowed Norway, Denmark and Sweden to closely coordinate our programmes, which are characterized by consistency, transparency and flexibility.

The programme for the Danish Chairmanship in 2009 to 2011 was announced in Tromsø and covers a long line of issues specific to the Arctic – but of which some have global consequences. Let me mention key issues such as climate change, biodiversity, resource management and ensuring the legacy of the International Polar Year. As a central component in our programme, I would also like to underline the human dimension and the issue of human health in the region that was a major theme for the last Conference of Arctic Parliamentarians in Fairbanks as well as the living conditions of the indigenous

peoples and the other inhabitants of the Arctic. I am happy to notice the great convergence of Arctic priorities between the Arctic Council and the Arctic Parliamentarians as evidenced by the Council's work program and the recent Conference Statements by the Parliamentarians.

Likewise with this year's Conference, where you will discuss issues right at the centre of our programme. I very much welcome these discussions, because the sharing of knowledge among all Arctic stakeholders in combination with a preparedness to respond to emerging challenges remains the only way to ensure a sustainable development in the Arctic.

Therefore, I would like to use this occasion to provide our perspectives on the issues that you will be discussing in the next few days.

Let me start with climate change.

The international perception of the Arctic has changed dramatically over the last ten to fifteen years. Back in 1996, when the Arctic Council was founded, no

one really cared much about what happened in this remote region far up in the North. Today, the situation has completely changed. The main reason why, the world has begun to focus on the Arctic is, of course, climate change.

We see evidence of climate change all over the world, whether it be in the form of increased temperatures, severe drought, deadly floods or other abnormal climate activity. I think that most of the world's leading scientists, if not all, will agree that the flooding in Pakistan and the fires in Russia are the devastating results of a changing climate. But nowhere do we see the evidence of climate change as clearly as in the Arctic. And nowhere do we see changes as rapid as in the Arctic.

As the Arctic continues to be the region, where we find the steepest rise in average temperatures on the planet, we will face a future where a major part, if not all of the Arctic Ocean, will be ice-free – at least in seasonal periods. As a consequence, self-accelerating mechanism in the Arctic will increase global climate changes. This is due to the fact that ice and snow reflect most of the sunlight and counteract warming of the planet. But higher temperatures in the

Arctic will lead to melting ice and a shortening of the snow-season, which again will lead to further warming of the planet. At the same time, the permafrost is melting, whereby vast areas will be destabilized and contribute further to the emission of greenhouse gasses.

Melting ice and higher sea temperatures will also impact the wildlife and biodiversity that characterizes the Arctic. Fish – on which the Arctic residents depend heavily – may change their patterns of migration as ocean currents are changing. The polar bear will not be able to catch its preferable hunt of prey, seals, which are mainly caught on sea ice, and faced with starvation, the polar bear will seek to areas populated by humans. Several species of seabirds also rely on the ice in their lifecycles, and the melting of the sea ice may therefore lead to a loss of biological diversity in the Arctic.

In sum – ladies and gentlemen - the Arctic is our entrance point to understanding the global climate. An important part of our current understanding of climate change in the Arctic stems from a report titled “Arctic Climate Impact Assessment”, which the Arctic Council together with the

International Arctic Science Committee presented in 2004. This was the first report to compile all available knowledge of climate change in the Arctic, and as such became a landmark report. Among many other things, it stressed the need for further studies and better understanding at a regional level.

Consequently, the report was followed up last year by the Arctic Council report on the “Greenland Ice Sheet” that was presented by my predecessor and the Premier of Greenland, Kuupik Kleist, to the United Nations and the climate negotiators taking part in the COP15 in Copenhagen. At the next Arctic Council Ministerial meeting, in Nuuk, Greenland in May, a new and comprehensive follow-up report titled “Snow, Water, Ice and Permafrost in the Arctic” will be presented.

Also during the International Polar Year in 2007-2009, much attention was devoted to the interconnection between the Arctic and the global climate. Now, it is our responsibility to ensure a proper follow up on the International Polar Year. This should not only be based upon the pure scientific results and achievements, but we must also ensure that the scientists, the decision-makers and the local and indigenous communities in the Arctic continue to work together to understand and address the scientific results that were achieved

during these two years. One important aspect in this regard, is the so-called SAON-process, which is an abbreviation for Sustaining Arctic Observing Networks. We must be able to move from words to action in this process in order to institutionalize and make widely available to all the scientific data that are currently not freely available. We will not understand the full effects of climate change unless we all work together in a joint scientific research.

Understanding climate change and its consequences is necessary for us to respond to it in a proper and timely way. However, responding to the consequences of melting ice in the Arctic is not the responsibility only of the Arctic states and peoples. On the contrary: Climate change in the Arctic is mainly, or rather overwhelmingly, a result of the developments outside the region. It is the global CO₂-emissions that are responsible for the changing climate in the Arctic, and that is why we need a global solution. And a solution as soon as possible. We have no time to waste.

That being said, we should of course take whatever national, regional and international measures necessary in order to protect the fragile Arctic

environment, but to this end, we need solid and consolidated scientific recommendations. We should not out of fear or on the basis of public opinion polls make rash decisions that are not based on sustainable use of resources, including the living resources. If we fail in this regard, we are likely to stumble into quick-fixes that, contrary to our intentions, will have a negative impact on local communities living in the Arctic. Especially the indigenous peoples and their needs must be reflected when adopting legislation that influences livelihood in the Arctic. When we discuss sustainable use of living resources in the Arctic, we need to remember that people living in the Arctic rely on being able to catch the living resources in Arctic waters to meet local subsistence needs. Sustainable use includes a **right to use** the resources of the Arctic as long as it is sustainable. All decision-makers – whether they are parliamentarians, local governments, national governments or NGOs should remember this important message.

Allow me briefly to return to the Arctic Council. Initially, I mentioned some of the most important priorities and themes of our chairmanship, but numerous different projects are now under way and many questions are being dealt with right at this moment. So, let me conclude by mentioning two of maybe the most

important challenges facing the Arctic Council today and that is the observer question and the functioning of the Council itself.

The role of observers became an issue before we assumed the chairmanship. The reason is quite simple. As the interest in the Arctic region grows from all quarters of the world, more and more countries and organizations wish to become observers. The Danish Chairmanship has been working on the observer question from day one, but so far, the required consensus has eluded us. As we have said repeatedly, we will do everything possible to try to solve the question. It is, as we see it, the most important political question before the Council, and it has implications for the work of our Council and for the standing, prestige and credibility of the Council on the international scene. We believe that the Arctic Council will benefit from being open to the outside world and welcome in those observer parties that can contribute to the objectives of the Council. Denmark, for one, thinks that the European Commission can contribute significantly to the work of the Council, and we would welcome the Commission as an observer.

The observer question does, however, raise another question. Is the Arctic Council able to function properly with still many more observers? Is the Arctic Council able, so to speak, to “digest” an increasing number of observers, of which some are heavyweights like the European Commission and China? We should bear in mind that the Arctic Council is a quite unique creature. It has no budget. Today, it has only a temporary – and very small – secretariat, generously financed by Norway. So far, it has been only decision shaping and not decision making, and it operates by consensus. So far, it has worked that way and delivered many important results that have benefited the Arctic and the indigenous peoples living there.

But will it still be able to function properly and efficiently in the future within the existing institutional framework? This question was discussed among the Arctic Council Deputy Ministers and the Permanent Participants in closed sessions at a Deputy Ministers’ meeting in May. It was agreed that the questions should be dealt with at the Senior Arctic Officials level. The aim is to allow the Ministers to take appropriate decisions on a balanced and comprehensive proposal to strengthen the Arctic Council and solve the observer question at their next meeting.

I very much look forward to receiving these proposals for discussion with my fellow Arctic Council colleagues in Nuuk next year. As new challenges will present itself in the Arctic in the years to come, I feel confident that the Arctic Council will continue to be able to respond to these.

With these words, I thank you for your attention.