

Seventh Conference of Parliamentarians of the Arctic Region

Venue: Kiruna, Sweden, 2-4 August 2006

Report of the Chair of the Standing Committee of Parliamentarians of the Arctic Region

Report by Ms. Hill-Marta Solberg

Chair, Fellow parliamentarians, Excellencies and Friends,

On behalf of the Standing Committee of Parliamentarians of the Arctic Region, I would like to extend our warmest thanks to the Parliament of Sweden for hosting and organising the Seventh Conference for Parliamentarians of the Arctic Region.

Thank you for inviting us to Kiruna, a fascinating and historical venue for our conference. A city built around the big mines. The history and destiny of the two so closely linked together. A society still deeply dependent on its natural resources, but also finding new ways to create a livelihood. This is a story shared by so many cities in the Arctic region.

I am at the end of my first term as Chair of the Standing Committee of Arctic Parliamentarians. I have had the honour and pleasure to follow in the footsteps of a very fine leader and a great politician, Mr. Clifford Lincoln, who chaired this Committee for six years. Mr. Lincoln has left his definitive mark on the history of Arctic cooperation.

One of the strengths of Arctic cooperation is the participation of the **indigenous peoples** of the Arctic. This is also the situation in the Standing Committee. In

this connection I would especially like to extend my warm thanks to the former President of the Norwegian Sami Parliament Mr. Sven-Roald Nystø, who, until he stepped down last September, always contributed valuably to the discussions in the Committee.

Arctic cooperation is maturing. As the Arctic Council is celebrating its ten year anniversary this year, the Arctic as such is still very much a newcomer in international cooperation and in the international arena. However I am of the strong opinion that Arctic cooperation has proved itself to be an important and constructive player during these years. A cooperation which has delivered results and very much influenced both international and domestic politics.

Also the work in the Standing Committee has developed and gradually found its form. For the first time in its history, all members of the Committee were present at the Ottawa meeting in March this year. This was an inspirational occasion, with presentations on Canadian Arctic policy, especially with regard to the International Polar Year. Senator Murkowski from the USA spoke warmly of Arctic cooperation and gave a strong commitment to further collaboration.

After the last Conference of Arctic Parliamentarians in Nuuk in September 2004, the **Arctic Climate Impact Assessment** (the ACIA), was launched in November 2004. The report created a whole new momentum in the debate on climate change in many countries. More than 300 leading Arctic researchers, together with indigenous representatives, gathered available scientific information and traditional knowledge to find out how climate change is influencing the Arctic today, possible future scenarios, and the consequences for the Arctic and the rest of the world.

On the parliamentary side, we have followed and will continue to pay close attention to how the findings in the report are transformed into political decisions. Climate change is continuously being discussed and was at the top of the agenda when the Standing Committee met in Washington in March 2005. I expect that the work of the “Focal Point”, established by the Arctic Council, will take the process to the next stage.

There is no doubt that we need more knowledge about the different aspects of climate change. That being said, we also need to act on the basis of what knowledge we have today. We must enable Arctic cooperation to continue to contribute constructively to the global debate on climate change, but we must also ensure that we disseminate the knowledge of the consequences of climate change to the peoples of the Arctic.

The **Arctic Human Development Report** was also presented at the Arctic Ministerial meeting in Reykjavik in November 2004. This report is an important instrument in helping to remind us that there is more to the Arctic than flora, fauna and climate; people also live there. We must ensure that we don't arrive at a stage where we end up knowing everything about the living conditions of the polar bear, but nothing about those of the people that inhabit the region.

The initiative to commission this report was taken at the Arctic Parliamentary Conference in 2000, and we as parliamentarians have a special responsibility to follow it up. It is our job to make sure that the report becomes a living and dynamic instrument for the future, not only a remarkable achievement of the past. We must make use of the findings and improve the Arctic Human Development Report as an instrument for monitoring development.

There is obviously a close connection between climate change and living conditions in the Arctic. To a great extent, the climate will influence all aspects of future life in the Arctic areas.

Education is a vital tool for improving the standards of living in the Arctic. The creation of the **University of the Arctic** (UArctic) has been close to the heart of many parliamentarians. My message to you is that UArctic is a success. New student programs have been created and there are an increasing number of students, 66 in 2002 and 730 in 2005. The rise in numbers is likely to continue in 2006.

There is, however, still a challenge with regard to funding, a challenge which will increase with the success of the UArctic. Much of the work so far has been done on a voluntary basis, but as the number of students increases, the work needs to be professionalized. All of us, as parliamentarians of the Arctic, must work to raise funds to secure the future prosperity and success of the University of the Arctic.

Another important tool in creating strong and sustainable societies in the Arctic is **Information and Communication Technology** (ICT). The subject is closely related to access to education, such as through the UArctic, and health issues, such as telemedicine. ICT is high on the agenda of the Arctic Council, and the next speaker, Mr. Bernard Funston, executive secretary of the Sustainable Development Working Group, will introduce the conference to this subject in more detail. The Committee is impatient to make progress in this field and see the technology in use all over the Arctic.

The Standing Committee arranged a workshop in Oslo in November 2005 to look at different aspects of creating a binding **legal regime** for the Arctic. This

concept is not new, and as you know, a treaty has existed for the Antarctic for more than 40 years.

I believe it is very timely that we as politicians take a lead in this process. If today's reduction of the sea ice continues at the same rate as the last 50 years (every 10 years 3-5 % of it disappears), in 40 to 50 years' time, there will be very little left in the summertime. If the ice disappears for large parts of the year, we will see an explosion in human activities in the Arctic. We need to find ways to regulate this activity and keep ahead of the development. This is why a future legal regime is one of three main topics at this conference.

The Antarctic treaty came as a result of the "The International Geophysical Year" in 1957/1958, which celebrated the 75th and 25th anniversaries of the First and Second International Polar Year (IPY). I don't expect the upcoming International Polar Year to result directly in an Arctic treaty, but it is an excellent opportunity to boost Arctic research. The Committee was given interesting presentations on the preparations for the IPY at its meetings in Ottawa and Copenhagen. I believe it will be very interesting and useful for all of us to be introduced to this topic and to have the opportunity to provide parliamentary input to this important Arctic event.

Russia has served as chair of the **Arctic Council** since November 2004 and will continue to do so until October this year, when Norway will take up the baton. The Committee has been informed about the programme and work of the Russian chairmanship on several occasions by Ambassador Churkin. In particular I would mention the Russian initiative of arranging multiple round tables on opportunities and challenges in the North in connection with the Economic Forum in St Petersburg in June 2005. I had the pleasure to represent the Committee in a panel debate on Arctic issues chaired by Mr. Sergei Lavrov,

Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs. Other round tables scrutinized the possibilities of closer cooperation in the Barents region, which is included in the Arctic region.

What we have seen and experienced in many countries during the two years since our last conference in Nuuk, Greenland is a strong and increasing interest in the Arctic region. This interest is due, not least, to the expected substantial quantity of energy resources and other natural resources in the Arctic. However, the climate change in the region and its projected wider impact has also contributed to this focus.

Climate change and natural resources will without doubt be very important issues in the years ahead. These issues will demand political decisions and active participation. Above all I must underline our obligation as parliamentarians to direct our focus to the social and human dimension, and ensure that we don't get lost in technicalities and scientific debate.

We are very much looking forward to the Norwegian chairmanship of the Arctic Council for the next two years as well as the further four years of Scandinavian chairmanship. Already at the last meeting of the Committee in Copenhagen in May this year, Mr Karsten Klepsvik, the Norwegian Senior Arctic Official, outlined the ideas of the programme. I know that Norway welcomes the sound proposals from this conference.

The Committee and its members aim to play a constructive role on Arctic issues, both in our national parliaments and in our cooperation with the Arctic Council. To do this job we need your active participation, proposals and ideas. We need you all to be Arctic parliamentarians in your national parliaments. I am confident this conference will give us plenty of inspiration and new ideas, which

will create a solid basis for the work of the Standing Committee for the next two years.

Thank you for your attention.