



Unlocking the Arctic's Assets

A Conference of the Greenwich Forum

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**The 'Stakeholders', their Agendas and the Interests
of the Wider World**

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It is a great honour to be invited to attend the Greenwich Forum. The subject of this conference is an excellent example of how the Forum is leading efforts to promote awareness and better understanding of the United Kingdom's maritime neighbourhood.

I use that phrase advisedly, even though, from the point of view of British naval power, there may traditionally have been little difference between the neighbourly and the global. There is a unique sense in which the Arctic and the sub-Arctic can be regarded as a British neighbourhood. From the time John Cabot set out from Bristol in 1497 with a Northwest Passage to the Orient in mind, Northern geographic discovery was dominated by Britain for more than 350 years. This is confirmed by the many names that leading members of the Royal Navy have given to areas in the Arctic; Martin Frobisher, John Davis and Henry Hudson, to mention only a few.

Furthermore, the venue of the Royal Society is, indeed, a source of inspiration. The first international research expedition to the Arctic, led by Constantine John Phipps in 1775, was sponsored by the Royal Society. The expedition of Lieutenant William Edward Parry, another member, was the first to winter in the High Arctic in 1819 and a third, Sir James Clark Ross, is credited for the discovery of the North Magnetic Pole in 1831. The United Kingdom may be an observer in the Arctic Council, but its record of Arctic exploration and research is certainly second to none.

Therefore, it is a distinct privilege for me as Chairman of the Senior Arctic Officials of the Arctic Council to be given this opportunity to come here and discuss issues having to do with the Arctic; "The Stakeholders, their Agendas and the Interests of the Wider World."

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Let me begin, then, with the stakeholders. Who are they?

The answer to that question is not as straightforward as one might wish. There is no internationally accepted agreement on the concept of the Arctic and therefore no single definition of its geographic extent. For this reason you will find the Arctic variously defined in terms of latitude, temperature, ocean currents or vegetation limits. In other words, the phenomenon in focus frequently defines the geographic area.

Even if the Arctic were to be delimited once and for all, this might not settle the question of who the stakeholders are. The United Kingdom,

for example, is not in the Arctic, but obviously qualifies as a stakeholder. In fact, while the Arctic is readily identified as a piece of polar real estate extending over one sixth of the earth's landmass, we are increasingly beginning to appreciate the complex interlinkages between the Arctic and the rest of the world, whether they involve flora and fauna, ecology or economy. To a certain degree, we are all stakeholders in the Arctic.

With that proviso, let me identify what I would call the immediate stakeholders in the Arctic, the countries and organizations associated with the Arctic Council. Those are the eight member countries, the North American countries, the Nordic countries and Russia, as well as the six organizations of indigenous peoples' that are involved in the work of the Council as permanent participants, in full consultation with governments. This unique form of participation is a most successful feature of the Arctic Council and one that we like to hold up as a possible model for the cooperation of indigenous peoples' with governments elsewhere.

Twenty-five observers, including five non-Arctic states, international organizations and non-governmental organizations attend meetings of the Arctic Council, where they have the opportunity to participate in discussions. They are also entitled to records, documents and reports, as appropriate, and are expected to submit to the Council up to date information about their relevant Arctic activities.

International cooperation in the Arctic did not begin with the Arctic Council. For example, when all the 129 members of the fateful Franklin expedition went missing in the Arctic in 1848, several countries organized what was then the biggest search-and rescue mission in history. Since 1882 scientists from all over the world have worked together and exchanged information in the three International Polar Years organized since then. Russia is now leading efforts in preparation for a fourth such year in 2007-2008.

Nevertheless, with the establishment of the Arctic Council in 1996, we now have the first and only circumpolar forum, involving national governments, for addressing issues of common concern, be they of an environmental, economic or social nature. Through the Arctic Council, the North has a distinct voice in the international community at a time when global discussions on sustainable development are in full swing.

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I may not have provided you a definitive answer to the question of who the stakeholders are. Clearly, stakeholders are not only governments and indigenous peoples' organisations, but also regional governments, through the Northern Forum for instance, and businesses involved in economic activity. But assuming that I have identified at least the immediate stakeholders, let me go on to the next question of what their agendas are.

One of the first known descriptions of Arctic stakeholders' agendas can be found in a book written by an unknown Norseman around 1250 called *The King's Mirror*. There are three reasons, the author writes, "why men journey thither in so great danger to their lives;" one is the desire for fame, another the desire for knowledge and the third the desire for gain. All three motivations seem to have been in play through the centuries of geographic exploration and the frantic search for the Northwest Passage that ended so precipitously in the middle of the nineteenth century. Unfortunately, the failure of attempts to find either the members of the Franklin expedition or the Northwest Passage seem to have coloured popular perceptions of the Arctic for quite some time. The region now came to be seen as cold and barren and possibly outside God's domain. One author who survived a particularly harsh winter there, even wrote in his diary that he saw himself and his crew sledging across the Arctic like the fallen angels of Milton's *Paradise Lost*.

This cheerless picture of the Arctic went largely unchallenged, until authors like the Canadian-Icelander Vilhjálmur Stefánsson reacted to it in the early twentieth century. Through books like *The Friendly Arctic* and *Northward Course of Empire* Stefánsson created the impression of a more hospitable, accommodating Arctic that could be mastered by the spirit of man, provided he has able to draw on the wisdom of its indigenous inhabitants. Regrettably, the onset of the cold war prevented us from unlocking the many attractions of the Arctic, at a time when the vision of Stefánsson and others was beginning to take hold.

Today, we have begun to appreciate the vast potential of the Arctic. The Arctic is emerging as a region of great significance for the world as a whole. It contains a huge reservoir of oil, gas, mineral resources and freshwater. Predominantly a marine region, it has some of the most important seas in the world for commercial fisheries. The Arctic Ocean, the Labrador Sea and the Greenland Sea drive the deep circulation of the world's oceans. The Arctic has an ecosystem worthy of protection, a rich source of biodiversity. Home to people for thousands of years, the Arctic

is also an area of thriving national and indigenous cultures with dozens of separate languages. Last but not least, the golden fleece of past geographic discovery, a circumpolar sea route encompassing both the Northwest Passage and the Northeast Sea Route, is finally in prospect as a consequence of global warming. If realized, the opening of the Arctic Sea routes could transform the maritime transportation system of the world.

Confronted with such a catalogue of assets, what are we, the stakeholders, doing to take advantage of them? Are our agendas still driven, as of yore, by the desire for fame, gain and knowledge? Given the constants of human nature, we should probably not ignore the element of human acquisitiveness. However, let me suggest that the Arctic Council has as yet a relatively modest record of fame and gain. We are still a little known forum, with no permanent secretariat and no fixed budget. By comparison, our ambition to acquire knowledge is quite considerable, not least as regards the Arctic environment.

Since the Arctic Council was established, Arctic governments and indigenous peoples have joined together in making the monitoring and assessment of the Arctic environment a key element of the Council's agenda. Groundbreaking reports have been prepared on pollution risks and their impact on the Arctic ecosystem and on the conservation of biodiversity. Having identified the major pollutants, the Arctic Council is now increasingly involved in projects to limit and reduce pollution in the Arctic.

A project attracting great attention at this moment is the ongoing assessment of the impact of climate change in the Arctic. This will be the first comprehensive, regionally based study of climate change to be published since the United Nations Convention on Climate Change. With temperatures in the Arctic rising at twice the global average, climate change will have an impact on every aspect of life in the Arctic in coming years and decades. Circulation of the atmosphere and the ocean, the biosphere, infrastructure, livelihoods and human health will all be affected to a greater or lesser degree. Understandably, the scientific results of the assessment, due to be published in the autumn of 2004, are therefore eagerly awaited.

There can be little doubt that environmental issues, in some ways the most successful part of the Arctic Council's agenda, will remain at the forefront of the Council's activities. But the Arctic and the sub-Arctic are not just environment, they are home to people, some four million of them,

including more than thirty indigenous peoples. As it happens, the consequences of many of the processes described in our environmental reports are beginning to show in the lives of the people of the region. This applies most obviously to climate change, but also, to a lesser extent, to pollution in the food web.

I don't want to sound alarmist. Big as the changes may be, we will have to live with them and use the opportunities they open for developing the Arctic in an environmentally friendly way. But if we are to take a balanced look at the circumstances of life in the Arctic, it is now widely recognized that we need also to pay greater attention to the social and economic dimension. For this reason, we are now undertaking, among other things, a first extensive study of living conditions in the entire Arctic region, an Arctic Human Development Report, to be published before the autumn of 2004. Other initiatives are also underway, including studies of how we can most effectively empower the people of the North through improving their access to information and telecommunication technologies.

Based on improved knowledge of the Arctic environment, we are thus proceeding to address the common needs of Arctic inhabitants.

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Why should the Arctic be of interest to the wider world? I have already alluded to several reasons, including the abundance of resources. If someone once wondered whether the Arctic was part of God's domain, the question never seemed to trouble much the inhabitants of the Arctic region themselves. Quite the opposite. According to a Russian legend, when God created the earth, he journeyed around the globe spreading resources. When he reached the Arctic, he slipped on the ice and spilled his bag of treasures all over the area.

The motive of material gain can never, of course, be the sole or even dominant factor in our approach to the Arctic. With the growing importance of the Arctic to the world economy comes the danger of environmental degradation. This is one of the perennial policy dilemmas of the Arctic region. To take an example: Should the Arctic sea routes one day become viable for the regular transportation of oil, natural gas and minerals, a large oil spill could have disastrous consequences. The spill of the Exxon tanker Valdez in 1989 revealed that no one country can deal with such consequences on its own. A similar accident in the Arctic, where contaminated ice might be carried to vulnerable habitats, could

make clean-up and containment a logistical nightmare. Risks of this kind are no reason for declaring the Arctic off-limits for the responsible use of its natural resources. But they do point to real challenges in the Arctic region requiring imaginative solutions.

There is another reason why the Arctic should attract growing attention by the world at large. Through our study of Arctic phenomena like long-range transboundary pollution and climate change, we are gauging what the future may hold for the rest of the globe. In this sense, the Arctic can be regarded as either a sentinel or bellwether, according to which metaphor you prefer. How, for instance, is the increased bioaccumulation of harmful substances, including mercury, going to affect human health? Or how will increases in glacial melt, precipitation and river runoff, affect global sea levels and the ocean conveyor belt that helps distribute the earth's heat? The Arctic may, indeed, hold the key to answering such questions.

While paying attention to the Arctic, is a good beginning, more is required. To be able to deal with issues that may be global in origin or have implications for our planet as a whole, the Arctic Council needs to engage major international actors, including the United Nations, its programmes and agencies, and the European Union. This is why cooperation with international organizations is an important component of the Council's work. One example is the United Nations Environment Programme, where the Arctic Council had a role in putting the problem of mercury pollution on the Programme's agenda. We participate actively in the regional implementation of the plan adopted at the Johannesburg World Summit on Sustainable Development in 2002. The Council has also contributed to the European Union's Northern Dimension Action Plan and is identifying concrete projects of mutual interest.

Needless to say, we need to draw on our most interested, active observers, including the United Kingdom. We highly appreciate the contribution both government officials and scientists in this country have made and continue to make to a range of Arctic Council projects, including studies on Arctic human development, flora and fauna, marine issues, pollution and climate change.

Few nations have done more than the United Kingdom to shape popular conceptions about the Arctic in the English speaking world. It is a role I am confident this country will continue to play. I am encouraged that through your conference here today, you are, indeed, honouring and building on that excellent tradition.