

”Strengthening Sustainable Communities”

Speech by Greenland Minister for Industry, Labour, Trade, Energy and Foreign Affairs,

Mr. Vittus Qujaukitsoq. The Arctic Futures Symposium, Brussels November 30th 2016

Distinguished participants - Ladies and Gentlemen, Welcome to this year’s Arctic Futures Symposium.

Greenland is at the center of attention of developments taking place in the global discussion on the Arctic. In recent years we have had official visits of UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon and earlier this year of US Secretary of State John Kerry.

From Europa we have arranged important visits, which have served to highlight climate change and the need for action from both former French Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius in the run-up to COP 21 in Paris and most recently, the President of the European Council Donald Tusk in May 2016. It is our expectation that interest in Greenland will only continue to increase.

I am glad that the organizers have worked so closely with representatives from the Arctic states and peoples in organizing this event - thereby strengthening the legitimacy and first-hand knowledge about the Arctic present at this Symposium. I am certain our time will be well-spent here today.

The European Union is a global actor, and through its Member States Sweden and Finland, the EU has Member States which are directly part of the Arctic. However, with Greenland as an Overseas Country and Territory of the European Union, the EU’s interests in the Arctic are even more far-ranging. I want to say without any hesitation, that the European Union is a force for good – also in our part of the world.

Greenland acknowledges and welcomes the views and opinions of the European Union about our region. But we – the residents of the Arctic – are the guardians of our environment and have to determine the pace of our sustainable development. In many regions of the Arctic, residents are living in conditions which fall far short of conditions in first world countries in the rest of Europe and North America.

For many years , the Arctic has not been a region of interest from non-Arctic states, and therefore knowledge about the region has not always been on the highest of levels. This is improving, and conferences like the Arctic Futures Symposium, are making a very big contribution to this process.

Greenland shares many values and a long history of cooperation with the EU. We do not agree on everything, and particularly regarding the sustainable management of marine mammals, we have historically seen things differently. The most clear example of this, was the introduction of the EU sealskin ban, which had a devastating impact on Greenland`s economy. But, with the joint communication on the Arctic, I feel that the European Union is now taking a big step forward in creating a coherent policy, which addresses many of the real-life challenges which are present in the Arctic today.

As Greenland`s Minister for Industry, Labour, Trade, Energy and Foreign Affairs, my number one concern, is meeting the aspirations of Greenlanders.

Because, unlike the Antarctic, the Arctic is a region where peoples, societies, law-making competences, well-established governmental structures and democratic institutions are in place. Our histories in the Arctic stretch back thousands of years, and our societies are today contemporary societies with their own challenges and aspirations.

Sustainability has always been at the core of Arctic indigenous communities, including the Greenland Inuit communities. We, the Inuit, always knew, and know to this day today, that we had to grab any opportunity of obtaining resources from nature in order to survive – with a balanced approach – harvest enough, but not too much. We knew, and know today, that if we do not take care of nature and handle it`s resources with respect in our struggle for survival, then nature will kick back and show us the same lack of respect. Therefore, we always had to keep the sustainability principle and respect for nature and its resources in mind. Because that is the way to survive sustainably in the Arctic where resources can be scarce, and where changes and de-stabilizing activities have very long-term repercussions.

We also want to make a living in our region, and therefore we need industrial activities, investments and infrastructure in the Arctic as well. But this has to be done sustainably. In Greenland we already have strict environmental legal provisions in place. We demand thorough Environmental Impact Assessments, and we have thorough hearings before an industrial project can be approved and go ahead.

This is something we do not want to get diluted nor undermined by other initiatives - such as the the proposal for an international “Arctic Environmental Impact Assessment”, which can only come in place through agreeing upon lower common denominators.

Some of us in the Arctic are indigenous to this region - with our own cultures that we treasure and will continue to protect and uphold. This does not mean, that we want to stand still and become museums frozen in time.

Greenlanders are in favour of modern progress as well, if done with a sensible approach. Our country and other regions of the Arctic have been subjected to painful periods of colonisation and domination by European powers. There is therefore a very fine balance to tread, and one cannot tell the peoples of the Arctic to not develop and not utilize opportunities in their region which people elsewhere take for granted.

We are societies where we need to educate our children and youth, and we also have to be able to afford taking care of our weaker and older citizens. Just like in any other society. We do not want to develop in order to get rich in material terms. We want to develop in order to sustain ourselves and take care of our own citizens – our people. Therefore it is imperative for my Government, that we create new opportunities of income in a sustainable manner in our region.

I was pleased to read the Commission and the European External Action Service's Joint Communication on the Arctic presented earlier this year. The policy is definitely a step forward in understanding and dealing with the Arctic.

We of course still have disagreements. Greenland for example does not agree with the European Union's historical policies regarding marine mammals, in particular sealing which continues to be a mainstay of our economy, and Greenland cannot endorse the adoption of Marine Protected Areas in the Arctic unless they are determined in full respect of the legitimate rights of the coastal states adjacent to such areas. It is unacceptable for us that some countries and NGOs in Europe, continue to think that policies – also when the stated intention is environmental protection in the Arctic – can be decided without a clear mandate from the Arctic peoples and countries. Such policies, also advocated by NGOs in Europe, are a painful reminder of policies adopted during our very recent colonial past.

I suspect that several Arctic states, which are coastal states to the Arctic Ocean have the same position. The key really is sustainable utilization and management of the resources in the Arctic in order to strengthen sustainable communities. Marine Protected Areas can be one of the tools in the toolbox, but not the only one, and certainly not a goal in itself.

Last month a new broad government coalition was formed in Greenland. The new coalition brings together representatives of 80% of the electorate. It is a coalition where sustainable development is a main principle in the coalition foundation. In Greenland we want to continue to focus on our educational sector - including the cooperation under the Partnership Agreement between the EU and Greenland. Education is the way forward if sustainable development is to be maintained.

This audience should be aware, of just how vital importance the European Union's education program in Greenland is. The improvement of our primary and secondary school system is a key component of our overall reform effort, which will allow for Greenland to adapt to our changing environmental and economic circumstances in the Arctic.

Without the European Union's support in this sector, Greenland would find it very difficult to meet the future challenges of achieving a sustainable economy, with a basis which is broader than our current reliance on solely the fisheries sector.

In terms of other sectors of interest for cooperation between the European Union and Greenland, the minerals sector is of great interest. Next year the first exports of raw rubies and sapphires will start. We will probably also see the first loads of the industrial product anorthosite be shipped to customers next year, in a project where the European Investment Bank is co-financing. Other mining projects are near handing in applications for extraction of minerals.

The involvement of the European Investment Bank in the anorthosite project is historical for several reasons. I have since the beginning of my mandate worked to create new international financing mechanisms to benefit the Greenlandic economy, and the anorthosite project to my knowledge, is the first time the European Investment Bank is involved in a project of this scale in an Overseas Country and Territory of the European Union. I have also secured a similar facility, which entered into effect last year with the Nordic Investment Bank allowing for Nordic investment funds to actively contribute to developments in Greenland.

It is important for me, that developments and investments in Greenland take place with the full involvement of our population. This is why the involvement of public institutions like the Nordic and European Investment Banks are important. There are specific standards for their involvement, which beyond our national legislation ensure that our interests as a small state are safeguarded, also when dealing with large multinational corporations, now and in the future.

In the first half of next year, my Government looks forward to opening the new and improved harbour of Nuuk; Sikuki Nuuk Harbour. This new harbour will make shipping in Greenland more effective with a container hub, which can be extended in the future if needs dictate this.

Last year Inatsisartut – the Parliament of Greenland – also decided that five new airport projects in Greenland are to be developed. A dedicated new company has already been established, and the preliminary work before actual construction of the first three airports has already begun. These airports will make travelling to and inside Greenland much more effective and less costly.

More than 65% of Greenland's electricity consumption comes from renewable hydropower. This is a high number, but it is not enough. My government has decided to further extend hydropower with additional investments, and we are actively examining the potential for small-scale off-grid use of wind and solar energy, in areas that cannot be served by hydropower plants. In this way, Greenland will continue to increase the share of renewable energy used in our country.

Greenland also has an abundance of clean fresh drinking water, and we now have legislation in place, which will form a good framework for initiatives on exporting clean fresh water.

In many of these areas we are open to partners from abroad – also European partners. The Partnership Agreement between the EU and Greenland has as its main focus education. This we would like to continue. But there are also ways to cooperate with Greenland through our Letter of Intent on mineral resources and through EU participation within renewable energy and other areas, that could be developed if additional resources were allocated to these areas – to our mutual and direct benefit.

Besides fisheries, Greenland is today a world-class science hub within the field of climate change research. We want to build on this, and extend our advantage, and I want to ensure that our society and education and research institutions in Greenland also to a much greater degree are involved, and actively take part and benefit from world-class science undertaken in Greenland.

I hope here today, that my invitation to the European Union to participate even more actively in developments in Greenland and in our part of the world – the Arctic – is received and acknowledged.

It would be a great result if we as a group, could come up with even more ways in which we can work together. Why only fisheries and education? Why is the EU not more involved in the minerals sector in Greenland for example?

My invitation to collaborate, in principle covers all areas that are described in the EU's joint communication on the Arctic. I think there is so much more we can do to work to promote a sustainable development of the Arctic region. This is also why from 20-26 March 2017, the Government of Greenland together with major international research institutions and with US National Science Foundation funding, will be hosting a "2017 Ilulissat Summit" focusing on the achievement of the seventeen Sustainable Development Goals across the 21st century, in particular in the Arctic region.

I believe that the European Union has a very important role to play in my region – the Arctic – and I am as concerned as many others, that any institutional uncertainty may weaken the European Union’s presence and impact internationally. Because, make no mistake – the European Union – is an important actor in shaping international developments, in setting an ambitious international agenda on issues ranging from environment, trade, climate change, investment, transport and education, that also have a huge impact in my region and in Greenland.

The Arctic Futures Symposium here in Brussels today, is an important link between what goes on in Europe and developments in the Arctic. With the joint communication on the Arctic, I see this as an opportunity to launch a new more far-ranging dialogue on how Europe and Arctic nations can work even closer together, in the many fields where there are results to be achieved.

With these words, I would like to welcome you, and wish you all a useful debate.

Qujanaq – Thank you.