

18 November 2009

Parliament of Finland, Annex

Opening statement by Mr. Hannes Manninen, MP, Chair of the Conference of Parliamentarians of the Arctic Region

Ladies and gentlemen,

On behalf of the Finnish delegation to the Conference of Parliamentarians of the Arctic Region it is my great pleasure to welcome you to this workshop.

We will this afternoon be looking at possibilities and challenges in relation to the UN Convention on the Law of the Seas and its relevance for the Arctic. This is an issue that we Arctic parliamentarians have been actively engaged in already for some years. We have in cooperation with UNEP/Grid Arendal organized a seminar on the multilateral environmental agreements and their relevance for the Arctic. In 2008, on our initiative, the UN Annual Treaty Event also had a certain focus on the Arctic. When we last met here in Finland, in Rovaniemi, together with the rectors of the University of the Arctic, we also had a special paper prepared on this issue.

One of the questions that have been raised is if there is a need for an Arctic Treaty. At least for the time being, there seems to be very little support among governments as well as legal experts for starting a massive negotiation process with an uncertain outcome. There are, however, more and more voices being raised in favour of strengthening the Arctic Council. A few weeks ago I had a very successful visit to Washington DC, and an opportunity to discuss Arctic policy on Capitol Hill as well as in the State Department and with the academic community. I came away encouraged. There seems to be a momentum now for moving on with initiatives to strengthen the base and structure of the Arctic Council, as well as the way we finance its activities. During the Norwegian chairmanship of the Council initiatives were already taken in this direction, and hopefully Denmark will now see new opportunities to redouble the efforts.

I also just a few days ago got some interesting news from the USA concerning UNCLOS. It now seems likely that the US Senate will be debating the treaty and voting on its ratification as soon as in January.

A good year ago, at our conference in Fairbanks, the Standing Committee was asked to continue the discussion on legal regimes that impact the Arctic, and in particular to promote ideas to strengthen the legal and economic base of the Arctic Council. We were also asked to actively involve our national parliaments in the Arctic policy process. This is what we are doing today.

This is a very "Arctic" day here in our parliament. Not only are we having our workshop here but the Finnish parliament is also right now debating Arctic policy on the basis of a report from our Foreign Affairs Committee. Parliament is now urging our government to clearly define a Finnish Arctic strategy, including Arctic governance on a global level, and on an EU level coordination with the Northern Dimension Policy. We are confident that the work that has now been done here by our parliament will contribute to strengthening our commitments as an Arctic state. Together with the other Arctic member states of the EU, Denmark and Sweden, and hopefully soon also Iceland, we will support a stronger role for the whole European Union in Arctic affairs.

Our domestic discussion has also emphasized the Finnish commitment to the Arctic Council as the central forum for cooperation in the region. Cooperation in other, smaller groups, can only have a supporting and complementary role. It is important that cooperation concerning the Arctic region remains open, and that we don't create divisions between coastal and other Arctic states. Our Foreign Affairs Committee has also stressed the principle of freedom of the seas.

Ladies and gentlemen,

With these words I want to welcome you to Helsinki and declare this workshop open.