



30TH BSPC: OPENING

Speaker: ***Dr Andreas Norlén***, *Speaker of the Riksdag*

Mr President,
Members of Parliament,
Government representatives and Excellencies,
Ladies and gentlemen,

I am delighted to have this opportunity to meet you. This is the third time the Riksdag has hosted the Baltic Sea Parliamentary Conference and of course we were looking forward to welcoming you in Stockholm. Not only has the pandemic changed our plans, it has also changed our societies in many ways– but I would like to say this:

I am happy to note that there are around 160 of us participating in the Conference, members of both national and regional parliaments, from ten of the Baltic Sea countries. We may not be in the same room but we can nevertheless talk and exchange views^[1]. This is as important as ever – or even more so – due to the very special circumstances we are experiencing.

Yes, we are indeed living in interesting and challenging times. It is fair to say that the last 30 years have brought considerable change to the Baltic Sea region.

The fall of the Iron Curtain shaped a new geopolitical landscape, as did the process of EU integration, when several of the countries in the Baltic Sea region became members of the European Union.

The last 30 years have brought economic growth, but also financial crises. Democracies have matured, but in more recent years, we have also seen democratic backsliding and an undermining of the rule of law. Digitisation has provided us with new tools, while, at the same time, presenting us with new challenges.

Despite the fact that our region has undergone major changes over the last three decades, much also remains the same. The first Baltic Sea Parliamentary Conference held in 1991 was created as a forum for political dialogue between parliamentarians in

^[1] Den svenska delegationen kommer att sitta samlat i ett rum och de kommer förmodligen även andra delegationer att göra också, men du är ju med online och säkert fler.

the region, with the aim of strengthening cooperation and raising awareness of issues of common concern. Promoting cross-border regional cooperation and working together to achieve common goals continue to be as important today as they were thirty years ago.

Sharing best practices, promoting parliamentary cooperation and cooperating in order to deal with common challenges, such as climate change or Baltic Sea environmental issues, are still on our agenda.

The COVID-19 pandemic is the most recent proof of the ongoing need to preserve cooperation, as well as protect democracy. During the crisis, difficult, and sometimes rapid, decisions have been taken in order to stop the spread of the virus. In times like this, it is vital to have well-functioning parliaments that can scrutinise and evaluate decisions and protect the freedoms and rights of citizens.

Parliament is at the heart of democracy – just as the Baltic Sea is at the heart of our region – and we need to continue to protect and preserve them both.

The pandemic has also underlined the importance of inter-parliamentary cooperation. I would like to emphasise the fact that the Baltic Sea Parliamentary Conference quickly adapted to the new circumstances and held its annual Conference online back in August last year – very well done.

The current Swedish Presidency goes under the title *Sustainable Democracy*, pointing to democratic institutions, strong cooperation and environmental and social sustainability as cornerstones of the organisation.

This theme is also connected to the Swedish Parliament's commemoration and celebration of 100 years of democracy. In September 2021, one century will have passed since women were allowed to vote for the first time in parliamentary elections in Sweden.

I strongly believe that democracy is worth commemorating, celebrating and vitalising. The purpose of celebrating the centenary is to generate engagement and

understanding of the importance and development of democracy in Sweden in a historical perspective, and for the future. This will also increase knowledge of the process of democratisation and the role of the Swedish Parliament, both historically and today. By increasing our knowledge of history, the understanding of, and hopefully engagement in, politics today will increase.

The democracy centenary also serves as a reminder: democratic values, participation, equality before the law and trust in the democratic system are nothing that we can take for granted. We must always strive to protect and develop our democratic systems.

On this note, I would like to mention that a key issue for the Swedish Presidency is youth participation, which is expressed through the organisation of the Baltic Sea Parliamentary Youth Forum in connection with this year's annual conference.

Young people are our future. We ought to – indeed we *must* – listen to their opinions and encourage their political engagement. Intergenerational cooperation helps us to protect and develop our democracies. And I have to say – when listening to young people, I am always filled with hope. They have the engagement, the compassion and the courage to take on the challenges that lie ahead.

Friends,

When reflecting upon historical events, we tend to take the outcome for granted. But the breakthrough for democracy is never something that could be taken for granted. It could not be taken for granted in Sweden 100 years ago, not in the Baltic Sea region 30 years ago and nor can democracy be taken for granted today.

Thirty years ago, our predecessors established this cooperation across the Baltic Sea. The coming thirty years will bring new challenges and new opportunities.

The BSPC is a forum for political dialogue with the purpose of strengthening cross-border cooperation in the region. Meetings, formal and informal conversations and the exchange of ideas and experiences are all crucial parts of this work.

In this spirit, I would like to take this opportunity to welcome you to the Swedish parliament on 12-14th June next year. I do hope that by then we will be able to meet in person.

And now, I would like to wish you a successful conference with fruitful discussions and debates!

Thank you.