



UNIVERSITY OF ICELAND

Conservative Liberalism

Burke and three Nordic Thinkers

Professor Hannes H. Gissurarson

New Direction, Dublin

17 September 2024: 9–10.30



Conservative Liberalism North & South

Grundtvig, Einaudi, and their Relevance Today

HANNES H. GISSURARSON



Tacitus and Montesquieu on Germanic Self-Government

Snorri Sturluson: A Proto-Liberal

- Law similar to language, evolving spontaneously, not imposed by kings
- Government by consent
- Right of rebellion
- Defence of private property (Haakon the Good)
- Defence of free trade (Earl Rognvald)
- Icelandic exceptionalism (Einar Eyjolfsson)





The Classical Liberals: Locke, Hume, Smith

- **Locke:** Government by consent; right of rebellion
- **Hume:** Justice product of evolution, response to scarcity
- **Smith:** coordination without commands; profit without loss



Split caused by Failed French Revolution



Burke's Conservative Liberalism

- Burke a Whig
- His famous letters to gentlemen of Bristol about defending free trade with Ireland
- Supported the 1688 and 1776 revolutions because made to extend existing liberties
- Opposed French Revolution, radical reconstruction of society bound to fail



Two Branches of Liberalism after 1789

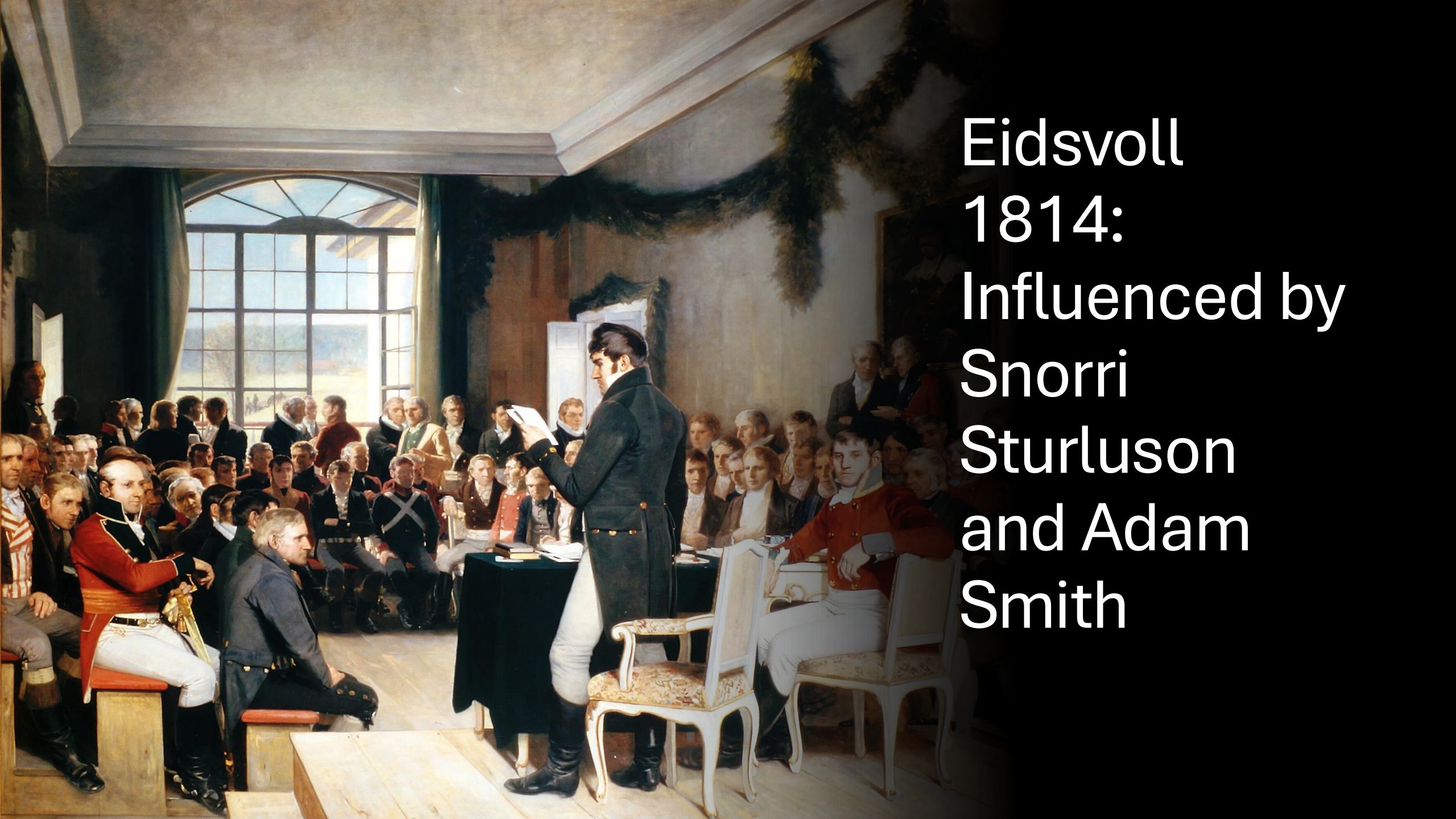
- **Conservative liberalism** of Burke, Constant, Tocqueville: limited government, private property, free trade, respect for traditions
- French Revolution failed because it broke with traditions and destroyed intermediate institutions
- Political tradition continued by Hayek, Röpke, Oakeshott, Einaudi
- **Social liberalism** of Paine, J.S. Mill, Hobhouse, Keynes, Croce, Ohlin: open mindedness, romantic individualism, rationalism, restrictions on economic freedom
- Neglected Nordic tradition of conservative liberalism



Chydenius and Grundtvig

- **Chydenius** explained coordination without commands and profit without loss in 1765, 11 years before Smith
- Fought successfully in Diet for freedom of thought and of religion
- **Grundtvig** translated Snorri Sturluson and emphasised Nordic cultural heritage
- Presented national liberalism in 1848
- Emphasis on intermediate institutions
- Both rejected French Revolution





Eidsvoll
1814:
Influenced by
Snorri
Sturluson
and Adam
Smith

Memorable Couplets in Grundtvig's Poems

- **1832**

Freedom our watchword must be in the North!
Freedom for Loki as well as for Thor.

- **1848**

Of a 'people' all are members
Who regard themselves as such ...



Comment on Denmark and Ireland

- Denmark, like Sweden, turned from military adventures to trade after 1814 and 1864 defeats. Motto: Lost outside, regained inside
- Free trade and flexible, efficient agricultural sector (as a result of land reforms in 18th century)
- Three reasons Denmark more successful than Ireland in 19th century:
 1. Denmark a 'Grundtvigian' nation state
 2. Greater 'Grundtvigian' social cohesion (e.g. farmers' collectives)
 3. Better structure of property rights in land

Grundtvig's Relevance Today

- Democracy requires civic education
- Social cohesion brought about by associations, clubs, collectives, societies, congregations, private schools—and nations
- Support of the non-aggressive nation state
 1. *Border changes by plebiscite*: Schleswig in 1920; Ukraine?
 2. *Peaceful Secession*: Norway 1905, Finland 1917, Iceland 1918
 3. *Autonomy of national enclaves*: Åland Islands; Palestinian territories?
 4. *Cooperation with minimal surrender of sovereignty*: Nordic Council, a model for Europe?

