



Speech
by
the President of Iceland,
Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson,
at a State Dinner
in honour of
the President of Finland,
Sauli Niinistö, and Madam Jenni Haukio
at Bessastaðir
28 May 2013

Your Excellency, President Sauli Niinistö,
Madam Jenni Haukio,
Honoured guests,

On this bright spring evening with the view of the mountains where snow still gleams and sparkles in the sun, we rejoice in the company of good friends here in this historical residence and we pay tribute to the firm and growing collaboration between Iceland and Finland, the two republics in the Nordic family.

Urho Kekkonen was the first of Finland's presidents to visit Iceland, returning for years to enjoy good fishing in beautiful settings, and your predecessors have firmly cemented collaboration between our nations, particularly since the end of the Cold War when the nations of Northern Europe once again enjoyed freedom in peace, no longer living in the shadow of the arms race.

In fact, both our capitals, Helsinki and Reykjavík, became associated with two of the crucial steps leading to that historic watershed: the Helsinki Accords and the Reagan-Gorbachev summit.

Democracy, a government based on law, is the model that the Nordic countries have held up as an example to the world, and it is in this area that Your career has been distinguished by prominent service: as a lawyer serving before the courts; as an elected representative in local

government and in parliament; as the Speaker of the Parliament and also as Finland's longest-serving Minister of Finance.

It is sometimes said that the surest way to become unpopular and have one's political career cut short is to be a minister of finance during a period of economic crisis and recession. The Finns and the Icelanders have disproved this theory resoundingly, as we can see from the examples present here this evening.

However, Your Excellency, I must warn you of one tradition in Iceland that has deep roots in our culture and our national consciousness. Writers, and particularly poets, have always enjoyed greater respect here than have elected representatives: after all, the poems outlive the speeches. And so it is a particular pleasure for us to have your wife, Madam Jenni Haukio, here tonight, and her visits to the workplaces of Icelandic writers is an important part of the programme.

Over the centuries, Bessastaðir has enjoyed particular fame as the home of Icelandic poets. Snorri Sturluson, the most notable writer of the Nordic Middle Ages, who wrote the history of the Norwegian kings and also *Ars Poetica* as part of his *Edda*, had here his home. In the oldest building on the estate, the poet Sveinbjörn Egilsson, translator of Homer and the Bible, was the headmaster of the school which nurtured the nation's campaign for independence. Among his pupils was Jónas Hallgrímsson, who was to become one of Iceland's best-loved poets and a pioneer in the natural sciences. Here sat Grímur Thomsen in the closing years of the nineteenth century and wrote of how he had escaped, with his heart struck cold, from the courts of royal power. Finally, I should mention Theódóra Thoroddsen, an excellent poet, who was an influential figure in the struggle for women's rights. We are reminded here every day of the legacy of these poets and how the power of the written word is a constant source of nourishment on our journey.

It was a major cultural milestone when Karl Ísfeld made his excellent translation of the *Kalevala* into Icelandic, and recently a Finnish writer, Tapio Koivukari, whose first book was about people in his home district of Rauma, recently wrote a novel about dark deeds of violence committed in my home district, Ísafjarðardjúp, in 1615. This came out in Icelandic late last year and opened our eyes to a new vision of our own history.

Thus, literature continues as a fruitful field in dealings between our nations, which have expanded steadily in many other areas of culture and the arts, science, research and technology.

While Finland and Iceland have worked together for quite some time, within Nordic collaboration and in many European and international organisations, it seems likely that Arctic issues will form the core of our common tasks in the years ahead.

When the University of Lapland in Rovaniemi and the University of Akureyri launched The Northern Research Forum at a meeting held here in this hall in 2000, the Arctic was still on the periphery in international debate, but Finland and Iceland were quick to place themselves in the forefront of those who were calling for new priorities.

We now stand at a new crossroad, as the leading nations in Asia and Europe have received observer status in the Arctic Council and the five largest global economies – the USA, China, Germany, Japan and France – will there be represented, together with India, Italy, South Korea and Singapore.

New shipping routes, natural resources, rights of indigenous peoples and climate change, which is now becoming manifest at a terrifying rate with the melting of sea ice and glaciers, are among the urgent items on our agenda; many thus see the Arctic as the region of central importance on the global agenda in the coming years.

Collaboration between the Nordic republics, Finland and Iceland, has therefore acquired new dimensions and now calls for performance and skills that will be judged by stringent standards.

In this we are well prepared by the heritage of our history and experience, by the culture and accumulated wisdom of our nations, which have tackled the rigours of hard winters, knowing that the world of ice and snow is a determinant of spring and new growth.

Thus, Your Excellency, your visit is connected with a new phase of history; its programme includes discussions on the future of our northern nations which are now linked in dialogue with distant states and the world's most powerful countries concerning the fate of our neighbourhood.

With hope for the prosperity of our venture and a successful outcome of the journey that lies ahead, I ask our guests to stand and raise your glasses in honour of the President of Finland, Sauli Niinistö, and Madam Jenni Haukio, expressing thanks for the sound friendship between our peoples.