



‘GLOBAL CHALLENGES – NORDIC EXPERIENCES’

WHAT CHALLENGES? WHAT OPPORTUNITIES? THE FUTURE OF THE NORDIC MODEL

**Speech
by
the President of Iceland
Guðni Th. Jóhannesson
at the University of Oslo
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Your Majesty,
Honourable Minister, Rector, Ladies and Gentlemen.

Apparently, we are the best in the world. We top almost all lists. We are better off than practically all other nations. We are also happier. We are more equal and less corrupt; we are more liberal; we enjoy more freedom and security. We live longer than most other people. We are the Nordics. We are a model for others, the Nordic model.

Dear conference guests. For two days, you have discussed and dissected the Nordic experiences and global challenges, with the Nordic model as a core concept. For two decades or so, I was busy in the academic world, working on contemporary history, mostly Icelandic politics and international affairs. I know a thing or two about the Nordic experience and global challenges but I am no expert, just a president. I can contribute, not by disseminating my research like so many speakers have done today and yesterday, but rather by sharing my thoughts about the past and the present, and then also a vision of the future.

Fortunately, we can all agree that a Nordic model exists. We can trace its roots to the nineteenth century, or even further back. By the mid-twentieth century, all its main pillars were in place: The general rule of law, universal

franchise, a large public sector with social welfare such as free health care and unemployment benefits, the principle of gender equality, personal freedom, press freedom, religious freedom and social corporatism in the workplace. Apart from the phrase “the Nordic model,” we have other terms for this social contract of ours: “Nordic capitalism” or “the social democratic model.”

We also have Nordic expressions which describe the thinking behind the Nordic model. From Sweden we have the phrase “Folkhemmet,” indicating that the country in question is our common home, and “Alla behövs” – Everyone is needed. Everyone is part of society; everyone deserves dignity and respect.

More recently, popular books and TV programs have been made about “hygge”, that peculiar Norwegian and Danish word which is used, according to one source, to describe “cosiness, charm, happiness, contentedness, security, familiarity, comfort, reassurance, kinship, and simplicity.”

In short, for decades, the Nordic model has been portrayed as effective and nice: an exemplary society. True, there have been misgivings and criticisms. I am pretty sure that during my research in one of the presidential archives in the US, I came across a quote by an American politician describing the Nordic societies as “sex, depression and socialism”. I do know that while we Icelanders score high in happiness surveys we also use more anti-depressants than most other nations, per capita.

Moreover, despite great progress, full gender equality has not been achieved. In recent years we have also discovered how minorities were sometimes maltreated, how some people with disabilities were abused and neglected. Today is World Down Syndrome Day. Let us remember that we could have done better in the past, and let us then make amends in the future.

Also, “hygge” may be a nice new word on the international scene, but five years ago, another word was invented here in Norway, the verb “nave”, derived from NAV, the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration, referring negatively to young people and others who allegedly misuse welfare benefits. With rights there must always be responsibility.

Most recently, the great increase in immigration and admission of refugees has caused strains in the Nordic countries. The best-known phrase today about Norway’s next-door neighbours is no longer “Folkhemmet” but rather “You look at what’s happening in Sweden. Sweden! Who would believe this?”

Clearly, there are challenges ahead. People would be foolish to deny that. But there are opportunities as well, and there is no need to panic. In my opinion, not as an academic or a president, but rather as a citizen of a Nordic country, the Nordic model remains strong and, yes, enviable. It will only survive, however, if it meets the needs and aspirations of the population in general. It will only

serve as an example to others if it is seen to be just and economical, forward-looking and sustainable.

Of course, people will always disagree on what is fair, how goods and burdens should be divided and how we should prepare for the future. Furthermore, as head of state I am in a privileged position, with financial security in place for life. I do remember, however, what it was like to be a middle-class academic, not poor, but not that rich either. A few years before that I was a freelance researcher, wondering whether I would have any income in a few months' time, whether we could afford everything a modern, Nordic family needs. And as I look further back, I also have not forgotten what I aspired to when I was in my late teens; which hopes I had for adulthood, what I would want to do in society, and what I felt society should do for me.

First, I wanted to find somebody to love. In the twenty-first century, we must guard and advance the freedom to love. That must continue to be an integral part of this export of ours, the Nordic model. Here I am reminded of King Harald's inspirational speech last September. "Norwegians," His Majesty stated, "are girls who love girls, boys who love boys, and girls and boys who love each other." Let me add, humbly, that Icelanders are boys who love Canadian girls, and so on and so forth.

Second, I wanted to get an education abroad; I wanted to travel. We cannot close our eyes to the dangers of terrorism, we must accept the need to take precautionary measures. And we will not solve the problems of the world by inviting everyone to create a new life here, with us. Yet, progress depends on the meeting of minds, the freedom to take in fresh ideas and approaches, the freedom of movement. We know this well in Iceland, where we need foreign labour to run the economy with us, and our word for stupid is *heimskur*, the one who always stays at home. The Nordic model must continue to be inclusive and progressive.

In my youth, I did not want to have a guilty conscience. I did not want to live in luxury while others suffered; live in a gated community, as it were, with slums on the other side. Despite our challenges and faults, we in the Nordic region must not forget how privileged we are in comparison to most other parts of the world. We who are still young can thank older generations for all their hard work. And we in the Nordic region can proudly, and without guilt, enjoy the fruits of our labours. Still, it must remain a part of the Nordic model to help others, not only because this is in accordance with our humanitarian and Christian beliefs, but also because it is in our own interest. The advancement of world security and prosperity will benefit us all in the long run. What to do, and how to do it, is not for me to say, but this must be the underlying assumption: that we should help others, especially if they are in dire need.

As I continue to look back and recall what I expected of the Nordic model, once I had received my education, travelled abroad, and found somebody to love (in no particular order), I wanted a job and a home. In a proper Nordic model, these goals must always be attainable. Yes, it should be hard. You should have to exert yourself, and be a bit flexible about what you want to do in the workplace. But the prospect of not getting interesting work, the threat of long-term unemployment, saps energy out of young people, dampens their enthusiasm and their will to contribute to society. Similarly, it must not be practically impossible to start a family, or to buy or rent a home. There are worrying signs that this is becoming increasingly difficult. My wife Eliza and I love our children but we don't want them to live with us into their forties. Young people must be able to afford a secure home.

Security is a keyword. We all want to live in security. The Nordic model must continue to include a safety net, lest we fall ill, or for some other reason need assistance in our daily lives.

Finally, let me also look ahead. As I am getting older, I ultimately want my Nordic state to offer the necessary care in retirement. The reality of an aging population poses real challenges to the Nordic model. Last week, I attended an interesting conference in Reykjavík – another interesting conference – about successful ageing, health awareness and the measures that the state will need to take to enable the elderly to stay in mental and physical shape so that they will contribute to society for as long as they can.

Let me add the freedom from worrying overmuch about the future of our children. I know that we will never be completely free from such concerns, but the Nordic model must be environmentally conscious, environmentally friendly. We must make the next generation feel that we have not caused irreparable or unnecessary damage to the planet.

Dear friends, it is a bit novel for me to address an academic conference without adhering to the established contours of such gatherings. I have not mentioned the state of the art, the different theoretical approaches, the development of the field, and so on, and I have only quoted one person in my talk, and that person is His Majesty the King. But I want to thank the organizers of the conference for having invited me to address this gathering. I know from personal experience how valuable it is for academics to meet and share their views.

I also know how important it is that people in academia have an impact on society. That can be difficult, for a variety of reasons, but this is perhaps where I can assist, where I can contribute. Although I was unable to attend the conference sessions, I managed to read many papers online. I now know more than before about the Nordic model, its vitality and the challenges it faces. In

future speeches and addresses, I will be able to use this wealth of information and analysis. Besides, I am more convinced than before that, despite all the limitations of the Nordic model, all the possible weaknesses, we in the Nordic region can be proud of the society we have constructed, a society of togetherness and tolerance, personal freedom and the rule of law.