



**"THE SPECIAL POSITION OF ICELAND."  
ICELANDIC ATTITUDES TOWARDS EUROPEAN INTEGRATION  
AT THE TIME OF THE ROME TREATY**

**Lecture  
by the President of Iceland  
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Honourable Ambassadors,  
Ladies and gentlemen,

History has been described as a harmless pastime. The industrialist Henry Ford said “History is bunk;” he was interested in action and had his eye on the future. So much for that. Some of those who love history and make it their occupation to describe what happened in the past have justified what they do by pointing out what great fun it is. But a stronger defence of history is that it is important to know the background of our modern communities, to know what it is that unites groups and nations and what it is that causes hatred and fear, disputes and wars. It has become a cliché but we should remember the well-known saying that those who do not do not learn from history are doomed to repeat it.

Learning from history, however, is easier said than done. History becomes a powerful tool for shaping the present and the past. Historians never recount everything that has happened before: we have to select what we regard as worth retelling, worth remembering. We also have to pick and choose the lessons that are to be learned from the events we describe. Opinion is usually divided on this point, and sometimes it gives rise to heated disputes. This is why historians, and others who examine the past, attach such great importance to impartiality as the

guiding principle in their work. At the same time, most of them are aware that complete impartiality is an impossibility. This principle can be our guiding light, but we will never make it all the way to the promised land. But what matters is the journey, not the destination. The destination does not exist, because we are all influenced by our own environment and the spirit of the times, limited by our own values and even by prejudice. Those who do not admit this are only fooling themselves and others.

No, my friends, history is neither bunk nor a harmless pastime. Simply accepting your invitation to make this speech meant that I was taking a position, for example taking the opportunity to stress that we can learn from history and that we should strive to tell the story of past events impartially. But history is also such fun! What can be a more welcome refuge from the fiddle of daily life than to spend time communicating with the past, browsing in old newspapers, digging around in old documents, putting together a narrative of events and how they happened?

Monday, the 25th of March 1957, was a remarkable date in the history of the nations of Europe, and indeed of all humankind. Representatives of six states met on that day in Rome – and of course the choice of venue showed that they knew something about history: this was the capital of the ancient Roman Empire, the centre of a state that spread its authority across the whole of Europe and even further under its most expansionist emperors. The six states represented in Rome that day were a mixed bunch in many ways: the three small ‘Benelux’ countries, Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg, and three powerful states in the history of the continent: Italy, France and Germany. Only a little over a decade had passed since the end of a terrible world war, an orgy of violence started by Nazi Germany with the support of their allies in Rome. In all six countries, the ordinary people had suffered from the horrors of war.

Now, those who had fought each other intended to join hands. On the basis of the European Coal and Steel Community, which these states had set up five years earlier as a framework for their heavy industries, they now founded the European Economic Community, the EEC, establishing a common market, with the promise of ever closer cooperation on many fronts. Euratom, the European Atomic Energy Community, was proclaimed at the same time.

News of this great event reached Iceland. “Little Europe signs agreement on common market and Euratom,” ran the headline in the Icelandic newspaper *Alþýðublaðið* the following morning, Tuesday the 26th of March. “The largest step that has been taken towards unifying Europe,” said that paper. “A large step towards a unified Europe,” said *Tíminn* on the same day, adding: “This agreement is considered as being of the greatest importance for the free nations of Europe, and its signature is without doubt by far the greatest step that has been taken up to now towards a unified Europe.” The other Icelandic

newspapers carried shorter reports. Nevertheless, it was clear to everyone that an important event had taken place far across the sea.

And what effect did this have in Iceland? The editor of *Tíminn*, Þórarinn Þórarinnsson, wrote these comments a few days later:

Much is being said about the future implications of the close economic cooperation between these states for other countries in Europe. Many people think it could prove dangerous for them unless they take part in it in one way or another. Britain is currently working hard on a plan of this type, but it is not yet clear how it would actually put such participation into practice. The Nordic countries are also examining how they should respond to the attitudes that are coming into being.

A few more days passed. On the 6th of April 1957, the “Grapevine” column in *Tíminn* contained the following:

The Government has been allowed to observe events that are on the agenda of the Common Market in Europe ... Following the recent six-country agreement in Rome, negotiations have now begun under the auspices of the OEEC [the Organisation for European Economic Cooperation] in Paris on enlarging the region covered by the agreement. ... Þórhallur Ásgeirsson, Permanent Under-Secretary in the Ministry [of Commerce], has gone to Paris ... presumably with the main aim of keeping abreast of developments there in this area ... It is regarded as a matter of paramount importance and necessity that Iceland follow these developments and take part in them from the outset ... the Government intends to ensure that this will be the case.

These news reports can be found on the website [timarit.is](http://timarit.is), an amazing facility that has broadened our view of history, enabling anyone to look back into the past much more quickly and easily than used to be the case. Access is open there, free of charge, to anyone who wants to look at everything that has been written in practically every Icelandic newspaper and periodical from the beginning of their print-runs down to our own day.

However, this database tells us little about these exploratory voyages by Þórhallur Ásgeirsson and other Icelandic officials. We cannot be sure of finding materials about what went on behind the scenes. To find that sort of thing we must go to the archives, both in Iceland and abroad. Some documents can admittedly be dug up on the internet, but most still exist only in their original form, on ageing and yellowed paper, but safely preserved in special boxes on the archive shelves.

There these materials lie. They should be open to everyone, subject of course to the rules on the protection of personal data and national security,

which however should never be interpreted as meaning that these sources are to be shrouded in secrecy for the rest of time. In the same way, it is important to transfer as many documents as possible into digital format so they can be accessed on the internet in the same way as newspapers and periodicals.

There is plenty to be done there, but until these things can be read on line, the only thing one can do is to go, in person, to where the sources are kept. Recently I went to the National Archive of Iceland, equipped with details of where to look for information on the attitudes of the Icelandic government of the time towards the Treaty of Rome. Various things came to light.

What the newspaper *Tíminn* had heard on its grapevine was correct; in fact, it was common knowledge, that Þórhallur Ásgeirsson, Permanent Under-Secretary in the Ministry of Commerce, had gone abroad. Before that, meetings had been held, reports compiled and telegrams sent.

We can start this story at the beginning of 1957. As the evidence shows, Ásgeirsson played a key role among Icelandic public officials, though others were certainly involved too, for example Einar Benediktsson, Hans G. Andersen and others in the foreign service. At the end of January, Ásgeirsson wrote a short statement, 'A Customs Union and Free Trade Area' for the ministers of the Progressive Party, the People's Alliance and the Social Democratic Party, which were in coalition at the time. He said it was fairly certain that a common market of these six states would be established and that collaboration between them could be expected to become closer and closer as time passed. Britain, on the other hand, wanted to confine its involvement to free trade under the auspices of the OEEC. Ásgeirsson said he had discussed these matters with the British ambassador to Iceland, Andrew Gilchrist, touching on Iceland's special position and the difficulties that would be involved in participating in a collaborative venture of this type. At the same time, he said that Icelandic leaders realised the disadvantages that might be involved in standing outside the community.

Then came the report about the signing of the Treaty of Rome on 25th March 1957. Even though the news reached Iceland quickly, things were nevertheless rather different in those days from what they are now. Our embassy staff in Paris reported to the ministry in Iceland that they hoped to have a copy of the treaty in French shortly, but that it would take at least a few weeks before an English translation would be ready. When we look back at former ages we must always be on our guard against viewing events through the lens of our own time. Things took longer in those days; distances were greater and the distinguishing features of nations and their people were perhaps more palpable.

And so Þórhallur Ásgeirsson travelled to Paris to obtain information and to present the position of the Icelandic authorities. It was clear that Icelandic membership of the new customs and economic union was out of the question, as

no one on the mainland of Europe seemed to be remotely interested in any such thing. On the other hand, there might be some sense in looking into potential cooperation on free trade within Europe. In this, it was recognised that it would scarcely be possible for the small states of Europe to remain outside all commercial and trading associations. While recognising this, it was seen as vital that Iceland's negotiators explain the special position of the country and the problems it entailed. Its agricultural sector would not survive the lifting of protective tariffs and its fisheries depended on access to foreign markets for the sale of its products.

This is how, sixty years ago, Iceland's relations began, first with the European Economic Community, then with the Common Market and finally with the European Union that we know today. The emphasis in the union's headquarters has been on common interests, with the course set on ever-closer union within Europe. Here in Iceland, we have taken account of this process, while at the same time giving due weight to Iceland's special position and the special requirements of our country.

This can be seen clearly in the first debates in the Althingi about "the free trade issue," less than a year after the signing of the Treaty of Rome. It seemed clear at the time that Britain would take the lead on the establishment of a free-trade association. Once again, I draw your attention to the technical developments that have been made and the advantages of the internet. Parliamentary debates, bills and their explanatory notes can all be read on the Althingi's website, [althingi.is](http://althingi.is); there it is possible to make word searches and so to see in the twinkling of an eye what was said and written. For example, Gylfi Þ. Gíslason, an MP for the Social Democratic Party and Minister of Education, said: "... it is up to us to follow closely everything that happens regarding this issue ... At the same time we must work to have full consideration given, in the draft free-trade agreement, to Iceland's circumstances and its particular problems." Skúli Guðmundsson, an MP for the Progressive Party, was of the same opinion: "As things are at present, there seem to be good reasons for Iceland to participate in this proposed association. Nevertheless certain conditions would have to be met because of our special position in certain respects."

Einar Olgeirsson, an MP for the Social Democratic Alliance and for many years the leader of the communist and socialist movements in Iceland, took another view and held a long speech listing all the drawbacks involved in membership:

My opinion is that we should not open our country up to the flood-tide that would sweep over us, a flood-tide of unemployment, a flood-tide of recession, a crisis in trade, a flood-tide of foreign cartels which would come into being if we opened our country up to, for example, regions such

as a possible free-trade area in Western Europe. We must realise clearly that such a flood-tide would sweep away our old-established occupations ... even though I am regarded as being in favour of revolution, I must say I think that what has distinguished us as a nation and given our national culture its special stamp has been swept away quite fast enough up to now.

Ólafur Thors, Chairman of the Independence Party, also voiced his opinion. “The honourable minister of education did everything he could to conceal the fact that what we have here is a first draft of a united Europe,” he said, and went on to quote a speech by another giant in the political arena, a man who, it could be said, was as influential in the politics of his country as Ólafur Thors was in Iceland:

I myself had the pleasure of listening to a speech that Sir Winston Churchill gave on this topic where this idea [of a united Europe] was quite clear; it was as far back as 1947 that he gave that speech. It is this idea that is now gaining support among a great number of the leaders in Europe, even though, for various reasons, some of them are not prepared to state it openly.

A great deal has happened, both in Iceland and abroad, since those words were spoken in the Althingi. One example is the involvement of women in connection with European integration issues in recent years: Jóhanna Sigurðardóttir in Iceland and Angela Merkel and Theresa May in their countries, to name a few. I will not go further into all that here.

Ladies and gentlemen, in this speech I have mentioned, amongst other things, how we can find sources and evidence about the past. It goes without saying that there are many ways of doing so. Sometimes we can speak to witnesses and ask those who played a part in events what they remember; we can also go to libraries and look into studies by academics and others. Various lines of investigation are open, for example, to those who are interested in looking further into the history of Iceland and the European integration project. This is precisely why it is so important for us to be able to publicise our research on our history and society. Praiseworthy though it is to be able to assemble pools of information on the internet, this is by no means sufficient. We need to delve down further, to put facts into their context, compare and draw conclusions. This is why we need access to other people’s expert knowledge and to academic research where different interpretations of events can be seen and heard. This applies to all areas of the sciences and humanities.

But it is also vital, in a democratic society, that individual citizens should be able to make up their own minds, form their own opinions, receive the good education needed for this during their formative years and have, as adults, time to learn, to look into history and the range of opinions current in their own

times, come to an informed conclusion and let their views be heard. Then they will be less likely to be drawn into the mazes of hate speech and prejudice that are damaging for others. This is what real democracy and a mature welfare society is about – and this foundation must be defended within and outside Europe, within and outside the European Union.