



Address
by
the President of Iceland
Guðn Th. Jóhannesson
at a State dinner hosted
by
the President of Finland
Sauli Niinistö

Helsinki
15 May 2018

Mr. President,
First Lady,
Excellencies,
Ladies and gentlemen

On behalf of my wife and myself, I would like to thank you for the goodwill and hospitality we have enjoyed here in Finland. In this country, we Icelanders are among friends.

We are here now in order to strengthen yet further the bonds of brother- and sisterhood that have long existed between Iceland and Finland. Last year, Eliza and I were honoured to be here, to take part in celebrations of the centenary of Finnish independence; and this year we Icelanders too mark the centenary of our country becoming a free, sovereign nation.

This is something we have in common, Finns and Icelanders – the fact that we are celebrating important landmarks in the history of our nations – centenaries. After that point, the experiences of our two nations differed in many ways: here in Finland you had to fight for your right of existence as an independent nation, while it was certainly an advantage for Iceland to be an island in the remote northern ocean. Yet, despite our very different experiences, both nations have also succeeded in gradually establishing welfare states – societies where personal freedom is respected, and where those in need of

assistance should receive it. We often call it the “Nordic Model,” with its combination of individual freedom and social fellowship. And when we look back, and consider how the majority of people lived a century ago, with poverty and inequality, we can proudly say that we have made progress. We in the Nordic countries are, of course, far from having established perfect societies – much remains to be done. And a range of problems must be faced: pollution and environmental issues, economic inequality, and the distress and adversity experienced by too many people in our welfare societies.

Yes, we face many challenges, and who knows what the future holds? But is that necessarily a bad thing? We can, at any rate, make our mark on future times by what we do; and let us remember the words of one of Tove Jansson’s characters in the world of the Moomins: “All things are so very uncertain, and that’s exactly what makes me feel reassured.”

Mr. President, ladies and gentlemen: It was recently reported that you in Finland are the happiest nation in the world – a cheering conclusion based on surveys and research. And not only that! A multitude of evidence indicates that the Finns are leaders in many fields. On the Statistics Finland website, for instance, there is a special section called: “Finland among the best in the world.” The website’s evidence of that distinction is so multifarious that I shall just mention a few random examples:

Finland is the safest and most secure country in the world.

Finland has the best educational system in the world.

Finland is in third place in the world for gender quality – not in first place, I dare to point out – as president of Iceland!

Finns drink more coffee than any other nation.

Such assertions must always be taken with a pinch of salt. Generalisations and averages cannot sum up all the good and bad sides of a diverse and complex society. And surely there is room for improvement in Finland? Yes, of course: a good nation can be made even better. “What we lack is boldness!” That was the answer to that question, given in recent TV programmes on the future of Finland. An Icelandic friend of mine who lives here said much the same: that it was hard to find anything to criticise about the typical Finn – but that if something had to be mentioned, it was that your heartfelt modesty and self-deprecation may sometimes prove to be an impediment.

But my answer is that this is yet another case of Finnish leadership – as the most modest nation in the world! Despite all you have achieved, you are far from having the reputation of a proud or boastful nation. Furthermore, your down-to-earth attitude may actually contribute to your general level of happiness. Modesty is a virtue, when it goes with healthy self-confidence.

Mr President! At this delightful dinner, I want to end by saying that I see us, travellers away from home, as being on a sort of fact-finding mission here, in this land of outstanding happiness. How did you Finns go about establishing yourselves in the leading ranks of the community of nations? What explains your happiness and success? Who knows: perhaps *talkoot* is a factor – your deeply-felt conviction that people must join hands in the interests of the group, the village, the whole society. Also, you are well-known for an essential element of your national character – *sisu*: the willpower, tenacity and persistence that have stood you in good stead over the centuries.

And then there is the country of Finland itself – the water and the woods, which are unfailing resources, and will continue to be so if well managed. But most important of all are human resources – the enormous value you place on knowledge and learning, science and innovation. My wife and I, and our companions on this visit, will certainly see that confirmed as we travel around Finland. That is something that we Icelanders can learn from you.

Another question is whether the same may be said of us Icelanders, as is apparently sometimes said of you Finns – that it would do us good to be even more daring, to take more risks – both large and small. Another question is also whether Finns, and others, take the view that we Icelanders are too modest and self-doubting! I think not, somehow. But to you, our Finnish friends, I say: Don't change too much. We like you just the way you are!

Ladies and gentlemen,

I ask you all to stand, and lift your glasses in honour of the Finnish people and the President of Finland: Sauli Niinistö.