



Table Speech
by
the President of Iceland
Guðni Th. Jóhannesson
at Helsinki City Hall

Helsinki
15 May 2018

Your Excellency Sauli Niinistö, President of Finland,
Jan Vapaavuori Mayor of Helsinki,
Tuuli Kousa, Chair of the City Council,
City Council Members,
dear guests.

It is a great honour for me to be invited to the City Hall of Helsinki and to meet with the leaders of your charming city. Last week, I spoke at the Smart Cities conference in New York, and Mayor Vapaavuori was also there. I can safely say that both of us were inspired by the spirit of innovation, fresh thinking and energy which could be felt there.

The twenty-first century will almost certainly be the era of continued urbanization, of people moving to cities from villages and the countryside, especially in the developing countries of the world. I believe that we Icelanders can play a positive role in this process. In recent decades, we have gained great knowledge and experience in the utilization of geothermal power for electricity production, for heating homes – or for cooling them if that is necessary (which is actually hardly ever the case in Iceland). In many parts of the globe, it makes perfect sense to use geothermal power instead of fossil fuels, polluting health hazards in busy cities.

We can lead by example. In a recent survey on the cleanest cities of the world, Reykjavík managed to reach sixth position, ranking high on sustainability, recycling and green spaces. This of course makes us proud. Still,

we are perfectly willing to salute you, the inhabitants of Helsinki, for being even higher on the same list.

Indeed, Reykjavík and Helsinki share many positive characteristics. Of course, the Icelandic capital has fewer inhabitants, but one of our most prominent architectural jewels is the Nordic House. When it was inaugurated in 1968, it was pointed out that this was the only building in our country that was designed by a world-renowned architect, your very own Alvar Aalto.

Five years later, Finnish architecture was noted again in Iceland. In late January 1973, the people of the Westman Islands woke up to a volcanic eruption. Overnight, all the islanders, more than five thousand persons, were evacuated to the mainland. Suddenly, they needed new homes and our friends in the Nordic region offered help, including you here in Finland. Almost 500 houses were built in that year, many of them wooden, prefabricated buildings from this country. With some modifications, these houses were perfect for Icelandic needs and conditions. It must be mentioned, however, that many Icelanders found it strange that the buildings all came with a built-in sauna, a true rarity in Icelandic homes.

Once the eruption ended, most of the Westman Islanders returned but others then moved into the Finnish houses, “Finnsku húsin” as they are commonly known in back home. Almost half a century ago, they have stood the test of time. In a recent survey, the owners of these Finnish and other Nordic houses gave them the average mark of 8,6 out of ten. Admittedly, though, over 80% have removed the sauna. In Iceland, we have hot pots instead – jacuzzis – in which to warm ourselves and relax, again, one of the many benefits of geothermal resources on the island.

Later this month, municipal elections will be held in Iceland. In Reykjavík, voters will be able to choose between sixteen party lists, a record in the capital’s history. All or almost all candidates emphasise the need to increase the number of affordable homes, in particular for first-time buyers who find it increasingly difficult to climb on the property ladder. The example of the Finnish houses demonstrates that we can design and build at a fairly quick pace low-cost homes, simple but solid – and with or without a sauna.

Ladies and gentlemen. It is always a pleasure to visit your country and your delightful capital. On behalf of my wife Eliza and myself, I express our thanks for the goodwill and hospitality we have received. I ask you all to stand, and lift your glasses in honour of the President of Finland, Sauli Niinistö, and members of the Helsinki City Council.