



Speech
by President of Iceland
Guðni Th. Jóhannesson
at the State Dinner
in honour of
the President of Finland
Sauli Niinistö and
First Lady Jenni Haukio

Bessastaðir
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President of Finland, First Lady,
Speaker of Alþingi, ministers,
ladies and gentlemen

On behalf of my wife Eliza and myself, I welcome our guests to Iceland. We are honoured to receive you here, to have the opportunity to demonstrate in practice the friendship that exists between Icelanders and Finns. Now we have the chance to strengthen still further the bonds that tie our two countries together.

As a child I learned about Finland from an Icelandic book published in the middle of the last century. It gave a true picture of how you, the people of Finland, value your country, your dense forests and your thousand lakes – or however many there are! Still, that old book perhaps ventures a little too far in maintaining that “The Finnish nation is so integrated with the nature of the country that Finns abroad are rarely at ease unless they are by a lake or river, with forests nearby.”

You won’t find much in the way of forests here, dear friends. Our land is more bare, with fewer lakes. But, on the other hand, we have higher mountains, and we have glaciers. We look forward to our expedition with you onto

Langjökul – the Long Glacier – tomorrow. We will not see the home of Santa Claus there – so far as I am concerned, it is fine for Rovaniemi to be the residence of the red-clad Santa: we have thirteen “santas” of our own, and they are quite different. But we shall see how the glacier has retreated in recent decades, after the cold centuries that went before.

Unremitting emissions of greenhouse gases are undoubtedly a contributory factor in that process – leading to greater weather extremes and higher temperatures. You too can also see indications of global warming in your own country: the book I mentioned earlier states when the Finnish winter starts, when the lakes freeze over, and so on. However, in a recent report on the website of the Yle national broadcasting company, I read that in recent years average temperatures in Finland have been far higher than they were in the middle of the last century. The lessons I learned as a boy have become outdated.

Some things change, while others remain the same. One thing that is unchanged is the goodwill we Icelanders feel towards you, not least during times of trouble. Matthías Jochumsson was one of Iceland’s greatest national poets. His works include our national anthem but he also translated into Icelandic the acclaimed works of Runeberg, your own national poet. After that, few Finns could captivate the hearts and minds of Icelanders as powerfully as Sven Tuuva, the simple but courageous country lad who battled to the end against the overwhelming might of Russia in the war of 1808.

And our admiration for the Finnish people was no less, many years later, during the Winter War at the beginning of World War II. Icelanders sent food supplies and winter clothing, and a fundraising campaign raised a then-record sum in Icelandic history up to that time. Likewise, we will not forget the support and sympathy that you have shown us, for instance in 1973, almost fifty years ago, when a volcanic eruption destroyed a large part of the town on Westman Islands.

Now we show solidarity with the people of war-torn Ukraine, and we welcome Finland into the western defensive alliance. When the going gets tough, we must all stand together. Sofi Oksanen once said that if people do not know about your existence, they won’t notice that you are disappearing.

My dear Sauli! My dear Jenni! In Finland we have enjoyed your hospitality and goodwill. And we have also seen there how much we can learn from the Finns. You are a progressive nation, you place a high value on education, and we admire your resilience and unity when those two traits are needed.

To be sure, I want to be cautious about placing too much faith in stereotypes. But there is surely some reason why you Finns are said to be

characterised by sisu – grit and stoicism – and you have a reputation for being people of few words. The same is also said of us Icelanders, as well as the Faroese and Greenlanders, actually; and in Nordic collaboration we and you appear to get along especially well together – with all respect for our delightful and loquacious Scandinavian friends.

And we have our own healthy love of our homeland. It must be grounded in a realistic respect for our history and culture. We must be willing to acknowledge the mistakes that were made, and sometimes still are. Furthermore, our patriotism must be founded on broad-mindedness and tolerance: and that reminds me of the story of a man of few words here in Iceland, who was so in love with his partner that he almost told him how much he loved him. I am sure that could happen in Finland, too.

Dear friends! I hope you will enjoy your stay here in Iceland. I hope you will take home good memories to your own beautiful country. And perhaps you will recall the lovely words spoken by one of Tove Jansson's Moomins: "You must go on a long journey before you can really find out how wonderful home is."

Ladies and gentlemen: I ask you all to rise, and raise your glasses in honour of the Finnish people, their president Sauli Niinistö, and the First Lady, Jenni Haukio.