

Speech delivered by HE Høgni Hoydal, Minister of Fisheries for the Government of the Faroe Islands, at the Celebration of the Faroese Flag Day in London on Wednesday the 25th of April 2017

My Lords, Distinguished Members' of Parliament, Your Excellences, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Good evening

I should like to begin by extending my thanks to the Representative of the Faroe Islands in London, Mr Áki Johansen, for hosting this event in honour of the Faroese flag, and for inviting me to speak.

This annual event, the Flag Day, which is celebrated around our island country and beyond, is a festive occasion. The days are slowly getting longer as winter gives way to spring. Change is in the air, just as the growing sense of optimism, confidence and purpose. But the Flag Day is also a reverent, reflective occasion.

It recognises the significance of the flag, as a part of our historic cultural awakening and ongoing nation-building project. It invites us once again to review our progress and set out new objectives. It allows us to stop and ask: 'what is in a flag?' Don't worry; I am not going to try to awaken your inner flag enthusiast.

Firstly, a flag is about external recognition. A flag must be recognised for it to have any utility. To make this point, let me rewind to the 12th of April 1940, which saw the start of a strategic, but peaceful military occupation of the Faroe Islands by the United Kingdom in response to the sudden, aggressive Nazi invasion of Denmark.

With the Faroes and Denmark occupied by opposing sides, a new flag was needed to identify and protect Faroese fishing vessels caught up in total war, and their cargo, which was so important to the war effort.

These considerations overruled any existing hesitance – even active resistance in some quarters – to allow for a Faroese flag, and the British Admiralty therefore recognised the 'Merkið' on the 25th of April 1940.

The importance of this decision – and its implications – cannot be overestimated. Recognition of the flag was – and still is – an implicit recognition of the Faroese people as a nation with its own national symbol. It is therefore a special and profound feeling, to be celebrating with you at The Travellers Club this evening, only a minute or two away from where the decision was made.

Secondly, a flag is about internal recognition – it is who we are, wherever we are. Here, there is absolute clarity – we, the people of the Faroe Islands consider ourselves one nation like any other, with our own symbol of national identity, national unity and national purpose.

Domestically, we are building a society of inclusivity and unity, of equal rights and opportunities. We are building a sustainable and self-sufficient economy, with resilience measures against external economic shocks – that are a common vulnerability amongst small island economies.

To this end, we are championing reforms opening access to our natural marine resources – a matter close to my heart. We are also determined to open our economy to innovation, creative industries, tourism and gastronomy – the latter of which has already resulted in increased numbers of visitors to our islands and a first Michelin star to a Faroese restaurant.

Add to this, we are also constantly improving the infrastructure to make our island economy more and more competitive. The domestic energy consumption is increasingly supplied by sustainable, green energy. The aim is that by the year 2030 the domestic energy consumption will be 100% renewable. The various Faroese economic hubs are being connected by a third and a fourth sub-sea tunnel, and telecommunication advancements have seen the islands covered by state-of-the-art 4G mobile net.

They are also serviced by a modern airport, extensive port facilities, as well as the skills and expertise that enables us to speak confidently of a future Faroese maritime services hub. A hub that will be central in facilitating the 4th Faroese Licencing Round for Hydrocarbon Exploration which opens on 17th of May this year, at the Faroe Islands Exploration Conference in Tórshavn.

As I mentioned earlier, the Flag is also about recognition abroad – a shared domestic determination to participate internationally. And here I am not only talking about our committed and talented athletes, students, researchers and entrepreneurs – of whom we are so very proud. No. This determination also refers to projecting a deliberate presence where our geo-political interests are at stake.

It is for this reason that Faroese stakeholders attend international conferences and exhibitions, and it is why the Faroese government participates in relevant international organisations and initiatives. These include a number of marine management regimes, which fall within my own portfolio.

The Faroe Islands are a coastal state party to the pelagic fisheries in the Northeast Atlantic – and in the broader region – the Faroe Islands are also a member state of NEAFC, NAFO, and NASCO and even an active member in the South Pacific. Even more, Faroese officials participate in the ongoing consultations to regulate fisheries in the Arctic, and Faroese marine biologists participate actively in ICES and NAMMCO research. Being a committed and heavily invested stakeholder in these matters begs an active and dynamic role in the international arena.

It is in this spirit that the Faroe Islands, soon after the 23rd of June 2016, took steps to ensure that the relationship between the Faroe Islands and the United Kingdom is nurtured and reinforced. Therefore, with the Article 50 process triggered on the 29th of March and Brexit visible on the horizon, I met with my UK counterpart, Minister of State at DEFRA, George Eustice MP this morning.

It is clear that Brexit offers both challenges and possibilities. It is my firm belief that we should focus diligently on the possibilities, which are many and diverse. The Minister of State and I agreed that fisheries cooperation should go beyond lesson-learning, and that it could be a central element of a new strategic partnership. A partnership, which also includes trade, as well as collaboration within entrepreneurship, innovation, research and development.

Ladies and Gentlemen

‘What is in a Flag?’ Well, often cultural and political identity. Note that the Faroese red, white and blue flag is a unique banner, in the design shared by most of the Nordic nations. Nations with whom we share our ancestry, heritage and values – and with whom we work as an independent party.

A modern Nordic nation, our political identity is shaped by finding consensus and pragmatic solutions. Specifically, Faroese internal and external self-government within the Kingdom of Denmark has primarily resulted from an often ambiguous sub-national constitutional space. It is this ambiguity, which is addressed in a new Faroese constitution that will be put to a referendum, 1 year from today.

A constitution is of great value for any nation – whether sovereign or not – and in the Faroese case, it will define the internal origin and organisation of power. As a foundation document, the constitution will unite our nation around our shared values and visions. It is not a divisive document, but an attempt at flexible accommodation. Indeed, flexible accommodation is important in our globalised world. It may also serve

the United Kingdom – whose banner carries great symbolic significance – as do all the national flags of the British nations.

Under these flags greatness was won and defended. Both near and far – including sheltering the Faroe Islands during the Second World War. Here, I would like to express my thanks to all those service personnel who served in and around our islands during ‘Operation Valentine’, in particular Harry Wilson who is here with us tonight.

Ladies and Gentlemen

With Britain as our closest neighbour, at both the Arctic and European peripheries, the Faroe Islands are still geo-strategically important as security tensions rise in the High North. The Faroes are an existing trading partner – ready to expand trade cooperation. The Faroes are a committed fisheries partner – dedicated to sustainable and equitable management.

Indeed, our flag in the international arena is a symbol of the determination of a nation to work together in partnership with our Nordic neighbours and with the United Kingdom. On that note, I would like to conclude by thanking you for your time and consideration - and I hope we will continue to have an enjoyable evening together.

Thank you!