

**Speech delivered in Reykjavik on the Faroese Flag Day of April 25<sup>th</sup> 2017 by Aksel V. Johannesen, Prime Minister.**

Góðu áheyrendur, your Excellences, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Today is the 25th of April, our national Faroese Flag Day where we celebrate our beloved and almost 100-year-old national flag, which we called Merkið.

For us Faroese, this annual celebration is a proud and happy event that has a central importance for the identity of the Faroese people. That is why it is a special honour and pleasure for me to share it with so many distinguished guests, Ministers, Members of Parliament, representatives of the diplomatic community, officials and friends of the Faroes.

Merkið was created in 1919. But back then the Danish Government that ruled over the Faroe Islands would not accept the Faroe Islands should have their own flag.

But things changed as the second World War erupted. Denmark was occupied by Nazi Germany and shortly after it was the same in Norway. In order to ensure that this expansion could not continue - Britain acted – and occupied the Faroes. As a large number of Faroese boats shipped fish to Britain, a Faroese flag became a necessity, to ensure that Faroese vessels would be identified as allies rather than enemies.

On the 25th of April 1940, the British Government along with her wartime allies recognized our flag as the official flag of the Faroe Islands.

Ever since, this day has been celebrated by the Faroese as the official Faroese Flag Day.

**Ladies and gentlemen,**

The relationship between Iceland and the Faroe Islands, the Icelandic people and the Faroese people, has always been special. I dare to postulate, that no other nation is so close to us as the nation of Iceland. We have so many things in common: our language (even though I am addressing you in English today), history, culture, nature, and not least the sea that joins us and that is so important to us both as island nations

Indeed, in Iceland, Faroe Islanders feel at home, and in the words of the Icelandic poet Hannes Petursson:

Hvergi er íslendingur minni útlendingur en í Færeyum

/ Nowhere else is an Icelander less of a stranger than in the Faroe Islands.

The Faroes and Iceland are close neighbours and even though we occasionally have oppositional interests, our two countries have longstanding traditions for good cooperation and close relationship in many areas.

After the violent storm in the Faroe Islands last Christmas, the Faroese people experienced the warmth of our Icelandic sister nation. A group of kind-hearted Icelandic volunteers helped raise a significant amount of money for our brave emergency services. A sincere thanks to our Icelandic friends for their kind and generous efforts and contribution!

**Ladies and gentlemen,**

A few weeks ago, we celebrated an historical milestone when the official population of the Faroe Islands exceeded 50,000 people for the first time. This is a true landmark in our history. Just a few years ago, the notion of “*Exit Faroes*” stole the headlines and set the agenda with the message that the Faroe Islands were losing the younger generations to the other countries. Young people pursuing an education overseas were not returning to the Faroe Islands. *Exit Faroes* has now become *Enter Faroes*. Many who have studied and lived abroad are returning. Foreigners also move to the Faroe Islands to live and work. The excess of births is increasing and Faroese women continue to have more children on average than in most other Western European countries.

But the Faroese society faces great challenges. We still have skewed gender and age demographics, which undoubtedly is our greatest challenge of all. My government takes it very seriously by investing in youth, education, culture and families with young children. We have an enormous responsibility to ensure that we have a country and society in which there is room for everyone to flourish.

At the moment, the Faroese economy is booming with an annual growth of 7-8 percent and an unemployment rate of 2 percent. But our economy is fragile and demands special prudence to maintain a high welfare society for our descendants. Therefore, my government is working hard to implement structural reforms in many areas. Just in these days, the government are struggling hard to get an approval for a new framework for our public fisheries administration.

**Ladies and gentlemen,**

My Government is committed to making the Faroes a more active player in the global community. This includes finding new markets for both exports and imports.

And in this regard we aim to establish free trade relations with as many countries as possible. The Faroes have Trade Agreements with the European Union, Norway, Switzerland and Turkey. And of course the Hoyvík Agreement with Iceland is the most comprehensive form of bilateral agreement we have with any country.

In the aftermath of the UK's decision of leave the EU, the Faroese Government is preparing for the new reality. The UK is a major partner for the Faroe Islands in both fisheries and trade. The Faroese Government wants to ensure a close future relationship both with the UK and the EU after Brexit becomes a reality. New agreements with the UK to ensure

future trade and other relations is a high priority of the Faroese government.

Another important priority is our position in the West Nordic region of the Arctic. As an island nation we have many political, economic and social challenges and opportunities in common with our neighbouring countries. Faroese contributions to Arctic cooperation are a natural part of the continued development of the Faroe Islands as a relevant and constructive partner in international cooperation in the region.

We believe the Arctic nations can and should lead the way in showing how issues related to the management of natural resources can best be resolved in peaceful and mutually respectful ways.

**Ladies and gentlemen,**

On this exact day next year, the referendum on the Faroese constitution will be held. On our national Faroese Flag Day in 2018, the Faroese people will vote on a new constitution.

This vote is not a vote on full sovereignty.

However, it will confirm our right to self-determination. The constitution will define our identity as a nation and our fundamental rights and duties as a people. It will also determine our procedure, if or when the Faroese people choose to establish Faroe Islands as a sovereign state.

The Government is aiming to ensure as broad support as possible for the new Faroese constitution, both in the Parliament and amongst the Faroese people.

**Ladies and gentlemen,**

Once again thank you for being here today.

I would like to thank the head of our Representation, Petur Petersen and his staff for hosting this afternoon's event. A wonderful spring afternoon, a stylish setting, in good company; these are all the ingredients for a wonderful afternoon.

- Please join me now in a toast to friendship, and close and fruitful relations between our respective countries in the times to come.