



**Speech
by
Halla Tómasdóttir
President of Iceland
at a reception in honour of
President Alexander Stubb
and Suzanne Innes-Stubb
Helsinki
8 October 2025**

Your Excellencies,
President Alexander Stubb and Suzanne Innes-Stubb,
Your Excellencies, Distinguished Guests.

It is a true pleasure to host this reception in honour of the presidential couple of Finland – a country we Icelanders admire for many reasons, including your commitment to sustainability, education and culture.

My own affection for Finland indeed began with cultural exchange, when my school choir visited Rovaniemi in the early 1980s. I remember being surprised to learn that the capital of Finnish Lapland was the official home of Santa Claus, not only because it was one of the greenest places I had ever seen but also because Iceland had its own special claim to Santa. I was quickly calmed by a choirmate who reminded me that although Iceland is only one-third the size of Finland, we can boast of more Santas – thirteen of them, in fact, known as the Yule Lads!

These naughty brothers are sons of the despicable troll-woman Grýla, who captures and cooks those Icelandic children who misbehave.

Thankfully, Björn and I got to know better trolls when we became parents and frequently found ourselves escaping to Moominvalley together with our children. Thankfully, Tove Jansson's Moomin-trolls were as distinct from Grýla and her Yule Lads as day is from night. Moominvalley became a cherished fantasy world for the whole family – a haven that gently upheld the values we hoped to pass on to our children through stories of friendship, beauty and cooperation. This afternoon's visit to the Architecture and Design Museum, where we previewed the *Escape to Moominvalley* exhibition, was therefore not only delightful but especially meaningful. If the world has ever needed a place informed by kindness and empathy – and the conviction that we can build a better world together – now is that time.

Tove Jansson's powerful vision brings me to something which has long been a central concern of mine: the mental wellbeing of our people, especially the young. Studies show that teenagers in our part of the world now spend on average up to nine hours a day on their phones, much of it on social media. They are better connected than ever – but paradoxically, also more disconnected. These platforms, perhaps designed for engagement, now fuel enagement, harming our children's wellbeing as well as the democratic health of our societies. Likes and followers have become stand-ins for self-worth. Instead of supporting community, we experience competition, anxiety and loneliness. Instead of establishing genuine, human connections we are frequently haunted and even deceived by Internet trolls and fake news.

We must help young people find balance and teach them right from wrong. Their mental wellbeing cannot be sacrificed at the altar of digital validation or in a sea of disinformation. And this is not just a youth issue – it is a societal one.

Finland, I must say, sets a remarkable example in this area. Your education system not only aims for academic excellence, but it also supports children's emotional health from the start. You have integrated mental health professionals into schools, normalised public discussions about wellbeing, and shown that mental health can be a national priority. In Iceland, we are also taking positive steps – with investments in early intervention, school-based services and efforts to reduce stigma.

I know mental wellbeing is not a checklist – it is not as easy to measure as, say, coffee consumption or running speed (which I know Alex and Suzanne track with impressive dedication). It is not just about exams or screen time. It is about ensuring every young person feels seen, supported and valued. That is a tall order – but one the Nordic countries are hopefully well positioned to tackle together. We have long embraced the idea of collective care. But even in our peaceful, high-trust countries, cracks are forming. We see rising division, growing loneliness, escalating violence. And this demands not only counteractive measures, but also courage.

Not long after I took office, Iceland faced a national tragedy. During our annual Culture Night – a festival of community and the arts – one child fatally injured another. It shocked the country. The immediate reaction included calls for tougher laws, more police, even metal detectors in schools. But some of us, including the grieving parents of the young victim, felt a different response was urgently needed – one rooted in compassion. In cooperation with a group of young people and community leaders, we launched an initiative called *Knights of Love*. And no, I am not talking about evenings of passion and lust, but rather a movement grounded in kindness, human empathy and care, a movement that upholds the values that we could associate with Moominvalley.

This voluntary movement has grown across Iceland, with multiple concerts and cultural collaborations, compassion circles formed at many schools, and creative youth-led expressions of empathy – including a song you will hear tonight. It was written by teenagers from the northern Icelandic town of Hofsfós who chose to respond to violence not with anger, but with meaning and compassion. The Icelandic singer GDRN, Guðrún Ýr Eyfjörð Jóhannesdóttir, who co-wrote the song, will share more about its creation. While it is sung in Icelandic, I believe the shared Nordic rhythm of care will come through loud and clear. It will no doubt sound better than when my choir attempted to perform “Tuku Tuku Lampaitani” in Rovaniemi and inspired heartfelt laughter from the locals. One of my favourite lines in the song you will hear goes like this: “Vertu viti á leið fyrir vini í neyð,” which translates as: “Be a lighthouse for friends in need.”

Dear Alex and Suzanne:

It has been such a pleasure for Björn and me to spend these past two days with you, strengthening the bonds of friendship that were initially formed when we met with other Nordic colleagues in Berlin last year. As we then discussed, the Nordic countries collectively represent the 10th largest economy in the world. With that comes both hard and soft power, both the responsibility and opportunity to make a difference for the world. That starts by us being there for each other as friends and colleagues, as people who care about each other’s wellbeing.

Often, wellbeing is grounded in simple acts of caring, as the one I unexpectedly experienced nearly a decade ago from a former Finnish president, Madame Tarja Halonen – sometimes called “Moomin Mama”. We met at a women’s leadership event in the United States. Just before the programme began, I clumsily tore a hole in my cardigan. Without hesitation, Tarja reached into her Moomin bag, pulled out a sewing kit and calmly repaired it. That simple and

straightforward act of compassion felt very Finnish – and further strengthened my already deep affection for your country and your people. The experience over these past two days has repeatedly shown me how deep our friendship runs and how much joy we experience when we join forces.

I firmly believe that if the Nordic countries stand united, learn from and look out for each other, we can ensure that our future generations grow up not just surviving but thriving. In that way, we may perhaps be able to be a lighthouse not only for each other but the whole world. So tonight, let us raise our glasses – to the lasting friendship between Iceland and Finland – and to the future we can build together.

Kippis! Skál!