



Press Conference held by the Icelandic Prime Minister 18. september 1964

Bjarni Benediktsson – Stjórnmal – Forsætisráðherra – NATO

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PRESS CONFERENCE held by the ICELANDIC PRIME MINISTER,
DR. BJARNI BENEDIKTSSON, on 18 September 1964.

-The conference was attended by abt. 50 NATO-journalists visiting Reykjavik, Iceland.

Prime Minister: I only want to say that we are very happy that you are all here and we hope you will have a pleasant stay in our country although I understand that you will stay here only a very short time. I know that if our people here can do anything for you they will be very happy to do whatever they can. And if I can answer any questions or tell you something you want to know about our country, of course I will be very glad.

Question: Mr. Prime Minister. Relationship between the Americans from the base (in Keflavik) and Icelanders are said to have improved tremendously during the past 3 or 4 years; to what do you attribute this?

Answer: I think on the whole that it has been exaggerated how bad they were formerly. Of course there can always happen something that is not so easy to solve, but I would say that on the whole during those years the relations have been good -and sometimes very good. Of course it depends on the people who are staying out there; it depends of course also on the goodwill and co-operation from the Icelandic side. But I think that in the last few years the relations have been better than ever before. You can... Some people say it is better to have the Navy than the Air Force, because the Navy is accustomed to go around the world and see people more than the Air Force. I don't know if that is the reason? But the chief thing is, that if the people who are responsible on both sides are willing to try to find a solution and try to hinder anything that may

come up, it will be easy to do so as it has been in the last few years.

Q: Do the American people marry Iceland girls?

A: I think some of the do, but I do not think too many.

I do not know really, if it is increasing or decreasing, this.

(A government spokesman gives the answer to this: Decreasing).

Yes, decreasing, I would say so. I know that there is some, if I may say so, resentment out at the base because those restrictions are there. There are some Icelanders too, who think they are not necessary. But on the whole I think ^{that} it would be unwise to alter those rules that already have been enforced now for many years. And because our community is so small it is obvious that the impact of foreign troops here is much more than in greater countries, so those rules, even if they are not very good in themselves, they have had a useful purpose; and there is no doubt that they have helped to hinder conflict that would have arisen if they were not. So even if we would like not to have those strong rules, as I say I think it would not be wise to alter them to any great degree.

Q: Mr. Prime Minister. What is the reason for the restriction on the Navy men and other American service men going in town in civilian dress? Why do you insist on the uniform?

A: That is a historical matter, I would say. It was tried once to allow them to go in civil dress and the experience was not very good, I would say. And then people would say that they were in a way ^{trying to} smuggle themselves into places where they ought not to be, and it would create misunderstanding and suspicion here. But I don't know if it is very strongly enforced now. I think there are some exceptions that are given, and up to a

degree it is nothing against that. But I must say that personally I can very well understand that those boys who come from a foreign country to defend us here think it is very curious that they are under those restrictions; but on the whole we think that they are to the benefit of both the Icelanders and the forces, because else we would have more difficulties, more suspicion and so on. And you must understand that even if the great majority of the people here are for NATO and want to have those forces inside the country, there is a lot of people here who are very much against the Americans, NATO and all that. And many of them would be... I could say at least some of them would be very glad if there occurred some possibilities for conflict - and at least not work against it.

Q: Mr. Prime Minister. How great a percentage of Icelandic population is opposing NATO membership and American presence here?

A: It is not quite easy to say, but I would say that the parties who have consistently supported NATO and the Defence Agreement are now have 80-85% of the votes. But of course there are some people inside these parties who are against NATO and want the forces to go away. Without any exaggeration I would say that at least 2/3 or about 70% support NATO and want the Americans to be here while the world situation remains as it is. But that is of course guess-work; It has never been a referendum on it.

Q: But is the opposition last 10 years for instance, is it growing or...?

A: It is weaker than it was. (Journalist: The opposition is

weaker?) Yes, definitely it is weaker.

This summer they are trying to, we can say, resurrect this opposition. And they were having a meeting, I think two weeks ago, those people. They are satisfied themselves about what they have achieved, but I think they are not taken quite seriously by most of the people, because most of the people think, as the world situation is, that Iceland cannot be left undefended. And therefore we want to be inside NATO and think that, as I say, for the time being we must have some defence and we want to support NATO and this is our only contribution to let ^{the} American forces stay out there.

Q: Is there any budgets in, national Iceland budgets for defence expenditures. I mean, does it cost you anything to be a NATO member?

A: No, it does not cost us anything. We cannot say so. As you know we are so few that we have no and have never had any military forces, and even if we decided to have some they would be so weak that they would not be of any help. So we have made this agreement with the American Government, and the only thing we do, we let them have the necessary land and then they do not have to pay taxes or customs or anything like that. Instead, we can say we have: there are some people who are working out there; some people think that the stay of the Americans is of very great help to our economy. It has been so in some years, but in latter years I would say that we could employ all the people, so it is not of any great economic importance for us and would not be felt in that way as a great

loss. And most of the people do not at all look at the matter from that point of view, but we think it is to the good of Iceland that we take part in this, it is necessary for us, and we want to be according to our strength and possibility a loyal member of NATO.

(We may pay a ^{very} small contribution to NATO, but that is of no importance, you see. Neither for us nor NATO).

Q: Is there any tendency for the population of Keflavik to grow by virtue of the US base being there, any shift in population in that direction?

A: No, I would not say so, not now, there are not so many ^{who are} people/working out there now. But you see Keflavik is a very prosperous fishing village and a great lot of fish which is coming ashore in that neighbourhood, so that would in any case be a growing part of the country.

Q: Do you think that NATO is strengthening ~~now~~ or weakening ~~now~~, in your consideration, Sir?

A: I think you can answer that question as well as I can. But, we know about the difficulties NATO is in, but I do not think that any member of NATO wants to withdraw from NATO, so, I think the right spirit is there still, even if there are some practical difficulties. But we all hope that they will be overcome, and I think both in the States and in other places there is much talk about the necessity of strengthening the ties that already are there. And I think every member of NATO understands that both the community and each member would be much weaker if NATO was not there.

Q: Sir. Has the Iceland Government any say in the size and

nature of the American forces in Iceland?

A: Of course we talk those matters over, yes. And if we have any wishes they are taken notice of and there is found a solution. There is an agreement about the approximately strength of the forces out there...

Q: ...Is it now at its maximum?

A: I would say it is about the number that has been ^{now for} ~~existing~~ many years, and there is no question arising about changing it. But it is obvious that as the forces are here we want them to be not nominally but so that they can fulfill the purpose they are here for and therefore the Americans consult with us if they want to make changes and if ^{we} ~~they~~ have any wishes we consult with the American Government.

Q: Are there any differences of views as to the types of weapons which the forces here may use?

A: I only want to say that the question about atomic weapons has never arisen. The Americans have never asked for it, so it is not alive at all. The communists have sometimes been saying that the Americans wanted to have that kind of weapon here, but that is not true. They have never asked for it.

Q: What about the use of missiles?

A: It has never come up. (You see, I think your own people can of course better explain that than I can, but) I think for the time being the chief importance of Iceland lies in this, that we are on the line of the U-boats that might be sent out into the Atlantic from the north, so therefore it is necessary to be here to be able to follow what happens in the straits between Iceland and Greenland, and Iceland and Scotland; to be able to follow it and then also to hinder them to come through,

if a serious situation would be created. (But your own people do of course know more about this than I do).

Q: Prime Minister. I happen to be a reserve officer, but in private life a newspaper publisher in California. I would like to ask you to what extent the non-NATO nations, powers, approach you, your government and your country, for international trade and other considerations that ordinarily exist between two different nations? (PM: To what...) As for instance imports and exports of goods, foods, materials and so forth. I have read to some extent, that you, ^{I believe,} export fish/for instance to Russia. (PM: Yes) ... What part of your import-export trade would you say occurs between non-NATO nations and yourself?

A: I am not quite sure about that, but we can say that for the time being may be 25 or 30% of, or we can say between 20 and 30% of our trade is with the countries behind the iron curtain. Yes, may be 20 or 25 now; it has been decreasing in the last few years. It may be 20 for the moment. It may increase; it may decrease, a little.

Q: Have these relations been thoroughly amicable to yourselves and the other nations?

A: Oh, yes, I would say on the whole they have been very satisfactory now for many years. And we are interested in this trade with these countries. We do not want to have all our eggs ~~are~~ in one basket, if I may say so. So we want to sell to the Russians, to Western-Europe and to America. Our greatest trade is with the countries in Western-Europe and it has been increasing, so it may be so now for the time being that about 60% of the trade is with them, 20% with the countries behind the iron curtain and little less with the United States and