



OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee

Thursday 30 March 2023

Session 6



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

© Parliamentary copyright. Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body

Information on the Scottish Parliament's copyright policy can be found on the website - www.parliament.scot or by contacting Public Information on 0131 348 5000

Thursday 30 March 2023

CONTENTS

Col.

PRESIDENCY OF THE NORDIC COUNCIL OF MINISTERS 1

**CONSTITUTION, EUROPE, EXTERNAL AFFAIRS AND CULTURE COMMITTEE
11th Meeting 2023, Session 6**

CONVENER

*Clare Adamson (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Donald Cameron (Highlands and Islands) (Con)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Alasdair Allan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)

*Sarah Boyack (Lothian) (Lab)

*Maurice Golden (North East Scotland) (Con)

Jenni Minto (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)

*Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Sturla Sigurjónsson (Ambassador of Iceland to the United Kingdom)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

James Johnston

LOCATION

The Robert Burns Room (CR1)

Scottish Parliament

Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee

Thursday 30 March 2023

[The Convener opened the meeting at 09:15]

Presidency of the Nordic Council of Ministers

The Convener (Clare Adamson): Good morning. I offer a very warm welcome to the 11th meeting in 2023 of the Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee. We have apologies from Jenni Minto MSP. I am sure that that means that she will leave our committee shortly. I thank Jenni for her service to the committee, and I wish her the best in her ministerial role, assuming that Parliament passes the motion on junior Scottish ministers this afternoon. We send our best wishes to our colleague. Donald Cameron MSP, our deputy convener, joins us remotely.

Our first agenda item is to take evidence from His Excellency Sturla Sigurjónsson, Ambassador of Iceland to the United Kingdom, on the priorities of the Icelandic presidency of the Nordic Council of Ministers in 2023. I invite the ambassador to make a short opening statement.

Sturla Sigurjónsson (Ambassador of Iceland to the United Kingdom): Thank you very much, and I thank the committee for inviting me. I mentioned previously that I was in Edinburgh when we still had Covid restrictions and I was not able to come to the Parliament at that time, so I have been really looking forward to this session.

Nordic co-operation was formalised and institutionalised in the Helsinki treaty in 1962, so it goes back about 60 years. Of course, Nordic co-operation existed at different levels and in different forms before that, but that was when it was formalised. The two main fora are the Nordic Council, which is the parliamentary forum, and the Nordic Council of Ministers, which is the official body for intergovernmental co-operation in the Nordic region. The collaboration extends between the five Nordic countries—Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden—and the self-governing territories of the Åland Islands, the Faroe Islands and Greenland.

The Nordic Council of Ministers meets regularly at most levels of government, including ministers and civil servants, and it is where consultations, co-ordination and decision making take place as required. In addition, there is Nordic co-operation

among the Prime Ministers and the ministers of foreign affairs in a format called the N5, which does not come strictly under the umbrella of the Nordic Council of Ministers, but it is, nevertheless, an important component of Nordic co-operation because that is where the senior figures can consult and co-ordinate on the issues of the day.

The through line is working in areas that benefit the Nordic region, applying the Nordisk nytte principle, which basically translates as “Nordic value”. That is led by the ministers for Nordic co-operation. One Cabinet minister in each Government has that role, which, in most cases, is a side function of being the minister for Nordic co-operation. They act on behalf of the Prime Ministers, who have the main responsibility for Nordic co-operation. The work is supported by a permanent secretariat based in Copenhagen.

The presidency, which is held for one year, rotates between the five countries and includes setting the pace of work in a specific presidency programme, which we have distributed to the committee, and chairing and hosting meetings. We meet in different configurations so their numbers can be substantial. Iceland holds the presidency in 2023, and we introduced our programme in November last year under the title, “The Nordic Region—A Force for Peace”. Like the previous programmes, it is based on our vision 2030 declaration, which was adopted by Nordic Prime Ministers in 2019, during Iceland’s previous presidency. We have an action plan based on it.

According to vision 2030, the Nordic region should become

“the most sustainable and integrated region in the world by 2030”.

The three priority areas that have been chosen to achieve that goal are for a green, competitive and socially sustainable region. The framework is already set, and the chapter headings in the presidency programme—“A Green Nordic Region”, “A Competitive Nordic Region”, and “A Socially Sustainable Nordic Region”—indicate the main emphases.

In addition, Iceland puts emphasis on peace. As the fourth theme for the presidency, Iceland decided to highlight the correlation between peace and respect for human rights, welfare, women’s rights, and environmental and climate protection. An international peace conference will be held in Iceland in October, when the two-day programme will focus on sharing findings and furthering dialogue regarding peace. That is to further the agenda of peace in view of the turbulent times that we face currently.

More tangible objectives include the advancement of digital speech development, green energy transition in maritime affairs and the

further removal of unnecessary barriers to the freedom of movement in the region. There will also be a focus on young people and their involvement in society, with a month-long youth agenda in November, which will include events all over the Nordic region and culminate in a youth conference in Iceland.

In conclusion, I will mention some points regarding co-operation with Scotland. The co-operation of the Nordic Council of Ministers with its neighbours in the west, including Scotland, has grown closer in the past few years. We have some common conditions and challenges in population distribution, large geographical areas, infrastructure challenges, north Atlantic and Arctic climates, and a common dependence on the sea and maritime resources.

In 2019, when Iceland previously held the presidency, the ministers for Nordic co-operation held a meeting in Edinburgh. I understand that that was in September 2019. Maree Todd, the then Minister for Children and Young People, was the guest of honour from Scotland. There are currently some talks regarding further strengthening of co-operation.

I will end there, for the moment. I will be happy to answer any questions that you might have about the Nordic Council of Ministers or other issues relating to Iceland.

The Convener: Thank you very much. Our Scottish Government is prioritising improving links with the Nordic region and recently opened its Nordic office in Copenhagen. The Scottish Parliament has also engaged with the Nordic Council recently; indeed, the Presiding Officer, one of my fellow committee conveners and I attended the Nordic Council in Helsinki. I found it very informative and interesting. I particularly liked the session with the ministers from the countries that were represented there. The interaction between the delegates and ministers was amazing.

My colleagues will ask a little bit about the situation with Ukraine. I will ask a question about cultural co-operation. The council has an awards ceremony that recognises, for example, literature, music and film. How do you see the cultural links between Scotland and the Nordic region improving? We have been trying to support as much as we can the Ukrainian Institute London to support the culture of Ukraine. We have 26,000 refugees here. What is the Nordic Council of Ministers doing to support the cultural protection of Ukraine at this time, when its language, artefacts, museums and cultural centres are being destroyed in the war?

Sturla Sigurjónsson: You are quite correct that, through the decades, there has been cultural

co-operation between the Governments. The most visible aspect of that has been the awarding of prizes at the Nordic Council of Ministers' meetings. That is perhaps not very well known outside the area, but it is pretty well known in the area. The recipients who have been honoured have received quite a lot of positive attention in the countries.

In the Nordic context, the awareness of vulnerability—I shall put it that way—has been high in the minds of different ministers and governments through the years. Iceland has by far the smallest population of these countries, but they can all be classed as small states. They also contain, for example, small language areas. That goes not least for Iceland. The primary motivation in this cultural co-operation is to assist each other in maintaining cultural characteristics in a globalised world where you have so much happening and so many influences coming in, particularly in our societies, which are relatively well plugged in, so to speak, and open to the outside world.

I have to admit that I am not aware of any particular initiative that the Nordic Council of Ministers has taken on Ukraine. If that has not happened, I think that that is a good suggestion. It has not happened probably because that is something that has fallen more to the national Governments. Furthermore, only a bit more than a year has passed, and it will probably take a bit longer for the host nations to react to the needs of this relatively large group of people. First you have to attend to the basic needs of housing and, possibly, jobs and education. I think that culture will follow as well.

The Convener: Reflecting on the awards ceremony, I found it absolutely amazing. It was broadcast throughout the whole Nordic region, and the audience that it had in those countries was quite spectacular. I thoroughly enjoyed that. It is our literature and our music that speak to peace, so it was very welcome to see that at the time.

Sarah Boyack (Lothian) (Lab): It is very good to have you in Parliament today, Your Excellency.

The paper that you have distributed to us is excellent and really frames your priorities in a very interesting way. It is entitled "The Nordic Region—A Force for Peace". Has the invasion of Ukraine impacted on the work that you are doing? What has changed with the invasion of Ukraine? Is it the impact on rights, which you mentioned, and economic issues? Can you talk a little bit about that? I was also interested in the reference to peace institutes. Was that on your agenda before the invasion, or has that come to the fore since Russia's invasion of Ukraine?

Sturla Sigurjónsson: The invasion of Ukraine has had a great impact on the Nordic region

because it is so close geographically. Norway has a border with Russia, and Finland has a very long border with Russia. Sweden and Denmark meet Russia in the Baltic Sea. Geographically, we in Iceland are a bit more distanced, but we feel the Russian presence. We felt it throughout the cold war and, lately, because of military activity in the north Atlantic. Perhaps most indicative of how far-reaching the impact and implications have been are the applications of Finland and Sweden for NATO membership. If you look at it in a historical context, you will see that, only a year and a half ago, that would have been unthinkable politically, but, today, they are just about to become members.

09:30

In about 2010, a former Minister of Foreign Affairs in Norway, Thorvald Stoltenberg, the father of the current secretary general of NATO, was commissioned by the Nordic foreign ministers to prepare a report on Nordic security and defence. That has since been updated, but, following his report, we started co-operating much more closely on security and defence than we had done earlier. There were different alignments within the group: throughout the cold war, in the Nordic Council, you could hardly discuss foreign policy and you could not discuss security and defence policy at all, because we had Finland, with its particular situation vis-à-vis the Soviet Union, and Sweden, which was neutral.

That changed following the end of the cold war, but it really took off, as I said, about 12 or 13 years ago, and now we have even formalised the co-operation through Nordefco—the Nordic Defence Cooperation group—which does not contain any obligations or guarantees but has helped, for example, in logistics and purchasing equipment. Some of you may have noticed that, a week or two ago, the four Nordic countries that have air forces—Iceland does not have national armed forces—decided to combine their air forces in an operational way, creating one of the biggest air forces in Europe.

That is where we see the impact, which has also been economic. Finland had considerable trade with Russia. Following the annexation of the Crimea, it was reduced, but it was still there, and it has diminished almost to nothing. The impact is real. You mentioned the peace institutions. That goes further back and is an older idea, but it is, perhaps, becoming more relevant.

Sarah Boyack: That is what I was thinking when I was reading your paper: you have the expertise already. I also noted a practical issue in your paper, which says:

“During our year of presidency special attention will be paid to how peace is the prerequisite for human rights,

especially women’s rights, social stability and environmental protection.”

It is interesting to see women’s rights centre stage. You have talked about the gender pay gap, so, although the work that you are doing is high level, it is also practical.

Sturla Sigurjónsson: Without sounding too formal, I can say that gender equality has become an integral part of our foreign policy in Iceland in the past few years. To be honest, that has not really been intentional; it just happened because, as you know, foreign policy almost always reflects domestic policy, so, as developments happened in Iceland, they transferred to the foreign policy field. We suddenly realised that we had a story to tell and experience to share. You mentioned the pay gap. About five years ago, we started implementing legislation on equal pay. That has already resulted in the near elimination of pay differences in the public sector, and we are making advances in the private sector.

Sarah Boyack: That is really interesting. Thank you very much.

Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green): It is excellent to see you in front of the committee this morning, ambassador. I want to ask you about the green transition priority during the Icelandic presidency, and in particular the conversation about the transition away from oil and gas. I am aware that the Danish climate minister, Dan Jørgensen, has established the Beyond Oil and Gas Alliance. I recognise that the Nordic countries are at very different starting points when it comes to their access to energy resources, but to what extent is the transition away from oil and gas, and where the solutions may lie, now a Nordic conversation?

Sturla Sigurjónsson: You are quite right: all the countries are in very different positions. Finland relies to a large degree on nuclear energy, Sweden and Norway have a mix, Denmark primarily uses gas and wind, and Iceland primarily uses hydro and geothermal, so there are big differences in the region. That said, all are as one in their goal of reaching net zero.

On one hand, Norway is in a special position, as it is one of the biggest oil and gas producers in Europe, and as a result of the war in Ukraine, it will remain one of the biggest providers of gas to Europe for the foreseeable future. On the other hand, advances have been made in other areas, and those advances indicate where we are headed. For example, at the same time as Norway is in that position, the proportion of electric vehicles in the country is very high, and it is the same in Iceland, at least with regard to family vehicles. We have some work to do in Iceland on, for example, lorries. We do not have a train

system, and as Iceland is a country in which the population is quite dispersed, we depend completely on lorries.

In addition, we rely on the sea, so we are looking at the issue of generating power for fisheries and merchant vessels. Of course, there are different solutions; green hydrogen is one possible option.

Mark Ruskell: Is the Nordic Council of Ministers able to discuss the transition away from oil and gas, or are there difficulties there?

Sturla Sigurjónsson: No, it is discussed. We all share the same ambition and the same goals, but the countries will have different ways of achieving them. In Iceland, we have brought the net zero goal in from 2050 to 2040. That said, we are perhaps uniquely placed to reach it because of our peculiar circumstances. All our electricity is renewable: it is 70 per cent hydro and about 30 per cent geothermal. Fossil fuels are mostly used for transportation. I mentioned land and sea transportation, but another important sector in Iceland for which we have to find a solution is aviation. We have transatlantic traffic going through Iceland, which is very important for us. Iceland has become an important tourist destination, so we have to deal with that challenge.

Mark Ruskell: I noted a focus on wind energy. We had a delegation from the Icelandic Parliament's Environment and Communications Committee at our Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee. We had a very good conversation about wind energy planning and the role of that technology. Is wind energy planning a particular focus for learning beyond the Nordic region?

Sturla Sigurjónsson: Funnily enough, the debate on wind in Iceland is just starting. If there is something that we have in abundance in Iceland, it is wind, but that debate is probably just starting because hydro and geothermal energy have been so accessible and relatively economical. We do not have many windmills, and it remains to be seen how many will be constructed and where they will be located.

We have the same debate in Iceland as you have in the UK about wind energy. For example, should it be onshore or offshore? What should we do about protected areas? How does it work for tourism, when people who come to Iceland expect to see pristine nature? That probably all sounds familiar to you.

If we look at energy policy in strategic terms, looking to the next few decades, I freely admit that we in Iceland still have a lot of homework to do. We are starting the debate, and I do not know how long it will take. Perhaps we will never get complete cross-party consensus on it, but we

need relative consensus. Hydro is controversial because of the land that is required for reservoirs. Geothermal has been controversial because of pipelines and the fact that there have sometimes been localised earthquakes related to drilling. There are advantages and disadvantages.

Mark Ruskell: I attended the Arctic Circle assembly in Reykjavík last year on behalf of the Scottish Parliament, and there were a lot of conversations between Governments, academia, business and non-governmental organisations in the west Nordic region. We met representatives from Parliaments that are part of the west Nordic region.

How does ministerial co-operation happen in that region? Is there room for others who are more on the periphery to be involved? We had representatives of Orkney Islands Council at the assembly, who were very keen to take part in the discussion on some of the topics.

Sturla Sigurjónsson: In Iceland, we have always prioritised west Nordic co-operation because they are our closest neighbours—Greenland to the west and the Faroe Islands to the east. We all have similar conditions and, in many ways, similar challenges. We are small societies. We have commonalities, and my feeling is that, due to those commonalities, it has been easier for ministers and parliamentarians to forge personal relationships, because they are experiencing and dealing with the same things. Of course, there are limits to what this particular sub-branch can do. As to whether it can be expanded or extended, I have to admit that I do not know what the mechanics of that might be. It might be done in an informal way, but it would, of course, be for them to address that issue.

Mark Ruskell: I was reading the introduction and the comments of Katrín Jakobsdóttir. She says:

“We will also greatly emphasise working together against the setback, which has occurred in the struggle for the rights of LGBTQ people”.

Can you say a bit more about what she means by that? What was the setback?

Sturla Sigurjónsson: Sorry—who said that?

Mark Ruskell: Katrín Jakobsdóttir, in the foreword to the “The Nordic Region—A Force for Peace”.

Sturla Sigurjónsson: She is referring to the international context, not the regional one. We—all the countries in the Nordic region—take pride in being advanced in that respect and in having taken a very definite international stand, where it has been possible to do so, on those rights. It is the international context that she is worried about. I will not name countries.

Mark Ruskell: So, there has been no weakening of rights for LGBTQ people across the Nordic region.

Sturla Sigurjónsson: No, not in the Nordic region; definitely not.

09:45

Maurice Golden (North East Scotland) (Con): Ambassador, I am interested in the priority area of a green Nordic region, and particularly your thoughts on what areas could be explored for collaboration between the Scottish Parliament or, indeed, the Scottish Government and the Nordic Council of Ministers.

Sturla Sigurjónsson: It will be important to share experience and technology, particularly if there are technological advances, in a broad way, whether those are in industry, space heating or, of course, transportation. Scotland is so geographically close to the area—somebody told me that, if you are in the islands, the closest railway station is in Bergen, Norway, which is indicative. It would be interesting if we could establish more regular channels of communication to share experiences, rather than occasional consultations or occasional ministerial meetings.

Maurice Golden: That is helpful. I am also interested in the perception of Scotland in the Nordic Council of Ministers with regard to tackling climate change. As you will be aware, Scotland has some of the most ambitious climate change targets in the world, yet the delivery record is the polar opposite, unfortunately, with failure to meet emissions targets in three of the past four years. In fact, it was only a lockdown that allowed Scotland to meet its emissions targets. What are your thoughts on the perception of Scotland in tackling climate change?

Sturla Sigurjónsson: I have not personally been aware of any particular perception of Scotland in the Nordic countries. Of course, I am primarily familiar with the debate on this question in Iceland, and, more superficially, in the other Nordic countries, but I do not recall seeing any specific references to Scotland in that regard. To be honest, everyone is preoccupied with their own goals and how to reach them. I am not sure that the Nordic countries are prepared, in this regard, to start finger pointing; we have to look to ourselves and try to do what we have promised.

Alasdair Allan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): Not everyone watching will be familiar with how the Nordic Council of Ministers, or the Nordic Council, works. Will you say a little bit about how the Nordic Council of Ministers is embedded in the political cultures of the countries concerned? Many of us look with envy at the diplomatic reach of a country such as Iceland. How do the individual

countries relate to the Nordic Council of Ministers? How do your pronouncements as an organisation relate to policy in the different states?

Sturla Sigurjónsson: You know how it is sometimes with co-operation: if it is successful, it is taken for granted. Nordic co-operation goes back a long way. It was institutionalised in the early 1960s, but it goes back to the years following the end of the second world war, and, culturally, it goes much further back. Sometimes, people do not realise how early and how deeply we went into integration. For example, we had a free travel zone in the Nordic countries many decades ago, long before other countries. Schengen is just a recent phenomenon, but that was back in the 1950s. There was lots of integration with education and social services. For example, through the decades, a huge number of Icelandic students have studied at universities in the other Nordic countries without having to pay tuition fees.

As I mentioned, my feeling is that it has sometimes been taken for granted. People just assume that that is how it is and always has been, but there is a lot of work behind it, not only in getting it started and establishing it but in maintaining it and keeping it running. It is not perfect. Believe it or not, even though three of the countries are in the European Union and Iceland and Norway are participating in the single market, there are still trade barriers in some instances, which we have the objective of getting rid of. It is not perfect, but it has been working pretty well.

Speaking as a civil servant and having attended a lot of meetings in the Nordic context, I can say that, for the governmental systems, co-operation is extremely important in many ways. It is not only about consultation and co-ordination but about picking up best practice. When it comes to more urgent issues that are, perhaps, security related, we can pick up the phone or reach for the mobile and immediately know whom to contact. The Governments are very familiar with one another. That is an asset that it is difficult to put a price on.

Alasdair Allan: I will resist the temptation to ask whether Scotland can become a member in the future. You said that the vision for 2030 is that the Nordic region will become the most sustainable and integrated region in the world. That is a huge ambition.

Sturla Sigurjónsson: I know, and there is not very long to go.

Alasdair Allan: Can you tell me what it involves and how you will do that in the next few years?

Sturla Sigurjónsson: It is a goal, and, obviously, when we set such goals, we are serious about reaching them, but I have to admit that we will probably not wholly reach that goal by 2030. Perfection is still some distance away. It is

important to set such goals in an effort to mobilise the Governments. It is not a deadline; it is a goal. It helps us to focus. Perhaps it is the wrong word to use, but it is a political objective. As I mentioned, we were already very integrated before the goal was set, as we are with the green aspect in comparative terms internationally.

The Convener: Ambassador, you mentioned the free movement of people. Obviously, Scotland finds itself outside the European Union now, which presents challenges to our young people in terms of opportunities for free movement, studying abroad and linking up with other youth organisations. I know that that was a real priority at the Nordic Council, and I believe that you define young people as being those up to the age of 28. Is that right?

Sturla Sigurjónsson: Do you mean the memorandum of understanding that we have with the UK?

The Convener: Well, since you mentioned the importance of free movement of people, I wondered what the council's priorities are for your youth in the Nordic countries and what opportunities you see being opened up by further integration and free movement.

Sturla Sigurjónsson: When Sweden and Finland joined the EU—Denmark was already a member at that point—there was great reluctance, or even opposition, in all the countries to doing away with the passport union that we already had, which dated further back. That is how Iceland and Norway came into the Schengen area. We are in the peculiar position of being in and out; we are not EU member states, but we participate in the single market and are members of Schengen.

Iceland is the only European country so far to conclude an MOU with the United Kingdom on youth mobility. That involves people between the ages of 18 and 30 being able to come here for two years. They have to apply for a particular type of visa to do that, but the process of getting that visa is simpler than asking for a student or work visa, for example. We hope that that process will facilitate movement.

The number of Icelandic citizens in the UK is relatively low. When we were tying up loose ends after Brexit and encouraging our citizens to apply for permanent settled status, almost 3,000 people applied. If you look at Denmark, Norway and Sweden, however, you will find that there are more than 10,000 citizens from each of those countries. The main reason for that is that Iceland has never enjoyed a rebate on tuition fees for higher education. Iceland and Norway were never in the same position as the European Union countries in that regard. Iceland's demand for higher education

has not been the same as that from other countries.

The Convener: I echo Dr Allan's comments about how we want to strengthen those opportunities. Obviously, it is for Scottish Government and UK Government ministers to take forward those wishes.

Thank you very much for your attendance—

Sturla Sigurjónsson: Can I make just one further point, convener?

The Convener: Absolutely.

Sturla Sigurjónsson: I just want to draw your attention to the fact that we also have the chair in the Council of Europe until May. Our chairmanship will conclude with a summit meeting in Reykjavík in mid-May. There are 46 member states of the Council of Europe, and we expect to host almost 40 heads of Government, and some heads of state as well. It will be quite a gathering and, of course, Ukraine will be the main issue there. The issue of Russian accountability is also relevant for the Council of Europe and will be high on the agenda. My colleagues in Reykjavík have been preparing for that event for a few months and, as you can understand, it is quite a logistical undertaking.

The Convener: We wish you all the best for that conference and, indeed, for the peace conference later in the year. We will watch with interest. I hope that this is not the last time that you will be able to come and update the committee on your work. Thank you very much for your attendance this morning.

Sturla Sigurjónsson: Thank you very much.

The Convener: We move into private session for our final agenda item.

09:59

Meeting continued in private until 10:12.

This is the final edition of the *Official Report* of this meeting. It is part of the Scottish Parliament *Official Report* archive and has been sent for legal deposit.

Published in Edinburgh by the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body, the Scottish Parliament, Edinburgh, EH99 1SP

All documents are available on
the Scottish Parliament website at:

www.parliament.scot

Information on non-endorsed print suppliers
is available here:

www.parliament.scot/documents

For information on the Scottish Parliament contact
Public Information on:

Telephone: 0131 348 5000

Textphone: 0800 092 7100

Email: sp.info@parliament.scot



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba