

Keeping order in the General Assembly: The strange saga of how a Viking gavel was broken, then lost, then carved again

If you're a keen observer of the United Nations [General Assembly](#), you may have noticed the body's President wields a very unusual looking gavel. It is a gift from Iceland, and there's a very interesting story behind it.

Iceland's democracy is believed to be the oldest in the world: the country's parliament, *Althing*, sat for the first time in 930, making it the "grandfather" of modern parliaments.

Given their democratic heritage, Icelanders decided that the person who presides today over the "world parliament" – the UN – should be "armed" with an Icelandic gavel.

The many conference rooms at UN Headquarters in New York have a standard small wooden gavel. But the gavel used in the General Assembly Hall – where the UN's [193 Member States](#) gather to hash out the business of the world – used in the is unmissable: large, ornate and brownish-red.

The President's gavel is an integral element of official GA sessions. It is used to declare the beginning and end of meetings; the approval of the agenda; the election of officials; and the adoption of resolutions. It is also employed forcefully at times, to bring the gilded chamber to order.

Former Permanent Representative of Iceland to the UN, Hjálmar W. *Hannesson*, sums up the history of the striking object, this way:

"In 1952, when the new UN Headquarters building was opened on the bank of the East River, here in New York, Mr. Thor Thors, Iceland's first Permanent Representative to the United Nations, presented the gavel to the President of General Assembly. Because of this, our gift was nicknamed "Thors' gavel."

The gavel "served" in the General Assembly for eight years. But then: "In October 1960, our gavel made global headlines. Because it ... broke. To be more precise, it was broken by the then President of the General Assembly, the Irishman, Frederick Boland.

Ambassador Boland wanted to calm down the Soviet leader, Nikita Khrushchev, and in particular, to stop him banging his shoe on the table."

There was an incredible noise in the hall and Boland tried to put things in order, so he hit the desk with his gavel and broke it. "

According to press-reports, after this incident, many delegations, in

solidarity with Boland, sent him dozens of replacement gavels for his consideration.

However, at the UN it was decided to ask Iceland to make an exact copy of the broken gavel. Unlike the original, the copy managed to hold out at the UN for almost half a century, said Ambassador *Hannesson*:

“But this is not the end of the story. In 2005, it turned out that the (replacement) gavel... disappeared. A senior UN official informed us about this, and we immediately responded that Iceland would make a second copy of the gavel. This time, the author was one of the most famous carvers in the country, *Sigrídur Kristjansdóttir*.”

The Government turned to Ms. Christiansdóttir with a request: taking into account the previous incident, she was asked to make the gavel especially sturdy. She chose pear tree wood. Was it the right choice? Although it's now 2018 – let's wait and see.

“A small tablet with a brief inscription in Icelandic and Latin is affixed to the gavel,” explained Ambassador Hannesson. “This is an excerpt from one of the Icelandic sagas, which dates back to the 10th century.”

“During this period, we adopted Christianity, which contributed to the cessation of internal strife and unification of the country. And one of the leaders said then: ‘Society must be built on the basis of laws.’ This phrase now decorates our gavel.”

Stylistically, “Thors’ gavel” does not look much like an instrument of peace, making one think more perhaps, of the Viking era of pillage and conquest. But as history shows, even in the world's parliament at UN Headquarters in New York, from time to time, a bit of old-fashioned Viking force is needed, to bring world leaders to heel.