

Speech: PM Nordic Council speech: 30 October 2018

Takk skal du ha, og god ettermiddag alle sammen.

Secretary General, Prime Ministers, Parliamentarians, friends... It is an honour to be asked to speak to you all today.

This is the first time a British Prime Minister has been invited to address the Nordic Council.

But my country is no stranger to the Nordic world.

The ties that draw our nations together have snaked their way back and forth across the North Sea for almost 1,500 years.

This common culture is most obvious in Shetland.

It's a place where the Arctic winds buffet flags bearing a blue and white Nordic cross, and the darkest nights of winter are illuminated by the torches of Up Helly Aa.

But the Nordic influence is not limited to our most northern islands.

Right across the UK, towns and cities owe their names to Viking settlers.

Our homes are infused with Scandinavian design.

We listen to Sibelius, read Larsson, and watch Borgen.

Some of us occasionally dance to Abba.

And the UK has just as much of a presence in Nordic life.

Across the Nordic Council nations, British investments exceed £30 billion.

Just last week the contract to run the Oslo South rail network was awarded to the Go-Ahead Group.

And nor are the links solely about business: every year, 320,000 British people visit Iceland – a number not far off the island's entire population.

The UK's relationship with our Nordic neighbours is one of immense breadth and depth.

But it has not come about simply because our shores are lapped by the same seas.

Rather, we are friends and partners because those values and ideals that bring unity to the diverse Nordic nations are also shared by the United Kingdom.

We believe in democracy, in equality, in human rights.

We believe that global stability, security and prosperity depend on adherence to the well-established international system of rules, treaties and protocols.

And we recognise that it is not enough to simply hold such beliefs: we must be prepared to speak and act in their defence.

We saw that earlier this year, when the Russian state deployed chemical weapons in my country and all five Nordic governments stepped up to stand alongside the UK.

The sickening attack was symptomatic of a period in which the rules and norms that underpin international behaviour are being tested and challenged by both malign states and non-state actors.

Permitting such a degradation of the rules-based order risks an increase in global instability.

It makes it all the more difficult for nations to co-operate with one another to tackle common challenges – and, just as importantly, to embrace shared opportunities.

Faced with this, those of us who believe in democracy, human rights and the rule of law have two duties.

First, we must work together to take practical steps in defence of the international order and in defiance of those who would undermine it.

That can be through diplomacy, as the UK and Nordic world showed after Salisbury.

It can involve the brave men and women of our armed forces, who train and serve side by side across Europe and around the world – helping young democracies defend themselves in distant lands while keeping us all safe here at home.

Or it can come about through projects such as Helsinki's European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats – where the very first non-Finnish expert was supplied by the UK.

Second, we have a duty to ensure the system itself is as strong and effective as it can be.

The current system has served the world well, but many of its core ideas and institutions were enshrined half a century or more in the past, so it is vital that the global rulebook evolves to reflect these changes.

Today, businesses are international and our economies are intertwined.

Artificial intelligence is becoming ever more sophisticated.

Developments such as the so-called “gig economy” are transforming the way we live and work.

In the face of such changes, we must work together to ensure the continued relevance of the rules-based order.

Only by doing so can we defend its core principles from attack – and, in doing so, build thriving societies that work for everyone.

But we don’t just want to see prosperous, stable societies in the UK and the Nordic nations.

We want to see them take root right around the world.

It is no understatement to say that the countries here today are true powerhouses of international development.

World leaders in both the quantity and quality of development assistance we offer.

But we live in an age where the need for Official Development Assistance is increasingly questioned and even rejected.

And in such times it falls to us in this hall – as representatives of nations that believe in international development – to speak more loudly than ever in its defence.

To champion the Global Goals, to make the moral case for spending 0.7 per cent of GNI, to make a positive investment in the future of those less well-off than ourselves.

We in this room know that aid works.

Let us not be afraid to share that with the world.

Let us work together to deliver aid that really drives sustainable development, helping countries reach a point where outside support is no longer required.

Aid that unlocks the transformative power of new markets, creating the jobs demanded by people around the world.

Aid that provides greater stability for us all, and helps us find global solutions to challenges that the whole world must confront.

Challenges such as rising seas, climate change and ocean pollution.

Once again, these are areas where nations that believe in clean growth have a duty to take a lead and show the world what can be done to tackle such threats.

I have made a personal commitment to make the UK cleaner and greener, including by cracking down on the single-use plastics that all too often end up in our oceans.

In New York last month I was delighted to see Prime Minister Solberg bringing together governments from around the world for the High Level Panel for a Sustainable Ocean Economy.

Prime Minister Rasmussen's recent P4G Summit was a great success.

And I welcome Iceland's plans to make oceans a major focus of the Arctic Council when it assumes that organisation's chair next year.

We must continue to show leadership in this way.

We must demonstrate that there is no choice to be made between a greener environment and economic growth.

No need to decide whether we want reliable energy or clean air.

We can have all these things, and I want the UK and Nordic nations to work together in developing the policies and technologies that will prove it to the world.

Environmental protection, international development, and the rules-based international order are just three of the areas in which the UK and Nordic nations are already co-operating closely.

And I believe they can be the pillars on which we base a stronger, deeper future relationship between our countries and our people.

It is a relationship that will continue to thrive after Brexit.

On 29 March next year the UK will be leaving the EU.

We will not be turning our backs on the world.

And we will certainly not be turning our backs on the Nordic region – a part of the world that has long shown how a commitment to international co-operation and European values goes well beyond any one political structure.

Like the countries you represent, the UK is a proud part of Europe and a proudly internationalist nation.

We always have been and always will be.

In our referendum, the British people made it clear that that they wanted decisions about their lives to lie closer to home.

So we will deliver the greater accountability they demanded.

And we will also remain active members of the UN. Of NATO. Of the Northern Future Forum, the Nordic Plus group of development ministers and the Northern Group of defence ministers.

We will continue to act as observers on the Arctic Council, further strengthen our relations with the Nordic Council, and embrace the possibilities of closer bilateral engagement.

And, of course, we will build a new partnership with the EU and with the EEA and EFTA countries.

One that will deliver on the democratic wishes of the British people while maintaining our commitment to international co-operation in pursuit of our shared values.

I would ask all of you here today to work with us to build that partnership – just as we have worked together for many years to build the partnership the UK and Nordic nations now enjoy.

It is a partnership perhaps best described by the Norwegian Stone memorial in London's Hyde Park.

Its inscription speaks of our “common struggle for freedom and peace” – a message that, in 2018, remains as relevant as ever.

The UK and our friends and allies in the Nordic world have long struggled together in support of one another and in defence of the values we hold dear.

Now, as we confront new threats, rise to new challenges and embrace new opportunities, let us work together once more to take that relationship to the next level.

Let us build stronger defences against those who would do us harm, let us speak with stronger voices on behalf of those who have none, let us secure stronger protections for our shared environment.

And together – as neighbours and as friends – let us work to build a thriving, prosperous, inclusive world that reflects and upholds those precious values we all share.