

**Speech delivered in London (Churchill War Rooms) on 27 April
(Commemorating the Faroese Flag) by Prime Minister Bárður á Steig Nielsen**

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen.

Today we celebrate our national flag, known as Merkið.

This symbol and its history have a central importance for the identity of Faroese people.

It is an honour to be here, in a place of such historical significance, and with so many distinguished guests.

My thanks to Dame Diane for her warm welcome, and to the Representation here in London for making this year's Flag Day such a special one.

It would be difficult to find a more suitable location in London to remember Operation Valentine – the friendly occupation by British forces of the Faroe Islands in 1940.

I also want to express my warmest greetings to our Faroese expats in the UK and the friends and relatives of the Faroe Islands who have joined us.

Vælkomin!

In the Faroe Islands, we value the relations we have with our closest neighbours in the North Atlantic.

The UK is our closest geographical neighbour.

The culture, language and politics of the Faroe Islands have all been influenced by our larger island neighbour to the south – not least because of the British occupation during the Second World War.

Our flag was not readily accepted when it was designed in 1919.

It took another 21 years and the outbreak of the Second World War for this flag to be accepted as the legitimate emblem of our distinct nation.

Britain played a central role in this story.

On the 9th of April 1940, Denmark was invaded by Germany.

Only four days later, Britain occupied the Faroe Islands.

We were cut off from Denmark and the continent.

Within a year, most Faroese fishing vessels converted their fishing activity into a lucrative, but dangerous, fish transport trade.

Attracted by rising fish prices on the British market, Faroese ships purchased fresh fish in Iceland, and shipped it to Scotland.

By the end of the war, Faroese vessels had made 522 trips to Britain, bringing 33,000 tonnes of fish.

This was more than one fifth of all the fish eaten in Britain during the war.

The Faroese flag had been created as a symbol of national identity.

The war made it a practical necessity for the British navy, ensuring that Faroese vessels were identified as **allies** rather than enemies.

On the 25th of April 1940, only twelve days after the occupation, the British Government and its allies recognized Merkið as the flag of the Faroe Islands.

But, flying Merkið on a ship was very dangerous during those first years.

German U-boats identified Faroese vessels as enemies.

Many ships were sunk, including Sólarris, with my grandfather, Petur á Steig, as skipper.

Sólarris completed several trips picking up fish in Iceland and delivering it to the market in Scotland.

But, in August 1941 they were located off the east coast of Iceland when they were hit by the Germans.

My grandfather managed to get on a life raft with two other men.

Five men perished.

They persevered for several days. They drifted in the fog, and they were missed by passing ships.

At one point they killed a seal and drank its blood to stay hydrated.

When they were about to lose all hope of rescue, they were finally discovered by Icelandic fishermen.

My grandfather survived, but many other Faroese sailors were less fortunate during the war.

According to Danish historian Jørgen Steining, writing in 1948, Winston Churchill said after peace had returned to Europe, that the Faroese sacrifice during the war would never be forgotten.

Between 1940 and 1945, twenty-five vessels were lost due to enemy attacks. More than 200 Faroese sailors were killed, a significant portion of the Faroese male population.

The history of our flag is synonymous with this dramatic period and the sacrifice made by Faroese fishermen.

Ladies and gentlemen,

“The farther backward you can look, the farther forward you are likely to see.”

These words of Winston Churchill fit very well with Faroese-British relations.

The better we remember and value our long and shared history as neighbouring countries and peoples, the more clearly we can see the potential for developing our relationship even more in the time to come.

After the UK's decision to leave the EU, the Faroese Government is preparing for a new era of bilateral relations with the UK.

We see the UK as a major partner and give our relations with the UK high priority.

We certainly see scope for a lot more trade in both directions.

The Faroese people agree, according to a recent survey by the University of the Faroe Islands.

When asked which countries, the Faroe Islands should cooperate more with, the UK is at the top of the list.

Geography alone does not ensure that we can grow our future relationship in a meaningful way.

As close as we are, we still need to nurture bonds actively and consciously in all possible areas.

Bonds between our governments, businesses, researchers, students, creative artists, and other fields of common interest.

And we must not forget the many close and valuable personal and family ties that have been formed over the years.

Many began with war-time romances and the young Faroese women who left their families in the 1940's to make new ones in Britain.

Many of them kept their ties to the Faroe Islands alive and strong, also in their children and grandchildren.

Since Brexit became a reality, I have been encouraged by the UK Government's growing interest in engaging with

the Faroe Islands in many areas of cooperation, new as well as existing.

I am sure this will help us work well together to solve several pressing issues. These include the need to find lasting solutions for the international management of our shared fish stocks, such as the mackerel.

I know from my own meeting with Prime Minister Johnson in November 2019 that there is commitment on the part of the British government to build constructive relations between us.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

We are shocked and outraged by Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

We are concerned about the security situation in Europe and, by extension, the North Atlantic and the Arctic.

The international order depends on respect for sovereignty and the basic principle of the rule of law, underpinned by active diplomacy.

In the North Atlantic and in the Arctic, we are ready to do anything within our means to contribute towards permanent security and peace.

Continued close friendship and closer political, economic and cultural cooperation between the Faroe Islands and the United Kingdom is not only mutually beneficial – it is essential!

This, Ladies and Gentlemen, must be the lasting legacy of Operation Valentine.

Thank you!