

SPEECH BY THE PRESIDENT OF THE REPUBLIC
AT THE OPENING OF THE SÁMI PARLIAMENT, 3 APRIL 2012

Esteemed President of the Sámi Parliament,
Esteemed representatives of the Sámi people,

1. Last autumn, the Sámi people voted you in as their representatives at the Sámi Parliament until 2015. Your task is an important but challenging one. The election resulted in more than half of the members of the Sámi Parliament being replaced, which means that you have a unique opportunity to leverage the experience and new ideas that have been brought in.
2. This election showed the same worrying trend as the national election – a decline in voter turnout. This is something that we would do well to think about. I believe that you, as representatives of the Sámi people, will be able to nurture their interest in upholding their language, their culture and matters concerning their homeland.
3. The Sámi are the only indigenous people in the European Union. As such, they are guaranteed by the Finnish Constitution the right to maintain and develop their own language and culture and to conduct official business with the authorities in their native language. Although the legislation concerning the language rights of the Sámi is up to date, many shortcomings and problems have been encountered in enforcing those rights.
4. The availability of services in the Sámi languages and of Sámi-speaking service personnel is insufficient, both in the Sámi homeland and outside it. The Sámi languages with the smallest speaker communities, Inari Sámi and Skolt Sámi, are the most vulnerable. In 2009, the then Finnish Government submitted a report to Parliament which specified the drafting of a revitalisation programme for the Sámi languages. Measures to be implemented under the revitalisation programme may also be found in the Government Programme of the Government of Prime Minister Katainen.

5. The action plan for the revitalisation of the Sámi languages was completed in March. The action plan includes measures such as permanently establishing and expanding language nest activities, which have proven effective in practice, and investing in Sámi-language daycare. Great expectations are vested in the revitalisation programme; after all, a viable language is an essential feature of a living culture. However, the letter of the law alone is not enough to guarantee an increase in Sámi-language proficiency or a strengthening of Sámi culture. In addition to the law we need vibrant communities and active citizens.
6. Today, the majority of the Sámi people live outside the Sámi homeland. The future of the Sámi languages and culture depends primarily on young people. A study published by the Office of the Ombudsman for Children in 2008 notes that young Sámi people are proud of their heritage and their homeland. I feel that this is encouraging from the perspective of upholding and developing the Sámi culture. However, we should not forget that young people make the major decisions in their lives based on the availability of training and jobs.

Ladies and gentlemen,

7. The Sámi homeland is in the Arctic region. The Arctic region is a region of considerable economic and political interest at this time. Finland must promote sustainable economic activities in the Arctic region with a view to securing jobs in northern Finland. As economic activities in the region increase, we must also ensure that the culture, language and traditional livelihoods of the Sámi people have a chance to survive and that the activities undertaken in the region are ecologically sustainable. The Sámi Parliament, representing the Sámi people of Finland, plays an important role in discussing issues concerning the Arctic region. It is now time for decisions and actions crucial for the future.
8. Sámi matters form an important part of national politics. Ratification of the Indigenous and Tribal Populations Convention of the ILO has been pursued over several electoral periods and is entered in the present Government Programme yet again. However, ratification requires finding national solutions to issues that have proven to be difficult and complex.

9. One key issue is how to enforce the rights of the Sámi with regard to land use and traditional livelihoods on government-owned land in the Sámi homeland. Years have been spent trying to find a balanced solution acceptable to all parties.
10. The Sámi culture is not delineated by national borders. There are Sámi people in Finland, Sweden and Norway, and on the Kola Peninsula in Russia. The Nordic countries co-operate on matters involving the Sámi people, together with the Sámi Parliaments in their respective countries. Although the legislative structure is similar in all three countries, there are differences in policy and practice. Beginning preparations for a Nordic Sámi Convention may be seen as a significant development in Nordic co-operation.
11. According to the draft Convention completed in 2005, the purpose of the Nordic Sámi Agreement is to reinforce and strengthen the rights of the Sámi people so that they can preserve and develop their language, culture, livelihoods and social system with minimal hindrance by national borders.
12. The official treaty negotiations were launched in March 2011 and are scheduled to be completed within five years. Tricky issues in these negotiations include the content and interpretation of the right of self-determination, the right of the Sámi to the land and water, and reindeer husbandry as a Sámi livelihood. It is my hope that progress will be made through conciliation and that the work to achieve the Nordic Sámi Convention could be completed on schedule.
13. It is vital both for ratification of the ILO Convention and for the Nordic Sámi Convention negotiations to find a shared national solution for how to administer government lands in the Sámi homeland and how to support traditional Sámi livelihoods. Until we have reached a national solution, we cannot estimate which international commitments Finland can enter into.

Ladies and gentlemen,

14. A report by the Sámi Committee from 1973 states: "It would be advantageous for the aims of the Sámi culture that an activity centre be established in the Sámi homeland, housing a variety of functions such as exhibition space, a museum, meeting rooms and facilities for leisure activities. The Committee proposes that

such a centre be built in Inari on government funds, to house the offices of the forthcoming Sámi administration.”

15. That Committee laid the groundwork for the Sámi administration we know today. The status of the Sámi as an indigenous people was first acknowledged in the Finnish Constitution in 1995. The linguistic and cultural autonomy of the Sámi people was enacted by an amendment to the Constitution in 1996 and the related Act on the Sámi Parliament. The Committee’s proposal regarding museum facilities was realised with the inauguration of the Siida Sámi Museum and Nature Centre in 1998.
16. This fifth opening of the Sámi Parliament is more of an occasion than before, because today we are finally celebrating the achievement of the last remaining goal set in 1973, the inauguration of the freshly completed Sámi Cultural Centre SAJOS. The wish expressed by my predecessor President Halonen at the opening of the Sámi Parliament in 2008, that the following opening would be celebrated in a building dedicated to that purpose, has thus come true.
17. The Sámi Cultural Centre SAJOS is both the Sámi Parliament House and a seat of learning, culture and expertise for the Sámi people. I am confident that it will soon be housing a wide variety of activities and pursuits dedicated to the Sámi people and their culture.

Esteemed representatives of the Sámi people,

I hereby declare the Sámi Parliament open and wish you every success in your important and demanding duties.