

3 December 2000

**Statement of H.E. Mr. Harri Holkeri,  
President of the 55th Session of the General Assembly,  
on the the occasion of Finlandia Foundation Independence Day  
Celebrations**

Ladies and gentlemen, Next Wednesday marks the 83rd anniversary of the independent Republic of Finland.

You, ladies and gentlemen, hardly need an introduction to Finland. But if I had to tell the average American in the street about Finland, I would tell him that the area of Finland is about almost three times the size of State of New York but it has only about five million inhabitants. I would tell him that Finns love their country and that Finland was recently the top of two important lists. Firstly it ranked as was number one when countries were compared in having the least amount of corruption. At the same time, we were heading the World Series in liberalization and deregulation of business laws.

Then I would ask him if he has read in his schoolbooks about the country that keeps its word - that pays its debts. If my American in the street would like me to continue, I would tell him that Finland is not overpopulated, nor undernourished. It is a typical, modern European country, proud of its history and culture, and combining natural beauty and modern technology.

I would also say that my country is very middle-class. It lacks the ultra rich, but it also lacks in extreme poverty. It strives for high levels of education and social security. That is also why it regularly struggles with its public finances, even if it currently enjoys a healthy public sector surplus.

Finns love their freedom and are prepared to defend it. This has been true in our history and it is still true today.

We Finns have chosen December 6th our Independence Day for the same reason as the United States of America chose the 4th of July as its Independence Day. We celebrate the declaration of independence. Some other countries may celebrate the king's or the queen's birthday or the anniversary of a change in the political system - a revolution.

At this time of the year, the weather in Finland is about as bad as it gets. A proper, dry Nordic Winter with plenty of white snow has not yet set in - it is mostly just wet, windy and dark. This is one reason why we Finns celebrate our Independence Day out-doors only symbolically. Our celebrations have traditionally been rather devotional, or as some might say, too solemn.

Even though this is a most festive occasion I would not want to repeat my experience of 37 years ago when I celebrated Finland's independence here in New York City. I was at Carnegie Hall, where The New York Philharmonic Orchestra played Finlandia by Jean Sibelius, conducted by Jussi Jalas, the son-in-law of Sibelius. Now that several decades have passed, I can confess to you that practically throughout that piece I cried softly, missing my home and my country.

Six years ago Finland decided by referendum to join the European Union. It was in my mind the most significant decision since the declaration of independence. Its ultimate consequences still remain to be seen. In any case, it was a decision totally different in nature from those made and implemented in the past two centuries concerning Finland's statehood.

Ever since Napoleon, in the treaties of Tilsit on 1807, agreed with Czar Alexander I of Russia on the division of Europe, Finland belonged to Russia's sphere of interest at the negotiations of great powers.

I am not going to go further into Finland's international political position or to attempt assess political morals. I would only remind you that the Finnish Parliament issued a declaration of independence on the 6th of December in 1917. But the rest of the world did not react to it until the new Bolshevik rulers of Russia recognized it on the final day of 1917. This prompted the western countries to recognize Finland.

When foreign ministers Molotov of the Soviet Union and Ribbentrop of Nazi Germany agreed on the division of Europe just before the Second World War, Finland once again belonged to its great eastern neighbor's sphere of influence.

Despite the heroic Winter War and international admiration for Finland's defensive effort, the western leaders, Churchill and Roosevelt, did not look as far as to Finland when they planned the division of postwar Europe at the Yalta Conference in February 1945. They simply accepted Finland's position on Stalin's political map of Europe.

In the black and white world of the Cold War era, Finland was considered an oddity, perhaps a kind of a left over, and there was uncertainty about how Finland would act in a tight situation. The restrictions placed on Finland's armed forces by the Paris Peace Treaty of 1947 gave external observers reason to distrust Finland's ability to defend herself.

But it was particularly the Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance of 1948 with the Soviet Union that made other countries interpret Finland's defense policy so as to put Finland under the shadow of its eastern neighbor. Nor did the Soviet Union itself wish to recognize Finland as a neutral country with no qualifications until shortly before its own demise.

The East has always been Finland's fate. When Finland was a part of Sweden we were always the border regions of the West in times of war. Finland's and Finns own views were hardly requested.

But since then, over a period of a couple of hundred years, the West easily turned its back on Finland when things got tough, despite the fact that politically, socially and culturally Finland was always a western democracy.

Very often Finland's political future and fate have been better known elsewhere than in Finland. When the Second World War broke out, the generally accepted theory was that Finland, left alone, would fall in the face of superiority of the Red army. Similarly, when the Second World War ended, the theory was that Finland would fall before the political might of the Soviet Union. And when, on top of that, Finland refused to receive Marshall aid, which was made available for postwar reconstruction, the theory was that Finland would fall economically, too. - But Finland proved to be like the wasp, which when studied by experts in aerodynamics, was found to be unable to fly. In other words, scientific expertise proved that the wasp could not fly. But the wasp, happily unaware of the result of the study, just keeps on flying.

Celebration of the Independence is a good occasion to reflect upon the fact that in theory Finland has fallen many times. Fortunately, Finns have not cared for these theories. Finland has developed its own strategy for survival, which was not always well understood by the outside world. Yet it ensured our sovereignty and preserved our western political, economic and social system, without the help of military alliance even in the world of the Cold War.

Now the situation has changed.

What should be emphasized today is that when Finland decided to join the European Union it was the very first time that we ourselves could decide our location on the political map of Europe. The decision was not made in Stockholm, Moscow, Berlin or Yalta or anywhere else beyond Finland's borders.

But does the membership in the European Union mean an end to Finland's independence?

Those who have been opposing Finland's membership in the EU have said that now that the East has failed to take away Finland's independence the West will do the job. Is this now *Finis Finlandiae*, the end of Finland?

I find it difficult to agree. The operating modes and principles of the European Union are such that membership does not force us to change our fundamental ways. We have not had any need to amend the key principles of our constitution, and our citizens' constitutional rights have remained intact, some have even been strengthened.

All in all, when the brave decision-makers 83 years ago declared the independence of Finland they probably had an ideal about the newly independent country's future in their minds. The history of the Finnish Independence has not been easy. The price of independence has been high. But it is my firm belief that today's Finland is quite close to those visions of those who made the decision 83 years ago.