The Politics of Equality, the "Populist Moment"

and the Power of New Technologies

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Dear all.

It is a pleasure and honour to be with you here today. I am going to address some of the great challenges of current politics; including the populist moment and the politics of equality and their relationship with gender equality, climate change and new technologies.

This will probably not be news to you, but Iceland was once a part of the domain of the Danish king. Therefore there is a long-standing impact in Iceland from Danish literature, indeed many of us were even raised to believe that Donald Duck was a Danish duck ('pear Danish' as you say in Danish) since he came to Iceland in Danish translation. And therefore the fairytales of H.C. Andersen are very well-known in Iceland and I am going to begin by quoting one of his greatest stories, *The Emperor's New Clothes.*

In this story, it took a child to say what everyone saw, but did not dare say out loud: that the emperor was naked. Together with his trusted advisors and, eventually, the public, the emperor had been lured into believing he was wearing the most beautiful clothes; the only caveat was that the special material was invisible to any person who was stupid. What many people do not recall about this tale is what the emperor does when his nudity has been exposed. He realises that the child speaks the truth, but decides that the show must go on. Hence, he walks even more majestically than ever before, followed by his chamberlains carrying the train that does not exist at all.

At a time when a global movement of young people is emerging, pushing climate change to the forefront of the political agenda, the question remains: Are we still walking more majestically than ever, wanting the show to go on?

I do not pretend to know the answer to this last question. But I see a cause both for deep pessimism and qualified optimism. As the latest Climate Change report makes clear, far more is needed than what was accomplished within initial pledges for the Paris Agreement. The climate system is spinning out of control, with irreversible damage to nature and human societies. The melting of the Greenland ice cap, alone, can drown coastal cities and entire island states. Glaciers cover around 11% of Iceland and are all retreating. Scientists warn that they will largely vanish in the next 100–200 years if warming trends are not halted. Climate

scepticism tried, in vain, to put on a cloak of respectability twenty years ago. And there are politicians in the present who persist in climate change denial. But it has become harder than ever to ignore the scientific data or to base decisions on „alternative facts."

Now, my government has agreed on aiming for carbon neutrality no later than 2040, hopefully earlier. My government has also put forward Iceland's first fully-funded action plan against climate change. Even if there may be disagreements on some of the details or the pace of the plan, there is a broad agreement on the scope of the problem and its urgency. Iceland today generates almost all its electricity with renewables. We have also significantly stepped up efforts in afforestation and revegetation. Currently, we are working towards cleaner transport, which will include a ban on the import of cars driven by non-renewables after 2030. As part of our strong commitment to the international collaboration needed to fight climate change, we have also called for the integration of gender concerns in global environmental policies, including in the workings of the UN Climate Change Convention. Needless to say but often forgotten in the debate, gender equality is central to climate change: women's roles as primary caregivers and providers of food and fuel render them more vulnerable to flooding and drought and other consequences of climate change.

Climate change is, in the end, the story of a failed economic model. It is also about class divisions between and within states. Wealthy countries have contributed the most to climate change, but tend to be most immune to its effects. 100 companies are supposed to have been the source of more than 70% of the world's greenhouse gas emissions since the late 1980s. Of course, the blame cannot be solely put on them, but the world's largest companies need to take responsibility. Individualised policies to halt climate change – individuals trying to eat less red meat, use the bicycle or choose an electric vehicle – are important, but not sufficient against a problem facing humanity as a whole, which renders borders meaningless.

The poor are more likely to be displaced due to climate change; they are also more likely to be hit harder with inconsistent or contradictory climate change policies. Biofuels were seen by some as a silver bullet and, indeed, they are part of the solution. But their use can affect food production and prices, which can contribute to poverty. Similarly, there has been an outcry for the abolishment of fossil fuel subsidies, which amount to perhaps 500 billion dollars globally each year. That is an outrage from a climate perspective, but the subsidies are often targeted at low income groups.

The *gilets jaunes* movement in France shows that sensitivity to petrol prices is not confined to developing countries. This fact is being exploited by politicians, notably in right-wing populist movements. The re-introduction of climate

denialism as a political strategy was most recently seen in the parliamentary elections in Finland, regrettably with resounding success. Thus, although we are witnessing far greater international awareness of the climate change crisis and a will to do more, we should not underestimate the political challenges. Action for climate and environmental protection needs to be guided by justice and equality and government policies need to target the core problem, not the poor. There is no alternative to the need for forging global solidarities, for there is no time for the narrow, self-serving national interests that have been too dominant in this debate.

This year marks the 150th anniversary of John Stuart Mill's famous essay, *The Subjection of Women*, which describes the urgent need of moving away from the legal subordination of one sex to the other and towards the principle of perfect equality. I do not know how Mill would analyse the state of equality in the 21st century; we have certainly moved away from legal inequality in most corners of the world. But it is shameful how far we are from achieving the full liberation of women.

I am often asked about Iceland's achievement when it comes to gender equality, as Iceland is considered a frontrunner in this field according to World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Index. I can tell you that I, as so many other women of my generation, owe my success to the movement of women who were there

before me and fought for a legal and societal infrastructure that enables women to take part in public life. Specifically, I would like to highlight two public policies in this context, both which have contributed greatly to the achievements of the Nordic countries in the field of gender equality. These are universal childcare and shared parental leave, with a "use-it-or-lose-it" portion accorded to fathers. If applied properly, these policies have the potential to change the makeup – and the rules of the game – of both the public and the private spheres and it is my firm conviction that they have already changed our values in Icelandic society, both for men and women.

It is not just a matter of women having productive professional careers. Women need to have financial independence – which is also the precondition for halting violence against them. If women are to be represented in public life, we have to create the conditions that enable them to do so. Women are essential to the efficiency of all social and economic models but often absent from vital decision-making. One of the results of this unacceptable condition is the continuation of unsustainable solutions to deal with existential problems, such as armed conflicts and climate change.

Most recently, the #MeToo movement revealed the systematic harassment, violence and everyday sexism that women across various layers of our societies are subjected to. In Iceland, thousands of women spoke out. The movement in

Iceland also exposed the multiple discrimination suffered by migrant women in a country that has always been relatively ethnically homogenous.

In this context, I believe we have lessons to learn from other countries whose populations are more diverse, including the UK. This will be one of the key themes at an international conference on the scope and impact of the #MeToo movement, which will be hosted in Reykjavik this autumn, as a part of Iceland's presidency of the Nordic Council of Ministers. I take this opportunity to mention this conference, which is open to the public and you are all welcome to join us. Many of the most knowledgeable and experienced people in the field – academics, politicians, activists, survivors – will participate, including a few who are present here tonight. I am decidedly aware of the need for governments to play their part in responding to the realities exposed by #MeToo. We do not only have a duty to ensure that the women who have spoken out in relation to the campaign are heard but also that we seek out voices that have not been given a proper platform.

Progressive policies on climate change and gender equality are regrettably being tested and hampered by a hostile political climate, which is characterized by a return to aggressive nationalism and intolerance. It raises the question of how to respond to the global surge of right-wing populism and authoritarian politics. In Europe, this development has to be seen within the context of broader societal trends. This includes the increased social inequalities stemming from neo-liberal

globalisation agendas and a nationalist reaction against multi-culturalism. Since the 2008 financial crisis, the European populist Right has also taken advantage of the dislocation between personal identities and political party affiliation in liberal democracies. With the general weakening of liberal parties, the erosion of the dominant position of Social Democratic parties and some "big tent" Centre-Right parties, far-right parties have, in many countries, now become the second or third largest political force.

The consequences for the Left have been stark: In 2017 alone, left–wing parties were swept from power in the Czech Republic, Austria, France, Italy, and the Netherlands, adding to a string of electoral losses since 2010. There are few European countries now under Social Democratic or Socialist leadership. Several explanations have been offered to the Left's retrenchment, such as the embracement of a globalist neo-liberal agenda – through the Third Way – an increasing detachment from the labour movement, and a lack of commitment to equality politics.

The development has been different in the various countries. The general tendency has been in many instances to combine a pro-welfare stance with anti-elite and anti-immigrant rhetoric. What unites these forces is the political discourse that they are speaking in the name of the "people" – a discourse that can be combined with traditional right and left-wing issues. In Europe, we have

seen the biggest populist surge among right-wing parties. The refugee influx has provided them with an additional political weapon to drive home the propagandistic point about the alleged threat of immigration to national identity and culture. And now we are seeing that climate change is being used by these forces to question its scientific bases and the need to fight it. We have seen this tendency in new parties, but also a shift within the old party system.

While this regressive trend has so far not elicited an effective response by the Left, it is trying in various ways to reinvent itself to meet the challenge. The decline of a party system dominated by centrist forces, with insignificant ideological distinctions, has opened up space for left-wing and green parties, which are currently going through a period of revival in Europe. My party, the Left Greens, is a party which seeks to build on a tradition of progressive policies, whether in the field of social and welfare policies, the environment, or women's and LGBT+ rights. In addition, new movements, such as the Progressive International led by Bernie Sanders and Yanis Varoufakis, which I am a part of, want to forge transnational alliances for political change. On the one hand, within the context of the global fight against climate change and economic disparities, it supports a forward-looking agenda with emphasis on social justice, gender equality, the green economy and international institutional reforms. On the other, it is mindful of the need to have a backward-looking orientation based on the historical memory and experience of earlier anti-authoritarian struggles.

The populist Right's criticism of elites in the name of the people can, in part, be seen as a reaction to anti-democratic technocracy. It also seeks to bypass representational institutional mechanisms, including parliaments procedures, to narrow the distance between the people and their representatives. Such an affront against liberal democracy raises serious questions about their commitment to human and minority rights protection or independent institutions, like the judicial system.

Populism cannot be judged alone by its relationship with democracy. The focus should also be on its extreme ethno-nationalism and social and cultural conservatism. Hence, there is no need to downplay the political challenge represented by the far-right on the grounds that many of its demands are "democratic." It should not be forgotten that such parties are rooted in different political milieus, whether as part of "legacy fascism," neo-fascism or neo-liberal anti-tax revolts. Most of them have been careful not to identify themselves with fascism because of the stigma attached to it and because they realise that any such affiliation would diminish their political clout and threaten their electoral prospects. Yet, ethnocentric politics is a throwback to the past. Right-wing populism does not inadvertently serve progressive aims by adopting an anti-globalisation rhetoric. On the contrary, instead of destabilizing the neo-liberal system, it can actually sustain it as part of a restorative conservative alliance.

The success of the right-wing populist parties – whether as part of governing coalitions or supporters of conservative governments – has allowed them to act, paradoxically, both as systemic destabilisers and stabilisers. On the one hand, they are a disrupting anti-elitist force, seeking to reverse mainstream policies on immigration, welfare, multiculturalism, gender and LGBT+ equality and European integration. On the other, they are an accommodating formation, which are prepared to forge alliances with elites as part of a power strategy.

Populist programmes often stress a purist national past and cultural homogeneity, where historical myths play a major role in forging exclusivist identities. In the Nordic states, for example, populists have sought to appropriate left-wing policies, such as a commitment to the welfare system and even the rights of women, in their attempt to get the ideological message across that they belong neither to the Right nor Left. Yet, this stance is usually qualified by their nativist insistence that the social state belongs to the majority population alone. Populists also build on the idea of ethno-pluralism as a counter-narrative to multi-culturalism. Instead of focusing on ultra-nationalist "blood and soil" ideology as many of the fascist parties did in the interwar period, they now refer to essentialist mono-cultural ideas to buttress their case for segregation. Different ethnic groups have to be kept separate because any "mixture" would lead to cultural decay. Apart from the anti-Islamic subtext, this ideological strand is clearly part of a

racist tradition. “Separate but equal” was, for example, the standard refrain of those in the United States who sought to preserve a segregated South during the civil rights struggles of the 1950s and 1960s.

As I said, the populist movements in Europe have mainly been on the Right of the political spectrum. But there have been thinkers and activists who believe that the crisis of 2008 has created the conditions for a “Populist Moment” on the Left. I could mention Chantal Mouffe in that context.

Her idea to pursue a counter-strategy, in the name of a Left populism, to form a broad coalition of political forces to combat the xenophobic policies of the Right. She offers a reversed Thatcherist strategy, with the aim of achieving a left-wing hegemony, as a blueprint. Thus, what Thatcher managed to do for the Right – to establish a neo-liberal hegemony – could be replicated by the Left to achieve transformative egalitarian changes within the liberal democratic system.

This might be one way to strengthen progressive political forces and form the basis for new transversal solidarities But it is by no means a certainty that such a strategy would work as well for progressive politics as it has for reactionary politics. What is more, it is, of course, far easier to pursue such a strategy in a country like Britain, where there is no proportional representation than in a

political system where seats match votes and which requires coalition governments of two or more parties.

There have also been calls for unifying democratic struggles against post-democracy or technocratic rule, which is seen as being stacked against civic engagement and popular participation in decision-making. Some believe that the Left should enlist the supporters of the right-wing populist parties and channel their demands toward more egalitarian objectives.

To be sure, some followers of right-wing populism might be tempted by such a promise. But the plea for an anti-moralistic acceptance of the far-right as a democratic force subject to left-wing conversion can be questioned. It might be based less on a strategy designed to counter technocracy and more on electoral politics – or the need to lure back former voters. If that is the case, the price might be the weakening of the Left's universalist and internationalist aspirations in favour of nationalism, which runs the risk of reproducing, even if in a different language, an ethno-centric agenda. We have seen such a trend in some European countries where the Social Democratic Left has adopted anti-immigration rhetoric in a desperate attempt to protect its voter base. Another challenge that we are faced with as a result of the rise of right-wing populism is the attempt to make democracy more intensely majoritarian. We have seen instances where strongmen have used parliamentary majorities to clamp down on minorities. Taken to its

extremes, such a course could, in the end, lead to a fatal weakening of democracy. Populist politicians raise important questions about the functioning of democracy. But there is a need to confront their claim that they are acting in the name of the "people", for it is an exclusive, not inclusive, claim that leaves out a large number of the people.

There is a need to maintain checks and balances in any democratic system; it can require the existence of filtering or "intermediary bodies" in society, which can transmit political demands from a party base or the grassroots without the involvement of an autocratic leader or elitist technocrats. Yet, we also have to address the flaws inherent in liberal democracies, such as the power and influence of interest groups and big corporations – whose influence has magnified with the help of mass data – that have a corrupting impact and serve anti-democratic aims.

Despite all their flaws, political parties and political decision-making institutions are needed as democratic platforms. Politics need to be rejuvenated, but the reforms need to serve democratic aims and strengthen democratic and judicial institutions, not break them down.

Dear guests,

The right-wing populist tendencies that we see across Europe have not gained foothold in Iceland. While some parties have flirted with racism and xenophobia, none have gone so far as to claim those as their key theme. I believe that this political trend can, at least, in part be traced to the decision, which was made in response to the 2008 Icelandic banking collapse, to defend the welfare and education. The left-wing government at the time – in which I served as the Minister for Education, Science and Culture – opted for a combined method of austerity and social spending. Raising taxes on higher incomes and capital gains, while lowering the burden of those with less income, turned out to be not only a better approach for the economy but also for society. In contrast to the experience of many other countries during the Great Recession, inequality was reduced in Iceland. And even though the welfare system underwent considerable strain, it was not broken.

This is not to say that Iceland has escaped political instability in the past decade. On the contrary, there have been three parliamentary elections since 2013, and five since 2007. And this in spite of a speedy economic recovery since 2008. It is partly because alternative Icelandic governments have taken sound economic decisions and partly because of an exponential growth in the tourism sector which is currently the source of around 40% of Iceland's export revenues. Still, confidence in politics has not grown at the same rate. The 2017 election delivered eight parties into a parliament composed of 63 members. This is the context of the

current government. It is certainly not a traditional government, as it is a coalition of Conservatives, a centre-leaning Progressive Party, under the leadership of the Left-Green movement. This calls for compromises that are rare in the current political climate. But it may also be seen as an important exercise in countering the polarizing debate in many European countries, a chance not offered by a more traditional right-wing or left-wing government. The government parties have found ways to work together towards political, societal and economic stability. We agree on the protection of universal human rights and are united in working towards our main goals, such as climate, gender equality and the restoration of the social infrastructure. Now I still do not know how the Icelandic experiment will end – but it is an important experiment.

I will now discuss another challenge to democracy that has emerged over the past decade as traditional media consumption is increasingly replaced by social media consumption. New mediums allow more people space in the public debate. But at the same time, the medium has changed the message. And while more voices have access to the podium, we do not necessarily hear more diverse voices, or more diverse opinions and even less do we hear more well-grounded and well-argued opinions. The debates are layered. Algorithms give us access to likeminded people and political parties, with the help of mass data, and analytical businesses send out targeted messages to different groups. This combination is in a stark contrast

to what would generally be considered good ingredients of democratic decision-making.

Surely, political parties and political candidates have always been eager to find ways to influence and persuade people. But the technological means by which they can present different narratives to different people have been taken to a whole new level. Societal divisions by race, class, gender and location further expand the room for political manipulation. Of course, political interests are not the predominant interest online. It would be naïve to pinpoint mainly political parties or governments in the increasingly corporate-driven world of the internet. Online advertisers resist engaging with regulation that aims at stripping pages that host child sex abuse images of their revenues. The reason is simple: It adds an ethical dimension to the advertisers' jobs and they would be missing out on a target group that includes those open to child sex abuse, but also to many other messages, be they political or corporational.

The hesitation to discuss regulation in relation to the internet is slowly retreating and so is the avoidance of conversation about content. But regulators struggle, not least since the challenges are global, but the potential solutions are local or regional. This is one of the key challenges of the years to come in a world dominated by technological advances.

While politics is changing, so is work and education. The so-called fourth industrial revolution is entering all spheres of our lives. Most jobs consist, at least partly, of tasks that will be overtaken by technology in the near future. Some will, however, be hit harder than others. Traditional male jobs will be impacted more immediately, and it remains questionable if technology will ever replace some of the core tasks of traditional female jobs in care and education (would you have a robot babysit for you? It might be statistically safer than having people to do the job…). Migrants are more likely to hold jobs that will disappear, and rural areas will be more impacted than urban areas. And people are already using algorithms to find the correct partner which may mean the end of Romeos and Juliets and the emergence of only perfect couples.

One of the keys for the future of humanity during those technological changes is education. As we embark on the fourth industrial revolution – and in view of the various challenges I have discussed – I have become more convinced than ever about the necessity of education for all, but also that education must change to meet the demands of a new century.

It is questionable whether our education systems are prepared for future technological changes. This refers to education in itself but also, and no less importantly, to access to good quality education. While Iceland's high-quality state school system serves almost the entire population, we still see many of the

trends that are prevalent in more segregated school systems. Children of ethnic minorities or with migrant backgrounds and children from lower income parents are more likely to drop out of school before they reach university. Women are more likely to seek further education than men. These trends expose the challenges of serving the groups whose future jobs are likely to fall victims to the fourth industrial revolution.

I served as the minister of education, science and culture from 2009 to 2013, in the years right after the 2008 collapse of the Icelandic financial system. One of the things I am proudest of is the fact that the current curriculum in the Icelandic education system was published in 2011, during my time in the ministry, and the pillars of that curriculum are the pillars of civic education; education about democracy and human rights, gender equality and sustainability. I think a holistic education system where everybody has equal acces provides the answers to many of the most important current issues; such as how to confront the populist discourse, how to confront climate change and how to confront the technological changes we are experiencing.

Dear guests

Politicians are not always best equipped to look towards the future – their horizon tends to be determined by the day or the week or the next election – but there are

urgent, futuristic political tasks. The Green New Deal, which has part of its origins in the UK and is becoming a hot political issue in the United States, offers a programme of transition towards a sustainable economy that is both economically and socially responsible. My government has joined the group of Wellbeing Economy Governments, working toward sustainability and well-being for all, within the context of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals. Sustainability – including a forward-looking social justice agenda – is a key term towards the future.

Indeed, it is a reminder of the failure of our economic model that it has allowed outrageous global inequalities, with the richest 1% owning half of the world‘s wealth, while far too many live in poverty. The question is, are we going to respond like H.C. Andersen's emperor, holding our head even higher to make sure the show goes on? It may seem like a tempting option, but there is an increasing momentum for an alternative vision.

In this talk, I have mentioned many big issues, such as climate change, gender equality, populism and democracy, and technological change and how it affects the future of work and education. There are no easy answers to the complex and contradictory questions they raise.

However, they are all intertwined and just asking these questions allows us to make some sense of a culture and society by attempting a better understanding of both past and future. I do not deny that I worry about the impact of the many regressive trends that define the political present. But consistent with my ideological outlook, I strongly believe in a fairer, greener, and more equal world. I am grateful for the opportunity offered by this great university to share with you my political visions and hopes for the future.

Thank you.