



## President of the Republic Sauli Niinistö – Commemorative speech at the funeral of President Mauno Koivisto

25 May 2017

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### **CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY**

A great Finn has departed from our midst. Mauno Henrik Koivisto, the ninth President of the Republic, has passed into eternity. He has left us, but remains close to us. In terms of his ideas, ways, values and principles, he is still with us.

Let us now remember him; it is as if Finland's success story is told in pictures before our very eyes.

President Koivisto's uniqueness did not lie in the fact that he knew the people, but that the people knew him. The people knew him; recognized him, even if his message was sometimes described as opaque or open to interpretation. In this, the people were a wise interpreter.

His thoughtful, deliberative way of approaching issues brought the ordinary citizen close to the statesman, perhaps closer than to any other in Finland's history. Mauno Koivisto's pithy, sharply analytical and often humorous remarks remain embedded in the essence of what it is to be Finnish. They reflect a way of thinking, principles and values that still affect our actions and deeds.

Only a man who is not just a great statesman, but also a great person, can make such an impression on his own people.

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Work, education and trust are the cornerstones of Finland's success and prosperity. Mauno Koivisto was a strong, personal example of each of these.

The work ethic shone throughout his life in a uniquely varied career ranging from carpenter to harbour master, from school teacher to Governor of the Bank of Finland, and from Minister of Finance to Prime Minister and, finally, President of the Republic.

In these roles, Koivisto became familiar with Finnish working life and workers at all levels. Perhaps he discovered that the laws of human interaction vary little, whether you are wearing overalls on a construction site or wearing a suit around a ministerial table.

Koivisto continued studying while working: he earned a masters and then a doctoral degree after passing his baccalaureate. As well as talent, this required a thirst for knowledge and strong motivation to learn and acquire new skills. Nowadays, we refer often to life-long learning and adult education; Mauno Koivisto was decades ahead of us in this respect.

When addressing a session of the European Parliament in 1993, he said: "We Finns are a serious people. We are a people of few words. But no one should doubt that we tend to keep our word."

This is a wonderful statement, addressed to more talkative people. When carefully considered, it can also be understood in a number of ways. But the key message is clear: Trust is our, and your, watchword.

Mauno Koivisto never lacked faith. He did not hesitate to participate in voluntary civil defence and serve at the front on behalf of such trust. He wrote of those days in a letter: "When one has been involved in a contest in which life is at stake, all other contests seem minor afterwards."

Later, during the intense political contests of the 1980s, he had to trust in the fact that people had trust in him. His trust in this was not misplaced.

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"People sometimes ask which republic we are running, and for whom. I think that we have the same republic that was created in 1917 and took its current form in 1919." This is what Mauno Koivisto wrote on almost the last lines of his memoirs in 1995.

Of course, we can interpret this issue in another way.

Prime Minister Koivisto suffered a setback in 1981, when an attempt was made to thrust aside the government he was leading. At the time, he said that: "A government has as much time as Parliament permits." In other words, no power could bypass that of Parliament.

As President, Mauno Koivisto continued with the same theme: the President's powers were reduced and those of Parliament enhanced through parliamentarianism. No hint of a nomenklatura remained, even when governments were being formed.

Koivisto's policy is crystallised in his own statement: "I think it safest that a pyramid rests on its base, not its summit: it is better not to concentrate great power in a single pair of hands, and better that the most critical decisions taken by a republic require the views of more than one person."

Koivisto's republic, at least, was therefore one of a different kind. This is not far from the idea that it actually marked the beginning of Finland's second republic.

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Mauno Koivisto settled into leading foreign policy as the Cold War was once again intensifying. In this situation, he deployed steady deliberation and controlled wisdom. There was no reason to re-invent the foreign policy wheel when the traditional policy left enough scope for its flexible application.

The final account for these difficult years could be seen in the US and Soviet leaders choosing to meet in Helsinki. As events gathered speed and the opportunity arose in the early 1990s, Koivisto did not hesitate to seize it. The final outcome of Koivisto's period was a Finland closely integrated with Europe and the West, while retaining a balanced and equal relationship with the East. This provided a good basis on which to continue.

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Over 50,000 Finns paid their final respects in Mauno Koivisto's books of condolence. One message was as follows: "Above, beneath, to the side, in front and behind; yesterday, today and tomorrow we have a good safety net. My thanks to God and you for keeping it intact."

These touching and respectful farewells reflect how highly regarded and missed the deceased is, and many refer to personal encounters.

Many stories are told about Mauno Koivisto, which often include a lesson. It is said that heavy snow once fell on Tähtelä. A helpful security guard grabbed a snow shovel until the master arrived and took over the shovel: "This is my snow!" Indeed, whatever the heavens throw at us, whether large or small; I'll keep my own house in order, no matter what – that was the message.

At Kultaranta a few years ago, closer to Mauno Koivisto than before, while in the stand watching a volleyball match between his senior team and Raisio's veterans. "I should have brought my gear after all," said Mauno, each time his own team seemed to be getting into difficulties. He had a burning desire to be in the arena, no matter what kind of arena, playing his part and having an impact.

But "WE" was the key issue.

“We” is a pronoun which recurs continuously in Mauno Koivisto’s memoirs. We, meaning he and Tellervo, experience everyday issues together, work together and, every now and again, think things through together. They sometimes disagree but this ends immediately, when he learns to see things Tellervo’s way.

There are great men and great women. Together, they are unbelievably great.

And nothing can drive them apart.

Today, the whole of Finland remembers President Mauno Koivisto and his life’s work with deep respect and gratitude, and with the greatest of sympathy for his loved ones and friends.