

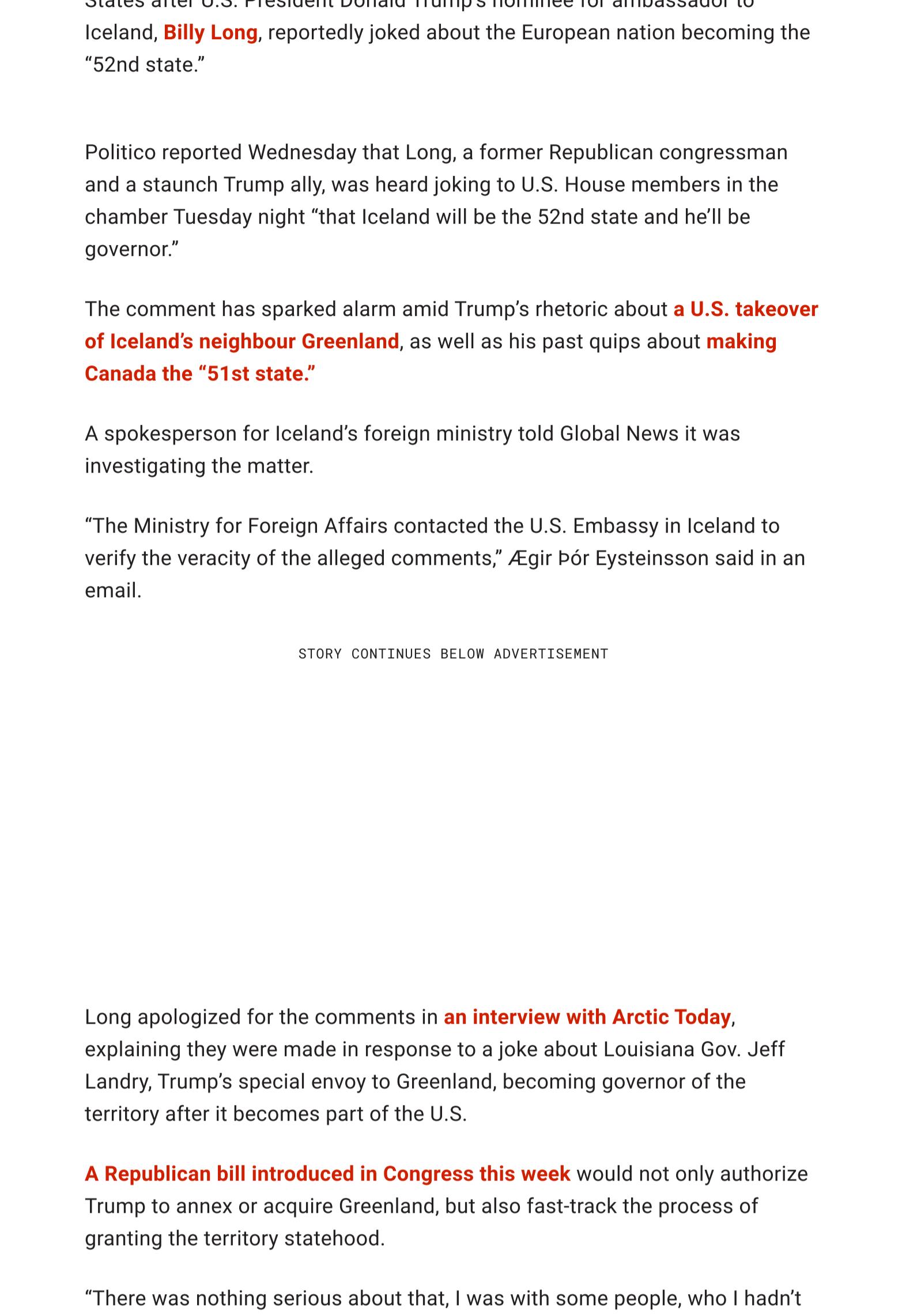
WORLD

Iceland the '52nd state'? U.S. ambassador nominee's comment sparks alarm



By Sean Boynton • Global News

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FILE - Rep. Billy Long, R-Mo., asks questions during hearing May 14, 2020, on Capitol Hill in Washington. (Greg Nash/Pool via AP, File). GN MG

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The government of **Iceland** says it is demanding answers from the United States after U.S. President Donald Trump's nominee for ambassador to Iceland, **Billy Long**, reportedly joked about the European nation becoming the "52nd state."

Politico reported Wednesday that Long, a former Republican congressman and a staunch Trump ally, was heard joking to U.S. House members in the chamber Tuesday night "that Iceland will be the 52nd state and he'll be governor."

The comment has sparked alarm amid Trump's rhetoric about **a U.S. takeover of Iceland's neighbour Greenland**, as well as his past quips about **making Canada the "51st state."**

A spokesperson for Iceland's foreign ministry told Global News it was investigating the matter.

"The Ministry for Foreign Affairs contacted the U.S. Embassy in Iceland to verify the veracity of the alleged comments," Ægir Þór Eysteinsson said in an email.

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Long apologized for the comments in **an interview with Arctic Today**, explaining they were made in response to a joke about Louisiana Gov. Jeff Landry, Trump's special envoy to Greenland, becoming governor of the territory after it becomes part of the U.S.

A Republican bill introduced in Congress this week would not only authorize Trump to annex or acquire Greenland, but also fast-track the process of granting the territory statehood.

"There was nothing serious about that, I was with some people, who I hadn't met for three years, and they were kidding about Jeff Landry being governor of Greenland and they started joking about me and if anyone took offense to it, then I apologize," Long said.

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"I apologize and that's my only comment, I look forward to working with the people of Iceland and I apologize it was taken that way, I was with a group of friends and there was nothing serious about it," he added.

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The comments came ahead of a high-level meeting between the foreign ministers of Greenland and Denmark with U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio and U.S. Vice-President JD Vance in Washington on Wednesday.

The visiting ministers acknowledged after the meeting they had not changed minds about Trump's aims for acquiring Greenland, but that officials agreed to continue working toward **a solution for the territory's security**.

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Long has not otherwise publicly acknowledged the comments or indicated he has reached out to Iceland's government or diplomats in Washington.

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The Icelandic government has repeatedly voiced solidarity with Greenland and its sovereignty in the face of Trump's threats.

A government petition launched by Icelanders this week calling on Foreign Affairs Minister Þorgerður Katrín Gunnarsdóttir to reject Long as U.S. ambassador has gained nearly 3,000 signatures in its first two days.

The petition says Long's comments, even if made in jest, "are insulting to Iceland and Icelanders, who have had to fight for their freedom and have always been a friend of the United States."

Long's nomination as ambassador to Iceland was **officially submitted to the U.S. Senate on Tuesday**. It was first announced in August after Trump removed him as IRS commissioner, less than two months after his confirmation.

In a **certificate of competency** for his nomination sent to the U.S. Senate foreign relations committee in November, Long was hailed for his "expert communications skills and his ability to cultivate strategic relationships with leaders domestic and abroad" that "make him well-qualified to serve as the U.S. Ambassador to Iceland."

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