



INAUGURAL ADDRESS
BY
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INTO
THE OFFICE OF PRESIDENT OF ICELAND

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Fellow Icelanders,

Foremost in my mind at this moment is gratitude for the trust I have been shown in being granted the office of President of Iceland. I take up this position in a spirit of humility, aware that I have much to learn and knowing that I might make mistakes. I also wish to express my thanks for the good wishes that my wife and I, and our children, have received. I am keen to accept advice and guidance from all of you, the people of this country. In addition, I look forward to fruitful collaboration with members of the Althingi, government ministers, officials and others in this chamber. In particular, I must mention my predecessors who are sitting here today, Vigdís Finnbogadóttir and Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson. There is also much to be learned from the careers of our earlier presidents: Sveinn Björnsson, Ásgeir Ásgeirsson and Kristján Eldjárn.

It is seldom that the president determines any matter on his own. It is also my view that he ought generally to be outside the political arena, independent of parties or alliances. All the same, I intend, while in office, to draw attention to matters that are of concern to me and to point out both things that are well done and others that could be done better. We live in a good and bounteous country. We have created a peaceful welfare state. In this, we reap the fruits of the initiative and the labours of past generations. Here I wish to acknowledge my own debt of gratitude towards my mother and my late father.

Of course there is always room for improvement in every sphere. The economic standing of many people must be raised: no one in Iceland should have to experience severe want. Our good health services can be made still better, with steps taken to ensure that everyone benefits equally from them, irrespective of where they live or what financial resources they have. There is still work to be done in achieving gender equality and, to mention something of which I have a closer knowledge, in building up the educational system, which is a fundamental part of the lives of all individuals, families and the whole nation. It should be possible for everyone to find suitable opportunities for learning without being held back by their economic limitations.

We must also nurture the youth of our country and give help to those who stand in need of it in our society. Self-reliance is a fine thing, but let us also bear in mind these lines, originally by the poet and teacher Þorsteinn Valdimarsson, that were made popular in a song by the group *Spilverk þjóðanna*:

‘God helps those who help themselves.’
The tiny bee disproves this: rather,
God helps those who help each other.

Here I have briefly mentioned a few areas where we need to improve our social fabric. I expect I will return to them many more times during my presidency, and I know they are also of concern to our politicians. Responsibility lies with them, and it is they who set our laws. Laws undergo change in the course of time, and the same applies to our fundamental social contract, the Constitution. If parliament is incapable of responding to calls from large numbers of voters and the declared will of the political parties for Constitutional reform or review, then we are in trouble. In this connection I stress the value of settling for partial victories and making compromises.

Challenges face us on all fronts. Iceland’s natural environment is sensitive, and it is our desire both to protect it and to utilise it in a responsible and sustainable manner. This may prove difficult, but it must be our aim to pass the country on to future generations in a condition such that they will be able to enjoy it and its resources to the same extent as we do. This chain of continuity is what matters most. Let us also give attention to climate-change issues; that is something our descendants will certainly be grateful for. It is appropriate here to mention the initiatives taken by Vigdís Finnbogadóttir in connection with land reclamation and environmental awareness, and the part played by Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson in promoting Arctic affairs and the role of sustainable energy sources.

At the same time, we must nurture and respect our language, Icelandic, and ensure that it will be usable in the cybersphere and as a vehicle for the exchange of ideas in the future. But we must not become isolated: we must be able to express ourselves in foreign languages too. Our present age has been labelled the age of globalisation and ever-increasing communications. The world is changing, and the present seems constantly to be slipping away from us. Old traditions disappear and new ones take their place. It is not so very long since practically everyone in this country lived by farming and fishing, was a member of the National Church of Iceland or another Christian denomination, was white-skinned, had Icelandic as his or her mother tongue and bore a name that was recognisably Icelandic. Seen from outside, we all seemed to be cast in the same mould, a uniform nation.

Our history was also an open-and-shut affair. The way it was usually told, Norse chieftains settled in Iceland and built up a flourishing society in the Saga Age. ‘Heroes rode through the regions,’ as the Romantic poet Jónas Hallgrímsson put it in his poem *Iceland*, which was published in

the first issue of the periodical *Fjölnir* in 1835. But after this golden age things went into a decline, according to the story. The Commonwealth was lost, and the murky Middle Ages took its place – at least in the traditional version of our history and the way we saw ourselves through recent centuries; ‘See how your forefathers’ fame faltered — and passed from the earth ,’ as Jónas Hallgrímsson summed it up a few lines later in his poem. But then our fortunes changed. The struggle for independence began; the Althingi was re-established; then came home rule, sovereignty, the foundation of the Republic and victories in disputes over fishing limits. These are well-known milestones in our past.

We must continue to be familiar with them, and with our poetic heritage too. Personally, I consider Jónas Hallgrímsson’s *Iceland* one of the most beautiful compositions in our language. But we must remember how complex our history really is. Let us not forget that the Age of Settlement was a time of cultural diversity, or that it was the close bonds with other countries that laid the foundation for our achievements in literature and our material progress in later times. Let us relate our history in all its glory and all its grief, and in the way we choose in the twenty-first century. In a poem written five years ago, Gerður Kristný says this about the nineteenth-century independence leader Jón Sigurðsson, whose statue stands in the centre of Reykjavík:

His hair unruffled
by any breeze
Jón stands tall
and proud on his pedestal
staring intently
out at the Pond.

Every spring
he makes sure
that the ducklings survive
and doesn’t hesitate
to hop down
and shoo away
the seagulls.

Here, an old story is told in a new way, making the past colourful and fresh. In the same way, today’s Icelanders are not such a uniform bunch as they used to be. We follow different religions and some follow none at all; we have different skin colours; we are allowed to have foreign names; thousands of people now living in Iceland are of foreign origin and speak little or no Icelandic, yet still make a positive contribution to our country. We live in a time of pluralism: may it flourish so that each

and every one of us is able to develop our individual talents and make our dreams come true, at the same time enjoying support in a stable society and protection in the rule of law.

There is one thing, though, that applies to all nations, in Iceland no less than elsewhere. That which unites them must be stronger than that which divides them. This is where the head of state has a role to play. The president must promote unity, respecting other people's opinions and avoiding the temptation to put himself on a pedestal. This does not mean that, as president, I may not say anything unless it harmonises completely with everyone's view; that would mean that I could scarcely say anything at all. Differences of opinion must be heard. Healthy disagreement is a sign of a mature and civilized community.

Indeed, I hope that we pass this test when we elect a new parliament this autumn. An election is where different policies and aims are made the subject of competition and argument, and afterwards, when the voters have delivered their verdict, then members of parliament must work together and find solutions, showing fairness and using methods that will enhance the respect in which they, and this centuries-old institution, the Althingi, are held.

My fellow countrymen, we need not be suspicious or fearful about how we will fare in this new age; it is full of hope and promise. Of course there may be concealed threats; unfortunately, we see examples of this. Of course it is good to be on one's guard. But we must preserve our faith in goodness:

Beauty and goodness
Two things and one.
What is more vulnerable
in an upside-down world

And yet greatest of all
and will outlive everything.

That was written by Snorri Hjartarson in the middle of the last century. He was pessimistic about Iceland's prospects, and those of all mankind, yet he permitted himself to hope. It is in a spirit of optimism, and hopefully realism, that I now accept this responsible office, and this applies to my wife as well. When Sveinn Björnsson accepted his election as our first president at Þingvellir on 17 June 1944, he said that his role consisted, more than anything else, of serving the welfare and interests of the Icelandic people. Those words are still in full force. I shall strive to learn, grow and serve the whole nation.

Fellow Icelanders! In conclusion, I repeat my wish that we stand together in defence of pluralism and freedom, mutual assistance and equality and respect for law and order. Let us join hands in defending these basic values of a good society, optimistically and with full confidence. May it be our fortune to succeed in doing this at all times.