



**New Year Address  
by the President of Iceland,  
Guðni Th. Jóhannesson,  
1 January 2017**

Fellow Icelanders, Happy New Year!

My wife and I wish you all a prosperous New Year. This is the first time I address you on this day, having served as President of Iceland for five months. Short time though that is, I already have many pleasant memories when I look back and take stock. I should like to thank all those who gave me support and encouragement in my election campaign last summer. I should also like to thank the other candidates in the election, and my predecessors in office, Vigdís Finnbogadóttir and Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson, for their goodwill and good advice.

More than seventy years have passed since Iceland founded its republic and elected its head of state. The foundation that was laid down then has stood the test of time. The President of Iceland is expected to be the confidant and representative of all Icelanders, of everyone who lives in this country. No individual is larger than the position itself. Each president in turn has nevertheless formed and fashioned the office of the president in his or her own way, within the framework of the law, tradition and the spirit of the times.

Here at Bessastaðir, most things continue as they were before. Admittedly, as observant television viewers have probably noticed, there is a new painting here on the wall behind me: *Flugþrá* [‘Yearning for Flight’] by Jóhannes Kjarval. He painted it over a long period, basing it on the Greek myth of Leda and the Swan. With the title, Kjarval reminds us of man’s powerful motivation to go higher and further, driven by vision and ambition.

It is also nice to be able to mention the new look of the presidential website, which has been completely overhauled. This was a remarkable innovation when it was first launched, an impressive news portal which perhaps served as a model to others in the governmental system in some ways. The URL is the same as before ([forseti.is](http://forseti.is)); now it is possible to link information there with social media and present news in a more up-to-date manner. Later

this year it will also be possible for members of the public to visit Bessastaðir without a special invitation. On the new website it will be possible to register for a guided tour of the presidential residence and learn about this remarkable place and its role in our history and the present day.

Fellow Icelanders: Over the past few months I have sensed how much respect Icelanders bear towards the office of the President of Iceland; how much they appreciate this position of dignity and influence in our constitutional system. At the same time, they expect the president not to look upon himself as being superior to others. Indeed, in Iceland we have seen it as an advantage – and even boasted about it – that the head of state in our republic can go about among other people without needing to be constantly on his guard.

In the early nineteenth century, Bjarni Thorarensen was provincial governor [*amtmaður*] of the Northern and Eastern Quarters of Iceland. He was severe in his dealings with those of low social standing, but was also known for his sense of fun. At parties and receptions he often put his uniform aside and enjoyed the freedom that came with changing into ordinary clothes. His attitude towards power and rank can be seen in his well-known poem *Selskapsvísa* [‘Keeping Company’]:

Ekki er hollt að hafa ból,  
hefðar upp á jökultindi,  
af því þar er ekkert skjól  
uppi, fyrir frosti, snjó né vindi.

[Of pomp and tradition the peak’s  
no place for a home; up there  
Surroundings are barren and bleak:  
Windy, cold, snowy and bare.]

It is good for everyone to come to the door as they are dressed. Helgi Björnsson put it this way in a recent popular song:

Vertu þú sjálfur, gerðu það sem þú vilt.  
Vertu þú sjálfur, eins og þú ert.  
Láttu það flakka, dansaðu í vindinum.  
Faðmaðu heiminn, elskaðu.

[‘Be yourself; do what you want to.  
Be yourself, just as you are.  
Just let go, dance in the wind.  
Hug the world; love!’]

“Hug the world; love!” Is this possible, in our day? This past year has brought many people destitution, threats and fear. It was by no means all

gloom, though, and other periods can certainly be found in history that have been worse and more dangerous. But many things turned out for the worse, which cast a shadow over positive developments and hopes for a better world. In our continent, acts of terrorism were committed in many places: in Brussels, Nice and most recently in Berlin just a few days before Christmas. In Syria, in Aleppo, innocent children and other ordinary citizens were the victims of hatred and a merciless power game. Savage wars and strife rage in many other places as well, even though they are not under the media spotlight. On the political front too, unexpected changes took place this year that leave the future less certain. Here I am referring to the outcome of the presidential election in the United States and the proposed withdrawal of the United Kingdom from the European Union.

What lies ahead for Iceland in this turmoil? When the Republic was founded in 1944, Hulda – Unnur Benediktsdóttir Bjarklind – wrote her prize-winning poem *Hver á sér fegra föðurland?* [‘Who has a Fairer Native Land?’] The Second World War was at its height. Seamen risked their lives to sail with food supplies (cargoes of fish) to Britain – both my grandfathers worked at sea during the war – and over two hundred Icelanders were killed as a result of the hostilities. Yet we were in a much better position than most other nations, as Unnur noted in her poem:

Með friðsæl býli, ljós og ljóð,  
svo langt frá heimsins vígaslóð.

[‘With light and poems, our homes at peace,  
far from a world by war convulsed.’]

Her poem continued:

Hver á sér meðal þjóða þjóð,  
er þekkir hvorki sverð né blóð  
en lifir sæl við ást og óð  
og auð, sem friðsæld gaf?

[‘Among all nations, whose is one  
that knows nor arms nor bloodshed,  
but lives content with love and song  
and riches, gifts of peace?’]

Our riches consist not only of peace, which in fact cannot be accorded a value in monetary terms. No; they consist not least in being able to trade freely with other states; in being able to travel and pursue education far and wide; in being able to live abroad and return; and in inviting others to come here and

enrich our society. “Iceland’s dear homestead” – to quote another phrase from Hulda’s superb poem – only has a future in a peaceful world. The foundation of the Republic in 1944 would not have been to much purpose if the world around us had continued to burn up in the fires of armed conflict. Now, as then, we must make our contribution. Now, as then, we are a nation without an army, but we can make our contribution in the struggle against the forces that pose the main threat to peaceful life in our part of the world: the movements dedicated to extremism and hatred that regard nothing as sacred. All the same, we must not be indifferent as to what consequences our anger may have. It is planned to welcome about forty refugees from Syria in the early months of this year. May they succeed in finding a home at peace, far from a world by war convulsed.

For a long time, Icelandic society was homogeneous. I mentioned this in my inaugural speech: that it was not long since practically all Icelanders were members of the National Church of Iceland or of another Christian denomination, were white-skinned, had Icelandic as their mother tongue and bore names that were recognisably Icelandic. That time is now past and will not return. Progress in our day depends on diversity and the movement of people across the globe. At the same time, though, we must always ensure and defend our fundamental values: to have a state based on the rule of law and a welfare society in which human rights are held in high esteem, with gender equality, freedom of belief, freedom in love, freedom of speech and freedom to practise one’s culture.

It would also be a wise move to make those who wish to settle here aware of the national characteristics that have helped us to survive in this challenging country of ours: resilience and stubbornness, solidarity when it is needed (and disunity at other times) and that special mixture of a lack of discipline and easy-goingness that both gets us into difficulties and out of them again – and may be summed up in the often-heard expression: “It’ll work out all right.”

Later this month, my wife and I will make a state visit to Denmark. Denmark is a country where immigrants, including Icelanders, have set their stamp on the community. Many of them have succeeded in adapting to the local rules and customs, but others have not. Queen Margrethe of Denmark mentioned this in her New Year’s address just over a decade ago, shortly after the ‘Mohammed cartoons controversy’ that arose after the newspaper Jyllands-Posten printed cartoons of the Prophet Mohammed. “No one,” said the Queen, “should expect those who move to a new home in a strange land to jettison immediately all their cultural heritage.” At the same time, however, she noted that new citizens must respect the laws and values of their new community. This is a sensible approach.

Back in the nineteenth century, Icelanders were also among the immigrants to Canada, the country where my wife Eliza was born. They were

not always welcomed warmly there, any more than were people of other origins. Today, though, immigrant integration is seen as having been highly successful in Canada, where people with dissimilar backgrounds, languages and religions live together in harmony. “We have successfully demonstrated that drawing in people from around the world has been an extraordinary plus, not just to our country and well-being and our sense of selves, but to our economy and to our success as a nation,” said the Canadian Prime Minister, Justin Trudeau, recently – at a meeting with the Lord Mayor of London, Sadiq Khan.

Fellow Icelanders! “Each person fashions his own fortune.” This old saying sets out in words how destiny and free will are intertwined; in Icelandic it can also be given another twist, with a change of intonation only, and the addition of a question mark: “Who fashions his own fortune?” A belief in unchangeable destiny can be found in many places in the sagas. “That which is intended will run its course,” is an example from *Njáls saga*. The same idea is found in Davíð Stefánsson’s poetry, written many centuries later: “We are all born in fate’s narrow constraints.”

Certainly, our lives are formed by our environment; by decisions taken by others, by events that we cannot foresee. Early last year, I met someone who had been at high school with me. Both of us were very happy with our lives. The next thing I heard of him was that he was in hospital with his life in the balance after an unexpected health crisis. Fortune deals us very different hands. All the same, we are not the puppets of destiny. “Each man is free to try to save his life while there is the chance,” said Kári Sölmundarson to Skarphéðinn in the burning scene in *Njáls saga* before he escaped and ran away. Nearly two centuries ago Sigurður Breiðfjörð composed this quatrain on the subject of free will:

Lát ei kúgast þanka þinn  
þegar efni vandast.  
Þú skalt fljúga á forlögin,  
fella þau og standast.

[‘Keep your spirit free and straight  
as the problems gather round.  
I shall fly and tackle Fate,  
bring it down and stand my ground.’]

My friend recovered from his blow, though he lost some of his strength and spent most of the year in hospital. I made the mistake of asking him whether he now needed a lift to move between floors in his house. “I don’t need any damned lift,” he said, slowly, emphasising every single word, and added an ironic grimace as Skarphéðinn was famous for doing.

Resilience and stubbornness are virtues. How we react to difficulty can make all the difference, no less than the scope we are given for tackling the whims of fate and inequalities in material wealth. My school friend and I first met in the upper years of senior school, together with the others in our year; all of us were from different backgrounds. Some had rich parents, others did not; some had parents who were prominent figures in society. But background did not make an important difference. The same applied regarding the health services when one of us needed help to save his life. Wealth was not a determining factor as to whether his life could be saved.

I think most Icelanders agree on these fundamental pillars of our society: equal rights to education and to health care, irrespective of one's financial position. There also seems to be general agreement on the need for Iceland's health and educational systems to be of high quality. If this is ensured, then there will be less risk of people becoming ensnared in poverty and being shackled through life by the circumstances of their birth. Everyone should have the chance to have a go, to excel, to become wealthy, to indulge themselves – but at the same time they should make a fair contribution to the common good. Let us bear in mind, however, that increased inequality leads to dissension and social tension. Humankind will never prosper if one per cent of the people on Earth own as much wealth as the other 99 per cent combined. A financial system in which a tiny handful hold the reins and do not take account of the interests of the majority is a threat. This is something that the US President, Barack Obama, and Stephen Hawking, the British scientist, have called attention to, and it is certainly possible to agree with his view.

The fact is that the strength of a state or a society cannot be measured in terms of economic growth or GDP, in armaments or population size. And even though we applaud Icelanders' achievements in cultural activities, in science and on the sports field, they are not necessary indications of the good points of the society. Its real strength lies in how well sick people, and others in need of care, and people with disabilities or developmental disorders, are looked after. The strength of a society can also be assessed in terms of how it cares for its children, and the quality of life for the elderly in their final years. All of these are measurements of the quality of life, the most important target at the end of the day. In comparison with many other countries, and with our own past, we have reason to be fairly satisfied. But there is always room for improvement.

Fellow Icelanders: Early in this century, Bragi Valdimar Skúlason wrote a little poem about the need to enjoy every instant because we never know what tomorrow will bring:

Líttu sérhvert sólarlag,  
sem þitt hinsta væri það.  
Því morgni eftir orðinn dag

enginn gengur vísum að.

[‘Each new sunset treasure,  
just as if your last it were.  
No one can, at evening’s measure,  
of the morrow’s dawn be sure.’]

We can all shape our own lives and our community according to the best of our abilities and aim at fashioning our own fortunes, confident of the support of others if we need it. I wish you all a good and prosperous New Year; a year of good work, sincerity, unity and progress.