



INAUGURAL ADDRESS  
OF  
HALLA TÓMASDÓTTIR  
AS  
PRESIDENT OF ICELAND

1 August 2024

My fellow-Icelanders,

I stand here today with my heart full of gratitude for the trust that is displayed in me and my husband, and the support we have received all around the country.

I am grateful to my parents, who gave me a good start in life, and to the strong women who showed me, at a young age, that with courage and solidarity we can have an influence upon society and be leaders for progress.

I am grateful for having been born here in this country – for being an Icelander, which today is an enviable position, although over the centuries that was not always the case. I thank the past generations who with extraordinary resilience not only ensured that Icelandic society survived, but created a unique cultural heritage in which we Icelanders can take pride. I thank all those who have paved the way for what we enjoy today, in one of the world's leading welfare societies.

The great responsibility I am undertaking is clear to me, and I shall do my utmost to work for the good of our nation and its people. I know that I will build upon the solid foundation left by those who have gone before me, and I think with respect of my predecessors in this office: Sveinn Björnsson, Ásgeir Ásgeirsson and Kristján Eldjárn. I am honoured to be able to express my personal thanks to Vigdís Finnbogadóttir, Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson and Guðni Th. Jóhannesson for their time in the presidency, and their service to the nation.

Now, when I swear my oath to the Icelandic constitution, only eighty years have passed since the foundation of the Republic of Iceland. Eighty years is about the average human life-span. What have we achieved in those years?

*Have we achieved good, on our journey along the road?* as nineteenth-century poet Jónas Hallgrímsson asked.

The population of Iceland has tripled in that time, and all conditions in the country have been transformed: education, prosperity, health services, transport, the composition of the nation, the economy,

national income. We, who were one of the most impoverished peoples of northern Europe, are now among the most prosperous nations in the world. In only eighty years, a transformation has taken place; hence it is worth asking at this landmark in time: What do we want to set our sights upon? Where do we want to be, both in the immediate future, and after another eighty years?

On my travels around Iceland this spring with my husband, we clearly perceived how much Icelanders love their country and their language, and how proud we are of our achievements and national heritage.

It was an especial pleasure to observe that the entrepreneurial environment has been transformed in many parts of the country. Sustainable food development is yielding diverse and delicious products, which in the past were all imported; full utilisation of seafood products means that previously-worthless waste yields high-value products; advances in software are leading to expansion beyond national boundaries; and in cultural tourism the potential appears unlimited.

We must continue to build on our strengths, activate our creativity, and set ourselves high standards. Undeterred, we should encourage ambitious people of talent to pursue their dreams, and not minimise the valuable lessons we learn from making mistakes. Painful experience can make us stronger, and has done so.

Icelanders' creativity is probably strongest in the arts – and in that field literature has long been our nation's pride. But now literature is being joined by one art form after another: music, visual arts, art, drama, stage arts and filmmaking are flourishing, showing the results that may be expected when creative talents are nurtured through education and other forms of support. It has long been clear that the arts do not only enrich us spiritually and mentally; they also make an important contribution to the national economy.

Everywhere we went in Iceland, my husband and I saw sports facilities of all kinds; sports play a vital role in the health of individuals and of communities. A healthy mind in a healthy body, as the saying goes. And that is not all, for one of the most unifying influences on us as a nation is when our leading athletes and sportspeople compete internationally. Most recently we may recall the spectacular success of Iceland's women's football team, who are now on their way to the UEFA Women's Championship next year. And at this moment our excellent representatives are competing at the Olympic Games in Paris. We send them all our good wishes! And my husband and I look forward to

accompanying the Icelandic contestants to the Special Olympics at the end of this month.

We Icelanders have much to rejoice in, yet we must also be ready to meet challenges. The world appears to be heading for more conflict, and aggression is increasing in relationships between and within nations. Vital human rights, which have been achieved by long and arduous campaigns, are now at risk. People are tending to take to the trenches – in opposing factions. Some of them are so fixed in their views that they are unable to hear each other's voices.

One of the gravest consequences of this is that trust, one of the vital pillars of human society, is declining.

Throughout the western world, authorities, financial institutions, business, media and administrative systems have been losing public confidence. While the vast majority of people perform their tasks diligently and honourably, those who have proved unworthy of trust have inflicted great damage.

Experience and research both go to show that dwindling trust gives rise to apathy among voters. People, especially young people, see no point in voting – they feel it will make no difference. Some even see no reason to participate in society. Ever-growing numbers are drawn to the argumentation of those who propose over-simplified and often extreme solutions.

We must be on our guard against these tendencies. For deepfake technology has now made it possible to manipulate both audio and video so that it is near-impossible to distinguish authentic from fake news. What, and whom, can we safely believe? What will happen to trust? Technological advances cannot be halted, but if we are not on our guard regarding these developments the consequences may be grave for societies and for democracy.

I have often expressed my views on mental and social health. In my mind these two are indivisible, as mental distress has a weakening effect on people, and the social impact is severe. Loneliness, sadly, is a growing problem among both the young and older people. Many people are spending more time in the virtual world than the real one. Anxiety, depression, substance abuse and self-harm have risen sharply. How can it be that a society said to be one of the happiest in the world is also near the top of the list for these alarming developments?

Philosopher Páll Skúlason once wrote:

So can we do nothing in order to be happy? Oh yes, we can: we can be open to happiness by focussing on what gives value to life. And we find out what that is by paying attention to what brings light and warmth into our lives.

We can, and we must, enhance mental and social health. I hope to be able to make my own contribution to addressing the roots of the problem, in collaboration with government, scholars, health sector workers, NGOs, the media, and not least teachers and parents. At times of change, dialogue and collaboration between generations, and among diverse social groups, are the key to Iceland attaining gender equality and generational equality. Hence it is vital that young people have their place at the table, that they be granted real access to mapping out their future, while benefiting from the experience and wisdom of their elders.

In times like these, it is necessary to take pause, to consider who we want to be, where we wish to go, and how we can enhance trust between people. Where do we see the Republic of Iceland going over the next 80 years? We must establish objectives and set our course. For what will happen to the ship of state with an inaccurate compass, and an inadequate social consensus?

In my work I have proposed a new approach to resolving challenges, and I have learned lessons. Experience has taught me that the most effective approach is to bring together the differing parties, ask questions and listen to the full range of views. To encourage people to analyse and define the problems and the opportunities, and work together to achieve solutions. When trust is lacking, government, the social partners and society as a whole must come together in new ways and work together on a future vision based on the common foundation of the nation. Supply exceeds demand for people who claim to have all the answers – but the people of Iceland, especially the younger generation, are no longer prepared to accept being excluded from the discourse about their future.

Do we have the courage to strike out on new paths? Can we, Icelandic society, opt for the moderate approach, conversing and working together across generational divides and different views? Can we recalibrate the compass, so that we are less likely to go astray? Opt for solidarity rather than discord? Can we ask the big questions and seek answers in consultation with the nation? The approach we choose now will have a major impact on how the Republic of Iceland fares over the next eighty years. What reality awaits our children and grandchildren?

No one person among us has answers to all the many challenges we face. But as president I shall urge you to ask questions and engage in constructive debate and collaboration, so that we may determine where we want to go, and the essential elements of that process. In that way I believe that we will find the answers, together, and that we can engage, with Icelandic perseverance and in unity, with every challenge posed by a changing world and the situation in society.

I am convinced that Iceland, and we Icelanders, have an important role to play in a world facing challenges. I have faith in our strengths and I know that we can continue to build on our uniqueness, that we have already established in the fields of equality and geothermal energy, in arts, sports, and in the democratic development of a society where human rights are paramount. I believe that our strength lies not least in our smallness and moderation. A small, but vigorous and courageous nation which has the wisdom and ambition to choose more moderate paths in a harsh world. I believe that we can choose to be a peaceful nation which enjoys prosperity while also offering a helping hand to those who need it. In that way we can set a good example, and be a light in the darkness that is so widespread in our time.

My dear fellow-Icelanders, that choice must begin with each and every individual. Who do we choose to be, and what do we choose to do, in a time when so many people are opting for conflict and aggression against those who hold differing views? Do we encounter each other with an open mind and heart, prepared to listen and to strive to understand differing perspectives, varying life experience and visions? The truth is that choosing to listen, determining to try to grasp where others are coming from, demands audacity, and it requires more effort from us in the short term than closing ourselves off and becoming defensive. Do we possess the courage to choose a human, peaceful approach, thus preparing the ground for a society where most people are able to flourish on their own terms? That is what I want us to aim for. Let us activate our ability to create such a society, together, for and with the next generation. – I know we can do it.

Iceland is a unique country, home to a creative nation that is now seeking answers to many exigent questions. I look forward to working with you, with sights set high, for the bright future of our republic. I will conclude with the words of poet Hólmfríður Sigurðardóttir:

Let us seek solutions,  
let hands and words  
embrace

seek joy  
in poetry  
find freedom  
in our hands  
seek the rainbow  
find the beacon

seek good fortune  
feel it play through the life  
of the land of water and light.