



**Address by
The President of Iceland
Guðni Th. Jóhannesson
at the Opening of
the Althingi**

14 December 2017

Members of the Althingi,

I wish you every success in your demanding work. The electorate has placed its trust in you. Each and every one of you has been entrusted to follow your personal convictions when resolving issues and to have the interests of the nation as your priority. At the same time, you have been elected under the banners of political parties. In this, you have come together in groupings with shared aims and ideals.

Eight parties are now represented in the Althingi; never before have there been so many. It is a praiseworthy thing to have different views expressed here. Our representative chamber must, as far as possible, reflect the diversity of our society. And its members must contend with each other, in reasoned argument, over policies and approaches, ways to move forward. The right to dispute and disagree is in fact the foundation of free societies and free parliaments. The French intellectual Voltaire championed this right in the Age of Enlightenment, as is well known. Later, an English writer, Evelyn Beatrice Hall, put Voltaire's position as being that even though he disapproved of what someone said, he would defend to the death their right to say it. In politics, and in all public debate, we must be able to argue, to defend our own convictions and speak out against other people's opinions.

Before the days of the internet, it was difficult for the general public to express itself openly. Fortunately, things have changed now, and most of those who make use of the new media for discussion do so in a responsible way.

Others, unfortunately, overstep the limits of decency. Criticism is one thing; defamation is another.

Issues of this type arise particularly when elections are called and the spirit of competition comes to the fore. Certainly, voters need to be informed about the agendas of the political parties that stand for election, and about individual candidates and what other people think of how they present their viewpoints. But do we want a flood of advertisements, derogatory remarks and misrepresentations – for which no one is prepared to accept responsibility? Do we want the boundary between news and propaganda, facts and opinions, to be unclear in our media? It has generally been regarded in Icelandic as dishonourable to make anonymous attacks or to disguise one's true identity.

Across the world, there is growing concern over the influence that social media, information channels and unscrupulous people in powerful positions can have on people's opinions and on public opinion. Some people fear that more and more individuals are becoming enmeshed in prejudices and seduced by false news, becoming narrow-minded and bigoted rather than experiencing the freedom involved in getting to know a wider range of ideas and different opinions.

This is not a plea for unconditional tolerance or an argument for regarding all opinions as equally valid and abandoning all convictions in the name of unity and acquiescence. But it is my firm belief that here, in Iceland and in this chamber, it is not our wish to brand all those who disagree with us as evil. I believe that we want to give people a hearing and weigh their opinions rather than to distrust those who have formed a party other than our own and assume, without further examination, that nothing good can come of them.

We should learn from examples. Prejudice and narrow-mindedness can be seen at work in the poem *Kata gamla í kofanum* ('Old Katie in her Cabin') by Jón úr Vör. "No one knew her life story," runs the poem, "no one knew her background," but this did not stop them from gossiping about her. Jón úr Vör himself fought for a better deal for the common man. For a time, he associated with the communist movement, but did not feel at home in it. "The thing about me," he said later, "is that I tend to show that the other side has something to be said for it."

From the wider world, we may call to mind the words of the famous dissident Alexander Solzhenitsyn, who spent years in the prison camps run by his oppressors in the Soviet Union and had every reason to harbour resentment against them. Nevertheless, he warned against the temptation of dividing people into two types, good and bad: "If only it were all so simple! If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary

only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart?"

Members of the Althingi: In this chamber, you are all to listen to your own convictions, and you have taken positions in your various parties, but here it is also necessary to reach compromises, to bridge gaps and to respect differences of opinion.

A new government took office at the beginning of this month. In the last ten years we have had five general elections. Less than a year passed between the last two, and this year, Iceland has been under three prime ministers, something that is without precedent in the history of the republic. While it is good to be able to elect a parliament on a regular basis, stability is also a desirable ingredient in the constitutional system. The new government has our best wishes for success in its work in the service of our country and its people. The MPs and parties that are in power will be judged by their deeds, as will those who form the opposition.

Disputes will continue in this chamber. But, while the right to disagree is important – and it can be said in all fairness that Icelanders are good at exercising it – we have always shown in practical ways that we are capable of closing ranks when the occasion so demands. For some time now, we have been following the earth tremors in the volcano beneath the Öräfajökull glacier. From past experience we know what chaos an eruption under ice can cause, and records from past centuries tell us of the death and destruction that may result. We also have experience of the terrible consequences of avalanches and other natural catastrophes. But when facing threats of this type we have learned the value of standing together. We can draw on this same resource when striving to improve our society in all areas.

Nowadays there is an optimistic feeling that we have reached a point when great changes can be expected. "So far, but no further" is a slogan that is heard all over the world. Shortly before this meeting, the newly-elected members of this chamber condemned sexual harassment and abuse, and the same message has been heard all around us. It is simple and clear: So far, but no further. Overstepping the bounds will no longer be tolerated. We must listen; we must do better, we who live together in this society. Obvious things can be said in many ways. I would like to quote these lines, from a prose poem by Elísabet Jökulsdóttir:

All sorts of ordinary men,
even friends of mine,
are complaining about the 'me too' campaign.

They say:

‘You’re not allowed to do anything,’ and ‘What can you do?’
and ‘Nothing is allowed any more.’

I would like to say to them that you can’t do anything, that you have to ask
permission for everything you do:

May I show you what I am writing?

May I have some toothpaste; may I have some milk?

May I quote you?

May I come and visit you?

May I hug you; may I borrow your woolly hat?

And “no” means “no.” In this, political party allegiance makes no
difference; the cause is that strong, the need is that urgent. Notwithstanding all
our disagreements, all our different ideals, we must stand together in defence of
the basis of our society – the rule of law and inalienable human rights; broad-
mindedness; tolerance and individual freedom; sympathy and compassion; equal
rights; welfare and the protection of all people against the abuse of power in all
its forms and against insulting and defamatory attacks.

I should now like to ask the members of this house to rise and honour our
native land.

Under Article 1 of the Procedural Rules, the longest-serving permanent
member of the house is to direct this meeting until the speaker of the Althingi
has been elected. I therefore call on the second member for the Northeastern
Constituency, Steingrímur J. Sigfússon, to come up to the speaker’s chair.