



**Address
by President of Iceland
Halla Tómasdóttir
at the Opening of
Alþingi
10 September 2024**

Members of Alþingi!

I welcome you to parliament, and I wish you well in the important tasks that lie ahead.

The opening of Alþingi is a solemn moment in which we rejoice, thankful for living in a country where democracy is upheld.

On this occasion parliament comes together under the shadow of the national trauma arising from the stabbing that took place on Culture Night last month, with tragic consequences. Under such circumstances we are overwhelmed by feelings of helplessness. For what can be more important in human society than our people? Our young people in the prime of their lives?

Like Alþingi, schools all over the country are beginning a new term in the shadow of this tragedy.

We must take care of our children – ensure their safety, and bring them up into adulthood. We must set them a good example in our own reactions, and help them with their reactions. Bryndís Klara’s parents have reached out to us, asking us to ensure that love is the only “weapon” used in our society. How will we respond to their appeal?

We have a duty. We must, we shall, uproot these dangerous tendencies, so that such an event cannot happen again.

This is the duty of us all – people of all persuasions are surely agreed on that.

This new session of parliament has many and complex tasks ahead. In recent weeks I have met privately with government ministers and with the leaders of all the political parties. I thank them for the good discussions we have

had, which have shown me that, though there may be disagreement on how to deal with them, there is general consensus regarding the most urgent issues in our society.

The vicious cycle of housing shortage, inflation and interest rates gives rise to concern for many. Demand for housing is driven by rising population – partly among the existing population, but mostly due to visitors from abroad whom we welcome – whether as tourists, or those who come to Iceland to work.

More than 80,000 foreign citizens are living lawfully in Iceland, most of them from the European Economic Area. Iceland cannot do without them. They are employed in many vital jobs. And they need a roof over their heads, like the rest of us. This naturally increases demand on the housing market. And that requires increased supply.

Large number of young people who are starting out in life, and must stand on their own two feet, do not know where to turn. They even consider whether Iceland is a good place for them to live. A good place to have children and bring them up. Rising mortgage payments are a heavy burden for many, while those who live in rented accommodation, whether young or old, have neither security as tenants, nor reasonable rents. Of course this give rise to worries and difficult feelings – even anxiety and depression.

The monitoring of natural disasters, and response to them, are now vital tasks. Monitoring technology grows ever more sophisticated, and the methods of our response bodies develop fast as they accumulate experience. But the catastrophic events on the Reykjanes peninsula are like nothing we have seen before: one volcanic eruption after another, threatening the homes, livelihoods and communities of thousands of Icelanders – and the gnawing uncertainty about the future – are an unprecedented strain. It is important to safeguard infrastructure – but no less vital to extend our care to a community that is suffering, and to ensure that the members of that community have a voice in decisions about its future.

Concerns are raised about our infrastructure, such as schools and the healthcare system. More than two million tourists visit Iceland every year, leading to greatly-increased demands on our society; and those who move to Iceland are entitled to health and social care, and their children must attend school and learn Icelandic. Otherwise they will miss out on opportunities available to other children, and the risk is that even more people will be marginalised. It is essential that we do better in these matters. Our efforts will be repaid, many times over.

The tragic events of recent weeks must touch us all. We feel heartfelt sympathy for all who are grieving. We are also united in our conviction that

growing violence must be halted. We must delve deeper, to find the root of the malaise that breaks out in the form of violence. Nobody who is contented – adult or child – carries a weapon to attack other people. We must be especially vigilant regarding the wellbeing of children, and we must be able to intervene when necessary.

Violence is not only a matter for the police and the judiciary. Violence is a health issue, as the British prime minister recently stated so unequivocally. Hence collaboration among many bodies is key, as is provided in the Children’s Wellbeing Act.

Discourse on children’s wellbeing leads to thoughts of ominous reports on children’s literacy. It is an essential duty of our educational system to ensure that children learn to read. Numerous studies reveal – to no-one’s surprise – that literacy is the essential basis for further study. A child that has not mastered reading falls behind, further and further, ultimately becoming discouraged and losing interest in reading, with grave consequences. Tried and tested methods must be applied in teaching reading. Children must also receive attention, and feel that they are listened to. They need the right amount of freedom, and a healthy framework: a peaceful environment, a purpose, and mental calm to enable them to know themselves and others. It is important to remember that research and experience indicate that breaks from screens and phones are crucial. We know that much of what young people see on social media every day has a damaging impact. The children say so themselves. In a world that is always online and connected, important connections have been lost.

Time spent by children with their parents and other role models is conducive to forming strong bonds that will last those children all their lives. Let us help them to talk about their feelings and find ways to express themselves.

In that context, arts and creativity can not only be mentally rewarding; they can also teach us to see things from the most unlikely viewpoints, and put them in entirely new contexts. And that is surely one of the best possible ways for us to deepen our understanding and our bonds with each other.

But in complex issues, there is no single answer. The solution is multifarious. Let us listen to other people’s perspectives, and come together in kindness: let us converse with mutual respect for others’ experiences and views. Let us rise up above the day-to-day squabbles. Other nations are facing the same challenges. Let us learn from what our neighbouring nations are doing well.

And this is perhaps the key to advances, for knowledge and experience are, fortunately, not limited to just a few. Intelligence, ideals, and the different approaches of people who want to work for the good of their society, are not

only useful but essential. We have a need for all the good ideas. We must ensure that they are given a fair hearing, whoever puts them forward.

We can find inspiration all around us for the task ahead. We have shining examples to follow. The Paralympic Games in Paris the other day were a lesson in humanity. Every person who competes in the Olympics has accomplished great feats; and to reach the highest level with a disability is an extraordinary achievement. The courage, hard work, stamina and diligence of the competitors was, in a word, unbelievable – and the same was true of the solidarity displayed on the packed stands: in Paris the spectators clapped until everyone had finished – for every single competitor.

Members of Alþingi: the people of Iceland look to you to do your work well and effectively. While the different political parties have divergent views and compete fiercely at election time, it is essential to be able to compromise and work together in the interests of the people.

Democracy demands compromise: processes of negotiation and conciliation that lead to a favourable conclusion for the bulk of the nation, though without negating the reasonable views of minority groups.

As a poet once wrote: “Oh, little nation on thin ice, do not be warring with thyself.” We Icelanders are rich in bounteous resources, at sea and on land. We are a creative and resilient nation, who have been brought up to adapt to new and changeable circumstances. Let us safeguard that which is most important to us and to future generations: a healthy society!

I wish parliamentarians and Alþingi all good fortune, and I ask you to rise in honour of our homeland.