



Address
by President of Iceland
Guðni Th. Jóhannesson
at the celebration of the centenary
of Icelandic sovereignty
at Harpa concert hall, Reykjavík
1 December 2018

Your Majesty,
ladies and gentlemen,
my fellow-Icelanders!

Happy anniversary! It was a hundred years ago today that Iceland became a free and sovereign nation. That marked one of the most important steps on our nation's progress to self-determination. It was a historic landmark. Let us imagine ourselves standing in front of Government House, just a stone's throw from Harpa, where we are now. Let us take a step back in time: "Icelanders!" declaims Sigurður Eggerz around midday (he is acting prime minister, as Prime Minister Jón Magnússon is in Denmark to meet the king). "Icelanders! Yesterday his Majesty the King approved the Union Act, and today it takes effect. ... May the good fortune of our land and our king also be bestowed on our flag," says the minister in conclusion.

At that moment the flag of the new state of Iceland is slowly and ceremoniously raised for the first time – above Government House, which had been built a century and a half earlier as a jailhouse.

National sovereignty is celebrated. In the evening, people go out into the streets, and all over Iceland people are buoyed up by the historic event.

Or were they? What do we really know about it? And why are we recalling that event now? Why are we telling each other stories of times past? What good does it do?

Dear friends and fellow-Icelanders: We know for sure, in fact, that many Icelanders were filled with optimism on that day a hundred years ago. "I am happy about this day," wrote Elka Björnsdóttir in her diary that evening, adding: "We celebrated, with beans and good fat meat, today, Sovereignty Day. Of

course we did.” She went on to write: “Some people are sceptical.” What would the new national sovereignty bring to the people of Iceland? Elka was a labourer, and her life of hard toil continued unchanged, with no prospect of education, advancement or a standard of living like that enjoyed by the small wealthy class.

Let us not tell each other untruths. Let us tell stories of poor people and conflict and injustice and corruption. But let us not forget that sovereignty brought with it hopes of a better world and a better society. We should tell that story too: the irrefutable story of progress – although much remains to be done. A story of unity regarding essential values and essential objectives.

And what are they? That people here in Iceland should enjoy freedom and full human rights, equality and equal opportunity; that we should permit people to spread their wings – perhaps to excel and enjoy the fruit of their labour; and also that we should help those who need it – and that all should take part in that social obligation in accord with individual circumstances; that we treat each other with honesty and respect; that we utilise the resources of the land, but without causing irreversible damage; that we safeguard our sovereignty, while continuing to share it with others, in accord with our own wishes and needs; that in our hearts should dwell a healthy love of our country, while we reject arrogance and pride, hostility and hatred for others; that we welcome those who wish to come to Iceland and enrich our diverse society; that we have one legal code, yet permit many different customs – customs which must, however, comply with the law.

Yes, my fellow-Icelanders, we must have common values and objectives. “People who never join forces to lift something, will never be a nation,” remarked leading 20th-century artist Kjarval once. We Icelanders have our own cultural heritage and language, which must be upheld and protected; but we also enjoy the benefit of powerful influences from elsewhere – and let us enjoy travelling and learning. Nelson Mandela said that there was a saying in his native language: “Ndiwelimilambo enamagama,” or “I have crossed renowned rivers” – a reference to the one who dares to explore new territories, travels afar and learns from the experience. We in Iceland understand the lesson; in Icelandic we say: “Don’t think a pot-lid is the sky.”

Ladies and gentlemen, we are drawing near to the close of the centenary year. I thank all those who have been involved in events, large and small, all over Iceland. And I thank the wonderful artists who appear here this evening. When Alþingi assembled at Þingvellir this summer to mark the centenary of sovereignty, I read out an ode to Iceland by Ingibjörg Haraldsdóttir. It is such a fine poem, so sincere and true, that I permit myself to read it here again, with sincere good wishes to you all: your Majesty, guests here at Harpa, fellow-Icelanders:

I tell you nothing of the land
I sing no patriotic songs
of the caves, the waterfalls, the hot springs
the ewes and the cows
of the people's struggles
and adversities in perilous weather

no. But stand by me
in the dark. Breathe deeply
and feel it flow

and say:
This is my home.

Yes, this is our home, my fellow-Icelanders, and this is where our history has taken place. Let us tell it in all its nuances, and rejoice in the future with all the challenges it brings. Let us be happy about this day, Sovereignty Day, as so many of our fellow-Icelanders were a hundred years ago.

Thank you.