



## **CONSTITUTIONS – POETRY OR PROSE?**

**Speech by the  
President of Iceland  
Guðni Th. Jóhannesson  
at the Reykjavík University  
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A Conference held by the department of law at  
Reykjavík University  
in cooperation with The Icelandic Constitution Society

The timing of this conference is no coincidence. Exactly four years ago, on 20 October, an advisory referendum was held here in Iceland. Voters were asked whether they wanted a proposed bill by a specially appointed constitutional committee to form the basis of a new constitution. A clear majority of those who took part in the referendum was in favour.

Four years later, subsequent steps have not been taken. Support in Parliament was insufficient, especially after the parliamentary elections in the spring of 2013. In nine days, elections will be held again. It will be interesting to see what the future will bring.

In any case, it is always important and enlightening to discuss the role of constitutions in society and the political system. Therefore, I welcome this conference and look forward to hearing various views on constitutions as poetry or prose. It is quite possible that a few months ago I would have liked very much to deliver a lecture at a conference of this kind, cover historical developments, share my analysis, state my clear conclusions. This I will not do here. My role is different, I no longer hold an academic position. It would be tempting, still, to reflect on the importance of constitutions and constitutional change in Iceland's past, present and future. And why not? I could, for instance, simply state the facts. "Truth is truth to the end of reckoning," William Shakespeare wrote, and

Charles Darwin later stated that full objectivity was both desirable and attainable. “A scientific man,” he said, “ought to have no wishes, no affections – a mere heart of stone.” He was not a historian, admittedly, but is history any different? “This book is about how we can tell the difference between truth and lies in history.” These are the opening lines in a book by Richard Evans, *Telling Lies about Hitler*, about a well-known trial involving an infamous author who played down or rejected facts about the Holocaust.

Still, the history profession has long since abandoned the belief that there exists a single, universally true version of events, even though we should be able to distinguish between obvious truth and blatant lies. “Every historian’s judgement will be influenced in one way or another by his own age,” the well-known historian, Hugh Seaton-Watson once stated.

This view, this rejection of a single truth, brings us to the notion of various interpretations, a multitude of truths, as it were. In our analyses, should we discuss them all, give them equal weight? There have been those who scorn the “impartiality” of the historian who pretends “to stand on the wall of a threatened city and behold at the same time the besiegers and the besieged”.

The speaker in question wanted scholars to take a moral stand. His name was Leon Trotsky, no academic, but should that undermine this contention? Does it matter where from we get sound judgments? Allow me to take another example, this time from the world of science. A couple of years ago, the U.S. astrophysicist and popular pundit Neil deGrasse Tyson emphasised that the media should not “talk about the spherical earth with NASA and then say let’s give equal time to the flat-earthers”. Reaffirming this point of view, he stated that “the good thing about science is that it’s true whether or not you believe in it”.

What has all this to do with Iceland and the constitution? I mentioned that it would be tempting to discuss the importance of constitutions and constitutional change in Iceland, and simply recite the facts. Iceland received its own constitution in 1874, it was revised in 1920, after the country had become a sovereign state in a royal union with Denmark. Then, in 1944, Iceland gained full independence and adopted a new constitution which has been modified since. It has never been entirely rewritten. However, after the collapse of the Icelandic banking system and a deep political crisis in 2008–2009, a process to revise the constitution began. The culmination of that course took place with the referendum exactly four years ago.

This recital of facts tells us little, of course. We need interpretation, analysis, conclusions, or dare I say the separation of truth and lies, the besiegers and the besieged, the scientists and the flat-earthers? If only the dividing lines were manifestly clear.

Debates about the revision of the constitution in Iceland have raised strong emotions. Weighty questions are asked: “Whose side are you on?”; “How can you not see the truth in my argument?”; “How can you not see the injustice in front of your eyes?” In the context of constitutional change in Iceland, I recently quoted a famous saying: “Politics is the art of the possible.” It is a short version of a remark by Otto von Bismarck: “Politics is the art of the possible, the attainable – the art of the next best.” I have never heard the saying, “Politics is the art of indignation.”