



INAUGURAL ADDRESS

BY

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INTO

THE OFFICE OF PRESIDENT OF ICELAND

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People of Iceland

I am now undertaking the office of president of Iceland for a second time. My foremost feelings are reverence and gratitude. I wish to thank the people of this country for the trust they have shown me. I am grateful for the goodwill my wife and I have enjoyed. And I thank my family for their endless support and affection.

This inauguration is conducted in a manner that differs in many respects from the usual procedure here in Iceland. The reason is clear: The vital measures against COVID-19, the virus that has so affected our lives here and abroad and will continue to do so. I encourage you all, my fellow inhabitants, to continue to exhibit tenacity and unity in our fight against this foe. It would be sad if we were to let bitterness or anger affect us now, and unwise to search for scapegoats in the midst of our struggle. Therefore, I also encourage everyone to continue to heed the instructions of our public health leadership. Constructive criticism is all well and good, but disunity today will help no-one.

“What’s it like to be president?” is a question I am often asked by friendly kids I meet, and it is easy to reply, instantly, that it is an extraordinary honour, every day, absolutely great in every way. The youngsters often seize the opportunity to urge the need for action in response to the climate crisis, violence and inequality, persecution and bullying – here in Iceland and around the world. “What are you going to do about it all?” they ask.

Then it can be harder to find an answer. One can, of course, explain the place of the president in Icelandic government – without power to take direct action, and outside the field of day-to-day politics. The president’s role in the political arena is confined to special circumstances, mainly in the formation of governments and their dissolution – not forgetting the presidential right to veto by refusing to sign legislation into law, based on his/her own convictions or on the clearly-expressed will of a large proportion of the electorate. But it is here, at the esteemed Alþingi, that we find the focus of political power in this country.

I express my thanks for good collaboration with parliament, government ministers and other officials and representatives. I look forward to ongoing collaboration during the presidential term that is now beginning. At present it appears likely that parliamentarians will soon be debating proposed amendments to the Constitution’s provisions on the powers and sphere of responsibility of the president of Iceland. No doubt some will see no need to alter the current provisions, while others will wish to implement a new constitution, based on the Bill prepared by the Constitutional Council several years ago. It will be interesting to observe the debates ahead, and I will of course make my own contribution.

But a number of factors must be borne in mind. From the early days of our republic, the president of Iceland has been seen as a symbol of unity. No doubt over the years increasing numbers of people have found that concept hollow or pompous – rightly or wrongly. In addition, it would be a mistake in the present day if a president were to feel that the best option, in view of her/his status, was to say nothing that might give rise to disputes in society, or that might offend somebody. Silence in the name of neutrality can prove hazardous, favouring the powerful over the more vulnerable.

A president must be able to express his/her opinions. A president cannot be free of responsibility. But no person is bigger than the office of president itself. The individual who holds that office should not permit her/himself to express only personal views and preferences, or to take sides in conflict, giving rise only to increased hostility without benefit to anyone.

In our saga literature, there is seemingly a tendency to extol those who fight most fiercely, slay the most enemies, and never back down. But let us not forget that the sagas also praise the peacemakers, the mediators, the conciliators. And on closer scrutiny we see that the authors of the sagas of Icelanders invariably ridicule those who display aggression, avarice and arrogance.

Hero worship is absurd, as is glorification of the “strong leader” – and even dangerous, as experience has taught us. Power is best structured by being dispersed. The principle that was marked out here in Iceland at the foundation of the Republic has been deemed a successful one: that the president is granted certain powers which are to be applied with care, while the duty of the head of state is above all to promote harmony, not conflict, and to support and invigorate that which unites us, the people of this country.

We share a centuries-old history, a remarkable culture and our own language. We also have a vision of a society in which people can fulfil their potential, to their own and the wider benefit; where the better-off make a fair contribution to the needs of all; where those who need help receive it.

We are, happily, all very different, but the vast majority of us are in agreement in valuing broad-mindedness and kindness, diversity and freedom. Let us continue to do so, but at the same time avoid falling into the trap of narrow orthodoxies – becoming hypersensitive to differing views and taking offence at various phenomena around us. Let us not follow the example of the old man in the adage (or was it a woman?) who said: “I feel best when I feel bad.”

Pessimism from Bessastaðir would certainly not be well received. Yet we must avoid presenting an idealised image which proves misleading on closer scrutiny. In the long term it will do us no good to describe our past as we might

wish it had happened, or to proclaim a glorious future which we know in our hearts is unfounded.

When I stood here four years ago, I did not know, any more than anyone else, what lay in store. Looking briefly back on the past years I recall actions in the political arena, for instance negotiations to form coalition governments; state visits and other travels; days of celebration and innumerable events in daily life. And I have got to know so very many people, both in Iceland and abroad: young and old; those in power and the general public; citizens who live a quiet and contented life, and others who have met with adversity; and those who wish to fight for a cause – for themselves and others.

Yes, there is much to look back upon. Yet all that experience fades into insignificance in light of the unforeseen peril that came upon us at the beginning of this year. The harmful virus raged here, and elsewhere. Lives have been lost. People are still falling ill. No vaccine has yet been found. Strict measures to defend us against the virus have come at a heavy economic cost, and that harm will get worse before it gets better. Now it is summer. But winter is coming.

It is not surprising that people are apprehensive. The pandemic brought home to us how small and powerless we are, for all our expertise, and for all our experience of natural disasters. But let us consider this: What did we show during the pandemic, more than many others? We showed solidarity and resilience. We were fortunate to have a strong healthcare system – although there is always room for improvement, as with anything we undertake. We were fortunate to have excellent staff in that field and in so many other sectors of society. We relied upon the knowledge and guidance of experts – a select team representing the authorities as well as private enterprise. We valued expertise and science. We did not fall prey to apathy and demagoguery.

So let us take hope, not gloom, from this difficult experience. Let us not allow the challenges ahead to discourage us but spur us on. Let us not give up.

And finally, let us think of this: We strove to protect the lives and health of the people of this country. We were comprehensively reminded of that primary responsibility of society and government. Now, as I am entrusted with the office of president of Iceland for the second time, I express the wish that we may continue to strive – even more than before – to promote the health and wellbeing of all the people of this country. It is my wish that we give even greater priority to public health and preventive measures; that we realise even more clearly that in the tumult of modern life it is vital to pay attention to mental wellbeing and to counteract stress and strain, burnout and anxiety. Let us show understanding. Let us display empathy and compassion, while also fostering resilience and strength of will.

“Gold and high office do no good, if your soul is in shackles.” Those beautiful words of wisdom were heard four years ago on this occasion, and they always remain valid. Today we have heard a song about a beautiful day, a dreamy-blue day. May the Icelandic nation enjoy such times for ever. May we have the good fortune to live in peace, freedom and happiness in this country for all the years to come.