



Address
by President of Iceland
Guðni Th. Jóhannesson
1 December 2020

My dear fellow-citizens.

I greet you on Sovereignty Day, and send you sincere good wishes from myself and my wife Eliza. One hundred and two years have passed since a historic moment on our progress towards self-determination. On 1 December 1918 Iceland became a free and sovereign nation. We are accustomed to celebrating this landmark in various ways. People gather together, and greet each other warmly with a firm handshake, and even a hug where appropriate. But this year everything is different.

The pandemic which now besets us has led to loss of life. Many people have fallen gravely ill. Measures introduced by us and other nations in order to mitigate the impact of the infection have led to unemployment and economic difficulties. Education has been disrupted, as well as services and leisure activities of all kinds.

It is of no importance in the bigger context, but in a normal year the person serving in the office of president would be out and about meeting people on this day, receiving guests and attending festivities. In a normal year one could also go swimming, or to a theatre or concert – even watch a good international match and hopefully celebrate victory with a high-five.

But today, any such conduct would be in violation of anti-infection measures. Yes, the world is upside down. Yet life has gone on. Children have come into the world, people have fallen in love. And in our daily lives we have had occasions to rejoice.

The people of this country have overwhelmingly displayed tenacity and resilience, solidarity and sympathy. As we weigh and measure our situation, there is little point in thinking about how life would be, had the virus not broken out. That would be empty wishful thinking. There is more value in imagining what our situation might have been, had we taken little or no action against the

pandemic. The death toll might have been many times greater, in addition to the larger numbers of people who would have fallen ill and been unfit to work, whether in the short or the longer term. Health services would probably have struggled to provide all patients with the care they needed.

We can also learn a lesson by looking back, comparing our lives with those of our forefathers and -mothers. In one of the legendary sagas, inhabitants of West Götaland in Sweden state that during times of want the elderly were expected to throw themselves off a cliff, *Ætternisstapi* (the Family Rock), “for then our parents are no burden upon us.” In Iceland too, stories were told that during harsh winters in the early years of the settlement, the elderly and infirm were thrown off cliffs.

Some may say that in those days they had no choice. But we live in other times. Our society prioritises the welfare of its citizens. Today we do our utmost to safeguard the most vulnerable – and not only in pandemic times. Thus it was a grave blow in recent weeks when a number of our eldest citizens lost their lives to the virus. On this occasion our precautions against infection had failed, but that was certainly not the fault of the staff on site. We have benefitted from the outstanding efforts of healthcare staff and others in society.

At the same time, we who are of younger generations have learnt from the stoicism of our elders. Among them there is no panic, no sense of defeat. Let us look back to a vanished era – to the first Sovereignty Day, 1 December 1918. Late that evening Elka Björnsdóttir, who had laboured hard all her life, wrote in her diary about the historic occasion, but also about the influenza epidemic that cast its shadow over the occasion. People did indeed gather together to celebrate, but those celebrations were muted, with an undertone of sorrow.

We face a similar situation today. And, then as now, there was no lack of tenacity and resilience. In her diary Elka wrote that fish was brought ashore each morning, and that the big fishing company *Kveldúlfur* gave away the catch to “the sick and the poor.”

But in this we see less similarity between past and present. In those days the impact of the pandemic was so much worse. More than five hundred people died of influenza – per capita, the equivalent today would be about two thousand. So many people died because far too many lived in conditions of cold and want, and far too few could seek medical care. Justice and equality did not apply then, and a welfare society was but a distant dream – one that would be made a reality by the efforts of the next generations, for the good of us all.

Yes, today we live in a changed world – a far better one in this sense. And we also enjoy the benefits of science, of knowledge amassed over the years, more effective drugs and medical care.

The crux of the matter is this: difficult though our situation may be at present, it pales in comparison with the sufferings of past generations. But that comparison does not, of course, entail that we should simply accept whatever happens. The singer and songwriter Megas once summed up that fallacy with the words: “Misfortune can be overcome by pointing out a worse one,” neatly subverting the words of Grettir the Strong in the eponymous saga: “It is an old saying that one misfortune is overcome by suffering a greater one.”

We do not live in a perfect society. The virus reminds us of humanity’s vulnerability, despite all the progress we have made. We have now learned from bitter experience how we must improve our medical care facilities and residential homes to make them safer. And, even a century on, some people of this country must still depend upon charitable help. It also remains true today that charities are pleased to accept generous donations from the corporate world.

My dear fellow citizens. Let us thank those who have earned our gratitude. I permit myself, on behalf of us all, to thank the staff of the National University Hospital, other hospitals and healthcare centres. Let us also thank those who work in residential and nursing homes, and home nursing and care. And we should highly value the experts at DeCode Genetics and our universities, as well as other bodies and businesses that contribute to our defences against infection. Finally, the “back-up team” are doing their bit: people who have responded to the call to help the cause in this time of need.

I also mention the Police, the Coast Guard and search-and-rescue teams – all those we can turn to in times of danger. And let us not forget staff in commerce and services, or teachers and school assistants, school managers and cleaners, who are keeping the education system going through challenging times – not to mention the students. To you young people, I want to say that you have coped with this difficult situation, and done a wonderful job – don’t give up now!

Finally, let me mention what we do indeed have in common with the generation of a century ago: Hope and vigour. Many of those who celebrated the historic day on 1 December 1918 looked to the future with high hopes, in spite of the disasters they had experienced that year: not only the influenza pandemic, but also the preceding “Great Frost Winter,” and a destructive eruption of Mt. Katla.

A little more than a century on, we can allow ourselves to be undaunted and enterprising. “Patience and fortitude overcome all things,” as the saying

goes. That has been a watchword here in Iceland for more than a thousand years – some of which have been eventful, to say the least. Our defences against the pandemic appear to be working, and a vaccine is on the horizon. That achievement is impressive testimony to the power of international collaboration, impressive testimony to the important role of science and knowledge in human progress, when effectively organised.

So I sincerely hope that in the coming weeks we will continue on the right path: taking our own precautions against infection, following the guidance of epidemiology authorities, and getting through this together. Before long we will be able to make good use of our unity, to turn from defence mode and look to the future. Then our society will be galvanised with energy, and we will really get going.

I know that nothing is certain in this life, but in all probability I will address you next on New Year's Day. On that day I want to look ahead, to mention this awful virus as little as possible; instead I want to consider all the opportunities we have here, a strong nation on an island that has so much to offer.

On behalf of my wife and myself I reiterate our greetings and good wishes to you all. Let us enjoy Advent, Christmas and the New Year, but take care – for the good of all of us, and especially those who need it most. I wish you happy times ahead.