



New Year Address by the President of Iceland **Guðni Th. Jóhannesson**

1 January 2021

Good afternoon, people of Iceland,
and Happy New Year.

It was quite a year, the year that has now passed, “and will never come again,” as we sing in our classic New Year hymn. No doubt many of us will sing that phrase with special feeling this time. Last year will undoubtedly be remembered for the virus and illness, for public health measures and economic setbacks.

The year brought other blows. Early in the year avalanches fell in the West Fjords. In the summer, a fatal fire broke out in Reykjavík and now, just days ago, massive landslides struck the town of Seyðisfjörður.

Together, we have stood against adversity. And so there were many occasions to express our thanks for the vital work performed for the good of the nation. I last did so in my address on Sovereignty Day, 1 December, when I said that in my New Year address I should refer as little as possible to the pandemic, instead looking to the future. But I want, here and now, to reiterate thanks to Iceland’s healthcare professionals, and staff in our schools, commerce and services, to the police and fire services, the coast guard and search-and rescue teams – to all on whom we rely in times of peril.

And once again I want to praise the unity and empathy that have been displayed by the people of this country – and still are today. The year 2020 will equally be remembered for the resilience and tenacity of the people of Iceland – in which our older citizens often set us a good example. We who are younger have much to learn from those who have been through so much during a long life.

We can also learn lessons from history. A book of verse for children by 18th-century pastor Vigfús Jónsson contains words of wisdom about resilience which are still valid today:

Hver sem lætur sér
huginn fallast,
hann er farinn
í hverju bangi
en þolinmæðin
þrautir allar
yfirvinnur
og aldrei bilar.

He who allows himself
to lose heart,
is defeated
by every blow,
but endurance
will overcome
all challenges
and never fail.

Yes, it is true that together we all had to face difficult times, and we will surely all meet with challenges in our lives. My wife and I send our warm good wishes to those who have suffered losses and grief during the last year.

Happily, in most people's lives good fortune and happiness play a greater role in the long run. During last year many of us had reason to rejoice over major or minor events in our daily lives. Children were born, couples fell in love, people achieved their objectives in study or work, new relationships and households were established. Together we were able to celebrate the achievements of our fellow-Icelanders who excelled in the international arena. I mention here as shining examples composer Hildur Guðnadóttir, who won an Academy Award, and Sara Björk Gunnarsdóttir, a member of the winning team in the UEFA Champions League in football. Together we were able to enjoy the contributions of all our wonderful artists – though certainly in unconventional ways during these times of restrictions on public gatherings and other measures.

And now a new year has begun. The sun is rising, bringing light and warmth. Before long the ship of state will have wind in its sails once more – of that I am sure. The vaccine has arrived – the remedy which we must continue to bring to Iceland, by all possible means. This answer to the grave problem of the pandemic is powerful testimony to the value of international collaboration, to the value of science and knowledge, when effectively organised.

We are also better equipped to deal with natural disasters than in past times. It is a telling fact that for many recent years, no sailor's life has been lost off the coast of Iceland. Not so long ago, we had to accept that large numbers went to a watery grave each year.

Our island can still be harsh, it is true. Yet it is still goodly and generous. Together the nation possesses rich resources at sea and on land. We must continue to utilise these in sustainable, environmentally friendly ways. Our untouched wildernesses are also a resource in their own way – both to ourselves, and to tourists who will return here when conditions permit. Their temporary absence has also offered us an opportunity to consider how we wish to welcome foreign visitors year by year, and to make our preparations, in harmony with our country and its people.

No less valuable are the resources of hand and mind. Yes, I am sure that we will have wind in our sails before long, and I am equally sure that what will sustain us during this century is ingenuity and innovation. Everywhere we have need of mental-energy-intensive industry; we need to harness the power of the human mind! We need ingenuity and innovation in agriculture and fisheries, our traditional economic sectors; ingenuity and innovation in tourism and utilisation of energy sources; ingenuity and innovation in fields that may remain unknown to us as yet – but which the young people of today will have mastered before we know it: the young people who have temporarily had to adapt to utterly different educational methods, restrictions on their leisure activities and other disruptions, and have done a wonderful job. Good luck to you all in the future, you fine young representatives of our future.

Finally, we have to put effort into people's wellbeing. The pandemic has placed a real strain on the fundamental duty of any government, to safeguard the lives and health of its people. Despite various setbacks, Iceland has done well. We have achieved better protection against the scourge than most other countries. We must of course continue to take our own precautions against infection, and follow official guidance and directives, guided by our conscience, so that each and every one of us will set a good example to others.

My dear fellow-citizens: the pandemic has reminded us of how precious a close embrace can be, how hard it is not to be with our loved ones – even though that separation serves the common good. Perhaps the restrictions of the past year have also helped us to sort the wheat from the chaff in our own lives, though I am not about to preach any sermon on that subject. But sometimes it is a good thing to slow down in order to get where one is going – to hasten slowly, take our time. It seems appropriate to quote the words of Valgeir Guðjónsson in his song performed by singer Sigrún Hjálmtýsdóttir (Diddú) in Guðný Halldórsdóttir's film *The Icelandic Shock Station*:

Þetta nútímalíf krefst svo mikils af mönnunum
Í sveita síns andlits sjá þeir varla út úr önnunum.

Modern life is so demanding for the people of the land,
In the sweat of their brow they can't see beyond the tasks in hand.

And, finally, the pandemic may lead us to understand even better than before the old maxim that good health is worth its weight in gold. We were and are willing to pay a lot to restrict the spread of a menacing infection. That is, naturally, all to the good. At the same time, we should devote greater efforts to maintaining and promoting health in a broad sense. We should focus on preventive measures that promote enhanced public health and mental health. In that way we will not only achieve improved wellbeing, but also reduce public

spending costs. It has been pointed out that, here in Iceland as elsewhere in the western world, a large portion of health expenditure is devoted to treatment of long-term lifestyle-related diseases. Only a fraction of that sum has been allocated to preventive measures. But the direct and indirect benefits of an initiative in this field are obvious.

I will not venture to suggest whether this may become one of many campaigning issues in the coming election year; but I am sure, at any rate, that we are all entitled to help in our time of need, and to expect treatment for our ailments. In *Hugarfjallið* (Mountain of the Mind), Gyrðir Elíasson writes beautiful verse about recovery and the hope of healing. I also read the poem as expressing optimism grounded in realism – and that is precisely what I believe the people of Iceland need at this time: not castles in the air, but not wailing and gnashing of teeth either. Brighter days lie ahead.

As I wish you all well on behalf of Eliza and myself, I shall end this address on the first day of a new year with the poem *Bati* (Recovery):

Að koma	To emerge
Hægt	slowly
inn í birtuna	into the light
Einsog að leggja frá	Like
sér vasaljós	putting down
á döggvotu	a torch
túni um nótt	on a field
að haustlagi	dripping with dew
Og stíga	in an autumn night
Hikandi	
inn í geislann.	And stepping hesitantly into the beam of light.