



**Address
by President of Iceland
Guðni Th. Jóhannesson
at the Opening of
Althingi
23 November 2021**

Honoured members of Alþingi!

I bid all of you who are seated here welcome to parliament. A new electoral term has begun, elections having been held nearly two months ago. In one constituency the election had repercussions; and under our constitution it is in the hands of Alþingi to determine whether its members have been lawfully elected. Great responsibility rests on the shoulders of parliamentarians, now as ever.

The pandemic continues to have an impact on society – including the work of parliament. As hitherto, opinions are divided regarding public health measures. And it is true that the right path has not always been followed – not surprisingly, when such difficult decisions have had to be made. And it is easy to be wise after the event. In face of complex issues, one person may accuse another of being deluded, of not making the effort to inform themselves, and of simply obeying official guidance in blindness and fear – or, on the contrary, of being obsessed by conspiracy theories, thinking only of their own personal interests and not those of society as a whole, and of downplaying an obvious peril.

Free exchange of views may entail exaggeration and extremes, but here in Iceland we have had the good fortune to stand largely united against a common menace. That unity has been grounded in common sense, public debate, widespread knowledge, and general trust.

In search of arguments in the debate, many of us have no doubt looked to our own experiences, and to history. Most of us who have been privileged to have children recall the immunisations which protect our children and others from dangerous diseases. We also remember that if they came down with chicken pox or a stomach bug, it was taken for granted that they should be

quarantined and kept home from school or preschool. Freedom to infect others is wrongheaded thinking.

Lessons may also be learned from long-ago times. In 1846, a year after the restoration of the Alþingi when it had lain in abeyance for nearly half a century, a measles epidemic swept through Iceland. The country's population fell by two percent – and we can work out for ourselves what that proportion would mean today. In recent lifetimes a revolution unique in history has taken place in the fields of pharmacy and medicine – a revolution in quality of life and living conditions.

That progress was, and is, grounded in critical thinking, open-mindedness and the quest for knowledge, constant change. If we were still to apply the advice of the leading experts of past centuries, we would be trying to cure patients by blood-letting – although that misguided measure generally only made the condition worse. In the pandemic that is now in full flow, our protective measures must be informed by what is learned, and an evaluation of their impact on society as a whole.

That is how true science and knowledge work, and “knowledge promotes all achievement.” We are familiar with that philosophy from an ode by Jónas Hallgrímsson (1807-45) to Paul Gaimard (1793-1858), a French natural scientist. Jónas composed his tribute some years before the restoration of Alþingi, and in it he lamented the decline of the old parliamentary site at Þingvellir. The following lines are less well known, but they also deserve a hearing:

nú er þar þrotin þyrping tjalda,
þögult og dapurt hraunið kalda –
þótti þér ekki Ísland þá
alþingi svipt með hrellda brá?

(its towering tents are long forgotten,
their turf foundations wrecked and rotten) —
did you not ache for Iceland then,
openly shamed before all men?

[English translation: Dick Ringler]

On three consecutive occasions now, parliamentary elections have been held in autumn. The electoral term which has now begun may continue until the latter part of September four years hence. We must address the advantages and disadvantages of holding elections in the autumn and not in the spring, as has been the tradition – not least with respect to the consequences for the work of Alþingi, the hub of political power in the country.

Members of parliament! The Icelandic nation has many more urgent issues to face than the revision of the constitution. But in conclusion I permit myself to mention that at the opening of Alþingi just under a year ago I expressed the hope that it would prove possible to give material consideration to proposed moderate amendments to the constitution, and to lead the debate to a conclusion here in this chamber. That did not happen. Instead the fate of the constitutional bill was decided in a committee room over on the other side of Austurvöllur square.

Hopefully more success will be achieved during the present electoral term in debating and undertaking reasonable improvements to the Icelandic constitution, just as it has been amended over the years. As before, provisions on the environment, natural resources and the Icelandic language will require attention, and also amendments to constitutional provisions on the role of head of state. The tasks of the days ahead in this chamber also indicate that other matters will demand scrutiny.

The internet offers us a definition of insanity as doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results. That remark is often attributed to Albert Einstein, but that is apparently a myth – and one more proof that you cannot believe everything you read online. I have far more confidence in the words of Svava Jakobsdóttir (1930-2004) in her novel *Gunnlaðar saga*, that between the new and the old all is unformed. The future is for shaping.

I wish the members and staff of Alþingi success in their work, and express all good wishes to the people of Iceland. I ask the members of Alþingi to rise, and honour our homeland.