



**Address
by President of Iceland
Guðni Th. Jóhannesson
at the Opening of
Althingi
13 September 2022**

Members of Alþingi!

I welcome you to parliament, and wish you well in your rigorous tasks. Alþingi is now opened, for the 153rd time since it was re-established in 1845. At that time its powers were limited, but times have changed. Today parliament is the bastion of political power in Iceland. But what is the character of an effective national parliament?

Most of us, no doubt, want the members of parliament to reflect society as a whole – that the voices of the many should resound in this chamber. For that reason, people campaigned for universal suffrage. For that reason, the members of this House are no longer nominated by a foreign king, and for that reason we have no unelected Upper House, such as still exist in some countries.

Thus constitutional principles evolve – although it is inadvisable to follow the zeitgeist too slavishly. But we can always debate whether further action is required, and consider various aspects of our constitutional law that have long been deemed ripe for revision – ever since the foundation of the Republic in 1944, in fact.

A strong parliament does not stagnate, it does not become bogged down in habit. Or is change unnecessary, perhaps? Nostalgia often haunts human thinking, perhaps especially as we grow older. And I can testify to that myself. There are some things that I feel were much better in past times, and I am sure I am not alone in that. I have heard, for instance, people even older than me remark that the character of our capital city is quite different from when they were young: all the eccentrics who made their mark on community life have disappeared. But let us look back to the memoirs of Indriði Einarsson, a pioneer playwright and economist in Iceland. In “1878 most of the eccentric old men in Reykjavík had disappeared,” he wrote.

Nostalgia may mislead us, create a false image, a false memory. Historical memory, on the other hand, can spur us on to achievements, reawaken past times, and safeguard what people wanted, or want – even though certain hopes may have ended in disappointment. Perhaps some Icelanders watched the popular TV drama *Verbúðin/Blackport* last winter from that perspective. And Ingibjörg Haraldsdóttir expressed that feeling so powerfully in her poem *Nostalgia*:

I do not miss what is gone
I do not believe in the beauty
of the past
but I recall dreams
with a heavy heart
now, in growing cold and darkness
as the void grows wider
between what is
and what was supposed to be.

[English translation by Anna Yates]

Yes, misguided nostalgia is one thing; a searching knowledge of the threads that connect past with present and future is something else entirely. Thus, the desire is strengthened to value what was well done; and also the willingness to recognise what went wrong, and cannot be justified.

The desire for progress is also strengthened. And in that context it is good to recall important landmarks. September 1 was the 50th anniversary of Iceland's extension of its fishing limits to fifty nautical miles. That was an important step towards foreign fishing vessels disappearing from Iceland's fishing grounds. And during this session of Alþingi, fifty years will have passed since the start of the volcanic eruption in the Westman Islands – that catastrophic event that reminds us of the overwhelming forces of nature here in Iceland, but also of the solidarity that sustains the nation in times of need.

If we look to the world outside, recent events include the invasion of Ukraine by Russian forces. War rages there, and our minds inevitably look back to previous conflicts. While we Icelanders were not unaffected by the horrors of World War II, we were better placed than most other European countries, “with peaceful farmsteads, poems, light, so far from fields where nations fight,” as Hulda wrote in a poem at that time (transl. by Bernard Scudder). But now, as then, our peace and security are predicated upon other nations also enjoying peace and security. Hence we support the decision of our fellow-Nordic nations, Finland and Sweden, to join NATO. And for that reason we support the people of Ukraine whole-heartedly in their struggle.

If we continue to look around us, earlier this year the United Kingdom marked the occasion that its head of state had reigned for seventy years – Queen Elizabeth II, who died last week. At the beginning of this year, Queen Margrethe of Denmark had also been on the throne for fifty years.

When Margrethe Þórhildur was born, in 1940, her grandfather was king of Iceland as well as Denmark. Having been a sovereign nation since 1918, Iceland founded a republic in 1944. No doubt a contributory factor in that decision was that the nation retained a strong memory of the medieval Old Commonwealth, subject to no king – a fond memory of the ancient Alþingi, and a black memory of absolute rule by foreign kings.

The Icelandic language was also a crucial factor. We had our historical manuscripts in our own language: devotional texts and law codes, annals, rimes and much more. But “all things on earth are transient”, as Romantic poet Jónas Hallgrímsson wrote (transl. by Dick Ringler) Now, in the virtual world, Siri doesn’t understand Icelandic. Our very own Embla is learning; but we simply must assure the position of Icelandic in our digital world. And let us recall what Treasurer Stefán Gunnlaugsson had his town crier announce – for good reason, that clearly still exists today: “In an Icelandic town, the Icelandic language shall be used – let all take notice.”

At the same time, we who are native speakers of Icelandic must show understanding for those who move here and want to learn the language, but do not master it instantly and need assistance. This is in the interests of us all, and let us not give up hope. We are quite capable of safeguarding the future of Icelandic. The will is all we need.

Icelandic is our language, and the Republic of Iceland stands on a firm footing. But of course there is much we can do better here, to improve the health and conditions of the people of Iceland. That must surely be your primary objective, excellent members of Alþingi. That must surely characterise a good, and effective, parliament. But let us not forget what has been achieved, here and around the world. Let us not forget that life expectancy and quality of life have improved, as have freedom and human rights. Let us not forget that technological and scientific advances can continue to provide answers to climate change, epidemics and other challenges.

The world is improving. We can certainly say so. At least, it is not true that everything was better in olden days. In my youth I learned the philosophy of poet Kristján of Djúpilækur, speaking for a little mouse named Píla pína: “The world is better than we think / The rest is mainly caused by us / that turns against us and goes awry” (transl. by Anna Yates).

I reiterate my good wishes to the members of Alþingi for success in their work, for the good of the country and the nation. Finally, I ask you all to rise in honour of our homeland.