



Speech
by
Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson
President of Iceland
at the Opening of
the Althingi
1 October 2010

We stand at a crossroads – recently, a parliamentary vote that proved to be a hurdle for the Althingi and the nation, unprecedented in our history. Barely three days passed between the conclusion of one parliamentary session and the beginning of the next; witness to the fact that these are still times of change, that the situation is a fundamental challenge to the fabric of government itself, that Members of Parliament must shoulder the responsibility that was earlier perceived as a matter for theoretical discussion.

Although turmoil continues to have an impact on society—as can now be seen and heard as the Althingi reconvenes, and problems mount all around, with thousands of Icelanders facing daily difficulties, many fearing repossession of their homes and hundreds relying on food handouts—it is nevertheless important that even the bleakest forecasts that were made in the wake of the financial collapse, both in Iceland and abroad, have fortunately not come true. Unemployment is lower than in most other European countries, though it is still too high by our standards; many industries have shown enormous resilience, and communities all around the country have found the drive to push forwards.

Newly acquired experience has once again reminded us of our land's precious resources and those in the ocean that surrounds us; how the richness of education and talent can provide a foothold and be the source of fresh opportunities; it is imperative that we see the positive signs and don't let discouragement or conflict sap the vitality of the nation.

Iceland's situation is much better than the dark predictions portended, and we see that also in the interest shown by other countries in increasing co-operation with Iceland; the friendship and support we find far and wide are reasons for optimism.

In September, I held discussions with some of Russia's and China's top leaders, who categorically want to expand co-operation with Iceland and embark on a large number of projects in industry, energy, science and research.

When the Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao and Vice President Xi Jinping—two of the three most powerful leaders of the world's most populous nation that currently shares economic supremacy with the United States of America—declare that they see Iceland as China's foremost partner state in utilising the geothermal resources available in that country for producing energy, urban space heating, greenhouses and health centres, it is a statement of the kind that carries special recognition of the achievements of Icelanders in recent decades, our knowledge and our technical ability.

When the President of Russia Dmitry Medvedev and Prime Minister Vladimir Putin take up the same thread and specifically mention projects in Kamchatka, an area that many Icelandic specialists know well, it is a further indication of Iceland's strength and of the opportunities available for the nation if we succeed in responding in a productive manner.

State visits by two European leaders in the summer and in the autumn also show the goodwill we enjoy in neighbouring countries. A number of other European presidents would like to visit Iceland. It is in the hands of the Althingi to decide how many of these wishes we can meet.

The Independence Day greetings we received from US President Barack Obama and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton also conveyed friendship and an interest in developing co-operation in new fields.

This all shows that despite the shocks, Iceland has many good options, opportunities that we urgently need to turn to our advantage. Prophecies of doom that we heard a while ago, that the country's reputation would plummet in the wake of the financial collapse and that we would suffer international isolation, have fortunately not been fulfilled. Quite the opposite. It could be argued that Iceland's circumstances have seldom, if ever, encompassed such a range of opportunities and that the location of this land will be one of our greatest assets in the coming years.

In discussions with the leaders of European states, China, Russia and India, which has also sent a clear message to Iceland earlier this year regarding its desire for improved co-operation, and in deliberations of experts and influential people all over the world, the vision of a new shipping route through Arctic waters puts Iceland in a new and central position in the world's transport network.

A few days ago, Russia's top leaders called for co-operation in creating plans for building harbours, warehouses, container areas and for binding regulations that ensure the protection of the biosphere, fisheries and environment in the Arctic when the shipping routes open. Similar opinions were voiced by the leaders of China, and the European Union has repeatedly underlined its policy of playing a key role in the development of the Arctic.

It is therefore vital for the Althingi and the nation as a whole to have a clear picture of Iceland's new position, that we enter into broad discussions about how best to react with the benefit of the nation as our ultimate goal.

In bygone years, it was said that Iceland's location had determined its role during the Cold War era. The vision of trans-arctic passages that other nations have now placed on the agenda gives our country even greater significance, and if matters are handled properly, it could play a part in creating a solid foundation for a prosperous future for Icelanders.

In addition, the nation has resources and characteristics that are continuously increasing in value, and are of growing importance in the international economy.

We utilise our stocks of fish in a self-sustaining manner at the same time as other countries are finding profitable and responsible fishing increasingly difficult to attain.

In this country, we have one of the largest reservoirs of fresh water in Europe, but water shortage is unrelentingly becoming one of the world's most serious problems, a threat which the World Economic Forum emphasised just a short while ago.

We are leaders in the utilisation of clean energy, and an ever-rising number of states are looking to work together with Icelandic experts, engineering firms and technicians.

We have a beautiful, spacious country, which is the reason why soon more than a million tourists will probably visit us every year; it is our dilemma how to successfully and ecologically accommodate such a large number of people who want to enjoy Icelandic nature with us.

We have striven to educate new generations and now we have a resourceful community of young people with diverse training who are already in the vanguard in many fields.

Iceland's new situation, the desire of other nations for co-operation, the country's natural resources and the capabilities of the people ought to make it easier for us, elected representatives, to successfully lay the foundation for resurrecting the economy and safeguarding Icelanders' future.

In this urgent work, solidarity is vital; it is important that opportunities are not missed because of internal conflicts or rifts.

To use the strength that Iceland possesses and the goodwill that we find far and wide around the world, we need a positive and creative vision that will inspire the working of the political system; key institutions must provide the positive leadership the nation needs.

A developed democracy with deep roots in the heritage of bygone centuries is built on robust organisations, political parties and movements, that adapt to new trends and shoulder responsibility for the nation's destiny with all-embracing, sturdy support.

A prerequisite of a successful regime is that these associations are able to act purposefully and with confidence, are able to engender solidarity, which is vital in difficult times, and do not allow conflict and division to prevent them from finding solutions to these problematic tasks.

This is especially important when, in the wake of economic trauma, a review of the constitutional foundation upon which our democracy is built is being called for.

A constitution is first and foremost a formal declaration of the pact that unites the nation. The pact itself is the core, not the rules that are bound in individual provisions. If the debate covers only the rules, only the form and not the spirit, there is a danger that the expedition will miss its target.

The main theme of the call for a new constitution has been the demand for increased democracy, for the direct participation of the people in important decisions. In these matters, it is informative to consider the success earlier this year when the nation was given the power which is its right in the current constitution. That experience demonstrated that the people are ready to shoulder increased responsibility. It ought to encourage us to develop methods to strengthen direct democracy, the form in which the national will determines the path to be taken.

That course of events also provides a reminder to all those involved in the issue which was then on the agenda, that, in the end the nation must be satisfied with the outcome.

As this new parliamentary session begins so soon after the last one wrestled with fundamental constitutional questions and challenges arising from the financial collapse, further tasks clearly remain for the Althingi requiring deliberation and a collective will. We are reminded of the important historical lesson that things have usually gone best for Icelanders when the will of the nation and the will of the Althingi have coincided.

In light of this lesson, I call upon the members to rise from their seats and honour our country.