



**A Tribute**  
**to**  
**Dr Guðmundur Alfreðsson**  
**from**  
**the President of Iceland**  
**Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson**

Law is a conservative discipline that rests on old foundations: texts that go back to Ancient Rome and the Icelandic Commonwealth a thousand years ago. Legal practitioners group themselves into fraternities rather like the medieval guilds; they become judges or advocates, work in public administration at the national or local level.

But there are others who use law as a means of changing the world, and improving it; securing rights for those who suffer or are in shackles; or win independence for nations.

Dr Guðmundur Alfreðsson joined that community while still young, integrated the learning with these ideals and dedicated his energies to movements and organizations that serve all, irrespective of their religion, nationality, colour or gender. He chose to take up a position on the field where human rights are the main concern.

As a young man he set out from a country that was then well off the beaten track and went to study at one of the world's finest universities. Later he began working in the halls where national leaders gather. The young Icelander was entrusted with responsibility in recognition of his knowledge, qualities and capability.

It is amazing how much Guðmundur Alfreðsson has achieved. Author or editor of countless books, articles and fundamental reference works, at the same time an influential director who has brought together scholars and national representatives; trained individuals of promise who have moved into positions of leadership all over the world.

It has long been my privilege to enjoy discussions with Guðmundur and benefit from his guidance and learning; to receive the hefty tomes he

has so often given me – with the affectionate recommendation that I should read them, cover to cover!

I still remember vividly the part that Guðmundur played about twenty years ago in the debate on Iceland's membership in the European Economic Area; how his interpretations of the Constitution and international law were often at variance with those of high-ranking officials and leading figures in the legal profession. This demonstrated clearly Guðmundur's courage and his loyalty to his convictions, his logic and his pluck – qualities that gradually earned him recognition as a leader in the international field.

These qualities stood Guðmundur in good stead when he was appointed Director of the Raoul Wallenberg Institute, the aim of which is to promote respect for human rights in countries that are under systems based on other principles, where compliance with authority is traditionally part of daily life. It was an uplifting experience to talk to Guðmundur's students in Lund and become aware of how he was changing the world by training those young people and holding courses on every continent.

I have always found a great deal of illuminating information in the weighty tomes he has given me again and again on his visits to Bessastaðir. Once, this custom of his created problems for me, though in fact it was really my own fault. At our meeting one morning he gave me two copies of the Chinese translation of a book on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which he had recently published. That afternoon, I received Li Peng, the Chairman of China's National People's Congress, who was making an official visit to Iceland. I was so taken with Guðmundur's initiative that it seemed to me the natural thing to give both copies to Li Peng – not least since I didn't read Chinese anyway. This led to nearly an hour's speech from my guest – a passionate defence of the state of affairs in China – and the entire programme of the official visit was disrupted as a result.

Looking back, I find it fittingly symbolic to have made this connection between Li Peng and Guðmundur Alfreðsson. It is also an example of how the Icелander has always been unawed in the presence of powerful men and unafraid to speak up in defence of human rights in the corridors of power.

The vision of greater rights for those who suffer, of independence and sovereignty for peoples and secure position for minorities, has been Guðmundur's guiding light. When Greenland's future came onto the agenda he was chosen to serve on a commission to examine its constitutional future and legal position. I thought of Guðmundur that

beautiful June morning in Nuuk in the summer of 2009 when the Greenlanders celebrated self-government, received the new law from the Queen of Denmark. Here too, this learned Icelander had played a part.

Even though Guðmundur's friends and colleagues are honouring his work with this festschrift on the occasion of a milestone in his life, I know that this vigorous pioneer will continue his journey with undiminished energy. His life has borne, and continues to bear, witness to how effective the combination idealism and learning can be. It is fortunate for the world, to each and every one of us, to be blessed with such persons.