



New Year Address
by
the President of Iceland
Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson
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My Fellow Countrymen

Dorrit and I wish you a happy New Year, and hope that it will bring health and prosperity to you all, although many still face difficulties and await the coming days with anxiety.

The New Year reminds us that “the hours move swiftly”, and in every step here at Bessastaðir, we truly sense the passage of time.

On 1 December, a day dedicated to the celebration of sovereignty, a fine family brought here a historical artefact, a gift to the nation: the writing desk owned by Sveinbjörn Egilsson, who was a teacher here at the Bessastaðir School almost 200 years ago, taught the Fjölnir group and other standard-bearers of Icelanders’ campaign for independence.

The history of Bessastaðir published in the middle of the last century describes Sveinbjörn Egilsson in this way:

“In his nature and in his work, we see interwoven the strongest and finest threads from Icelandic culture and Icelandic values, as if centuries of national studies, domestic history, classical education and Christian thought had been spun together. No Icelander who has bequeathed written works in recent centuries has possessed these powerful cultural attributes to such an extent...”

Sveinbjörn had a cosmopolitan spirit; a poet, pioneer, teacher of Latin, Greek and Hebrew, translated Homer’s epics, the Socratic dialogues and many books of the Bible. Above all, he was industrious in the field of the medieval Icelandic literature, authored a dictionary of poetic language, played a significant role in the revival of the national

language, a flourishing new era in Icelandic poetry, inspired by the vision which Einar Benediktsson later expressed so memorably:

“I know that in Iceland, a word exists
for all that the world envisages.”

Ingibjörg, the poet Grímur Thomsen’s mother, lady of the house here at Bessastaðir, described Sveinbjörn Egilsson as being “the most flawless person I have ever known”. It is, however, worth reflecting that when they were here and Sveinbjörn played the flute for the pupils, wrote the lullaby *Fljúga hvítu fiðrildin* and the hymn *Heims um ból*, Silent Night, which is so much part of our Christmas or was perhaps correcting the texts of Jónas Hallgrímsson and Konráð Gíslason on that very writing desk, the King in Copenhagen held all reins of power; the nation had no rights; liberty and freedom of speech were not guaranteed and many years would pass before Jón Sigurðsson and his partners in Copenhagen would begin the campaign for Icelandic independence.

The writing desk that has arrived at Bessastaðir reminds us of that beginning and brings to attention the incredible results that have been achieved, often in the face of adversity, against a tide of challenges which are almost impossible for us now to understand.

During this coming new year, we will celebrate the 200th anniversary of Jón Sigurðsson’s birth and the centenary of the University of Iceland. These events will present us with many opportunities to learn from this progress – how a small nation of poor farmers managed, through unity, to free itself from the yoke of colonialism, attain independence and gain the right to take part in the global community, participate in many international associations and, despite setbacks and difficulties, develop a society of welfare, healthcare and education; accomplishments that, despite everything, put us in the forefront.

It is fitting to honour the anniversaries of the University of Iceland and Jón Sigurðsson at the same time because the demand for an Icelandic university was for many years a fundamental pillar of the campaign for independence. Education, scholarship and science are unequivocally the cornerstones of the society that Home Rule, Sovereignty and the era of the Republic have brought to us Icelanders.

It is vital to preserve these foundations and learn from the experiences of nations that strengthened schools and all kinds of training in times of recession. Many states now seek to enter into partnership with Iceland, especially due to the know-how and the technology that our academic community can provide. I encountered this clearly in the past

year during discussions with the leaders of Russia, India, China and several European states.

The knowledge of Icelandic scientists, engineers and technicians in producing clean energy, the work of glaciologists, geologists and other natural scientists relating to Iceland's natural wonders, contributions by doctors and the health sector, innovation in software and research in fisheries – all these and many other areas of science and technology reinforce the respect we now enjoy around the world.

This year, Iceland will be in the place of honour at the great book fair in Germany, the world's most significant international literary event. This recognition has in recent years gone to Turkey, China and Argentina. The success of our authors, the popularity of Icelandic music and the triumphs of theatre groups in London and New York this last year bear witness to the innovative vitality of the nation's artistic life.

All this progress from the time when Sveinbjörn Egilsson taught here at Bessastaðir in the only school which then existed in the country encourages us to tackle the urgent tasks that now await us, many of which cannot be delayed.

The economic depression, the “collapse”, as we call it, have constrained the livelihoods of thousands of Icelanders such that every week, many people stand in line waiting for food handouts. Poverty has been with us for a long time, but widespread financial difficulties have now made queues for food a shameful blot on our society.

In a New Year address a few years ago, I drew attention to poverty and said then:

“More and more people become caught up in the poverty trap, a vicious circle from which there seems to be no hope of escape despite their determination to provide for themselves without outside assistance. It is a bitter experience to have to admit one's need in this way, to swallow the pride that is instilled in us all ...”

If there was reason to discuss poverty eight years ago, when prosperity was evident in most fields, it is now imperative that we take action. Poverty is now much more widespread; it is the despairing fate of thousands. A society that calls itself a Nordic welfare state cannot tolerate so many standing in line every week waiting for food.

We must unite and eradicate this shameful blot immediately in the coming months. Icelanders can perform herculean tasks when we all pull together.

During the last year, the nation has shown that it can measure up to a challenge. The referendum on 6 March was a categorical evidence of how well the Constitution of the Republic works when under strain; showed that the nation is fully capable of applying the powers given to it. All went well, although many predicted otherwise.

The National Forum and the elections to the Constitutional Assembly were then new ways to elicit the will of the nation, a path that will hopefully lead to success. But it is essential that all those who are elected, whether they sit in the Althingi, in the Constitutional Assembly or here at Bessastaðir, bear in mind that they are servants of the nation. It is the people of this country who have the ultimate power, the nation itself.

The constitution is not merely a collection of rules; a structural specification of how things should be. It is first and foremost a covenant made by the nation with itself.

A few months after the collapse of the banking sector, I strongly urged that such a covenant should:

“promote solidarity and mutual trust, embodying an agreement between the generations, upholding the values that neither moth nor rust corrupt: moderation, honesty, prudence and discipline; it would give permanence and prominence to the ideal of mutual assistance that has always been observed in Iceland when disasters and natural catastrophes cause loss and damage; this was the principle behind the establishment of the local community units called *hreppar* in the days of the Medieval Icelandic Commonwealth.

In a covenant of this type we could give expression to the ideal of an open, transparent and democratic society in which the right to information is always respected in decision-making, in policy formulation and governance.

This covenant would be a signpost that everyone would be expected to comply with, a sort of sounding-board for the new image of our nation and a moral bulwark in the new Iceland to be created after the crisis has passed over.”

I restate this appeal now that the Constitutional Assembly is beginning its work, and at the same time, I remind us all that if a new constitution does not have a clear covenant at its root, it will not attract the

support necessary for the creation of a successful system of government; the current constitution was at the foundation of the Republic approved by 95% of the votes cast, and 98% of the electorate turned out to vote.

The essence of democracy is the will of the people. It is that simple, despite the theories or the wisdom of the experts.

At crucial moments, the express will of the nation has served us Icelanders extremely well, and it is therefore important that neither conflict nor harshness nor intransigence paralyses our drive to accomplish good works.

In this respect, the reaction to the eruption of Eyjafjallajökull was edifying. The cooperation of the farmers and the rescue teams which arrived on the scene, offered a helping hand, tended the animals, cleared away ash and transported people to safe havens was a refreshing example.

In times of natural disasters, Icelanders have a collective soul, unite for support and regeneration, they have over the centuries brought out the best in us.

Why can we not react in the same way when tremors shake the economy or the inundation has wrecked the financial and banking systems? Perhaps because that is a man-made disaster.

We all celebrated when green grass emerged through the thick layer of grey ash, and when Ólafur, the farmer at Þorvaldseyri, could once again see his barley swaying in the breeze.

The fields of national life now need also to become green again. More than two years have passed since the collapse of the banks. It is high time to stop letting harsh words and spiteful discourse obstruct our progress. An ill wind blows nobody any good.

Of course, we need to find out what went wrong, make the necessary reforms and see that those who broke the law are brought to account for their actions. The special prosecutors and the courts will ensure that justice is exacted in an appropriate manner.

In other respects, although many live with unemployment, excessive debts or poverty, most Icelanders enjoy a quality of life and general conditions that are recognised as being of a high standard on an international scale. Most of our people should therefore be able to join together to press forward, apply their energy, education and skills for the good of the regenerative effort.

This year must be a year of transformation. We must join hands, find a new direction, richer in experience, more critical in thought, wiser because of the mistakes and guided by sound values.

We live in a beautiful and productive land, rich in resources, energy, fisheries, with an abundant supply of water, food stocks, talented people, educated generations, a thriving culture, flourishing creativity; a society that is well equipped with new technologies.

We are in a much better position than when our predecessors entered the scene and Iceland was still under the rule of others, when Jón Sigurðsson left western Iceland with the majestic peaks of Arnarfjörður inlaid in his soul, when Skúli Thoroddsen and Theodóra journeyed from Ísafjörður to Bessastaðir scarred by the tussle with Hannes Hafstein, or when Sveinn Björnsson arrived from Þingvellir as the newly elected President.

As those generations worked tirelessly to leave a most wonderful legacy, created a secure position for Iceland in the world such that many nations now show us friendship and aspire to seek cooperation, surely, we can unite and reconstruct, harness the forces of our national will and find a way to solve our pending problems.

The last year demonstrated how the nation can exercise power wisely and hopefully the new will bring unification and transition, optimism and better times, tolerance and respect for one another; a resolution whereby the Icelanders' hallmark will be the welfare of everyone; good governance; integrity.

We stand at a momentous crossroads; must together forge a successful path towards the future. That is our task. May good fortune be with us all the way.