



**Address by
the President of Iceland,
Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson,
at the opening of
the Althingi,
1 October 2011**

In the history of Iceland, and in our national consciousness, the Althingi has always occupied a special place, first as the foundation of the ancient Commonwealth, and centuries later as the venue for the campaign towards independence and sovereignty. In recent decades, it has charted out the framework for our progress and economic prosperity and the achievement of a standard of living that in most respects is second to none.

The Althingi is the heart of the democratic structure that Iceland has known from the middle of the nineteenth century and down to the time of the Republic. Relations between the nation and its parliament have been peaceful and productive during this time.

For more than a century, the opening of parliament has followed the same pattern, a dignified yet unpretentious demonstration of the respect and confidence felt by the people towards this democratic institution.

Now, however, there are signs of cracks in the bridge between people and parliament. Evidence of this can be seen in the debates here in the chamber and also in society at large, in the rough protests that occurred at the opening of last year's parliamentary session and in the crowd of people who gathered on the square in front of the house this morning to send their message to the assembly. That thousands of people feel compelled, year after year, to stage demonstrations at the opening of parliament is a danger signal that we must all take seriously. It is a reminder that rebuilding after the banking collapse involves more than merely measures to deal with finance and the economy. It must include the tilling of the democratic soil in which the roots of the Althingi lie.

The parliament that starts its work here today must look for a solution to this problem and engage the people in a new reconciliation.

Admittedly, in its recent sessions, the Althingi showed that it recognized this need by embarking on a revision of the Constitution, though without full agreement as to how this should be done.

This process has already involved the holding of a national consultative meeting and the work of a special constitutional committee, followed by elections to a constitutional assembly and work by a constitutional council, which has now completed its task. All this has consumed a lot of time and resources, and the expense has amounted to more than half a billion Icelandic krónur.

The Constitutional Council completed its proposals at the end of summer and delivered them to the Speaker of the Althingi. This was done at a formal ceremony, and the Althingi has since decided to discuss the proposals in further detail. Though many have expressed the wish that the people should be allowed to vote on the proposals at the first opportunity, the changes will not take effect as a new Constitution until the Althingi has approved them in the form of a bill on two separate occasions, with a general election taking place in between.

The proposals by the Constitutional Council entail important changes to Iceland's constitutional structure.

They include new provisions on human rights, natural resources, the environment and the quality of life, culture, personal freedom and access to information.

The nation is granted the right to participate directly in the enactment of legislation. One tenth of the electorate can demand a referendum on legislation approved by the Althingi, and the public can send the Althingi draft legislation and proposals which it will be obliged to discuss. Provision is also made for holding referendums on such matters. Clearly, the Constitutional Council regarded the experience we have gained of referendums in the past few years as being of value and it has decided that still more should be done in this direction.

The constitutional proposals also seek to strengthen the Althingi, making it more independent of the cabinet and consolidating its supervisory power over the work of the executive. A parliamentary committee would be authorised to examine the work of government ministers and to appoint a special prosecutor for this purpose.

At the same time, the power of the government and of individual ministers would be sharply reduced. They would no longer have seats in

the Althingi or the automatic right to attend meetings of the party parliamentary groups; their involvement in the enactment of legislation would be substantially restricted. As a rule, ministers would not be able to participate in debates in the Althingi unless they were specially called upon to do so. Their right to make appointments would also be reduced.

According to the proposals by the Constitutional Council, the role played by political parties and their leaders in the mechanism of government would be much smaller than it has been since the foundation of the Republic. To a large extent, the Althingi would become a forum for individuals elected by personal support: the influence exerted by parties on the work of the assembly would be significantly weakened.

These are all important changes. In effect, they would be the basis of a new constitutional structure, a democratic system different from what we have been used to for decades.

So far, I have not mentioned the proposals of the Constitutional Council regarding the President of Iceland. These allow for a broader role for the president in the governmental system and confer greater responsibilities on the office of the president.

The Constitutional Council has proposed that the president's right to refer matters to a referendum, which is currently stated in Article 26 of the Constitution, would remain unchanged. No restrictions are placed on the type of matter involved.

The president's approval would be required for the appointment of judges and the director of public prosecutions, and a refusal by the president to confirm such appointments could only be set aside by the vote of two thirds of the Althingi. A special representative of the president would also chair the committee evaluating the qualifications of applicants for other senior public positions and making proposals on their appointment. This would apply, for example, to the permanent under-secretaries of the ministries and the heads of other important government bodies. Ministers would be bound by the committee's proposals unless another course of action received the support of the same two-thirds proportion of the Althingi.

The president's role in forming governments would also be substantially changed and become more independent. Instead of the leaders of the political parties formulating the options available to the president, as has been the case since the foundation of the Republic, the president himself would take the initiative on holding talks with individual MPs and their party groupings. He would then make a proposal to the Althingi regarding the choice of a prime minister, and would not be

bound to select an MP for this position. If the president's first proposal were not approved, he would once again hold talks with MPs and their party groupings.

Whereas for decades the leaders of the political parties have played a leading role in the formation of governments, in the arrangement proposed by the Constitutional Council, direct talks between the president and MPs would be of prime importance.

The Constitutional Council has also chosen to reduce contact between ministers and the president. The Council of State would be abolished, and ministers would no longer submit bills to the president for approval. This responsibility would pass to the Speaker of the Althingi, who in the absence of the president would be the sole executor of presidential authority. The role of the prime minister would also be changed. He would neither share in the presidential authority in the absence of the president nor be able to propose the dissolution of parliament; this would be decided by the Althingi itself and approved by the president. Thus, the proposals allow for greater direct contact between the Althingi and the president in a number of ways.

As everyone in this house, and in fact the whole nation, is aware, the question has often come up over the past few years and decades whether the president of the Republic should play a large or a small role in the political system. The Constitutional Council has given a clear answer on this point. Its proposals allow for a much more powerful president.

This is of course a very significant step. However, one of the problems the Althingi will encounter when examining these proposals is that presidential elections are due to take place next summer. This means that a decision will have to be taken soon and it is vital that the Althingi adopt its position on these proposals in good time. Otherwise, the Althingi would be responsible for leaving voters in the dark regarding the role to be played by the president in the future constitutional structure when they turn out at the polling stations. The presidential election would be a complete gamble.

It is important to avoid such a situation. The nation must not be put in a position where it cannot make a realistic assessment of the qualities of the candidates because the power, influence and role of the president in the constitutional structure are still being debated by the Althingi and no one knows what duties the winner of the election will have.

Therefore, it is a matter of urgency that in this new session, the Althingi adopt a clear position on the proposals by the Constitutional

Council, even though amendments to the Constitution itself will not take effect until after the next general election.

If the Althingi fails to reach a conclusion now, this winter, the nation will find itself in a very difficult position as a result of this whole process. It will then find itself being asked to elect a President of Iceland while complete uncertainty reigns regarding his role in the constitutional structure of the state.

It is my sincere wish that this new parliament will find a happy solution to this situation and that its members will not allow their views of the actions of the current president to interfere with their work. My time as President will come to an end, as all things do; what is at stake here is the future structure of the Republic.

The nation has always expected much from the Althingi, and this is the case now too. It is therefore my wish, and that of the Icelandic people, that the assembly's work will proceed smoothly and be for the benefit of our native land. I now ask the members to rise and honour Iceland.