



Inaugural Address
by
the President of Iceland
Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson
1 August 2012

My fellow Icelanders,

It is in a spirit of humility and gratitude that I once again accept the responsibility that the nation has entrusted to me, the duties that the constitution confers upon the President.

The preceding events have been different on this occasion, but there can be no doubt that the election was a valuable experience, clarifying people's vision of this office and stimulating discussion of the nation's prosperity and vital interests.

At this juncture, therefore, gratitude is due to all those who, through their candidacies and the work of their supporters, enabled the nation to evaluate this office, taking the measure of its nature and functions by applying the supreme yardstick available in a democracy: an election in which everyone is on an equal footing.

A presidential election of this type is in step with the democratic demands of our times and takes better account of them than the long-accepted view that an incumbent president should not be challenged, that a first election conferred a long-term right to exercise this office.

Given the democratic essence of our Constitution and the spirit of the times, any president must welcome the fact that his words and deeds are weighed and examined when his mandate is renewed, and the more so after taking controversial decisions and submitting legislation from the Althingi to the judgement of the people.

The recent presidential election was therefore a jubilant testimony to our democratic evolution, a real indication of health at this time of reconstruction and a firm declaration of support for the policy of further progress along the road of direct democracy.

It is a testimony to the quality of the Constitution which the Icelandic people adopted at the foundation of the Republic that, since the collapse of the banks, it has given the people of this country the chance to deliver their judgement on five occasions: in a general election, in local council elections, in two referendums and now in a presidential election. No other states in Europe have given their people decisive power in such full measure during these crucial times.

Iceland's struggle for independence and sovereignty moulded the foundations of the constitutional structure that in many ways has served us well, being however adapted to the requirements of changing times. The guiding principle has always been that the people are in supreme control, and that all institutions and officials must bow to the general will.

The Constitution is unambiguous on this point. Its provisions are clear, though they could be worded more simply. It is a framework that withstood the strains of class conflict and the cold war, and in recent years it gave us the flexibility to meet the demands voiced in public protests and to settle matters by means of referendums.

Iceland has always succeeded in achieving a broad consensus on constitutional change which, as this new century approached, led to the abolition of the bicameral structure of the Althingi, the formulation of a new human rights section in the Constitution and a change in the mechanism for dissolving parliament.

The nation has been blessed by consensus, composed of many elements, with roots going deep into our culture and history; moulded by our experience of living close to the forces of nature, drawing strength from our struggle with challenge and adversity.

Many states, even in Europe, suffer from conflicts: tensions between different language communities and cultural traditions, a heritage from past ages that still splits people into factions.

In Iceland, by contrast we have been fortunate to be united by our language, culture, history and religious tradition. These elements create bonds that never break, notwithstanding stresses and confrontations in other spheres. It is a heritage which is also the basis of continual renewal and innovation in literature and the arts and provides fertile ground for science and research.

The victories we won when, as a young republic, we challenged a great power over the extension of our economic zone were also a source of strength in this area. The nation felt how solidarity was the guarantee of success. The departure of foreign troops was also followed by a closing

of ranks: in place of the gulf that once sundered the nation into hostile camps there appeared a smooth and solid plain; once again everyone could feel they owned a share in the cornerstones on which our international relations were based.

Few things are more important for a small nation than to have a broad and firm consensus regarding its position in the world. For this reason it is gratifying that the friendship between the Nordic countries has developed into a many-faceted co-operation in which the national parliaments, governments, local councils and non-governmental organisations work together for our common interests in more and more areas.

The north, the circumpolar region, is the latest venue for such a consensus. Together with Russia, Canada and the United States, the Nordic countries are developing extensive collaboration in this region and achieving results which demonstrate how successful cooperation can, in a short time, replace long-term dissension and strife. The arms race of the cold war has given a way to a spirit of friendship and democracy.

The Althingi's resolution on Iceland's policy in the circumpolar region, with the unanimous support of all political parties, is an example of a new and fruitful method of formulating foreign policy. It shows that national unity can be established on fundamental aspects of Iceland's policy, given the will to do so.

Experience of this type is a valuable asset at a time when the call is being heard for a new departure in parliamentary and national concerns, the opening of a new chapter in which the conflicts and reckoning that followed the economic collapse will soon be things of the past. Ahead of us lies a time that calls for solidarity and construction. The move forward must take account of what it is that unites us, finding its point of departure in the solid values that for decades have underpinned the achievements of the Republic of Iceland.

Admittedly, many issues regarding the collapse still remain to be faced and resolved, but most of them are now before the courts and special investigators, bodies that will complete their tasks in accordance with the rules of a state governed by law.

The rest of us must now unite and focus our efforts on tasks that can secure Iceland a prosperous future, drawing on the experience of the past and inspired by a determination to do better.

All those who are elected to positions of responsibility should join hands and ensure that constructive efforts take the place of internal strife.

The nation is calling for a new beginning of this type. This is what emerged from discussions in the run-up to the election – in communities, in workplaces and in homes.

The people want to be able to trust the Althingi and the other institutions of our Republic. Consensus on the most important issues, instead of constant disputes, is the surest way to revive the trust that is vital to the legislature.

As a nation, we know that just as fundamental harmony is the key to happy family life, so there is a limit to how long our society can withstand the strains that result from constant confrontation.

Now, therefore, I call on all of us who receive our mandate from the people, I call on the Althingi and local councils, on everyone who is elected to a position of responsibility, to adopt a new approach; to set confrontation aside and to prioritise our work in such a way as to ensure broad support for the decisions taken.

With consensus as our goal we will be able to achieve good results in the revision of the Constitution; we will place our international relations on a stable footing, lay the foundations for a healthy economy with general welfare, creative cultural life and education; we will be able to make Iceland the model of welfare, prosperity and democracy on which our younger generations have set their dreams.

A consensus on a new departure along these lines would be rich in content, based on the collective will and the strength that lies with our people.

It would also put us in a better position to help others, to apply Iceland's experience in tackling tasks that are now becoming a matter of urgency for the whole world.

The melting of glaciers, changes in climate patterns and the resources of the oceans and the need to find new sources of energy and produce more food – these things have directed the attention of other nations to the successes we have achieved in Iceland. It is for this reason that foreign leaders are coming to Iceland in increasing numbers in search of fruitful solutions.

As the ice in both polar regions retreats rapidly and huge blocks of Greenland's ice-sheet slide into the sea, research on Iceland's glaciers can add to our understanding of how quickly the threat of irreversible climate change is growing, change that may in a very short time transform the living conditions of all people on earth.

As extreme weather events – hurricanes, forest fires, heat-waves and floods in inhabited regions – become almost routine, the way Iceland has responded to eruptions and earthquakes, and our civil defence mechanisms, based on citizen participation and the use of the latest technology for early warnings and the transmission of information, are attracting the attention of more and more people for the lessons they can give.

As over-fishing poses an ever-greater threat to the life of the world's oceans – if the current trends continue, they may be left barren in only a few decades – Iceland's experience in stock protection, fisheries management and the monitoring of vessel movements, catches and fish processing stands out as a demonstration that it is possible to establish sustainable utilisation of marine resources. Thus, attention is now being given to how open internet access to satellite images, combined with registration according to the Icelandic model, could contribute to the protection of fish stocks and the oceans.

As the use of carbon-based fuels continues to disrupt the balance in man's interaction with nature, an urgent search is on all over the world to find ways of transforming the energy economy. For this reason, Icelandic expertise is already being applied in many parts of the world; numerous countries are seeking collaboration with our scientific community and want to apply techniques that have been developed here. India, China, Europe, Africa and the United States are all represented in this quest.

At a time when food shortages and the need to make better use of agricultural and marine products are becoming burning issues, and will become even more urgent as the world's population approaches nine billion, the methods used in Iceland to dry fisheries products which used to be thrown away, to grow food in greenhouses and to reclaim barren sands are increasingly being seen as potentially useful tools enabling other nations to forge ahead and secure reliable food supplies for the future.

All of this demonstrates that Iceland, having achieved successes in situations against all odds, is now able to help other countries while at the same time consolidating our own standing.

Never before have Iceland's interests been sustained by so many factors. Chief among these are the country's position within the Northern and the Arctic regions, the good relations we enjoy with our neighbours and the extensive collaboration in which we are involved with states both large and small in all parts of the world.

This strength will also be enhanced by our internal solidarity and the duty shared by all of us in positions of responsibility to respond to the nation's call for a new beginning, for unity instead of dissension, constructive work instead of discord.

This wish for solidarity is also the core of the message dominating the presidential election and of the trust sealed by this ceremony and the responsibility conferred on me by the nation.

I hope that the journey I have made since I first signed the presidential oath has made me more capable of shouldering this responsibility with humility; given me experience and maturity, knowledge, tolerance and understanding: qualities that will prove their worth in the times ahead.

I have many to thank: the people of the West Fjords, the farmers and fishermen who were disciplined and toughened by the struggle for existence, the villagers and townspeople; my parents and grandparents who brought me up; my own family that has shared in joys and sorrows; always feeling the loss of Guðrún Katrín, but has been fortunate to prosper and grow; without my daughters and Dorrit I would hardly have had the strength to stand here in this position once again.

It is a challenge, over a long period of time, to be worthy of the trust that the nation has placed in me. I will continue to be guided by the vision that the president's duty is first and foremost to serve the people, to face each new day with democracy and the national interest as his guidelines.

This is the vision I bring once again to my co-operation with you all, dedicating my duties to the interests and welfare of Iceland.