



**RESETTING THE COMPASS
CREATING A NEW LANDSCAPE OF POSSIBILITIES
A session of
THE SPIRIT OF HUMANITY FORUM**

**Speech
by
the President of Iceland
Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson
Reykjavík
14 September 2012**

*The speech was delivered without notes.
This is a transcript of the recording.*

Let me begin by welcoming all of you to our country and thank you Dadi Janki for these wonderful greetings from India; a country that has provided me with a new sense of the human spirit; where the excellence as well as the struggle of humanity is displayed anywhere you go, whether it is in a poor village or a big city. To be reminded of India here this morning is indeed a very profound message. Looking around the world, it is remarkable how India has managed despite all the challenges and difficulties to remain a democratic country since the foundation of the Republic. It is one of the most remarkable manifestations of how the human spirit can aim for a new world.

It is important for us in Iceland to be associated with India. We sometimes say that we are the oldest democracy in the world; it can perhaps be doubted but we like to say it; India is definitely the largest democracy in the world, nobody can doubt that. So we link Iceland and India.

Let me also welcome our friend Her Royal Highness. It is indeed a great pleasure to have you finally here in Iceland, but more than thousand years after the first Norwegians came to Iceland. It has taken you a long time, – but we are very pleased to have you here with us.

For all of you who have come from different countries I hope these days will be a time of inspiration, new visions and reflections on what can be done.

It is difficult to explain Iceland in a short time. Perhaps an important key is to read the opening of the Old Testament, the Book of Genesis, where it is described how the Almighty created the Earth in six days and decided then to rest because as the Holy Book says, the work was finished. By arriving in Iceland you realize that this is not entirely true. At least in this instance the Holy Book is not entirely correct because the creation has continued in this country until this very day and will continue in this way with new volcanic eruptions and new islands and earthquakes and lava fields; an extraordinary display showing that we are not yet the Masters of the Universe; that there are still forces of nature stronger than ourselves.

It is exactly this relationship between humanity and Mother Earth that is one of the most profound contributions that Iceland can make to this dialogue. We all have a tendency, driven by a certain arrogance from technological and scientific achievements, to celebrate our achievements. But in this country we are reminded every day, sometimes every hour, that we are not yet and never will be the Masters of the Universe. It is a humbling experience; an important message.

In this splendid building you can see that combination. I am often asked what did Iceland after the banks collapsed and during the financial crisis. You can give a long lecture in answer to that question. You can also answer it in one sentence: We built a Concert Hall. We reset the compass in this splendid way. And we did more. We surrounded this Concert Hall with the largest piece of art you can find anywhere in the world, created by Ólafur Elíasson who, by the way, also had a role in the new Opera House in Oslo. Here he combined glass and steel in this extraordinary way so we can see outside the building as we leave our discussions and dialogue and are reminded once again of the mountains and the oceans and the forces of nature.

It is a piece of art that only one company in the world could construct. That company was found in China. So this building is also a reminder of how the world has changed in a fundamental way. It is probably the only cultural building in the western world which China has made a major contribution to through its construction.

So, can we reset the compass? Can we indeed do new things? Can we create a new landscape of possibilities? That is the topic of the session here this morning. This very building proves that it can be done. That the compass can in fact be reset in a profound way with the combination of

culture and vision and daring and also by not giving up despite big challenges.

Let me also share with you five other examples of how Iceland in many ways demonstrates that indeed we can reset the compass, we can enter new landscapes and achieve what almost everybody thought impossible. In an international dialogue in which there are so many voices telling us what we cannot do, that it is impossible to change, that we must continue in the way we have done for long, it is important to let the concrete examples of profound transformations inspire us to move ahead.

You have come to this modern city with this extraordinary building, but two generations ago Reykjavík was a tiny village of three hundred people. There was no town in this country, definitely not a city and there was only one school – only one school! When I receive you tomorrow at the Residence you will be able to see that small building where the school was housed.

There were then about fifty thousand people in Iceland, spread over this large country, the size of England; poor farmers and fishermen. All the power was in the hands of the Danish King. We had no human rights in the modern sense of the word, not economic, judicial, environmental or even political rights.

Through the lifetime of only two generations we have seen an extraordinary transformation of a nation which most people believed was too small and faced too many challenges to be able to achieve independence and definitely to create one of the most advanced societies. It is a proof that almost any community in the world, wherever it is, however small, from poor beginnings can indeed transform itself in a fundamental way.

Only a mile or so from this new Concert Hall is the small house where Reagan and Gorbachev met twenty five years ago. Then the Cold War and the military confrontation so dominated the entire world that they could neither meet in Russia nor in America. They had to meet on neutral ground in a small house. The room where they had their dialogue was too small for any delegation to enter.

If anybody had predicted at that time that ten years later all of Europe would be democratic, that the Cold War would be over, nobody would have believed it. At that time our part of the world, the Northern Regions, the Arctic, were the most militarised area in the world, with military bases ranging from Alaska into Canada and Greenland, here in Iceland, in Norway and of course in Russia, with submarines, missiles

and military planes. If anybody had predicted that before the 20th century was over this militarised region, probably one of the most militarised in the world, would be a territory of peace and cooperation, where the eight Arctic countries, including the new Russia and the United States, would cooperate peacefully within the Arctic Council, reaching agreements on construction and cooperation, nobody would have believed it.

For more than a half a century the United States maintained a military base in our country. It was a core part of the military build up in the North Atlantic. Generations of Icelanders spent their political life in disputes and arguments about this military base. During our early political youth, for Ingibjörg Sólrún and myself, it was one of the main issues of Icelandic politics.

If anybody had said in the 1960s, in the 1970s, in the 1980s, even the early 1990s, that the Americans would leave; that the base would be empty of soldiers and instead of the military barracks there would be a university, a film studio, workshops of artists and innovators, nobody would have believed it.

You might not realise it, but I want to point it out, that for the last six years there has not been a single soldier in this country, not one! We have managed to conduct our affairs, to go through one of the most profound financial crisis we have ever experienced and major volcanic eruptions that caught the world's attention, receive every year more than a half a million visitors from all over the world, conduct an open, free democratic, advanced and progressive society without a single military figure – not a single person bearing arms in the sense that people think essential for modern societies.

Your presence here is perhaps for many of you the first experience of being in a society without a single soldier. It is a reminder that the spirit of humanity can change how we think, how we interact with each other, how we can reset the compass. Somehow our global dialogue, our political vision has been dominated by the view that every conflict must have a military dimension, that it is impossible to be human beings and cooperate without somebody having the responsibility to bear arms, or to put it differently, without somebody having the legal right to kill other people.

There are of course many other examples. The financial crisis was mentioned this morning. We can talk about that for a long time. But it brought us in Iceland to a very important historical crossroads where we had to choose: What is more important in such times of profound challenge, the democratic will of the people or the financial interests of the market?

We were forced to choose. The people of Iceland, farmers and fishermen, teachers and nurses said: We want to decide. We want to exercise our democratic will. We are not willing to accept that the interests of financial institutions are superior to the democratic will of ordinary people.

So we had two referendums in this country. Three years later we are an example of economic recovery, I believe partly because we allowed the democratic will of the people to point towards new directions.

Let me conclude with the following. Iceland is the home of the largest glaciers in Europe. Our neighbouring country, Greenland, has one of the greatest ice masses in the world. When we talk about the future of humanity and the future of Mother Earth we tend to forget that we live in an ice-dependent world. What happens to the glaciers in Iceland and Greenland, to the glaciers in the Himalayas that are the resources of the great rivers of India and China, and what happens in Antarctica will have a more profound impact on our future, on our civilisation, on humanity than perhaps any other event in the life of our children and our grandchildren.

We are all responsible. You can't find a single human being on Mother Earth who has not contributed in one way or another to climate change. We cannot put that responsibility on others. It is ours. It brings home the profound inter-linkage between humanity and Mother Nature.

Here in Iceland we are also reminded that it doesn't necessarily have to be so. This is a country which has transformed itself from being in my youth over 80% dependent on imported oil and coal. Now 100% of our electricity and our space heating comes from clean energy. If we can get enough electric cars in the coming years we can truly become the first country in the world where all land based activity uses clean energy.

It shows that we can indeed reset the compass, we can aim for a new landscape of possibilities. But we also must do that. There is no greater moral imperative for any of us than to work together to prevent the continuous melting of the glaciers, to prevent the disappearance of the ice and to enable our children and grandchildren to enjoy Mother Earth with the spirit of humanity that we have thought to be our birthright and our privilege.

With those thoughts I welcome you again to our country. I hope this small island will give you inspiration and I am looking forward to welcoming you all tomorrow afternoon.