



New Year Address
by
the President of Iceland
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My Fellow Countrymen,

My wife Dorrit and I wish you all a Happy New Year, with fortune and prosperity as the returning sun brings us more light with each passing day, a symbol of optimism and a brighter future.

In many respects, last year gave us much in material terms, even though many people still face uncertainty and difficulties. Yet again, as often before, the poor had to turn to charities for help as the Festive Season approached. It is beyond comprehension why our communal welfare system, the support from central and local government, is still at a level where young mothers have to stand in queues waiting for gifts of food for their children.

There is a long tradition in Iceland of helping one's neighbour when disaster strikes our communities. The responses to the crises following the recent volcanic eruptions in the south of the country and the blizzards in the north at the beginning of this winter demonstrated that, in spite of quarrels and confrontations in the political arena, a spirit of solidarity comes to the fore in times of peril; the nation acquires a single soul and the rescue teams arrive from all regions.

When we talked to the sheep farmers of Þingeyjarsýsla, Skagafjörður and Húnaþing, Dorrit and I were made keenly aware of how much they appreciated the work of the rescue teams and how grateful they were to the many volunteers who came from other parts of the country to dig their lambs out of the snow and clear passages through the deep drifts so the sheep could be brought back to the farms. Nevertheless, this was a very difficult time for the people in the rural districts. The children we met in Reykjahlíð had moving tales to tell and were deeply

affected by the fate of the lambs that never came back from the mountains.

Altogether, the farmers in the north lost about ten thousand sheep; a severe setback in communities with little capacity to absorb such shocks.

The blizzards at the start of our winter and again in the final days of the year, the tropical storm and floods that ravaged New York and the eastern seaboard of the United States, and the unusual and extreme weather conditions that have been experienced all over the world are, as the World Meteorological Organization has stressed, evidence that mankind can now expect changes in the global climate to find expression in more and more frequent severe weather. Studies show beyond all doubt that the melting of glaciers and polar ice is among the major causes.

We received a similar message from the Chinese scientists who sailed here last summer on the icebreaker 'Snow Dragon', taking the northern sea route from Shanghai to Iceland. They described to an audience in the auditorium of the University of Iceland how severe cold spells and storms in the winter of 2007-2008 caused huge power losses and disruption of transport and agriculture in China – all traced back to the melting of ice in the northern circumpolar regions the previous year; so sensitive is the world's weather to such changes.

The same conclusion emerges from American studies, which have attributed the violence of the tropical storm that hit the USA in the autumn to global warming; the mayor of New York referred to the hazards of global warming when he announced his decision to support President Obama for re-election.

The academic community in universities all over the world is calling unanimously for a change of policy, and only a few weeks ago, the World Bank published a striking report voicing the same plea. It is therefore astounding that politicians can still be found in various countries who turn a deaf ear to these warnings and come up with absurd 'reasons' why science should not be trusted.

Just as we in Iceland join hands when disaster strikes, so the whole of mankind must wake up in time and realise that the conditions in which we all live are threatened by the rapid melting of the glaciers and sea ice in the northern polar region, in Antarctica and in the Himalayas.

Small though our nation is, Iceland can play an important role in this area. Studies of Iceland's glaciers over half a century have yielded a store of knowledge, and the models that our scientists have constructed have a predictive value for the whole world. The transformation of our energy

economy, with increased reliance on hydropower and geothermal energy, is also an indication to other nations of the possibility of alternatives. Iceland is thus at the same time a place where the accelerating melting of the ice can be observed and also where new and much-needed solutions can be examined. These features are, to a growing extent, becoming central in our collaboration with other countries.

Solidarity in times of peril, rescue work based on volunteer efforts, a net of warning systems covering the whole country – these things are also attracting more and more attention. An investigative committee in the United States has now asked for information from Iceland, on our civil defence mechanism, for use in improving and focussing responses to meet the next tropical storms in the USA.

Communal assistance and solidarity are a social resource and one of our greatest assets. We must value and respect these traditions, not only when natural catastrophes strike but also when our community is ravaged by financial instability and economic crisis.

There is no questioning the fact that many things have gone well in Iceland in the past few years and that we are on the way to recovery, possibly even ahead of other countries. All the same, we could stand closer together and make less of our differences: dissension is rarely of advantage and weakens nations no less than it does families.

Following the collapse of the banking system, the need was felt for a new social contract, and it was made a priority to enshrine it in the constitutional structure.

Ever since the founding celebration at Þingvellir in 1944, the Constitution of the Republic of Iceland has in fact proved its worth, serving as a successful vehicle that has always proved adequate despite bitter class strife and the tensions of the Cold War. It also enabled us to respond to the economic collapse in a more democratic way than other nations have done, with a new government, a general election and referendums on issues of crucial importance.

Nonetheless, a new departure was made, with two main aims: the new constitution should be based on a national reconciliation, and it should be simple and clear.

Good ideas were then put forward in the proposals of the Constitutional Council, many of which enjoy broad support. New provisions on the nation's right to demand referendums on the most important issues: unequivocal national ownership of natural resources; greater independence of the judiciary and more extensive human rights

provisions – all these, and many other things, are steps in the right direction.

It is therefore unfortunate to find that now, as the new year begins, the debate about the new constitution has in many ways been led into a cul-de-sac. Instead of unanimity on a social contract, controversy rages over fundamental points, and scholars in our universities have stressed that much in the constitutional proposals is unclear and complicated.

There has been practically no discussion of the new system of governance that the proposals entail; how the Althingi, the Government and the President would interact.

Nevertheless, the intention is to abolish the Council of State. The Head of State and the Government would then have no venue for consultation in times of urgent necessity.

The team of leaders in whom the people showed their trust clearly in a general election would find themselves without the right to speak freely in the Althingi when they entered the Government.

It would become easier for individuals to secure election to parliament simply on the basis of being well known in the media; the influence of political parties would be much reduced, while individuals within the same party would compete against each other right up to election day; the importance of the regions outside the capital area would also be greatly reduced.

Leaders of the political parties would no longer have a special role to play in the formation of new governments. In this, the President of the Republic would control matters far more than has been the case up to now.

Under these arrangements, various governments that we have had since the Republic was founded would probably not have come into being; indeed, these new provisions would probably have prevented the formation of the minority coalition of the Social Democratic Alliance and the Left Green Movement in January 2009.

The Prime Minister would be granted disciplinary powers over ministers from other parties, and would be able to dismiss them all. It seems that the authors of these proposals feel that the main weakness in Iceland's constitutional structure over the past decades has been a want of even greater power on the part of prime ministers – and also, in fact, the President.

Certainly, the draft Constitution contains some useful provisions on referendums, national ownership and human rights, but it also creates a system of governance that is very different from what we have been used to since the foundation of the Republic. It would be a political experiment without parallel in the countries of the West.

The ingredients of the new system have not been discussed in any depth, but if a majority of the people considers them to be of advantage, then such a view would have to be clearly stated: no questions specifically about these aspects of the proposals were included in the referendum last October.

Substantial criticisms of many articles in the draft Constitution were voiced at debates held by the University of Iceland, Reykjavík University, the University of Akureyri and the University of Bifröst, and were backed up with references to studies both in Iceland and in the international academic arena.

Some supporters of the Constitutional Council's proposals have made light of these contributions to the debate from the academic community and even attempted to cast aspersions on their integrity. Such a response is, unfortunately, reminiscent of the deaf ears with which some people meet reports of research on global warming. On both issues, this is an unworthy stance. When formulating our policies to meet the challenges of the new age, it is important to have a solid basis of reliable knowledge as our foundation, both as regards climate change and the Constitution.

Our universities should give us advice, lighting a way that is paved with the results of research. Was not the most important lesson we learned from the economic crisis that we should take more notice of those who, from a position of knowledge, warn us of the dangers around the next corner? Not to listen to good advice can never be fruitful policy, and the problem may assume even greater proportions, because a new majority in the Althingi next spring could easily throw the constitutional bill out, so that all the care and effort which the Constitutional Council put into its work will have been wasted.

The hallmark of sound democracy is not to enable a succession of newly-elected majorities to strive to outdo each other in exercising total control. The quality of democracy is greatest when the arguments and rights of the minority are accorded respect. Such is the key to lasting results. At the end of November, the Vice-Chancellor of the University of Bifröst emphasised the importance of having opposing factions come together on a middle ground.

At a meeting of the Council of State yesterday, I called on all political parties to work together with broad-mindedness and a will for conciliation as their guiding light and for the constitutional issue to be channelled into an environment that would secure quality of treatment, with priority given to those changes which enjoy the broad support of the people. Only in this way will a successful result be achieved.

We must not let the constitutional issue become bogged down in wrangles and trials of strength in the Althingi. That would neither be worthy of the original pledge to create a new social contract nor show proper respect for the unanimity that greeted the adoption of our present Constitution.

Though the years that have passed since the collapse of the banks have in many ways been a difficult time, and it is natural that there should often have been disagreement about the course chosen and actions taken, the constitutional basis must, in this new age, rest on a broad and permanent consensus. Otherwise, it will be out of the frying pan and into the fire.

In fact it would be good for all of us, as a nation that has struggled with great problems, if we could now embark on a period of solidarity and constructive action, taking as our model, to a greater extent than before, the sort of response we make when natural catastrophes strike.

Just as the sheep-farmers in the north of our country are now rebuilding their herds and the young people in the rural areas see the opportunities that a new year brings to their communities, despite the destructive weather earlier this winter, so it would be sensible for all of us – the authorities, the business sector, NGOs and the general public – to focus our energies on what unites us and opens the way to development, to success that draws on the strengths of each and every local community, bringing benefit to all and enabling the middle class and those of lesser means to make ends meet in their daily expenses and home-buying ventures.

We have in Iceland rich natural resources; we enjoy good relations with all countries; we have well-educated people in most fields; we have demonstrated how innovation and initiative, technical skills and cultural achievements can be driving forces in progress.

We are blessed with the legacy of the generations that put our country in the front rank, setting education, health and welfare for all up as their goal, securing Iceland its independence and its place among the nations of the world.

All roads are open to us; there are opportunities at every step along the way, and unity will give us greater capacity for further progress. This is our task in the new year; the duty towards the young people of our country.