



**Speech  
by the President of Iceland  
Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson  
at the  
Opening of Parliament  
6 June 2013**

The hopes of our people go with you who now form this new Parliament and who will, over the coming years, shoulder the greatest responsibility placed on elected representatives under the democratic system and the constitutional structure of our state.

We have emerged from a difficult trial, the resuscitation of our economy following an upheaval that was without parallel in the history of the nation; a time of conflict and siege around the parliament building; winter nights lit by fires on Austurvöllur when police and security barriers played a crucial role in guaranteeing the safety of the Members of the Parliament. Those times will remain etched in the minds of Icelanders for ages to come, a reminder and a warning of the fragility of democracy. If trust is lost, the grassy square outside these walls may in an instant become an arena of protest and clashes.

Perhaps the most valuable achievement of the last parliamentary term was the restoration of stability and peace in Icelandic society, the fact that the nation went to the polling booths this spring in the same way as had long become established as the hallmark of our republic – and the leaders of the political parties could take ample time to form a new government.

While I welcome all of you, in particular those who have been elected here for the first time, to your position in parliament and wish our new ministers success in their endeavours, I should like to thank the departing government and parliament for their work over the past years.

Though many policies aroused controversy and the exchanges in this chamber were often heated and brusque, the way the elections, the formation of the government and the convening of this new parliament have gone ahead has shown that Iceland's democratic tradition has weathered the storm. We have

managed to preserve its innermost core: a peaceful society that gives the will of the people a secure means of changing course and choosing new representatives.

The foundation of our political system, the Constitution of the Republic, paved the way for the renewal of the Althingi, both four years ago and again now, so unequivocally as to be without parallel in our history, or in many parts of Europe. A vast majority of the Members is either new or have only a few years of parliamentary experience behind them. This, amongst other things, shows, as I have mentioned repeatedly in my New Year Addresses and my Inaugural Speech as President, that the Constitution of the Republic, which took effect at Þingvellir in 1944 and which has been amended on a few occasions with broad consent, has both withstood the stresses and strains of the economic collapse and proved to be a fruitful vehicle of change.

While the Constitution could be improved further, for example by adding provisions on the calling of referendums, the status of our national resources as the property of the people and enhanced independence of the judiciary, the fact is that it has proved to be a reliable framework for the democratic processes the Icelanders value most. Four years ago it provided the means for a change of government and new elections; it gave the authorities the flexibility to accede to the demands of the protestors; it granted the right to hold referendums on controversial issues; it gave many new political parties the opportunity to gather a following and it has ushered in an unprecedented degree of renewal in the Althingi and the emergence of a new government in the traditional way.

After the turmoil of the past few years, the Constitution of our Republic is once again firmly in place; the will of the people as the driving force for action and determining the preservation of elements of supreme importance.

The general election delivered important messages regarding the Constitution and also on the future of our sovereignty. A strong majority of the newly-elected parliament is bound by the promise that Iceland will stand outside the European Union and the issue will be placed in the hands of the people.

In a way it was natural, four years ago when ominous uncertainty loomed over our economy and that of the Western world, that the Althingi should see the attractions of opening membership negotiations with the European Union, particularly with regard to the euro, which then seemed to rest on strong foundations; but now we face a different reality. No one knows along what lines the European Union may develop, and the euro zone is mired in a deeper recession than the economies of Northern Europe, America and Asia.

Moreover, the European Union's negotiations with Iceland have gone very slowly. Already they have lasted longer than when other Nordic EFTA states – Sweden and Finland – made their approaches on membership. The last

parliamentary term came to an end before the negotiators had started to examine those aspects of the application that are of central importance for Iceland.

The way events have unfolded, and also my discussions with many influential people in Europe, have convinced me that notwithstanding its friendly declarations, the European Union is not in fact greatly interested in concluding negotiations with us in the next few years.

The reasons for this are in many ways understandable from the point of view of the Union. A democratic Nordic nation had rejected a membership agreement on two occasions in referendums, and it would be a setback if the same thing were to happen a third time with a rejection by Iceland. Also, there seems little likelihood that the Union will develop a permanent fisheries policy that Iceland could regard as serving its interests. And in addition, various Member States see it as a more urgent task for the Union to overcome its present difficulties before setting about meeting Iceland's demands.

It is therefore both responsible and necessary to share the view with the Parliament and the nation that it may be of little significance whether or not Iceland chooses to continue negotiations, since in fact the counterparty seems to lack the ability or the will to conclude them in the next few years.

We should none the less rejoice over the fact that our position with regard to international cooperation is now stronger than ever before: we are linked through alliances and collaborative programmes with our closest neighbours and all the leading nations of the world.

Nordic cooperation is constantly becoming broader, as was clearly demonstrated in the recent State Visit by the President of Finland, and our membership of NATO, EFTA and the European Economic Area bears continuing witness to the firm friendships we enjoy with the democracies of Europe and North America.

Also, the recent changes made to the structure of the Arctic Council mean that ten of the world's largest economies – USA, Russia, China, India, Japan, Germany, France, Italy, the United Kingdom and Canada – will in future join us, other Nordic countries and other states, in fashioning a prosperous, responsible and sustainable future for the northern circumpolar region.

These changes will bring Iceland a host of new opportunities. We share a rich agenda with all the world's most influential nations and they are eagerly seeking closer collaboration with us.

We are in fact witnessing an historical watershed. Iceland is now in the main thoroughfare of a new region of global importance which will be one of the major theatres of events in the struggle against climate change and the quest

for greater economic prosperity. Our home, the northern circumpolar region, has become a barometer for the destiny of mankind.

Decisions taken by this new Parliament will therefore be of significance not only for Iceland and our good neighbours, Greenland and the Faroe Islands, but also as regards our position in the global community.

It was the Althingi that charted the course towards Iceland's full national independence; it was the Althingi that, by extending our economic zone, placed control over the resources of the sea in the nation's hands; it was the Althingi that laid the foundations of welfare and progress that has, notwithstanding some setbacks, secured us a position in the very front rank.

At every step of the way in this process that created the heritage which is now being entrusted to you, our newly-elected parliamentarians, it has been Iceland's great good fortune that when it comes to facing important challenges, solidarity has been the guiding principle. Disagreements have been laid aside and mutual respect for different priorities has enabled parties and alliances to join hands and take a common stance on matters of crucial importance for the nation.

This is needed now, no less than before. This is the challenge that you must face, the test that will determine the respect enjoyed by this institution. Solidarity based on the will of the people is the Althingi's supreme duty.

In the spirit of this duty, I call on all Members to rise and honour our country.