



**Address by
the President of Iceland,
Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson,
at the opening of
the Althingi,
1 October 2013**

“There can scarcely be any other art that people have laboured at for so long with so little guarantee of success as national government.” These were the opening words of Jón Sigurðsson’s article “On a parliament in Iceland” [*Um alþing á Íslandi*] which appeared in the first volume of the periodical *Ný félagsrit* in 1841. In a way his article has something to say to all of us. His view of parliament and the will of the people is as relevant now as it was then, even though the better part of two centuries have passed; he showed a perceptive understanding of the nature of a parliament and how it and the nation work together – an understanding that was all the more remarkable since, at the time, all power lay with the crown and Iceland’s future was shrouded in complete uncertainty. There was virtually no hope that ordinary people would secure the democratic rights that we now take for granted.

Jón Sigurðsson went on to become the leading figure of Iceland’s independence movement and his portrait has long watched over the proceedings here in this chamber. Even though he was still a young man when he wrote his first article on the Althingi, his message still speaks to us today, and particularly now when we must face problems affecting both parliament and nation that call urgently for solution, as we can hear once again from the square outside.

In a way, this article influenced the basis on which Iceland’s democratic tradition has been built. It stated guidelines that gradually became integrated into the nation’s understanding of the functions of parliament and of its own rights. Just as the writings of Rousseau, Locke, Mill, Montesquieu and other intellectuals associated with the democratic revolution in Europe formed the constitutional structure that is still in force, so Jón Sigurðsson gave us an insight into the patterns in Iceland’s

history and the challenges that the democratic process faces at any given time.

It is therefore valuable to examine the first volume of *Ný félagsrit* at a time when there is a need to consolidate the position that parliament occupies in the nation's mind and to take account of the growing desire on the part of the people to take part in decision-making. There we find the fundamentals stated with great clarity:

“one of the simplest and most powerful means of making people think about the national interest is to have those whom the people trust best come together and discuss what is needed and what would be of benefit – and to do this in the country itself.”

“The aim of every government is to hold together all the forces over which it is placed and to make them work towards a single aim: the welfare of all citizens and the maximum possible advancement in both spiritual and physical matters.”

It is “the greatest honour that any person can receive to command the complete confidence of his fellow citizens and to contribute towards the attainment of every positive goal that lies within our powers at any given time.”

“... when each side criticises the other with intelligence and sound arguments and self-control, neither wishing to command more of the field than the truth itself will cover, and it is evident that both have the aim of rendering the maximum service to the nation, neither attributing motives to the other that would not do credit to a respectable person, then a contest of this type will always result in benefit for our country and the future generations ...”

“... supreme power rests with the nation itself, and no one can properly take a final decision in matters affecting the whole nation unless it reflects the will of the majority; this applies particularly to decisions on national expenditure, taxation and how taxes are to be paid, and also to legislation and dealings with other nations.”

“... I fear that there may still be many ordinary people who are not fully convinced of the usefulness of a parliament, or who have not really thought about it, but it is a matter of great urgency that they do so, since the main purpose of a parliament is to promote the good of the ordinary people and enhance their sense of nationhood.”

“A representative parliament can only be of benefit if people are convinced from the outset that it can bring benefit, after which everyone pulls together to make it work as well as possible, gradually putting to

rights anything that might have been less than wholly successful, and if each and every person makes every possible effort and thinks what is reasonable to expect of the representatives, and readies himself as if he himself might be called upon to serve as a representative, since it is of no less importance that the public should have an understanding of what goes on, and hold the representatives to account, than that the representatives should think about their work and strive to do it as well as they can.”

“When parliament is to be convened, one of the most important things is to realise clearly what it is supposed to do and what can be expected of it, because if people do not have a clear idea of these things from the outset, then there is the danger that unless parliament does what each and every person imagines it should do, then they will have no high opinion of it and will lose interest in it. If this happens, then there is a great danger that the whole venture will come to nothing.”

At the time when the young visionary published this article in a periodical launched by a few friends in Copenhagen, Icelanders had for centuries been among the poorest people in Europe and Reykjavík was a dilapidated village of only a few hundred people. Some years were yet to pass before elections were held to the resuscitated Althingi, and even then mainly the wealthier farmers and merchants were granted the right to vote. Women were not to have the vote until the following century, and the poorest citizens not until almost a hundred years had passed. The new parliament was merely consultative. It met for only a few weeks every second year, and news of its work sometimes took many months to reach other parts of the country.

In many ways the developments that took place from that state of affairs down to the democratic system of our own day has been revolutionary; democracy does not have a fixed form or a final destination but is a conscious search, a journey towards greater freedom, progress and responsibility. Yet the innermost core remains the same as Jón Sigurðsson described in his article. His view of elected representatives and the status of parliament, the goal of its work and the accountability imposed on it by the nation – these things are worded in such a way as to make us all sense that the text contains an evergreen message even though times have changed and the tasks we now face are mostly of a different type.

There are many things that could be said this autumn as the new parliament convenes in the transformed landscape after the last elections, but the message of the article I have quoted from covers the most vital

points, without the need to express it in different words. Such articles play a crucial role in the nation's history and remain relevant at all times.

It is in the spirit of this article that I ask the members of this house to rise and honour Iceland.