



**Address by the  
President of Iceland,  
Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson,  
at the opening of  
the Althingi,  
9 September 2014**

Now, at the opening of this new session of the Althingi, it is appropriate to recall that seventy years have passed since the foundation of the Republic at Thingvellir. On that occasion the Althingi, and tens of thousands of witnessing Icelanders, and those who were far away in their respective regions, wholeheartedly celebrated final victory in the struggle for full independence, an historical milestone on the journey that had begun about a century previously with the call to arms voiced in the periodicals *Fjölnir* and *Ný félagsrit*; drawing support from the newly restored Althingi.

At that time, the nation numbered only a few tens of thousands. Most people lived in poverty and without any of the rights that we now take for granted. Travel and communication was limited in a country without roads or bridges, and occupations and working methods had remained unchanged for centuries. There was no city in the country; no town: only a few decrepit villages, and most people lived in isolated turf farmhouses.

Boldness and dignity, a strong sense of self-esteem, a feeling of worth based on our literary heritage and the memory of the Old Icelandic Commonwealth – these were the guiding lights of all those who, throughout the nineteenth century, campaigned in the Althingi for broader rights, for a political structure commensurate with Iceland's vision of its own position in the community of nations.

The acquisition of home rule and sovereignty early in the last century then gave the Althingi the power to launch a new advance, to support economic development and progress on other fronts, to score successes in confronting the Great Depression and the repercussions of slumps on global markets.

Nevertheless, when the Republic was founded, Iceland was one of the poorest countries in Europe. That such a small nation should take the decision to establish an independent state was without parallel. Such, however, was the nation's conviction of its worth and its vision of its entitlement that this move had almost unanimous support. In a referendum, over 90% of the electorate backed the decision to establish the Republic and adopt the Constitution. No such expression of democratic will had ever before been recorded in history.

It is probably difficult for most people in the present day to appreciate just how revolutionary the establishment of the Republic of Iceland was at the time. It took our neighbours in Europe nearly a decade to grant full recognition to Iceland's President, the supreme symbol of the new political order, even though he had been elected by a special meeting of the parliament and won in an open election: the President of Iceland was the first head of state in the world to be elected by his nation in a direct democratic vote.

The Republic was clothed in an aura of glory and pride in the heart of all Icelanders, but its economic basis was very weak. Seafood was our main export and the foreign currency it earned was vital as the means to progress in all areas. Almost everything had to be imported: building materials to put up schools, hospitals and other vitally-needed structures; foodstuffs, medicines and equipment; the necessities for developing the infrastructure and society we enjoy today.

This presented the Althingi with a difficult challenge during the first decades of the Republic, since foreign countries sent their trawlers and fishing vessels right up to our shores and took a large part of our fish stocks. Thus, the extension of our economic zone was in essence the second half in the independence struggle. Each time the Althingi asserted Iceland's rights, with extensions of the zone first to four miles, then twelve, then fifty and finally to two hundred miles, the response from abroad took the form either of economic sanctions or the presence of warships in our waters.

However, solidarity and a belief in our cause and the inevitability of justice brought us victory, and in recent decades our nation has enjoyed the fruits of a firmly-based republican constitution and its own natural resources on land and in the ocean.

All these impressive achievements are the legacy that fell to the Althingi of our day. They must be defended constantly; today's parliamentarians must know when to pull together to meet major challenges and ensure continuity in this story of how one of the poorest

countries in Europe secured its independence and achieved one of the top places in terms of welfare and quality of life.

Although the financial crisis and the collapse of the banking system a few years ago threatened these achievements for a time, not least due to the ruthless attempts by others to bend us to their will, we have managed to turn the tide. Our economic growth, low unemployment and the growing strength of a range of export industries and services bear witness to a success that is without parallel elsewhere in Europe.

This has been the work of many, and all the political parties now represented in the Althingi have made their contribution. As the struggle draws to a close, credit must go to the Althingi as a whole; it deserves our appreciation and gratitude.

Iceland's position in the global community, which was the fruit of decisions by the Althingi in decades past to participate in international organisations, was secured and maintained.

Membership of the United Nations and the Nordic Council, which we joined in the first years of the Republic in accordance with broad consensual decisions taken in this chamber, formed the cornerstones of this position. Membership of NATO, by contrast, caused deep dissension, but was carried by the determined leadership of the Government and the will of the parliamentary majority. The clear attitudes of dominant forces in the legislature and the executive later led the country into the European Free Trade Association and the European Economic Area; broader support lay behind the earlier decision to participate in the Council of Europe, and membership of the Arctic Council at the end of the last century received unanimous assent.

Participation in this varied tapestry of international organisations underpins the standing of our Republic in the world at large and is one of the indications of the successes that can largely be credited to the Althingi. In all the steps along this road, decisions were taken on the basis of determined government leadership and the firm will of the majority in parliament; it was also the will of other member states to have Iceland join their ranks without delay.

Iceland's honour and self-esteem were the guiding lights in all these moves, together with a determination whose roots lay deep in the history of the independence struggle and the creation of the Republic; the legacy which the Althingi, and all of us who are elected by the people are bound to honour; a legacy which the Althingi has moulded by its actions ever since it was restored in modern times; a legacy that is the product both of

the leadership of the generations that have sat in this chamber before us and of the multitude that gathered at Thingvellir seventy years ago.

Each new session of parliament forges a new link in this chain, determining its strength as it extends into the future; it is the custodian of our Republic's health, protecting it intact for coming generations.

It is in the spirit of this vision that I ask the members of this house to rise and honour our native land.