



**New Year Address
by the President of Iceland
Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson
1 January 2015**

My Fellow Countrymen,

My wife Dorrit and I wish you all a Happy New Year and prosperity in your undertakings and in time with your families and friends. Firm bonds of solidarity have always served us best, both as individuals and a nation.

As the new year begins, we are reminded yet again of the debt of gratitude we owe to those generations who prepared the ground for the success that Iceland has achieved.

Last year we celebrated the seventieth anniversary of the founding of the Republic at Þingvellir; and this year there will be a variety of events dedicated to the landmark that a century has passed since women acquired the vote and the right to stand for election to the Althingi, thus becoming able to choose representatives in the legislature on an equal footing with men.

In the light of history, these were both revolutionary occasions. Never before had such a poor and small nation assumed sovereign independence and women had traditionally been excluded from the arena of political power.

Here, at Bessastaðir, we are often reminded – almost every day – of how remote these milestones seemed in the first stages of our national journey.

Up in the loft we have an old writing desk, an heirloom from the past, belonging to Sveinbjörn Egilsson who used it when he corrected compositions by his pupil Jónas Hallgrímsson, gave us the Icelandic version of Silent Night and translated the great epics of Homer. This humble desk reminds us that then Iceland had only one school and Reykjavík was a poor village with only a few hundred inhabitants. Icelanders had no civil rights and no say in their own affairs. All power lay with the king and his courtiers; poverty and oppression had for centuries stood in the way of growth and prosperity.

But Bessastaðir also became the home of Theodora and Skúli Thoroddsen, who arrived here with their children and a printing press from Ísafjörður around the turn of the twentieth century. By then their newspaper, Þjóðviljinn, had for years been a vehicle for appeals for increased women's rights; Skúli's editorials and the articles written by Theodora under different pen names echoed the vigorous and hard-hitting arguments of Bríet Bjarnhéðinsdóttir in Reykjavík. The women of Þingeyjarsýsla, together with their sisters-in-arms in Ísafjörður, also sent an address and a call of encouragement to the Þingvellir Convention of 1888.

Nevertheless, nearly thirty years passed before victory was won and celebrated with a procession of women and a display of flags on Austurvöllur, the parliament square.

The seventieth anniversary of the founding of the Republic last year, the events planned in this new year to celebrate the victories in the struggle for women's rights and the centenary of Iceland's acquisition of sovereignty in a few years' time underline achievements that stand both as an encouragement and a model for many other nations in present times.

For a while it has not been in vogue to give due credit to our national achievements and some people are even upset when those are held up for admiration. They decry this as boasting or out of place. The cutting ironies of the critics meet with greater approval than praises voiced by those who draw attention to things that have been done well.

The impact of the collapse of the banking sector, the ensuing disputes and the anger that many people felt for so long afterwards – all set the tone for public discussion, with the result that criticism, often bitterly expressed, became the dominant mode of discourse, with mistakes and recriminations singled out as the most newsworthy items.

In many ways this was understandable as a response to the sudden catastrophe, but in the long term it can be dangerous to be stuck in this rut and lose sight of the beacons that were raised in former times and of long-cherished values and the deeds that gradually brought Iceland into the front rank of nations.

Critical discussion is admittedly a prerequisite for democracy to function properly, but an awareness of our collective achievements is also necessary as a ballast to enable the nation to win victories, maintain its position in the whirling currents of change and advance towards better standards of living.

As we continue to develop the democratic traditions that are deeply rooted in Iceland's history and establish restraint and transparency as the foundation of

our system of governance, we must also rejoice over the achievements both of earlier generations and our own.

Though we must learn from our mistakes, no nation can ever flourish when fed on criticism alone. It must also reserve a place for its good works, honouring its positive achievements and be aware of how often it has managed to catch up with others, and keep abreast of them, and of the steps by which it made its way to the front rank.

Even though it has become rather unfashionable to discuss our positive achievements here at home, it is worth noting that last year, two of the top US universities and one of the most highly respected economic institutions in the world sized up our performance and our standing and placed us either first or among the top few in many areas.

It is an old Icelandic saying that the guest's eye is the one that sees most clearly, so it is all the more interesting to study the conclusions of those who observe Iceland from a distance and rank us in comparison with other countries.

A team of experts headed by Professor Michael Porter of Harvard University published a detailed report last year on where various nations stood in terms of their economy, democratic institutions, wellbeing, health services, human rights, the media and other criteria.

Their findings bear witness to Iceland's achievements. The team placed Iceland at the top in terms of child mortality rate, and sanitation, tolerance and inclusion, nutrition and basic medical care, personal safety, access to information and communications, and the standing of minority groups.

In addition, Iceland is among the world's top nations in terms of social progress, health and wellness, life expectancy for both men and women, private property rights and a low level of violent crime. Iceland also stands out on tolerance for homosexuals but in many countries, unfortunately, freedom in this area is only a remote target.

This detailed report, ranking nations' performance in various dimensions of society, quality of life and the well-being of their people, is an indisputable demonstration of the wide-ranging progress that has taken place in Iceland, particularly when we remember how poorly equipped our country was at the beginning of this process and the terrible toll taken by disease and epidemics right down to the first half of the last century. The report also shows that democratic progress towards a more humane society has produced good results.

The same conclusion was reached by the World Economic Forum, which announced last year that Iceland was in the first place when it came to political empowerment of women, their democratic leadership and education. This may come as a surprise to some people, since everyone is keen to advance women's

position and increase their influence still further. Nevertheless, there is good reason to be proud of our success, and also of the fact that Iceland is one of very few states, if not the only one, where women have now served in all the highest positions of the state and the church; served as leaders of the legislature, the executive and the judiciary, as bishop and president of the republic; the election of Vigdís Finnbogadóttir was an event of global importance at the time.

Progress in this area was slow to begin with. Ingibjörg H. Bjarnason became the first female member of the Althingi in 1923, and during the next 22 years only one other woman was elected. The landscape is now completely different. During the past fifteen years more than 60 women have been elected to the legislature. This figure shows that, notwithstanding some setbacks, we have managed to achieve real results in democratic evolution and human rights.

Sometimes we need reminders from outside to make us see where we stand in relation to others. The judgments of the American experts and the World Economic Forum are such examples, and so too is the honour that Cornell University conferred on Iceland in November last year. Cornell is one of the top universities in the USA, celebrating now its 150th anniversary; a name familiar in our history because its library holds a unique and large collection of Icelandic books, the Fiske Collection.

When it was decided to give the first award for global leadership in sustainable development and the use of green energy, a young institution within Cornell had no hesitation in choosing Iceland for the example it has set in turning away from the use of fossil fuels for electrical generation and space heating and basing its economic development and welfare instead on hydropower and geothermal sources; an example of great relevance to the global community now that the future of humanity is jeopardized by catastrophic climate change.

Our small nation, which in the last century set itself the target of changing traditional fishing and farming to a varied and creative economy, has developed knowledge and technical expertise in the field of green energy that can now be of use to others.

Almost sixty nations have sent gifted young people to study within the Geothermal Training Programme; now totalling almost 600 students. Icelandic energy and engineering companies are currently involved in geothermal projects on almost all continents. The most significant of these include the district-heating systems in Chinese cities developed in collaboration with Sinopec, one of the world's largest enterprises; the aim being to follow Reykjavík's example and replace fossil fuels with natural hot water as an energy source, thus cutting pollution emissions and improving public health;

and the development of a geothermal power station in Ethiopia which will be the largest in Africa.

No one could have prophesied such a future development when the first hot-water pipes were laid in the gravel streets of central Reykjavík and the first homes received pollution-free heat. Nevertheless, this achievement is what Cornell University chose to honour: proof that the energy economy of whole countries can be transformed so as to promote global sustainability and win a victory in the struggle against climate change.

The perceptions of those far-away observers, the specialists from Harvard, Cornell and the World Economic Forum, direct our attention to victories which bring pride and joy to all generations; qualities important to share with our young people.

Together with our literature, music and other cultural expressions, and our research into nature and human life, the achievements I have discussed have earned Iceland a reputation that commands respect and induces cooperation from others.

Nevertheless we know that there is a need for improvement; that challenges await us, that in some aspects our society still needs reforms.

Our most important task is, as I have said more than once in my New Year addresses, to eradicate the poverty that blights the lives of far too many, among them single mothers, old people and the disabled.

Now, as most of our economic sectors are once again growing and the impact of the recession is for the most part passing, we should unite in working towards the goal that no one in Iceland should have to live in poverty and that everyone should have a decent standard of living, thus meeting at last the old demand of the labour movement.

We can draw the energy needed to tackle new tasks from the strength that Iceland now enjoys; the achievements which stand as an encouragement and source of inspiration for others.

The young generation that will soon inherit our country can commence its journey with confidence and pride, building on the solid foundations formed by the achievements of the past.

The New Year brings the promise of better times, opportunities for all, a journey combining the best from our history with reforms made by a nation aiming ever higher, wiser in the light of previous failures, stronger because of the conviction that when determined it can indeed excel.