



**New Year Address
by the President of Iceland
Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson
1 January 2016**

My Fellow Countrymen

My wife Dorrit and I wish you a Happy New Year and prosperity on the new journey ahead; the change of year marks a new departure and the future, as always, is unknown, but circumstances and our own will determine the course we take. This applies both to individuals and to the nation.

In Iceland we can be proud when we look back over the road we have travelled; we can celebrate the achievements of past times and the deeds that raised a poor nation to a position among the foremost; thank those who had the vision of an independent Iceland as their guiding light, who were not disheartened despite adversity and setbacks but forged firmly ahead towards their goals.

In a certain way, Bessastaðir can be seen as the common denominator linking the episodes together. Here the school moulded the characters of the young men who went on to become leaders in the struggle for greater rights and made Iceland's culture and language the cornerstone of their demand for an enhanced national status. It was from here that articles were sent calling for greater democracy in the constitutional structure and for women's rights. It was here that the first President came after the foundation of the Republic at Þingvellir and it was here that torches cast a red glow on the old buildings when, six years ago, the nation demanded that its democratic rights be respected.

Bessastaðir fills each and every President with a deep respect for the history of our country and with humility towards the duties that election to the position entails; it reminds him or her of the power that resides in the will of the people. The President is directly responsible to the people.

The President is also a participant in the daily struggle, lending support and sharing experience; these tasks have assumed steadily greater proportions with the growing complexity and variety in the functioning of our society and increased contact with the rest of the world as nations far and near show interest in forging closer bonds with Iceland.

We are now in the fortunate position where leading nations in Europe, Asia and North America are eagerly striving to broaden their collaboration with us; the growing importance of the Arctic region and our success in utilising clean energy sources play a key role in this advancement.

This past year gave us many indications of Iceland's solid position: The keynote speech delivered by the President of France at the Arctic Circle Assembly that was held here in the weeks leading up to the climate conference in Paris; delegations mandated by the Chancellor of Germany and the President of China, representatives of the White House and the Russian Government, together with 2000 other participants from about fifty countries, showed that Reykjavík is now, every year, the main forum for discussion on the future of the Arctic.

Shortly after this, the British Prime Minister paid us a visit and reiterated the request for an assessment of the benefits of a submarine power cable from Iceland which could, like those from Norway, make a contribution to a new system of clean electricity in Europe.

The same desire to draw on our knowledge and skills, also in the fields of sustainable fishing and fish-processing, was expressed clearly during my recent visits with the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Icelandic experts to Vietnam, South Korea and Singapore.

Iceland has already contributed to the utilisation of green energy sources in dozens of countries; this experience will become even more important now in the wake of the agreement in Paris, where a fundamental change of the energy systems of all countries in the direction of clean energy formed the centrepiece in the outcome; the new global aim in which Iceland is both a model and an inspiration.

When we discuss the position of our good country and make plans for the future it is important to use as our basis a realistic assessment and not to be led astray either by undue optimism or constant denigration.

Although the difficulties following the banking collapse, the struggle during the financial crisis and the adversity we met on many fronts have at times almost silenced all discussions of Iceland's good qualities and the strength of our nation, it is important now, when the worst of our troubles

are over, to make use of the good alternatives on offer, to understand how bounteous the future can be to all of us and to draw added strength from the esteem that Icelanders enjoy throughout the world, an esteem that came to light in various ways in connection with the climate conference in Paris where our achievements in the field of clean energy harnessing constituted the basis for the formation of the new multi-national Global Geothermal Alliance; our land reclamation programme on the black sandflats along our south coast also proved to be an inspiration and encouragement to many people in distant parts of the world.

The vantage point that the President enjoys through dialogue and cooperation with many people, both in Iceland and abroad, has given me a clear view of the good options that face us and a conviction that Iceland's future can be particularly bright, with fortune on our side.

As I said earlier, we have firm bonds with other countries and have made use of the new position of the Arctic and cultivated our long-established contact with our Nordic cousins and with leading nations in Europe and in the New World; we have also managed to build bridges to the continent that will soon be dominant in the world economy: all the leading nations in Asia now cultivate collaboration with Iceland.

We have resources that are becoming constantly more valuable.

The fish stocks and other parts of the marine ecosystem continue to be the basis of our vigorous economy, which has also fostered sophisticated technology and industry connected with the fisheries sector; now, increasingly, they are a laboratory for the development of products that promote health and the curing of diseases.

The natural qualities of our land enable us to produce food, using the vegetation, both in its natural state and under cultivation, for a varied range of production; these qualities are of great importance at a time when food security is a growing problem for many nations.

The energy in the ground beneath our feet and in our rivers continues to be a treasure-chest of revenues, and our experience of utilising these resources brings us ever more openings abroad; know-how in harnessing clean energy has become a new export.

Also, the beauty of our country, the interplay of fire and ice, the gorgeous colours of nature, the majestic expanses of the uninhabited wilderness are drawing constantly more visitors; tourism has become one of our most significant sources of income. In the minds of millions of people all over the world, Iceland is a destination shrouded in mystery and appeal, the country where everyone can walk freely, both on street and

mountain path, a democratic society built on security and equal rights, the atmosphere free of the pollution that plagues foreign cities.

Icelandic culture, which in former times was enshrined mainly in poetry and prose, literature for the native readers, is now a vibrant and international field of many-faceted creativity. Icelandic books, music, films, plays and paintings are now appreciated all over the world. The young generation, by its own talents and abilities, is excelling in every field.

In science and technology, our universities, research institutes and companies have achieved unbelievable results, enabling us to be active participants on the global stage in the creation of new knowledge and the production of techniques and equipment that contribute to ever greater progress.

All these elements are strong pillars in Iceland's position, the foundations of the building dedicated to our future.

Some people may think I have painted this picture in colours too bright; nevertheless it is based on a realistic assessment, an analysis supported by experience and comparison with other nations which my duties as President and my earlier work have enabled me to make.

It is certainly remarkable that, a few years after the great setback caused by the collapse of our banking system, Iceland should be in a choice position with regard to the future; many deserve thanks for this achievement, this transition that has followed from decisions taken by governments, the Althingi and the nation itself over the past few years. The business sector is now blooming; salaries and the standard of living have improved and funding allocated to the health services, welfare, education and research is once again growing.

Therefore, we should all be able to join hands in making further improvements in the position of the elderly and the disabled, and, at last, to take steps to eradicate poverty in our society, poverty which, unfortunately, is still a shameful blot upon us, as I called it in my first New Year Address from this hall.

Yes, many years have passed since then; a long time, yet it has passed with astounding speed: a time of difficult challenges, of joy and also of sorrow; many things now have a different aspect compared with when Guðrún Katrín and I arrived here.

The nation has indeed prospered; solved most of the problems that it has been faced with on its journey. The uncertainty which a few years ago

influenced the attitudes of many people towards the presidential election that then lay ahead is no longer with us.

The confrontation with states in Europe in the Icesave-dispute ended in total victory for Iceland, secured both by the referendums and by the ruling of the EFTA Court.

The application for membership of the European Union and plans for a fundamental change to Iceland's sovereignty have now been set aside and all parties in the Althingi now promise that no such process will ever be set in motion again unless the nation first gives it the go-ahead in a special referendum.

The settlement of the estates of the defunct banks and the abolition of restrictions on economic transactions with other countries will soon be finalised; broad consensus reigns both in parliament and outside it regarding the final steps in this process.

Arguments about a shake-up in Iceland's constitutional structure have given place to an agreement on choosing instead special parts which are likely to receive broad support; to make a priority of introducing provisions on referendums and the national ownership of our natural resources.

The many-faceted uncertainty which, four years ago, resulted in calls on me to continue in office as President, is happily no longer a factor in the current situation in Iceland.

For this reason, the conclusion I announced here on New Year's Day in 2012 applies even more strongly today: "that the situation in Iceland is now such that I can be of greater assistance if my choice of action is subject only to my own will, free of the restraints which the office of the Presidency always imposes on speech and action."

Over the past few months, many people have nevertheless, in conversations, in messages and letters, invoked my sense of duty and stressed that there is still uncertainty in various areas, particularly as regards the execution of parliamentary and state powers in the years ahead.

I deeply appreciate the confidence that all those good people have shown in me, but I ask them, and indeed everyone, to consider fully the description of the choice position in which Iceland now finds itself, and which I have made the main theme of my address today.

In the light of this description, and on the basis of the democracy that is the main feature of our national life, I feel that the right crossroads are

now ahead to transfer the responsibilities of the President to other shoulders, and have therefore decided not to stand for re-election.

Now is a good time for the nation to approach the election of its President in a new way; Iceland's standing and the infrastructure of our life as a nation are stronger than they have been for many a long year.

Even though someone else will hold the rudder as President, I shall always be willing to undertake tasks on our ship of state; I am by no means abandoning ship and will always gladly grasp the oars together with others.

In the years ahead I will be able to attend in a new way to collaboration in the Arctic, consolidating Iceland's position still further as a centre of discussion in that field and strengthening the Arctic Circle Assemblies as annual forums for the nations of the world.

I shall also continue to devote my energies to the fight against climate change and to collaboration with nations far and near on greater use of clean sources of power.

Being free from day-to-day tasks here at Bessastaðir will also give me more time to respond to the growing calls for an international cooperation on the protection of the oceans and the sustainable exploitation of marine resources, a project that could gain strength from the experience and know-how that Iceland can make available.

I hope I shall also have many years to go on with my work with universities, young students, scientists, researchers and scholars, strengthening the academic ties between Iceland and other countries.

It has been my good fortune and a source of joy to have been able to help others in good causes, and I will continue to do so as long as I can.

Service to the nation is the highest duty of the President, one that outlasts the formal responsibilities accompanying the office.

This service will continue to be my guiding light, while at the same time I shall always remember, with gratitude, the trust that the nation has placed in me and the friendship shown by the people to Dorrit, Guðrún Katrín and my family.

I choose to end with the same words as I ended my Inaugural Address on 1 August nearly twenty years ago:

“I ask you all to honour the memory of our ancestors and our native land. May God’s blessing and the bounty of nature bring Iceland good fortune for all the future.”