



**New Year Address
by the President of Iceland
Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson
1 January 2014**

My Fellow Countrymen,

My wife Dorrit and I wish you all a Happy New Year and hope that the return of longer and brighter days will lead us all, our families and friends, on to good deeds and a better life.

It is often said that we Icelanders are like one large family, rallying together when setbacks strike or the threat of natural catastrophes looms over the communities in our rural areas. In times of crisis such solidarity has proved to be of crucial importance and we have been reminded again this winter of the victories it has brought us.

The recent celebrations marking the 350th anniversary of the birth of Árni Magnússon highlighted the fact that the return to Iceland of the manuscripts of our medieval sagas and poetry was achieved through the nation adopting a firm and unshakeable position, giving our elected representatives and scholars the moral strength to convince the Danes of the justice of our cause. The solution set one of the seals on the permanent friendship between our Nordic nations.

It was therefore gratifying that Queen Margrethe II of Denmark joined with us in celebrating this anniversary in the National Theatre where artists and writers presented a colourful programme surveying the continuity in our thousand-year history. The manuscripts that Árni Magnússon salvaged from oblivion, Halldór Laxness's novel *Gerpla*, the poem *Blóðhófnir* by Gerður Kristný and the trilogy that Einar Kárason based on the events described in *Sturlunga saga* are all sprung from the same root: stories and poems from across the centuries are to Iceland what palaces, castles and great cathedrals are to many other nations.

Our victory in the campaign to have the manuscripts returned is one of many examples of how solidarity has proved to be a more fruitful path for

Iceland than resorting to disputes and conflict which often catch more immediate attention.

In our struggle to come to terms with the consequences of the banking crash, the disputes were often so complex, the dissension so vehement and so deeply entrenched, that the lessons of history about the value of consensus and unity were for the most part swept aside.

Now, however, it is necessary, and even vital, that we place those lessons before us once again and take the wisdom they teach us as our guide wherever we can, seeking conciliation and agreement instead of throwing more and more fuel on the bonfire of confrontation.

Unfortunately, in today's media, disputes and controversy are regarded as being more newsworthy than reconciliation and the outcome of peaceful means. This is the approach of television and other media, both here in Iceland and abroad. In a new book about the influence of the internet and social networking sites, Eric Schmidt, the Chairman of Google, has described vividly how this new technology has unleashed a flood of negative attitudes, invective and even hatred, with an urge to hurt or humiliate emerging as the prime motivation in the babble of the blogosphere. In this way, many people behave amorally in cyberspace, like the psychopathic killer Þorgeir Hávarsson in the Saga of the Sworn Brothers who, when asked why he had slain an innocent shepherd, answered: "He had done nothing to deserve that from me, but I simply could not resist when I saw how conveniently he was positioned to receive the blow."

A nation that becomes embroiled in the cut-and-thrust of criticism and quarrelling and loses its memory of the power of unity is on dangerously thin ice. It needs to recall how the pillars of its independence, its economy and its welfare were raised and strengthened by the forces of solidarity and agreement.

The Constitution, Home Rule, Sovereignty, the Republic – all these cornerstones rested on the collective unity of the nation. Victories were won when this unity was dominant. We never reached any milestones on the way towards independence when we were divided against ourselves.

Similarly in the struggle to extend our exclusive economic zone – to 4, then to 12, then 50 and finally to 200 miles. Even though every country in Europe then opposed us, and Britain boycotted the landing of our fish and sent the Navy into our waters, our people, united in their purpose, succeeded in grasping victory and went on to play a leading role in the development of an international treaty on the right to utilise marine resources.

A little over twenty years ago, after inflation had retarded economic growth for decades and eroded the quality of life for working people, a national

reconciliation was eventually hammered out to ensure stability and a permanent basis for progress and prosperity.

We should also recall how the determined will of the overwhelming majority secured us victory in the bitter Icesave dispute. At the end of the day our position had the law on its side.

It is notable how, both in the struggle to extend our economic zone and in the fight against the ghost of Icesave, it was national solidarity that paved the way for a just solution. The democratic will of the people rested on a firm foundation.

It is no mean asset, this store of examples from the mid-nineteenth century down to our own day, to which we can turn to see how broad agreement and unity have brought Iceland prosperity and been the basis of permanent success; at the same time reminding us that strife and dissension have led us nowhere.

Although by convention we speak of the government and the opposition in the Althingi, it is valuable to remember that the dignity of that institution has been greatest when all parties manage to rally together: the parliament gains in strength when its members bury the hatchet. This was the case when the Althingi managed to modernize the Constitution in the closing years of the last century, giving the nation a new chapter on human rights, changing the constituency boundaries and the electoral system, abolishing the division of the Althingi into chambers and democratising the power to dissolve parliament. As a whole, these amount to extensive reforms of our constitutional structure – and they were supported by all.

The power of unity has also been demonstrated in the fight against the consumption of alcohol and drugs in our junior schools. Through a concerted effort by all sports and youth federations nationwide, local authorities, teachers, the academic community and others, consumption has been brought down from what was a dangerous level almost two decades ago to such small figures that our success has attracted international attention.

Now that, with a full five years of cleaning up after the banking crash behind us, we face a new period of reconstruction, new opportunities and a better life, it is important to draw yet again on the benefits of standing together in unity.

In dealing with the burden of household debt, a covenant between the generations is the prerequisite for a broadly-based solution, just as a national effort is needed to raise skills in Iceland's schools. Iceland must set itself the goal of having its teenagers ranked among the best in the world in terms of their reading ability. For a nation distinguished by its literary heritage – a nation of book lovers as we sometimes call ourselves – nothing less is acceptable.

The same applies to the fight against poverty among our population. It is completely unacceptable that thousands of people should have to rely on gifts of food at Christmas and even on aid of this type all year round. It is painful to draw attention to the fact yet again in my New Year Address that poverty of this type, particularly among young mothers and single persons, is a shameful blot on the fabric of our nation, a blot that we could so easily, by a concerted effort, make into a something to be consigned forever to the history books.

Solidarity has always served us best when we have faced the challenge of building something to last. It has been our guiding light in overcoming difficult obstacles.

Of course there will always be issues on which opinion will be divided; there will always be conflicts of interest, lines of attack and lines of defence over individual decisions; differing views on the merits of approaches and policies. But our strength, and Iceland's national well-being, will grow steadily when consensus and agreement are the basis on which we build. It was the way our small nation was able, in the course of a few decades, to consolidate its independence, develop its economy and welfare system and acquire a permanent position in the community of nations on the strength of its own abilities.

It is therefore highly gratifying to note that the Althingi unanimously approved Iceland's policy on the Arctic; creating a firm basis for a new structure in our international relations.

The Arctic, which used to be regarded as being beyond the edge of the habitable world, is now increasingly drawn into the centre of global concerns. The Arctic Council confirmed this change by the historical resolution it passed in May this year. From now on, more than half of the G-20 states, those that play the leading roles in the global economy, will participate with us, in one way or another, in taking decisions about the Arctic future. These include leading nations of Europe, Asia and America.

This new development creates a multitude of new opportunities for Iceland – in the sciences, commerce, the economy and culture. Our island, once isolated in the far north, is now on the global highway in a key position in a region that will play a decisive role during this century, both as a staging post as more and more is done to exploit natural resources and transport goods across the Arctic and, not least, in serving millions of tourists from all parts of the world who are eager to experience the wonders of nature and to see the Midnight Sun and the Northern Lights.

The rise in the importance of the Arctic will bring our band of brother-nations, Iceland, the Faroes and Greenland, many new challenges, and make the west-nordic union into an important unit in the design of the new world order.

We must remember that Greenland is equal in size to half of Western Europe, and that its people are increasingly seeking to collaborate with us, their neighbours in Iceland.

Arctic issues are rapidly receiving more and more attention at meetings of Nordic leaders; a special forum a core in the visit to Iceland by the President of Finland last year.

I also observed at my many meetings on both sides of the Atlantic last year that the Arctic region is at the top of the agenda when collaboration with Iceland comes up for discussion.

This was very much in evidence at my meetings in February with President François Hollande and other French officials, at my meetings in April with a large number of Congressmen in Washington, with leaders of both the Democrats and the Republicans in the US Senate; and at my discussions in June with the German Chancellor Angela Merkel, with the German President Joachim Gauck and with the authorities of the Port of Bremen, who described their vision of a new international harbour in Finnafjörður, on the east coast of Iceland.

Russia's desire to develop its good and longstanding relationship with Iceland with greater emphasis on the Arctic region came across clearly in my discussions with President Vladimir Putin in September; a view he had expressed to me on previous occasions.

There was also clear evidence of the interest displayed by leading nations in Asia at an international conference in Harpa attended by over a thousand delegates in October. These included representatives from India, China, Korea, Japan and Singapore, and from nearly 40 other countries. The purpose to discuss the future of the Arctic, the melting of its sea ice and ice cap, climate change, natural resources and the economy, new shipping routes, scientific collaboration, the interests of indigenous peoples, legislation and legal reform, security and rules of conduct.

After being isolated for centuries, and held tight in the shackles of the cold war during its first decades as an independent republic, Iceland is now a much-sought-after partner in the growing collaboration over the New North. It is in a key position in many institutions and contact networks, both Nordic and European, and also in others that extend all the way to Asia and across the Atlantic to the USA and Canada.

It is a blessing for a small nation that now stands on the threshold of a new era, after coming back onto its feet following the collapse of its banks, to have the opportunity to embark on such a journey and utilise it in the interests of all; a blessing enhanced by the unanimity on Arctic policy that was reached in the

Althingi and that enjoys the support of all parties as well as broad interest on the part of the academic community, business enterprises and associations in many fields.

Other nations have also reaped benefits from solidarity and agreement as was brought to the attention of people all over the world at the funeral of Nelson Mandela, the leader who suffered decades of incarceration but used his freedom to demonstrate to black and white alike that the future would have to be built on mutual trust and forgiveness of former injustices: without conciliation, the homeland would never be able to advance.

We in Iceland also have our store of accumulated wisdom, the experience of our history to serve us as we journey forward, from the conflict of recent years towards lasting cohesion and solidarity.