



**Address by  
the President of Iceland  
Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson  
at the opening of  
the Althingi  
8 September 2015**

The sovereignty of our nation, its independence, which was ratified on the foundation of the Republic and its right over marine resources in a zone extending hundreds of miles from the country's shores – these all bear witness to the Althingi's achievements and have been the foundations of our progress and prosperity, the ballast that has secured Iceland a firm place in the international community.

The journey to these achievements was sometimes not a smooth one, but the Althingi always managed to demonstrate its capacity for sustained hard work and the will to work together in times of the greatest pressure, securing victories at each stage until the goals were reached.

The broad powers that parliament now wields to good effect is based on the struggles of former times, the life's work of those who voted at the parliamentary meetings of the past and debated resolutions and the substance of legislation.

On each occasion, the opening of parliament is a reminder of this history, the legacy that democratic elections confer upon us and at the same time of our responsibility towards the future; it brings home to us the fact that the time each of us has in this chamber is only a small chapter in the long history of the Althingi and highlights the duty we have to pass on undamaged the precious legacy of the Althingi to those who come after us.

So young is our Republic that when, just on fifty years ago, I was here, as part of the small group of reporters up in the balcony – in those days the party-affiliated newspapers and the National Broadcasting Service's single radio channel were the only organs that reported the day-to-day work done in this chamber – there was still a team of leading

parliamentarians sitting here for all parties who had been present at Þingvellir as members of the Althingi on 17 June 1944, when the foundation of the Republic and the election of the first President were declared in the rain by the banks of the river Öxará. Some of them had even held ministerial portfolios during the Great Depression; years before foreign warships appeared outside the harbour at the beginning of the war.

The struggle for Iceland's full sovereignty had then gone on for nearly a whole century and everyone knew that sovereignty was the cornerstone in our vision of independence, a right that later became consolidated in our confrontation with foreign states over the extension of our economic zone; sovereignty was the precondition for a small nation to be able, eventually, to win out over a world power; sovereignty was also the decisive weapon recently when an association of European states tried to coerce Iceland into shouldering the debts of a private bank.

History, both past and present, shows us many examples of how a small nation's sovereignty may play a crucial role in determining its destiny. This truth lay at the heart of the reasoning and convictions of the generations who dedicated their efforts to the independence campaign; it was the bedrock which later enabled the Althingi to give the nation full control of the resources of the sea and the continental shelf.

Iceland's constitutional structure is hallowed by this principle of sovereignty, by provisions that the leaders of the independence struggle regarded as being among the most valuable gains in the nation's struggle for its rights.

Now, however, we hear a call made in the name of a committee discussing the Constitution, saying that this new session of parliament must change this cornerstone of Iceland's constitutional structure in the next few weeks; that time is short because, for the sake of economy and convenience, we must use the opportunity of next spring's presidential election for this purpose.

The substantive reasons given here include no reference either to the best interests of the nation or to any strong will emanating from the people, but merely general phrases about international collaboration, legal technicalities and the wishes of some officials. Yet ever since the foundation of the Republic, Iceland has succeeded very well in cultivating many-faceted international collaboration through the United Nations, the Nordic Council, NATO, EFTA and other alliances and in having productive and varied contacts with states, large and small, in all parts of the globe, without any need to amend the sovereignty provisions of the Republic, the sacred legacy of independence.

If, on the other hand, it is now the Althingi's intention to start tinkering with this cornerstone of the Constitution of the Republic, then this should be done with great caution, with close attention given to wording and all aspects of the matter; broad discussion should be initiated among the people concerning the consequences of such an amendment, a discussion commensurate with the democratic demands of our time and the debt of gratitude that we owe to the generations who, over a full century, dedicated their efforts to sovereignty.

The Constitutional Committee has also indicated that it will make proposals on referendums and on the national ownership of natural resources; ideas which have admittedly been discussed thoroughly and frequently over the past years and even decades. Consequently, they are founded on a broader and more democratic debate.

Yet it is also a demanding task to choose the right wording for such provisions in the Constitution, particularly when it is clear that opinion is divided both within the Althingi and outside it as to how far to go, how broad the right to demand referendums on individual pieces of legislation ought to be and how categorically the nation's ownership of natural resources should be stated in the Constitution; what is actually to be entailed in the wording of the new provisions.

I have long been of the opinion that articles on national ownership and referendums should be included in the Constitution, but I have also stated repeatedly, both in the past and now, that compiling such articles is an exacting task, and that neither a narrow time-frame nor motives of financial advantage may jeopardize the quality of the work.

Combining a referendum on such amendments with next spring's presidential elections is of little significance and is even, in its nature, anti-democratic. If it is considered necessary to amend fundamental aspects of the Constitution, then the expense involved in holding a special referendum for that purpose is a minor consideration; it is only natural that people should have an opportunity to assess such amendments free of other distractions.

In addition, it is necessary that the constitutional structure of the state should not be in question when the nation chooses its president next spring, in question due to uncertainty surrounding provisions which, directly or indirectly, will change the powers and position of the president.

I therefore repeat now the same words of warning that I included in my address at the opening of parliament four years ago: that the Althingi must ensure that the people know with certainty what position the

president is to occupy in the constitutional structure of the state when they go to the polls: otherwise, the presidential election could be a journey into uncertainty.

To yoke substantial amendments of the Constitution together with the election of the President of the Republic is contrary to the democratic nature of both tasks and this could only be done propitiously if broad and general agreement were reached, both in parliament and outside it, on the constitutional amendments so that they did not stand as a separate bone of contention in the debates and campaigns surrounding the presidential election.

Iceland is not such a poor country that it cannot give its people, by means of separate polls, the independent right to decide on new constitutional arrangements and to elect the President of the Republic in another ballot, so choosing into whose hands presidential power and responsibilities are to be placed.

Thus, as has always been the case, great responsibility lies with the members of the Althingi, particularly when the fundamental rights of the people and the constitutional structure of the Republic are on its agenda. Special care must be lavished on such tasks, as history shows us that provisions of this type stand for a long time and mould the destiny of the nation and individuals more decisively than other laws.

Everyone who is elected to the Althingi understands such duties clearly and the trust implicit in their election. I know this well from my own experience; connections that have lasted for half a century, even though my responsibilities and position have undergone change.

Now, as I in accordance with the mandate given to me by the people open the Althingi for the last time, I express both my profound respect and my sincere gratitude to the parliament; recall the many people who have been my colleagues, particularly those who shared with me the benefit of their experience; in fact, all those who were my fellow partners in parliamentary sessions and committees.

The Althingi has been connected with my work for much of my life; it has profoundly influenced my responsibilities and duties towards the Icelandic people, imparting to me lessons that have proved valuable and auspicious for attending to my work as President.

Members of the Althingi are given a historical legacy and, at the same time, an opportunity to mould the future, drawing their power from the freedom and democratic structure that the independence struggle established.

Here, at all times, tasks must be approached with the humility of those who know that all our destinies are uncertain; that the nation will judge, sometimes severely, and that support may wane without notice; no one who is given a seat here can be sure of holding power in the long term.

We also know that all periods come to an end; that the good standing of the Althingi and the prosperity of our nation are higher than the position of individuals; they have their entrances and their exits – but the Althingi itself keeps its position in the history of Iceland.

I thank the parliament sincerely for our relationship over the past years and ask the members to rise and honour our country.