



Inaugural Address
by
Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson
into the Office of the President of Iceland
1 August 2000

Fellow Icelanders

With humility and gratitude I have assumed the responsibilities of the office of President of Iceland anew. The nation has vested great trust in me and I pledge here to devote all my thoughts and actions to the good of Iceland.

The course which we embarked on together with my election four years ago has been an instructive and maturing experience for me, sharpening my understanding and view of the nation's will and expectations. The President is not merely the representative of the country, the only official elected directly by the nation itself rather than at the instigation of parliament or political parties, but also a tiller of the soil where progress and welfare are sown, one of the team in the tough battle with the challenge and privilege of being an Icelander.

Since the establishment of the Republic, the Icelandic nation has shown, through gestures great and small, the extent of its respect for the Presidency and the strength of its willingness for cooperation and dialogue with the person in whom that confidence is vested. The relationship between the President and the nation is governed by the articles of the constitution and also by the customs and expectations that living democracy shapes at any given time. Extensive links are forged by what is achieved in practice, the will which is the driving force behind democratic government where the judgement of the people themselves is paramount.

In joy and adversity, at times of rejoicing and sorrow, I have felt your support and goodwill. For this I give my thanks on this day. The past few years have been a time of tribulation for my family and myself because of Guðrún Katrín's illness and death, and we would hardly have regained our bearings without your warm feelings and help.

The memory of Guðrún Katrín is more precious to us than words can describe and the respect and gratitude which the nation has shown are a great comfort to us. Guðrún Katrín's outlook on life and good advice will continue to follow us on our long course and her share in my election will never be forgotten.

The path of life is not always a joyful one. An important point is never to lose faith in what is good, and to welcome the blessings that come our way. Most people seem to understand that the President is not empty form but rather a person with a heart which beats and a soul which takes nourishment. Without joy and happiness in daily life, little would come of the tasks that duty presents.

From my visits around Iceland and the guests I have welcomed to Bessastaðir I have discovered just how many things are expected of the President, how the march of time and the global process of transformation also change the nature of the requests that the President receives.

When Iceland was a less diversified and more isolated society, more sharply divided by the Cold War and fierce labour conflicts, the Presidency like everything else was subject to the principles that applied at that time. The President sometimes had a more distant profile than in our times, but also often played an active part when coalition governments were being formed, in order to resolve the problems that parliamentary crises and party political friction could cause. Although in more recent times parliament has more easily performed its duty of giving the nation a majority government, the President continues to serve as a safeguard, to assume responsibility if all else fails.

The enormous growth which is now taking place in Icelandic society and our increased contact at global level have created many new tasks for the President and increased the effort he devotes to other ones. In effect the President, in cooperation with others, has become an active player and analyst in the process of transformation which is continually bringing Iceland new milestone achievements and strengthening its position. The President joins everyone else on the path towards change, instead of sitting alone and isolated at Bessastaðir.

It is a particular delight to feel the wishes that young people entertain, their interest in seeking the assistance, dialogue and advice of the President. In the President they see at once a representative and a partner; not a remote symbol but rather an ally in making their dreams come true.

Artistic and cultural creativity, scientific and technological advances, innovations in the worlds of computers and business, selflessness in the battle against the threat posed by drug abuse, devotion to sport and health – all these are the positive qualities of the young people who are emerging now.

The generation which will soon assume control and leadership in most fields probably has a better education and broader vision than those who are at the helm today. It is therefore important for us to make every effort to help them on their way and ensure that our own country will be able to benefit in full from the talents and contributions of those who will lead the way in the future.

At the same time we also need to pay careful attention to the danger signs that can be seen in various places, if Iceland is to remain one of the leading countries in terms of providing opportunities for young people.

The school year in Iceland is shorter and our educational performance and spending lower than among most of the countries with which we align ourselves. So how can we reasonably expect Iceland to continue to excel as the years go by in the new century?

Even though all research findings show that education is the best investment available, we continue to prefer other options.

When work and upheavals everywhere give families less opportunity to bring up and train young people than was the case in the past, schools need to become powerful centres which not only provide instruction but also instil restraint. Otherwise we face the risk of trouble.

We have to respond to growing lack of discipline in Icelandic society, cultivate mutual respect, focus and self-control, courtesy and consideration for others.

We must unite in the urgent task of ensuring that the generations to come enjoy the best of all that is available, and be prepared to adapt our schools, their organization and status, to the vibrant society of the new century.

Technology has not only given us opportunities for prosperity and progress. It is also altering the nature and substance of democracy itself. Now, each individual can make his or her opinion and comments known anywhere and at any time, and invoke knowledge and capability in order to insist on being allowed to participate. The form of government which only entitles the public to express its decisions by elections every few

years, and restricts formal channels of consultation to party political institutions and professional organizations, is really only a relic of the past. We now have the possibility of restoring active democracy, a reality in which power is vested in the people themselves. However, the old framework continues to deceive many people who believe that leadership must inevitably be in the hands of the few.

In particular, the problem facing political parties is that they appear to have increasing difficulty in keeping their finger on the pulse of the age and tackling the new tasks which emerge. Productive dialogue is rapidly being transferred to new forums and parliament itself no longer reflects and shapes the fate of society in the way it once did.

This trend is becoming increasingly prominent and it is important for all of us in positions of trust and responsibility to try to help Iceland to gain from the democratic creative force unleashed by new technology and international movements, and benefit from policy-making on vital issues which is based on knowledge, open-mindedness and wide-reaching dialogue, where all people have an equal right to comment and state their opinions. Otherwise there is a risk that more mistakes will be made, and expensive ones too, and that Iceland will be left behind in many fields.

A crucial factor is that political parties should apply themselves to defining their tasks and actions in line with the changed times we live in, so that they can manage to function properly and inspire young people to seek public office.

During the term of office which has just come to an end, discussions with people all over the country have given me wide insights into this process of fermentation, into people's quests for ways to shape their own futures and fortunes. Perhaps Icelanders are more candid towards their President than towards other people in positions of influence, because he is responsible only to the nation that grants him his mandate. The interests he seeks to safeguard are not those of the government or the opposition, of political parties or forces of authority. The President's only bonds are with the Icelandic nation.

During my travels around Iceland I have found out how valuable the bonds of trust between the President and the nation are for people in the regions. In their campaigns for the interests of their communities, people in the regions use such opportunities to present the very best they have to offer, highlight local innovations and initiatives, show how they cultivate the heritage preserved there which has often been an influential factor in focusing the identity of the whole nation.

The time I have spent with people who live in communities all around Iceland has been both instructive and delightful for me and I hope it has also been of some use to them. I would like to express my thanks now for those good times and hope that we can continue on this course of constructive work together during my new term of office.

In fact, the whole of Iceland is affected by the rapid changes which have so greatly transformed many parts of the world. Our country is no longer an isolated settlement at the northern edge of the ocean; instead, we are at the centre of the maelstrom. Our well-being depends on successful relations with all nations; our independence to an increasing extent hinges upon cooperation with others.

We have for a long time devoted ourselves to our neighbours in Scandinavia and Europe, achieved close links with the USA and Canada. It has been a pleasure for me to have taken part in demonstrating how valid and productive Nordic cooperation is in our times and will continue to be in the new century; in consolidating the friendship which joined Iceland and the Baltic States together during times of difficulty; and in taking advantage of the heritage shared through the explorations and discoveries of a thousand years ago in order to give renewed vigour to our cooperation and friendship with the nations of North America, as I said we should do when I was first inaugurated as President.

In the years to come we must strive to demonstrate in practice that we also want to create partnerships with other nations in more distant parts. Countries in Asia, Africa and South America are rapidly becoming places where we have interests at stake, just like Europe before them. This we can see from the increased interest shown by countries in these parts of the world in cooperation and trade with Iceland, in finding out about our culture and our approaches.

The world shares a single fate; the Earth itself is our heritage; responsibility for it undivided.

We must not rely in the long run on the island-dweller's attitude that anything goes because we have no neighbours.

Fish stocks, the biosphere, the entire environment – these will only be conserved if everyone makes the best effort he can and respects each other. The continual quest for exemptions and exceptions for ourselves will surely come to an end some time, and soon or later may harm our reputation.

The people who brought us independence and sovereignty were guided by a vision of Icelandic prosperity and well-being. Have we managed to rally like that around an identity for ourselves which will hold good in the new century? We must not break the peace which, in spite of occasional internal frictions, makes us into a nation.

We must reach consensus about how to use the resources of nature, establish a truce which we all respect concerning the highlands and uplands, make a lasting national accord about which countenance we intend to preserve intact for Iceland.

Iceland's image and the respect it commands will increasingly be determined by our loyalty towards our country's nature, that beautiful work of creation which has made Iceland unique in the world.

The leaders of the Icelandic campaign for independence sought their most effective arguments in the unbroken continuity of language and culture from the earliest of times, and we must preserve that foundation for all time to come. Respect for nature has now acquired a similar status. Thus we must strive to achieve a consensus which we can all accept, so that we will all be together in the new campaign to preserve our independence, which awaits us in the new century.

Icelandic nature is the primal source, our treasure and our dowry.

We must not let either conflicts over fleeting interests or the gap in living standards which we are increasingly witnessing divide this nation gradually into opposing factions. Indifference towards the less fortunate members of the community must never gain the upper hand here. Thus we must pay close attention to growing danger signs about poverty and the inability to provide for oneself, especially among the elderly, the generation that did everything for Iceland that it possibly could.

As a nation we have been blessed with fortune and we have never had greater scope to do good works. We have everything we need to serve as a model for others. It all depends entirely on our own will.

Humble in heart and resolute in mind I again assume the responsibility with which the nation has entrusted me. May I be granted that I can serve you all for the benefit and good of our country.