



Address
by the President of Iceland
Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson
at a Conference on the Multicultural Society in Iceland
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Ladies and Gentlemen

Icelandic history began when this country was settled and we have been brought up to admire and respect those pioneers who became Icelanders more than 1000 years ago.

They left their homes in Norway and Denmark, Ireland and the British Isles, crossed the ocean and began their lives in an unfamiliar country. Their customs and habits differed, some were Christian, others heathen, but they were all determined to make Iceland their home.

Those original settlers founded an assembly, the Althing, and lived by the spirit and letter of the law, both of which were virtually unknown in Europe when most matters were settled by the rule of monarchy and might of the sword. Several centuries later their descendants chose to commit these stories of immigration and settlement to calfskin, and the Sagas of Icelanders earned their place of honour in the temple of world literature.

We Icelanders are originally a nation of immigrants and although centuries of geographical isolation hindered visits by people from other parts of the world, it is vital that we do not lose sight of those roots when we welcome newcomers who have arrived in recent years and have enriched our society and culture in diverse ways. And in the long context of Icelandic culture it has always been the case that it has reached the greatest heights when the most interaction has taken place between influences from outside and innovation from within.

We see widespread signs that life in Iceland is now more diverse and dynamic, livelier and more colourful, thanks to the contribution made by these people who have made Iceland their new home.

We have all acquired new views of customs and culture, religion and music, cuisine and everyday life through the knowledge and experience which are disseminated by living with new neighbours.

Participation by new Icelanders in many aspects of the economy, health service and culture have enabled us to strengthen these fields in a powerful way.

We can only be grateful for all this when issues involving new citizens are taken onto the agenda. At the same time it is important to acknowledge the need to remain alert and to present the new citizens of Iceland with the assistance they need, difficult as we sometimes find it to understand how urgent this might be.

The language which we learn to use and love from childhood is a tough challenge for people who have been brought up to speak others. In fact, we Icelanders have shown an incredible lack of understanding about the need to design in-depth educational materials for people from other countries who want to learn our language. There is not much in the way of materials for teaching Icelandic as a foreign language and little consideration has been given to presenting it in accessible forms through new computer technology, the Internet and multimedia, taking advantage of methods which make learning an enjoyable pastime.

Nor have we made much effort to interpret our history and culture for people who come here from distant countries. Perhaps this is a legacy from the time of our campaign for independence, when all the issues were presented and highlighted with the unmistakable mark of a nation justifying its claims for freedom and sovereignty. Now, however, we enjoy security and steadfastness, and no one poses a threat to Iceland's existence as a nation. Thus it should be easier to open our own eyes to the best ways for making the Icelandic heritage accessible for the new citizens of our country.

We need to continue to strengthen and cultivate an attitude of respect for the birthrights, customs and religions of people who come here from other countries. In this regard we must act like true cosmopolitans, seeing and realizing that Iceland is rapidly becoming a reflection in microcosm of the diversity which is the dominant form elsewhere.

I wish you all the best in your discussions of the urgent issues which are on the agenda here and hope that all of us, both newcomers to Iceland and equally those with older roots, will jointly create a richer, more diverse and more understanding Icelandic society in the course of time.