



STATEMENT BY THE PRESIDENT OF ICELAND

1. Democracy, freedom and human rights are the fundamental principles of the Icelandic system of government.
2. Wide opportunities to express opinions, evaluate developments and obtain reliable news of domestic and foreign affairs are important prerequisites for our democracy to be a living reality.
3. In modern society, the media are the interface that enables the public to enjoy such rights. Diverse and dynamic media, together with the separation of state powers, are preconditions for a democratic society to be able to flourish and evolve.
4. While the separation of powers is secured by the constitution, the media have more complex roots. For this reason, it is necessary for the laws and rules governing them clearly to serve democratic aims, and for a broad consensus to prevail on such legislation, just as an extensive social accordance is needed on how the separation of powers is arranged.
5. The media are such an important force in modern democratic government that they are often termed the fourth power. Many people believe that the media have more effect on the real democracy that nations enjoy than formal rules delimiting the authority of the main institutions. Our constitution states: “The law may never provide for censorship or other similar limitations to freedom of expression.”
6. Independent and strong, diverse and free media are a cornerstone of democracy.
7. In an age of increasing globalisation, flourishing Icelandic media are also essential if we are to continue to preserve the Icelandic language, possess an independent culture and be able to evaluate world affairs on our own terms. Vigorous Icelandic media strengthen our position in competition with foreign media and play a key role in ensuring that Icelandic culture and the Icelandic language retain and consolidate their status in the new century.

8. Heated controversy has arisen recently concerning the legal foundation that is created for the media in a bill that Parliament has now passed. It has also repeatedly been claimed that this bill is in breach of both the constitution and international treaties. Whether such claims are justified will be weighed up by the courts of law. However, it is important that legislation on the media should be backed up by extensive dialogue within the community, and that a general consensus should prevail about the procedures and conclusions.

9. Regrettably, the necessary accord between Parliament and the nation over such a major issue has been lacking. The media are such a cornerstone of our democratic government and culture in Iceland that it is inappropriate for a lasting, deep gulf to exist between the will of parliament and the will of the people. Such a gulf needs to be bridged.

10. This will best be done if the nation is assigned the right afforded to it in the constitution of the Republic of Iceland, and evaluates the bill in a national referendum.

11. I have therefore decided, in accordance with Article 26 of the Constitution, not to ratify the bill amending the Broadcasting Act and Competition Act, and submit it to the nation to pass its verdict. According to the Constitution, such a referendum shall be held “as soon as circumstances permit.”

12. My decision does not entail a criticism of either Parliament or the Government, nor a material standpoint towards the bill itself. Only the conclusion that the most appropriate course for us Icelanders is for the nation to have the opportunity to pass its verdict. Under our system of government, the President of Iceland and other elected representatives derive their authority and their mandate from the nation. The nation, according to the constitution, has the final word.

Bessastaðir, June 2, 2004