



**Inaugural address
by the President of Iceland,
Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson,
1st August 2004**

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Now, for the third time, the nation has entrusted me with the office of President of Iceland, with the responsibilities and obligations that this trust implies.

Uppermost in my mind at this moment are feelings of gratitude towards the people of this country and respect for our national heritage and our hopes for a prosperous future.

The years that have passed since I first accepted this office have been instructive and rewarding; they have often been difficult, yet also laden with happy times. I hope that this experience will serve me in the journey that lies ahead. The support I have received from people across the country, in all walks of life, in towns and rural areas, and your affection and goodwill, have given me the strength to tackle this demanding task, and I wish to express my sincere thanks to you all.

In the sixty years since the republic was founded, Iceland's presidents have often had to address themselves to difficult questions. Their actions and their contributions to our national history have proved positive and led to advancement in many fields.

We think back to Sveinn Björnsson and Ásgeir Ásgeirsson, Kristján Eldjárn and Vigdís Finnbogadóttir with gratitude for their work in the service of the nation and the good fortune that graced all their actions.

The office of the presidency has changed with the passing years, and this process will continue in the future. What is important, however, is to preserve its foundations in the national consciousness and its position in the constitutional structure as we tackle the transformations that are part and parcel of global developments and the future of Iceland.

The world we find before us, early in this new century, is very different from what it was 60 years ago, when Icelanders gathered at

Thingvellir to celebrate the foundation of the republic and a president was elected for the first time. The rain that poured down on that memorable occasion proved nevertheless to be a good omen, ushering in an age of growth and prosperity: few other countries in the world have experienced transformation on the scale that Iceland has undergone in the years since the republic was founded. The progress we have made imposes on our shoulders obligations of many types, not only towards the future generations in our own country, but also towards the rest of the world and those nations that face enormous problems and wish to learn from our experience.

We now share responsibilities with the rest of the world; no matter where we live on the globe, our destinies are interrelated. Loyalty to one's home community and participation in global transformation – these are the twin leading motifs that will preside over the lives and careers of the younger generation. Never before has the youth of Iceland had such opportunities. Never before have our young people had such scope for being both good Icelanders and good citizens of the world.

In the times of change that lie ahead, it is vital for us to maintain contact with our roots; the memory of our origins and history and our links with our forebears, who gave our country their lives' work. It is vital that our Icelandic heritage should continue in the minds of us all as a living reality, a source of inspiration and encouragement.

It was a miracle how our nation managed to survive in centuries past despite oppression, plagues, volcanic eruptions, foreign domination and internal dissension. In those days, the memory of our earlier history, recorded in ancient poetry and prose, was a beacon of hope and perseverance and gave people the courage and patience to go on. It fed their longing for freedom, which became the dominant element in the nation's consciousness when independence became Icelanders' rallying cry.

Certainly, it is almost unbelievable to think that a nation that consisted of about sixty thousand people when the schoolboys of the Latin School at Bessastaðir discussed the resuscitation of the Icelandic language and the yoke of foreign power, should now be on an equal footing with other members of the international community, in many respects a model to others, with a vigorous culture and a range of creative scientific activity and an open and confident democratic structure, based on respect for human rights and the opportunities each individual has to develop his or her abilities and talents.

Our path to independence was marked by many significant milestones: the re-establishment of the Althingi; the introduction of

commercial freedom; the granting of our constitution; home rule; national sovereignty; the foundation of the republic and the election of the first President of Iceland. In our journey along this path we received additional support from advances in our economy, in transport and communications, in technology and in our ever-richer cultural life.

The independence movement was not merely a matter of patriotic poetry and impassioned appeals in print and in speech; its strongest expression can be seen in the dedication to progress on the part of people throughout the country who believed in their hearts that it was possible to create for themselves and their children a good life in a bounteous country.

Our gratitude goes out to the tireless leaders of this movement, and also to the ordinary people who constantly gave them the support they needed. Were it not for their deeds, ideals and vigour, we would not be where we are today.

But a small nation's independence struggle is never finished; it is vital for us to consider carefully what we will need in the future to ensure that the extraordinary story of Iceland's progress can continue.

Interesting challenges lie ahead, and we now have the opportunity to have a real say in world affairs. It is therefore instructive and useful for us to ask ourselves these questions:

What is our future vision? What is our role? What are our ideals?

What contribution should Iceland make to the transformation of living standards of people all over the world, to the advancement of democracy and the consolidation of human rights, to saving children from death and restoring the sick to health, to giving guidance on the use of the resources of the ocean and energy reserves beneath the ground, to supporting the defences of peace and security for the whole of mankind?

What sort of Iceland do we wish to see in 20 years' time – what sort of society, what sort of culture, what sort of economy? How are we to integrate the experience of the past and the opportunities that are falling into our laps?

How can we best create a consensus about Iceland's role in the future?

Iceland's independence campaign in the past was successful because people's vision was constantly turned towards the future, with distant goals influencing their work from day to day.

In the same way now, in the early years of a new century, when our republic has come a considerable way, we should pause and give thought

to our future vision, open a debate in which all can participate and draw on experience, both our own and that of others nations, who have much to teach us.

What sort of world do we want to create? What part should Iceland play?

The nation must answer questions like these itself. The central point of our democracy is that the president, the Althingi and the government must all obey the will of the people and accept its guidance and work to serve the ends that the people have adopted as their goals through discussion and broad participation.

“Faith in the nation, trust in the ordinary people – this is the foundation of our constitutional structure,” said Ásgeir Ásgeirsson when he took on the office of President for the first time.

The democratic spirit of the Icelandic people is our guiding light.

We are now citizens of the world in all fields and increasingly, what we do will be observed under the microscope of the international community.

Our answers to the questions I have mentioned will be weighed and evaluated by other nations. This imposes a special challenge upon us.

We must show that we are equal to this challenge, especially with the support we now have from the young generation that is currently establishing itself in all areas of national life. This generation has already achieved success in the sciences, the arts and the business world.

With their skills and education, their discipline, self-confidence and progressive thinking, our young people have in a very short time yielded Iceland huge successes in the international arena.

These achievements give fuel to our optimism and ambition, and give us reason to believe that the vision of a prosperous future for Iceland is not a pipe-dream or a wild exaggeration but a clear reality, a proof of what can be done.

We must address ourselves to developing a realistic future vision, rich in ideals and based on solid knowledge, both now and in the years ahead. To share with the whole nation in developing such a future vision, and then translating it into reality, is an exciting challenge.

Now, when for the third time I am entrusted with the responsibilities involved in being President of Iceland, I vow that I will devote myself to such challenges wholeheartedly and with all my energies.

It is a privilege to be an Icelander. We are aware of this; so too are our relatives in the New World, descendants of the pioneers, who are doing more and more to cultivate their connections with ‘the old country’.

Also aware of this are the thousands of people who have moved to Iceland recently from other countries, determined to make it their homeland, learn our language and enrich our culture and society.

In the early days of Iceland’s human history, over a thousand years ago, the first settlers created a multicultural mix that became a fertile breeding-ground of independence and national consciousness, producing a unique contribution to world literature and a society that was without parallel elsewhere in Europe. The first settlers came from far and wide across the Scandinavian countries, the British Isles and elsewhere.

Iceland’s new settlers, those who have arrived in the past few years, have enriched our society in terms of vigour and diversity. They will continue to play an ever-increasing role in the transformation of Iceland, and this is a good thing.

As Kristján Eldjárn said when he first stood where I am standing today, one of the strengths of Icelandic culture is that it has always received “fertilizing influences from the culture of other nations; it did not become isolated, even at the time when the country lay far outside the main streams of commerce and travel”.

We are now more international than ever before, and we have demonstrated that we have a part to play among the very best, that we make a significant contribution in times of need. We are involved in development aid in many parts of the world, making our contribution to the struggle against poverty and hunger. We are playing an increasing part in peacekeeping, trying to share our experience of preserving a society free of fear and interference, terror and armed conflict. We are seeking partners in distant countries, and have taken a leading role in the development of co-operation the Northern regions.

All this reflects the changed landscape in the world and our new priorities in foreign affairs. It shows how a small nation can play a part in today’s world – an idea that would have seemed strange in the past, but is now a challenging reality.

Nevertheless, it is important to keep unbroken the thread that our culture and history, our language and patriotic feelings, spun in the past centuries. It is from this thread that a brightly-coloured tapestry has been woven, embodying the vision of our national destiny.

Future generations must not lose the awareness of how our history forms a continuous whole, and we must now redouble our efforts in education to make sure this does not happen. Sound contact with our national roots is the best guarantee for Iceland's continued prosperity.

Challenging times lie before us, and Iceland has an abundance of new opportunities to choose from. Our future vision must be something shared by us all, a gift given to all who serve the nation and a guiding light for the years ahead.

Destiny has given us a unique country with broad vistas of great beauty, rich colours, natural wonders, sandy plains and green valleys, rolling rivers and roaring waterfalls.

We must do our utmost to preserve this natural paradise we have inherited so that our children and descendants in ages to come can also look on it as a privilege to be an Icelander.

It is with a feeling of humility that I once more accept the responsibilities that the nation has laid upon me, and I promise to work with all those who have the advancement of our country and its people as their guiding light.

May our country and its people enjoy blessings and good fortune in the years ahead.