



**New Year Address  
by the President of Iceland,  
Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson,  
1 January 2008**

My fellow countrymen

My wife and I wish you a Happy New Year, and hope that the future will prove favourable for us in Iceland, even though there are some unsettling storm-clouds on the horizon and the weather may change for the worse.

Living at Bessastaðir, we are reminded every day that the struggle against adversity has long been part of life in Iceland. When Jónas Hallgrímsson went to his lessons in the schoolroom here on the other side of the wall, sleeping in the loft and wrestling out in the fields, Iceland had no rights at all: it was a colony, totally dependent on a foreign power; there seemed no prospect of this ever changing.

Travellers from abroad were amazed to find the schoolboys here dirty, lodged in rooms with hay on the floor, their diet consisting of poor quality fish, half-dried in the wind.

Yet, it was in these unprepossessing conditions that the yearning for freedom was born and developed, the yearning that inspired the group known as the Fjölnismenn and other leaders, enabling them to launch the independence struggle that eventually ended in victory.

A few weeks ago we celebrated the 200th anniversary of the birth of Jónas Hallgrímsson. The celebrations gave us an opportunity to recall how his life's work and achievements can be seen as summarising and foreshadowing the most important challenges that we must face in the years ahead.

For us today, Jónas Hallgrímsson is still a pioneer figure, even though nearly two centuries have passed since the days of his childhood in Öxnadalur. He showed us how a nation's culture can be at its most fertile when harnessing the currents flowing in the world at large; he was a

standard-bearer for the Icelandic language, creating new terms inspired by the heritage of past centuries; as an active scientist he strove to make his knowledge available to the ordinary public; he was a lover of nature and a campaigner for progress who, with his poetry, wove unbreakable strands in the fabric of our national consciousness.

It is a special privilege, in times of rapid change, to be able to turn to the legacy of such a man for inspiration and guidance, and to find answers, with his help, to the most urgent questions of our new century.

Those who doubt that our universities or leading companies will be able to go on using Icelandic for their day-to-day purposes, and say that this is time for English or some other international language, should stop and recall how Jónas Hallgrímsson used his mother tongue, capturing concepts in science and technology with brilliant linguistic innovations that now come to us so automatically that most of us are surprised to learn that they are in fact Jónas's gift to us, his reminder that Icelandic can be used for any purpose, that our language contains all the resources necessary for new development and that our laziness or pandering to fashion are the only excuses for yielding the palm to English.

Jónas Hallgrímsson's example also shows us how a knowledge and experience of other nations and cultures can be of benefit at home, and how close contact with international trends and currents can lay the foundation for domestic progress and growth, rescuing us from stagnation and giving us the means to forge ahead to new achievements.

There have been certain periods of progress and development in our history, for example the time of the campaign for independence, the Saga centuries or the past few decades, which show us that Iceland prospers most when we combine the cultivation of our heritage with an active process of learning from the experience of others, selecting from the best that the world has to offer – in short, when we are both citizens of the world and true to our own roots.

There is a parallel between the age in which we live and Jónas Hallgrímsson's life: we too are engaged in a struggle for independence, one that is likely to intensify in the future.

The struggle for independence in which we find ourselves today stems from the revolutions that have transformed our world, opening up countries and continents and giving new generations the chance of choosing where they live. In past times, it could be assumed that most people would live the rest of their lives in the countries where they were born, but now there is no such certainty. If better prospects are on offer

somewhere else, people simply move away. Never before have young people in our part of the world had the whole globe as their playground.

In all countries, leaders must now win the confidence of their young citizens and convince the rising generations that the best way to prosperity is to remain loyal to their native land.

Up to now, Iceland has been lucky in this respect. Our young people go abroad for training and experience, but they come back. In some countries the picture is different. I saw this clearly on my visit to Romania last year, and have heard it in conversations with leaders of other nations.

Most countries in Central and Eastern Europe, where thousands of young people have chosen to emigrate each year, are now fighting hard to win their minds and hearts. Romania has lost nearly half a million in emigration to Italy alone, and the exodus of people from the Baltic States is a growing problem.

Frequently on my travels I have been asked for ideas on how to deal with this problem. The President of Romania asked me: “How do you manage to keep your young people in Iceland?”

To guarantee the members of the new generation a prosperous future in their own country is, in effect, the independence struggle of our time, the key challenge to the government and the economy. Without success in this struggle, nations will suffer serious setbacks and find it difficult to make progress and guarantee a basis for good standards of living.

Our young generation is the first in which everyone, both men and women, are able to choose the country they want to live in. Constitutions, parliaments and governments are powerless to offer any guarantees that will decide the issue. Now, it is the individual citizen who has the power of decision and judges for himself where life is best; no legal or economic bonds can hold back those who wish to establish themselves in a new country.

Even though it may seem natural to us to assume that our young people will live here – perhaps because the love of our country that we inherited from Jónas Hallgrímsson and the Fjölnismenn is still strong in our hearts – the experience of other nations shows us that there is fierce competition for the loyalty of the younger generations who are now entering the arena.

Fortunately, Iceland has been highly successful in creating conditions in which young people are able to combine their roots at home with careers in the world at large, but it is by no means a foregone conclusion that this will continue.

A key factor in this success has been our extensive international involvement in business, the sciences, culture and the arts. This has given thousands of our people the opportunity to use their talents and achieve results that have brought benefit to the whole nation.

In their way, these ventures are one of the most important reasons for Iceland's strong position in the independence struggle we face in this new century. They have played a major role in building up our present strength, a proof of what can be done and a source of pride for our young people when they are asked whether they believe in the viability and future prospects of their country.

The new generation of scientists and other experts working in the sophisticated environment of our universities and research institutes have found ways of contributing to the growth of knowledge in the world at large.

The ever-growing interest in Iceland's culture, literature and other arts abroad has given our young people an additional incentive to devote their energies to artistic careers.

The results achieved by Icelandic banks and other companies all over the world have created a new forum for our businessmen and graduates who have trained in finance and business administration in universities abroad.

In the same way, the export of skills in the energy sector can, if we play our cards aright, make a major contribution to Iceland's position and give young people with an interest in geology, the natural sciences, engineering and technical disciplines a wide range of opportunities to put their knowledge to work. And at the same time, we can help other nations to harness clean energy sources, so making an important contribution towards the effort to combat climate change. In this way we can play a vital role in meeting the most urgent challenge of our century.

It has been a privilege for me to be able to be of some assistance in this campaign on so many fronts, and to help to open up opportunities for our young people.

Initially, the office of the President of Iceland was a symbol of the victory of a poor nation. Perhaps one of its most important roles in the present age is to be of assistance in the new independence struggle, to help young people to tackle the challenges of the future, so convincing our rising generation that the best alternative is to have their native country as their theatre of operations and to base their homes and families here in Iceland.

It has been a source of deep satisfaction and pleasure for me to have worked with you on these projects, and I shall always cherish the confidence and trust that the Icelandic nation has shown me. If, in the year ahead, it is the will of the Icelandic people that I should continue to shoulder these responsibilities, then I am willing to do so. At the same time, however, I am well aware that the office of the President of Iceland entails deep obligations, which no one can fulfil without the firm conviction that he enjoys the confidence of the nation.

Although our future prospects are perhaps now more uncertain than has often been the case, with signs of stormy weather ahead, as I mentioned earlier, both in the global economy and here in Iceland, we shall continue on our path with optimism, striving to preserve our unity and not to lose sight of the most important things, the real values that can give each and every individual satisfaction in life.

The race for wealth and material possessions has for some time been the characteristic feature of the present age. While it has yielded many good results, thousands of people still bear the burden of low wages, many are still caught in the poverty trap and it is still a matter of urgency to “weave the fabric of our welfare system so tightly as to guarantee everyone secure shelter,” as I put it in my New Year Address a few years ago.

At times, the resilience of our economy has seemed to be almost beyond belief. Now, however, there are indications that we should rein in our expectations, pause and consider carefully where our real priorities lie.

Do they lie in getting and spending material wealth, or in the time we spend with our families, the satisfaction that children bring their parents and the joy we feel when we know that our loved ones are healthy and happy?

To answer this question, we could do worse than to consider a comment made by a boy on the Drug Prevention Day. He said it would be better for people to buy smaller flats, since parents would then not have to work so much and families could spend more time together.

This angle on life is a valuable reminder to us all, and the same applies to the answers given by other children on the Drug Prevention Day. They did not ask for material comforts, the latest gadgets or computer games; they asked for the company of their parents, the joy that everyone can find in everyday things, the pleasure of sharing good moments together. We should listen to these young people and remember what it is that they value most.

Perhaps the time has come for us to slow down, to focus again on moderation and other virtues that are based on human values.

Though we Icelanders have at times been lavish spenders, and this has done much to power our economy, it may prove sensible in the years ahead to change course, to make saving a priority, to make discipline and thrift our watchwords and to go on using things that are still in perfectly good order instead of constantly buying new ones to replace them.

We have certainly achieved impressive economic results in Iceland, but overspending is the weak link in the chain. If we are to ensure stability for our people, we must proceed with caution.

We must establish respect for the values that served as the guidelines for our grandparents, the generation that raised Iceland from poverty to affluence.

Such a system of values will be essential if Iceland is to continue on the winning side and the independence struggle of the new century is to turn out well, like the adventure that began when the teenager from Öxnadalur, who was at school here at Bessastaðir, went on to send his countrymen words of inspiration and encouragement from Copenhagen and earned his place as the first modern voice in Icelandic poetry.

It is in his spirit that we will meet new currents without fear, consolidating our roots and being faithful to our origins.