



Inaugural address
by
Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson
into the Office of President of Iceland
1 August 1996

Fellow Icelanders!

The Icelandic constitution states that the President's first day of office is in the beginning of August for each new term. This date may have been determined to some extent by practical considerations, but it is also a symbolic national commemoration. During the first week of August in 1874, Iceland established a place for itself in the community of nations with the great national festival at Thingvellir. This was staged to commemorate the millennium of the first settlement of Iceland, but it was also on this occasion that the Icelandic nation was granted its first constitution. Besides recognising Iceland's special position, the constitution also laid the foundation for the rules of democracy and human rights which we have regarded as central to our society ever since. It is an important duty of the President of Iceland to contribute towards ensuring that the bonds which link us with the achievements of centuries past are not broken. The most important duty of all, however, is the President's loyalty to the nation itself, to its desires and aspirations at any time.

During our travels around Iceland in the prelude to the presidential election, my wife and I have become convinced of the deep respect which the Icelanders feel for the work of the President of Iceland. The cornerstone of the success which Presidents of Iceland have enjoyed has been the warm and positive attitude towards their office. Few heads of state have the chance to talk to the broad mass of their fellow-countrymen and find out about their attitudes. This is within the reach of the President of Iceland, however, and I sincerely hope that the relationship which we have formed with ordinary people all around the country will continue to last.

When the Republic of Iceland was proclaimed at Thingvellir in 1944 and the President of Iceland was elected for the first time, there was little

on which to model the presidential office, functions and general style. For just over half a century the four Presidents, in their separate ways, have shaped the relationship between the president and the nation which must serve as a vital link for anyone entrusted with this office. The Presidents of the Republic of Iceland have always had the good fortune to adapt the office and its functions to the changing demands of their respective times. It is to be hoped that this will be the case in the future too.

It is with reverence and gratitude that the people of Iceland honour the memory of Sveinn Björnsson, Ásgeir Ásgeirsson and Kristján Eldjárn on this solemn occasion. Each of them in his own way shaped and crafted the presidential office.

Over the past sixteen years, Vigdís Finnbogadóttir has added new elements to the tapestry of presidential functions. She has pioneered the international role of the President at the same time as nurturing our faith in our country, culture and language. We shall always cherish the memory of her warm approach and her encouragement of achievement and progress. All the people of Iceland offer her their heartfelt thanks and best wishes for the future.

In Icelandic history, we have a number of decisive periods, the outcome of which was determined by whether people had the good fortune to set themselves common aims or allowed themselves to be governed by their separate short-term interests. The late Professor Sigurður Nordal once said of the Sturlung family, that they walked forwards but looked backwards. They had a wealth of splendid memories, "but neither the hopes for a better future, which could have inspired them to great deeds, nor realistic aims and commitment which would have sharpened the mind and the will to concentrated action."

The pioneers of the independence movement in the middle of the last century, on the other hand, passed on the world view of that age to other Icelanders. Their actions pointed the way to the future, while from the past they sought the inspiration to perform great deeds. In the midst of the poverty and injustice of colonial rule, Jón Sigurðsson laid down political, commercial and practical aims for the process towards independence, and supported the Icelanders' demands with historical arguments. The cultural activists of the Fjölnir movement, for their part, then found a vocabulary which was worthy of an independent nation.

It is interesting to note that it was young people who were in the forefront of the movement for independence. Now, too, we must place our faith in young people. The rest of us also have our duties towards them. The generation of men and women who are now completing their education is the first in Iceland to enter the global workplace. They do not

lack awareness of national identity, respect for Icelandic culture or love for the nature of this country, but they are also realistic and make firm demands. This prompts the question of whether we will prove successful in international competition for the young people of Iceland. Will they choose to live with us here on the rim of the ocean, or to seek livelihoods for themselves elsewhere? The answer will depend on how successfully we who are in the positions of authority can open our minds and set reasonable objectives for the nation to follow.

The turn of the century is an ideal occasion to rally behind a national resolve which can "sharpen our mind and the will to concentrated action." It is the challenge of private individuals, organisations and businesses to choose new and attractive tasks for Icelanders to tackle in the coming century.

Among the tasks worthy of consideration is to take advantage of Iceland's unique position in environmental conservation and to earn recognition for pure land, unspoiled ecology and sustainable natural resources as our hallmark. Inevitably we must also address our human resources, our ancient heritage but no less the living arts, and the education and culture which endow new generations with strength and discipline. Nor should we forget, in pondering our future tasks, that healthy ways of living, loyalty and devotion to family and friends, are secure pillars of any society.

It is my firm commitment as President of the Republic of Iceland to link together the energy and resourcefulness of everyone who wants to shape the nation's vision of the new century and discuss the aims which can unite us towards constructive action.

People in Iceland have made sacrifices this decade in order to overcome various economic and industrial ills. Now, it is fair to say, reasonable stability has been achieved. However, a very large number of households have run up excessive levels of debt, and various sections of society are allocated less than what our sense of justice will allow us to admit is their fair share. Many people feel that the time must surely have come to reap the rewards of this effort. This is a natural attitude to take, testifying to growing thoughts of progress in Iceland. If the situation is managed correctly, we have every chance of enjoying secure living standards, good welfare services and an equitable society. In order to do so, we need to adopt more an organised approach than has been the case until now. And in order to do so, we need to take advantage of the opportunities that present themselves to us in the next century.

In the near term it is a pressing task to establish the consensus and determination at a national level to ensure that living standards in Iceland

will be comparable with the highest amongst our neighbouring countries. If such an achievement is not forthcoming, young people may lose their faith in Iceland as their future home.

We ought to be optimistic when we consider our possibilities as a nation in the near future. The evolution of world affairs, science and technology is in many respects favourable for us. A new world has emerged, characterised by open relations rather than by closed systems of power. Skills and resourcefulness are more important than size and strength. Those who are small may often be endowed with sharpness and agility which often serve just as well as the strength of the giant for applying modern technology.

We Icelanders therefore have unique possibilities. Recently free and developing countries everywhere have welcomed us to cooperate with them. No one needs to feel intimidated by our size or the possible threat of aggression on our part. Isolation as a result of geographical distance or obstacles to communications is largely a thing of the past and opportunities await us in all corners of the world.

In the year 2000 we shall not only be celebrating a milestone in the history of mankind. Iceland will also commemorate the millennium of the adoption of Christianity by the Althing. In the year 1000, it was decided at Thingvellir to have a single law and a single faith, and never to break the peace. This accord pointed the way forward, not back to a lost age and vanishing realm of ideas. The adoption of Christianity is a precious historical precedent for finding peaceful solutions to the most difficult problems.

In the millennium year we shall also be commemorating the one thousandth anniversary of the first European crossing to the New World, which was made by Icelandic seafarers. Our ancestors' navigational achievements are a historic feat. Their attitude to the settlement of new countries deserves to be studied. It is highly appropriate to stage impressive celebrations at the turn of the century to mark these voyages of discovery. In my reply to a congratulatory telegram from the President of the United States of America I shall draw particular attention to the millennium of the Icelandic crossings to the New World, and I shall advocate that we commemorate these explorers jointly and launch a discussion of the influence of the spirit of settlement in the history and culture of Iceland, the United States of America and Canada.

It is healthy for us in Iceland to recall that we enjoy the friendship of a vast number of people in North America who are descended from later settlers, emigrants from Iceland at the end of the last century. Western Icelanders are celebrating their Icelanders' Day in Gimli this weekend. I

send them my warmest greetings, personally and on behalf of the Icelandic nation, and hope for fruitful cooperation with them on the cultivation of our common heritage.

At the same time I would like to wish a heartfelt welcome to Iceland's newest settlers, the people from the war-torn Balkan territories who have decided to look for well-being and happiness with us here and have now settled in Ísafjörður, the town where I was born and bred.

We are heavily dependent on reciprocal contact with other nations. In recent years and decades, Iceland has consolidated its relations with nations elsewhere in Europe under the aegis of many types of organisations and institutions, such as the Nordic Council, Council of Europe, EFTA, European Economic Area, NATO and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe. European cooperation is certainly important to us and will continue to evolve and grow in the years to come.

A number of smaller states have joined the European family of nations during this decade and many of them are now seeking closer cooperation with Iceland. They are looking for models of the way an independent nation state conducts its daily affairs while maintaining full human rights and general welfare. These nations are well aware of Iceland's unique experience as they make their way along the route to democracy and human rights. In the course of just over half a century we have proved that a relatively small community is justified in enjoying independence. For this reason, Iceland's contribution to the future of Europe will be valued highly.

At the United Nations and other international fora where Iceland participates, the voice of democracy and human rights needs to resound loud and clear. Specific historical events, such as the adoption of Christianity and the independence movement which was fought solely with words as weapons oblige us to share with others our experience and tradition of peace. The history of Iceland is proof that a nation can agree upon the foundations of its society and achieve independence and full human rights, without the human sacrifices which have shaped the fate of many nations.

I have now sworn my oath of honour to the constitution of the Republic of Iceland. With wholehearted respect for its provisions, I undertake the duties which above all others symbolise Icelandic independence. But legal documents do not tell the whole story. Performing the duties of the President of Iceland is primarily an act of service to the nation. Only discretion, experience and living contact with the people of this country can guide the President along the right course.

At this turning point in my life I pay tribute to the memory of everyone who has shaped me, in particular my mother and father, grandmother and grandfather in the West Fjords who, in my childhood, provided me with the resources which I value above all others.

I ask you to honour the memory of our forebears and the country of our birth.

May God's blessing and bountiful nature always bring fortune upon the people of Iceland in the future.