



New Year's Address
by the President of Iceland
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Fellow Icelanders:

My wife and I would like to wish everyone a Happy New Year and thank you for the time we have all spent together and the warm feelings you have shown us. The nation's support has been of great value to us and has given us heart in taking on new responsibilities. Your encouragement and good wishes have gone with us to the Presidential Residence at Bessastadir.

At this time of year, Iceland possesses a particular beauty. Although the light lasts for a short part of the day, it often wraps a charming veil of romance and mystery around the places where we live. All of us have memories of such days.

At Bessastadir, the winter sun casts its golden glow onto the promontory and the lakes. The fields are dressed in finery and the encircling mountains have an air of nobility and magnificence about them. Sometimes, however, the weather makes its presence felt, when storms sweep over the land with mighty gusts. At such times, Bessastadir stands bare and exposed, with little shelter to be had.

Here, history has struck many chords, and the tones of times past still resound through the entire residence. Every morning here is a reminder of the energy and strong roots which have enabled the Icelanders to keep their bearings in the course of the centuries.

Last summer a communal firestead dating from the Age of Settlement was found here: a secure stone work which was built shortly after Ingólfur Arnarson the first settler of Iceland] made his home nearby.

A team of young archaeologists excavated this firestead which dates from the infancy of the Icelandic settlement, as well as pavings, stacked walls and a smithy floor from the time of the ancient Commonwealth, the Age of the Sturlungs and the Catholic era.

Formerly it was thought that the saga writer Snorri Sturluson was the first to farm at Bessastadir. Now we know that more than eleven centuries of Icelandic history have here left behind numerous other evidence. The Bessastadir

relics and other national treasures preserved here need to be visible and accessible to everyone in Iceland.

It is not only through research into times past that young scholars and authors provide us with new viewpoints on our history and origin. This Christmas, a number of books have been published which shed new light on the challenge of being an Icelander. They add new features to the Icelandic identity and sketch an outline for its transformation.

These books are characterised by determination and boldness. They display rich imagination and the capability of a new generation which unflinchingly tackles the heritage from the past and presents it in a suitable guise for Icelanders in a time when the world picture is changing.

The authors' methods are certainly different, yet they are all characterised by originality and insight.

One of them creates a mirror from the accounts given by foreign travellers to Iceland in older times, to reproduce many aspects of our forebears' characters which we, in our short-sightedness, have done little to preserve, yet which may be healthy for us to take along us in times to come.

Another author dons the guise of a man of the world who scrutinises Icelandic society with humorous undertones, then gradually prompts us to serious reflection upon what, until now, we have considered to be fully valid laws and principles, but which might prove to be a hindrance to us in fierce international competition.

The third seeks a new understanding of modern Icelandic politics from archives in other countries, thereby thawing the icy bonds of the Cold War. Instead of the old divisions which were often drawn right across our society, diverse evidence is used to open doors towards a new understanding of an important period in contemporary Icelandic history.

A nation which, over a single Christmas, is presented with fiction and scholarship that so sharply adds new features to its identity, can certainly rejoice at the fertile creative powers of its young generation. Besides the three works mentioned here, many others have made this Christmas a veritable feast of ideas.

A new generation has made its presence felt and intends a major role for itself in transforming the Icelandic identity. For the first time since the settlement, young men and women have appeared on the scene with the knowledge that the whole world is their stage, and that they can establish themselves anywhere on the planet they chose. Nonetheless, they still clearly want to make Iceland their home, provided they can break new ground here in business and technical skills, science, scholarship and the arts.

It can no longer be automatically assumed that new generations consider it natural to spend all their lives in Iceland and bring up their children in this beautiful country of ours. For the first time, Iceland now faces tough competition from all over the world for the hearts and minds of our young people.

One decisive reaction could be that political and business leaders, and in fact everyone in positions of leadership in institutions and organisations, realise in sufficient time the necessity of opening up channels for new generations to exert influence on all areas of society, and give young people the opportunity to begin work at once on the transformation of Iceland.

Only by such means can we harness the creative power of the new generation and ensure that Iceland will triumph in this new struggle to preserve our independence, a struggle which will become even fiercer in the new century.

Those who doubt that it is right to put young people in positions where they can have a decisive influence ought to look back at Iceland's history earlier this century and also examine very closely the achievements of Icelanders who have been gaining international attention in very recent times.

It was a group of young people who gave the Icelandic independence movement new vigour at the turn of the century. In the battle against the Great Depression several decades later, leadership was in the hands of people who had not reached the age of forty. Today, even younger people are establishing Iceland's presence in global business capitals and achieving great feats for the good of Iceland through the media of music and visual art. Innovations which have been crucial for us in Iceland in recent years in the fields of technology, the arts, science and business are largely the fruit of this young generation's world. Iceland's destiny in the next century will be determined, above all, by how quickly this generation is given the scope to break new ground for the good of us all.

It is human resources and education which will largely determine the global competitiveness and living standards of nations in the future.

The findings of an international study about schoolchildren's knowledge of science must surely come as a shock and cause of concern to us in Iceland. They should prompt us into awareness of global changes and our real position.

We have convinced ourselves that we rank with the world leaders in this area, along with our Scandinavian relatives. Now it emerges that Asian countries outperform all the Nordic countries. Our minds have been held captive by an obsolete view of the world for so long that many people have looked down with a certain arrogance on the educational framework in Asia. Several years ago, it was pointed out in Iceland that there were probably plenty of lessons to be learned from the peoples of Asia. Now the facts are there, facing us.

We must take a candid look at ourselves. Everyone who is responsible for education in Iceland needs to be willing to review his or her own performance, make an open-minded assessment of theories and structures, working methods and educational materials, and welcome reforms and new advances.

Although much improvement can be made without further funding, education is undoubtedly the most lucrative investment there is. Nations which neglect this foundation disqualify their own living standards in the world competitive arena. They run the risk that individuals and families will simply decide to move away and make their permanent homes in places where higher living standards are available.

The educational system fosters not only each generation's human rights, but also the nation's resources and independence during the coming century. Education also invigorates us Icelanders in the battle against the forces of nature, as we saw in the past year.

Lack of funds is a common reply to the question of educational reforms. The authorities are quick to respond and invest billions of krónur in new hydropower plants if someone offers to build a factory. Such a response may be natural, but it is equally necessary to bear in mind that the education, abilities and skills of young people are the best investment that any nation can make. There is full consensus on this point among economic scholars. We Icelanders must decide on our educational funding and structure in accordance with this truth. Otherwise, we will simply be disqualified from the international competition for quality of life.

The values we have inherited are a precious asset for us on our long voyage. Like the children who have been watching this year's Christmas calendar programme on television, we are all looking for someone who can tell us the secret of happiness. Just as in that programme, the true values, the keys which prove of the greatest worth in life, are trust, friendship and love. Care for others is the guiding principle which shines from the teachings of the Bible. When poverty increasingly becomes a shameful aspects of Icelandic society, we should, on the strength of these great values, give everyone the opportunity to be the master of his or her own fortune, and seek, like the children, the key to a new world.

The ethics of Christianity and traditional Icelandic social values enshrine the demand that individuals should be able to provide for themselves and their dependants in a decent way, give children an attentive upbringing and trust that the sick and the elderly are cared for with dignity and respect. Progress which only appears in economic statistics but does not improve people's lives is worth precious little. The welfare of each individual is the real aim of society's attempts to improve the living standards.

We must adopt the habit of thinking and working together with our long-term interests to guide us. By a concerted effort, we managed to overcome inflation after decades of fighting against it, when finally we took a long-term view. We have conserved our fish stocks far better than other nations, and not allowed our differences over fisheries management systems to impair the conservation of this resource. We have shown and proved that we can restrain conflicts and display a sense of direction.

We enjoy respect the world over for our loyalty to human rights, democracy and the peaceful coexistence of all mankind. We present a threat to no one and cause neither war nor conflict. We can offer guidance in the conservation of the environment, of nature and of natural resources. We are amply endowed with what will prove to be the most valuable qualities in the future.

The problem lies within us. It is all a question of our own will and ability.

Our country's mountains and valleys are now being greeted with growing daylight from one day to the next. May the rising sun bring new vigour to the country we share, and boldness and resolution to the people of Iceland on our path towards the future. May the light of the New Year bring you all prosperity and peace.