



**The Opening of the Althingi
Speech
by the President of Iceland
Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson,
October 1, 1997**

The session of parliament which is now beginning is the last but one this century. When parliament is opened two sessions from now, only three months will remain until the turn of the century. All over the world, people have been thinking towards the milestone that lies ahead. Plans are being considered and efforts made to choose goals which best serve the common good in the future.

On special days and anniversaries and at the turn of each year, it is natural for us to look both back in time and forward, and ask ourselves the classical question posed by Jónas Hallgrímsson in his Ode to Iceland:

“Have we moved toward better things
forward along the path?”

Successive generations have asked themselves this question, but when both a new century and a new millennium are in sight, the need to seek answers becomes more pressing than ever.

We Icelanders have the good fortune to possess a heritage and culture which date from the time when mankind was last in this position. One of probably very few nations, we are in the special position of being able to greet the new millennium with celebrations founded upon events and a literary and religious legacy dating from the time when the last millennium dawned.

In the year 2000 we shall commemorate the millennium of the adoption of Christianity by the Althingi at Thingvellir, and also the Icelandic explorations in the New World, events which were at once unique episodes in the old Icelandic Commonwealth and remarkable milestones in world history.

The challenge that we face is to arrange this double celebration in such a way as to reflect respect for the period when our nation came into being, and also our identity in a new age.

The Althingi has always been instrumental in commemorating turning-points in Icelandic history. The celebrations in 1874 to mark the millennium of the settlement and in 1930 to mark the millennium of the establishment of the Althingi, then the establishment of the Republic in 1944, the 1,100th anniversary of the settlement in 1974 and the half-centenary of the Republic in 1994 – these are all events which were paid tribute to with special celebrations and important decisions by the Althingi.

The adoption of Christianity by the Althingi in the year 1000 laid the foundation for the religion and culture that have played a crucial part in shaping the Icelandic nation. And for very many years a shield has been mounted here near the entrance of the parliament hall, inscribed with the account from the Flateyjarbók manuscript of Leifur Eiríksson's explorations, a gift from our kinsmen in the New World.

It is both appropriate and consistent with the tradition that the Althingi itself has created, that its members should begin to consider during the coming session how the history and honour of our nation can best be served.

People of Icelandic descent in the United States and Canada have a deep longing to share in such events, and the governments of their countries are prepared to discuss joint projects with us.

Many possibilities lie ahead. Ideas have been raised for making the Icelandic heritage accessible to schools and educational institutions around the world by means of computer programs and the Internet.

The old Icelandic Sagas describe the quest for new things, courageous ventures into uncharted territory. The settlement of Iceland and discovery of other lands to the west were the product of a culture which gave the explorer pride of place. Technological marvels today are again sweeping mankind into uncharted territory, and at such times there is a need for a solid foundation to build upon. Companies and organisations which operate on the horizon of virtual reality, with the

world as their stage, have identified ideal material in the Icelandic heritage for building a vehicle of knowledge with room on board for everyone. The ideology of the old Icelandic Commonwealth and the explorers, the urge to discover and settle in new territory, as presented in our literary heritage, could serve to guide new generations on their way.

In these tasks and others we have powerful supporters among people of Icelandic descent on either side of the Atlantic. Now there are more than 150,000 people of Icelandic origin in North America, as well as several tens of thousands of people in Scandinavia and elsewhere in Europe whose families and roots originate in Iceland.

All these people, around 200,000 in all, have a share in our culture and history, preserve poetry and songs, stories and customs which derive from the same source as our own cultural foundations here in Iceland. I have sometimes used the term “the Icelandic community” to refer to all the people who weave the fabric of their own identity from Icelandic culture and the Icelandic heritage.

We possess a unique resource among this vast extended family of people who want to be with us even though they are residents and citizens of other countries. In the past there were admittedly some bitter feelings surrounding the exodus from Iceland, which engendered heated debate both within parliament and outside. Those wounds have healed today. Our task now is to find new modes to clothe the common heritage of everyone who claims Icelandic descent, and tailor it to the focuses and conceptions of a new age.

Visits to the places where our common roots lie, development of museums and cultural centres, publication of books and software, a joint drive in land reclamation and conservation of vegetation, educational cooperation and teaching which can give young people new insights – these are some examples of the tasks that arouse interest among members of the Icelandic community on either side of the Atlantic.

In the upheavals which are changing our conception of the world at an ever-faster pace, few things are more important than having roots which lie deep in the soil of a fertile and creative culture.

In recent decades, governments in Iceland have had to devote most of their energy to fighting the urgent problems of inflation and economic instability. Now, in the space of less than a decade, stability has been achieved and this leaves us time and energy for tackling issues that tend to be put to one side in our day-to-day routines, yet will prove crucial for the fate of the country and nation in the long term.

As the new century approaches and the new millennium dawns, the parliament and the people of Iceland will have a welcome chance to ponder the values which can contribute to the cultivation of our land and the evolution of the nation in the new age.

Recent international studies have shown us where we stand in terms of educating new generations and conserving our country's natural bounties and vegetation. These findings were unexpected, and have certainly changed some features of the generally accepted image that we Icelanders have of ourselves. What we need now is to have the courage and resolution to face up to these facts and rally to the cause of making improvements.

National education and the resources of the land are decisive factors for the evolution of Icelandic independence in the approaching age. We would do well to dedicate its beginnings to reforms and reconstruction in this area.

Finally, I would like here, where the nation is listening, to express my thanks for the warmth and support that my family has recently been shown. May everyone who has to deal with illness and difficulties have the good fortune to enjoy the goodwill and helpfulness of others.

I ask the members of the Althingi to rise from their seats and pay tribute to our country.