



NEW YEAR'S ADDRESS
BY THE PRESIDENT OF ICELAND
ÓLAFUR RAGNAR GRÍMSSON
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Fellow Icelanders

The dawn of the New Year has for some hours bathed our country in hues of light and shadow. We sense the promise of happiness and good times, yet we all know that sorrow and tribulation may call upon us when we least expect it.

In the reverence of Christmas, the memories of a friend or relative who has passed away are the sounds that echo the longest in our souls, mixed with gratitude for the moments which good fortune gave and emptiness about the years in the future which will always be anointed with loss and sadness.

My family here at Bessastadir now shares such an experience with everyone who has sought consolation during the festive season and New Year in reflecting or talking with friends and relatives about the times when happiness reigned and the sun shone brightly during moments spent together.

During my wife Guðrún Katrín's illness, your prayers, greetings and good wishes gave her and all of us great strength. Your sympathy and compassion brought her the vigour to tackle every new challenge. She felt a warm gratitude towards you and it was her heartfelt wish that I should convey it to you now.

At the time of Guðrún Katrín's death and funeral my family felt the sympathy and warmth which in difficult times have long given the Icelanders a single soul, a single will. Kind words in letters and messages, drawings from children and classes, condolences from Icelanders all over the world – all these things and countless others served to grant us strength in struggling with our sorrow and loss. The tribute shown by the thousands of people who came here to Bessastadir to sign a book in Guðrún Katrín's memory will warm our hearts for all our lives.

I send you my family's sincere thanks and wishes that the New Year will bring you good fortune and happiness, and that as many days as possible will be occasions to welcome and to make progress, both in the lives of every individual and in communities all around Iceland.

That experience which fate imposed upon us was a reminder of how quickly all our terms of references and plans can change. In an instant our world was turned around and a judgement was pronounced which altered our lives and thoughts irrevocably. Such moments reveal in an instant how every hourglass eventually runs out, and how precious it is to make good use of the life allotted to each of us.

Perhaps most of us are so tied up with our routine life, the events and tasks of the passing moment, that we forget to cultivate love and friendship, solid relationships with our children and families, times spent together which are entirely dedicated to those we love.

Time is at once a bringer of happiness and a harsh master. The years rush by one after another and before we know it the end awaits around the corner. No part of a life will ever be reclaimed and it is important to be able to look back satisfied with every moment.

In modern society with its worship of money and success, faced with the onslaught of advertising and stimuli which measure most things against the yardstick of wealth and property, we might forget how the values that prove dearest of all at fateful moments are not those which wear out or rust, but rather the bonds which join us to our loved ones and family, their life and health. If these are broken, everything else is worth precious little.

Therefore it is important at the beginning of a new year, in fact when every day dawns, to promise ourselves to nurture friendship and family ties, give our children, relatives and companions all the time that we can, and not waste a large part of our lives in pursuing fleeting things.

We do not need to lose our health or see our loved ones suffer in order to arrange our lives and daily habits in accordance with this truth. Certainly, illness is a reminder of the values which are most dear to us, but they are also a time of admiration and gratitude towards doctors and nurses who with competence and self-sacrifice save people, grant health anew or soothe suffering at times spent together.

Gudrún Katrín and I were proud to hear her doctors in Seattle praise the skills, intelligence and scientific knowledge of Icelandic doctors and nurses. The American specialists' admiration for the health system and medical service of our small island nation was heartfelt and profuse. They considered the Icelanders very fortunate in having developed hospitals and health care which is on a par with the best of any nation, yet at the same time provides help and care for each and every person, regardless of means, class or family connections.

The tough fight which has lasted for almost a decade to tackle the financial troubles of health institutions and the scope of state expenditure has perhaps neglected to ask about the purpose and aim, the essential issue: How to serve people in need. Nothing seems more remote to us when a friend or member of our family is struck by illness than to talk about taxation levels and state expenditures. In spite of everything, the common feeling for the welfare of each and every person is so deep-

rooted in the Icelandic consciousness that we want to safeguard the system which grants all people equal rights to medical treatment, nursing, care, education and individual development.

Towards the dawn of a new century when we discuss the mission and vision of individuals and nations, it is natural for us to ask about the future of the social heritage which generations of hardworking people have bestowed upon us, about the future of this society which has given priority to health and education for all people.

Do we want to preserve our nation's ability to provide everyone in the country with medical services and nursing of a quality comparable with the best enjoyed anywhere? What are and will be our demands, expectations and hopes, when loved ones or relatives need treatment or nursing, or when we ourselves, especially those of us who are now young or in the prime of life have grown old and lose our health? How willing is society to maintain the benefits represented by the work of doctors and nurses, the entire health care system? Is it not natural and in keeping with the spirit of democracy that the institutions of the Republic should ensure that this real desire determines the future course taken?

Do we – most of whom received quality education earlier this century without paying any special charge for it – want our children and their descendants, the new generations of Icelanders, to be able to acquire the best education available in the new century? How do we intend to ensure that Icelanders will continue to be among the leaders in skills and ability?

The economy of the future will increasingly be based on industries in which knowledge, research, science and technology will be decisive for living standards, profitability and success in the marketplace.

Quite recently we been given various warnings that, in terms of quality and scope of education, Iceland ranks lower in international comparisons than most people would have expected. Other nations are rapidly surpassing us, and we are thus losing the vantage point which is necessary in order to be able to continue to enjoy one of the world's highest levels of prosperity.

On the other hand, we have also seen numerous examples of the way that education, knowledge and science are now proving decisive in Iceland for the growth of new industries, enriching life, art and culture, as well as strengthening our reputation in fields which increasingly shape the image and influence enjoyed by nations.

Computer equipment and technology are producing growing revenues for Iceland's economy and major foreign corporations are now seeking cooperation with young Icelandic innovators.

Medical research and work by experts in genetics and biotechnology have laid the foundations for a new industry which could become especially lucrative in the economy of the new century.

Teams of young executives are now to a growing extent assuming the leadership of companies and financial institutions, and successfully applying academic methods and professional training which they have received in the finest universities in the Western world.

The foundation laid with the reforms of music education a few decades ago has now transformed Iceland's artistic scene so radically that almost every week we see impressive signs of the way Icelandic music has become a dynamic export industry.

A comparable development has taken place in drama and the visual arts, and every Christmas the young generation of writers and poets delivers novels and verse to prove that the driving force behind Icelandic literature is as fresh at the beginning of the new millennium as it was in the early days of the settlement.

At the end of a century which has brought mankind more technical progress than all the other centuries put together, it is impossible not to conclude that the human mind is the greatest power station of all, that harnessing it is the most reliable formula for prosperity and welfare, that education and training are no less energy sources than waterfalls and the depths of the earth. The most successful nations competing in the world marketplace will be the ones that best of all cultivate the talents and creative power of new generations.

Thus it is vital to achieve consensus about consolidating and strengthening education in Iceland to allow the energy within young people to flourish in full, so that each generation will be able to take advantage of being at once worthy Icelanders and true citizens of the world. Only in this way can we secure Iceland's position in the new century.

The leaders of the independence movement certainly realized that education and culture were preconditions for sovereignty. This was why the demand for an Icelandic university was central to their arguments.

A month ago we commemorated Iceland's eightieth anniversary as a free and sovereign state, when the new flag of the nation became a symbol of its freedom throughout the world.

Admittedly, 1918 was a year of tribulations too: misery, distress and despair were sometimes all that occupied people's minds. Perhaps this background has diminished the place of honour which the events of December 1 should occupy in the Icelanders' awareness of independence and their nation's history. Nonetheless, it was certainly a day of triumph, bringing Iceland both the universal rights of a nation state and, through the Act of Union, the opportunity to establish the republic a quarter of a century later.

We are obliged to cherish such a day. It would be a great loss to forget it in the routine of life and thereby mislay a strong thread in our awareness of independence. Many other nations would welcome having such an occasion dedicated to their sovereignty and national flag.

We need to find ways together to restore December 1 to the nation, make it into a day for Icelanders to honour and a source of ever-new interpretations of our role and position.

Although schooling would continue as normal, the day could be dedicated to discussions and coverage of these issues, with projects by students and visits by artists, scientists and political and business leaders.

There could be an opportunity for media discussion about the evolution of sovereignty during times of upheaval and the values which create Iceland's unique position in an ever-changing world, about how sovereignty should be remoulded in the spirit of each age.

At the end of one century and the beginning of another, there is indeed an opportunity for the nation to look within itself and seek answers to questions about the course it is following and its mission. Many of us make New Year's resolutions – it would be appropriate for nations to do the same at the turn of a century.

Questions concerning the existence and status of nations become ever more pressing when the pace of change is too great for anyone to digest or understand these transformations fully, when new generations need to adopt the concepts of sovereignty and independence in accordance with their own desire and experience, and history alone is not sufficient justification.

At the beginning of the new century the questions arise once more which Sigurdur Nordal presented in his classic work, questions about the problems and privileges of being an Icelander.

Who are we? Where are we going? What are the values which make us into a nation and what are we prepared to sacrifice to preserve and strengthen them?

What will become of Icelandic culture, science and arts in the new century? How can we ensure that the nation's creative energy will continually revitalize our heritage and our contribution to the world?

How can we preserve our country's nature, the majesty of its uninhabited areas, the beauty of its fjords and valleys, and pass on to the Icelanders who will live here in future centuries the love of a fatherland which has inspired us with optimism? This question becomes all the more pressing when young people seek their roots and awareness of independence in the effects which mountains and canyons instil them with, and consider the value of being an Icelander to involve contact with nature's own unspoilt work of creation – a work of creation which yet again has shown people in Iceland and around the world its majesty and power.

As the turn of the century and new millennium approaches, it is appropriate for us to seek ways to engage in dialogue with each other, and the nation with itself, about the problems and privileges of being an Icelander in a new age, about what is most compatible with Iceland's reputation and image in the world community.

Sometimes the point is reached when it is impossible to avoid taking a stand towards the values which create a nation's independence, although tackling this question may prove difficult to begin with. Now is such a moment.

May Iceland be blessed forever. I wish you all a happy and prosperous New Year.