



**New Year Address
by the President of Iceland,
Guðni Th. Jóhannesson,
1 January 2018**

My fellow Icelanders, Hello and Happy New Year!

At New Year we tend to look back and go over the events of the past twelve months. Last year was certainly eventful. It would try anyone's patience to try to mention all the political confrontations and disputes, but the year will be remembered for certain other things too. Artists and performers enriched our lives, as did our national teams in the various sports: 'our boys' and 'our girls' carried Iceland's name far and wide and showed what can be achieved through a combination of will and courage, unity and discipline. Many victories were won, and we had good reason to rejoice – but grief also made its appearance.

In mid-January, nearly a year ago, a heavy cloud of gloom lay on our lives here in Iceland. A young woman had gone missing. She failed to come home. What could have happened? A huge search began. Our stalwart search and rescue volunteers came in from all parts of the country, and the public joined in too. 'We ... went for a drive this evening,' someone wrote on Facebook, 'to look for this girl who's gone missing ... We drove ... up into Heiðmörk, around Lake Elliðavatn and up to Urriðaholt. There were people looking everywhere, in some places cars nose to tail on what are usually lonely roads, torches shining all around. Even though we didn't find anything to help in the search, it was a powerful experience to feel the solidarity that forms between total strangers in a situation like this.'

Others said the same sort of thing. We hoped together and searched together; we feared together and many of us prayed together. The writer Guðmundur Brynjólfsson captured this feeling of community in words:

Nú biðji sem biðja,
nú óski sem óska,
nú voni sem vona,
nú hugsu allir þá hlýju hugsun,
þá einu ósk, þá bæn og von
sem býr með smárri þjóð.

Let those pray, who pray;
let those wish, who wish;
let those hope, who hope;
let all think the warm supporting thought,
the single wish, the prayer and hope
a little nation nurtures.

We lost her. We lost a young woman with a ready smile who had her dreams and longings and a whole life ahead of her. ‘This terrible event must never be allowed to define who Birna was,’ said the Rev. Vigfús Bjarni Albertsson, a hospital chaplain, in his memorial tribute. That which was so special during those dark days, that which will live on in people’s memories, was the great search and the sense of sharing, the empathy of the whole nation.

Others too were the victims of the abuse of power here last year, their lives taken by other individuals: a young father was snatched from his children; a young foreign man in search of a better life; a foreign woman who made her contribution to our society and said Iceland was the safest country in the world, slain by a man who said he had come here seeking shelter. Brutality can assume terrible proportions in our own environment. And it is not restricted to any specific or perceived group of people; it is not an attribute of any one nationality or religion.

Let us pause for a moment to think of those who lost loved ones or remember 2017 as a time of sorrow. But let us also allow hope to flourish and give those people strength. Martin Luther King said that true compassion would eventually overpower all evil. Recently, the writer Auður Ava Ólafsdóttir made one of her characters say, after losing the will to live and then finding it again: ‘I have met enough good people to have faith in mankind.’

Dear friends, perhaps last year will be specially remembered as being when women banded together against sexual harassment and abuse, saying ‘So far and no further,’ their call being taken up by men. We must stand together as a community that rejects manipulation by the selfish and the unbridled desire of those who believe they can get away with anything. Here, though, as elsewhere, we must beware of generalisations, rumours and trumped-up accusations; these can tarnish a good cause.

And now a new year begins. Tragedies will continue. Injustice will continue. Can we, in fact, look to the future with optimism? What can give rise to hope for a better world?

The year 1918, exactly a century ago, was an historic milestone in Iceland, when it became a free and sovereign state; still under the Danish crown but with the promise of full independence. The nation celebrated, but dreams of

the future were clouded by alarm and grief in the present. The year began with freezing weather, a spell of severe cold that lasted for weeks over the whole country. Then Katla erupted, though fortunately this caused little hardship in itself. Then, in the autumn, the global Spanish Flu epidemic carried off hundreds of people. It was a year in which many Icelanders experienced repeated sorrow and hardship.

And yet – and yet – the light of hope burned on. For a hundred years, fortune and misfortune have come and gone; both perils and help from the outside world; progress based on effort and inventiveness; setbacks and problems that we brought upon ourselves. And we are still here. Together, we can look back over the past with pride, and we who are younger can thank those who are older for the immense contribution they made to the benefit of us all. As a state we are thriving, and if surveys are to be believed, Icelanders are generally content.

We must therefore not hesitate in looking to the future with optimism; with optimism, yet at the same time with realism and humility. What customs and habits should we retain? What has proved its worth; what has worked less well? What is to be feared? What is to be avoided?

There are no simple answers to these questions. That is the way things should be in a free society. Nevertheless, the moral of the first hundred years of our sovereignty could well be this: We must nurture the natural environment of our country, and our culture. We depend on the world at large and how things develop there, and we must practice thrift and foresight, empathy and charity.

A hundred years ago, the generation born around the turn of the century was growing into adulthood, the generation known as *vormenn Íslands*, ‘the people of the Icelandic spring.’ They felt their destiny was to build up a new country. Then came the great age of expansion of the fishing industry. The wealth that created our welfare society came largely from the sparkling sea surrounding us. Today, fish catches do not play the same crucial role in the Icelandic economy as they did then, and fewer and fewer people are employed in both fishing and fish processing. But our marine resources are still hugely important, and we can be proud of the fact that innovation and technical development play a leading role in our fisheries sector. We have also been successful in stopping over-exploitation of our stocks. We are in control of fishing in our economic zone, and we want this to continue. Nevertheless we face serious threats in the form of pollution, rising temperatures and the acidification of the ocean. It has been predicted that by the middle of this century there will be more plastic than living fish in the sea. Iceland should make its voice heard in the international arena concerning all these threats. The voice of a tiny nation is likely to be listened to when its viewpoint is demonstrably based on knowledge and integrity.

The ‘people of the Icelandic spring’ are no longer at work on the land. Now, the ditches they dug to make hayfields are to be filled in so as to reclaim the wetlands for the benefit of the natural environment and the climate. Nevertheless, dedicated workers can still find outlets for their energies in agriculture. New opportunities have opened up in the rural areas: tourism and sustainable farming are the rallying-cries of the new age.

Power-intensive industry and large hydroelectric plants have long been bones of contention in Iceland. ‘Forwards! Tame the cascade’s roar!’ wrote Einar Benediktsson at the beginning of the last century, expressing in poetry the hope, shared by many, that hydropower resources would be tapped for the benefit of the nation. This hope was realised, and ways were found later to harness and utilise the geothermal potential to produce heat and electric power for homes. The gains this delivered in terms of the transformation of society and the economy must not be underestimated.

Fortunately, though, many people protested against what our Nobel laureate, Halldór Laxness, called ‘the warfare against the land,’ referring to the power plants and reservoirs that scarred beautiful landscapes. It pays to look before you leap; history teaches us that, and now the value of potential power-development sites is assessed in more than just megawatts. The huge vistas of uninhabited land in our country are a resource that is diminished by development. We ourselves, and the foreign visitors who stream to our shores, want to be able to enjoy the country in all its glory – from the pools of the Blue Lagoon to the shores of the Arctic Ocean as Rúnar Júlíusson sang – from the famous beauty spots to the unexplored corners and valleys.

Our society is evolving at breakneck speed. This age has been called the age of the city, of hi-tech and of globalisation. We cannot avoid being swept along in the current. Nevertheless, our own national culture can continue to flourish, mixing the new and the old, ancient roots feeding new branches that are nourished and stirred by new breezes from here and there. The song about people like you and people like me is American, but has been dressed in an Icelandic garb and its message unites people everywhere: ‘When things grow dark in my life for a while, I always can turn to the warmth of your smile.’

Yes, let us accept variety as the norm in our culture and customs. Let us watch Hollywood films and programmes; let us allow our children to play computer games in English, enjoying at the same time books, films and pop songs in our own resilient and cherished language, Icelandic. There is an urgent need, though, to take measures to ensure Icelandic a place in a digitised world. In the coming days we will communicate with machines and devices of all sorts by speaking to them – we have already begun doing so – and we must be able to do this hereafter in our own precious language, Icelandic.

Fellow Icelanders! By all accounts, Iceland is going through a time of great economic prosperity, a boom that some have even compared with the year 2007, with all its mixed associations. Just before Christmas, one of the media reported that evidence of the economic upswing could be seen in the kitchens of Icelandic homes ‘that seem to be getting posher and more costly by the day.’ Somewhere else there was a report that the waste reception centres could scarcely keep up with the mass of items and appliances that people were bringing; most of the time they were in good working order, but as they had fallen out of fashion, they had to be got rid of. Is this really the way things ought to be? At the same time as this is going on, many people in this country are having difficulty making ends meet and are even experiencing severe poverty.

One thing that is certain is that material wealth is not an automatic guarantee of happiness and quality of life. And it is certainly a matter of concern how poorly Iceland has managed to use periods of economic prosperity to save up for a rainy day. Is this something in the national character? In his rap song *Græða peninginn* (‘Making money’), a 10-year-old boy, Úlfur Emilio Machado Tinnuson, sings about the art that enables him to buy ice cream and sweets. ‘Wasted all my money but I’ll just make more tomorrow,’ runs the song. Things must be at quite a pitch when even children see things in this way.

In this, we can look with envy at Norway, which had the good sense to put the profits of its oil industry into a national fund. But we too have resources that are the property of the nation, so encouragement can be drawn from what the new government has proposed regarding a National Fund to ensure that the profits derived from our natural resources will be used to finance innovation and the improvements needed in the health system, in addition to other much-needed projects.

Fellow Icelanders! For far too long we have failed those who are at a disadvantage in our society: those with physical or mental disabilities. And so it is very pleasing to hear that the government intends to pass legislation on client-controlled personal assistance and to ratify the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. We have also failed young people who have ended up marginalised, many of whom have experienced want, irresponsibility and violence in their upbringing. Last year the writer Vigdís Grímsdóttir was granted the Jónas Hallgrímsson Award, which she fully deserved. Not long ago she said: ‘The only thing that really matters is being kind to children. That’s where it all starts.’

We are members of a community and we should treat each other well, particularly those who are in need of help, whether they are close neighbours or live further afield. I hope we will continue to show the determination and thrust that have pushed us so far along the highway of progress, but also that we will show the empathy and caring attitudes that are needed in a well-functioning

society. I hope we can agree on choosing a social structure that is based on equality in all areas; that everyone should have access to basic education and be able to rely on sound welfare and health systems, irrespective of how much they earn and where they live; that everyone should be able to reap the profits of his or her own efforts, while at the same time paying fair dues and taxes for public services, and that everyone should derive benefit from our shared natural resources.

Ladies and gentlemen: I join my wife Eliza in wishing you all prosperity and happiness. Happy New Year.