



**Address by
The President of Iceland
Guðni Th. Jóhannesson
at the Opening of
the Althingi**

12 September 2017

It is with pleasure that I stand here among you, the democratically elected members of the Althingi. The Althingi is the centre of gravity in our constitutional system. It is from here that government ministers derive their mandate; it is here that people look when they call for reform or review of our national legislation. This is why it is so vital that the Althingi should enjoy general respect and prove that it is worthy of the trust placed in it.

Members of the Althingi! The view has long been heard, in society at large and in this chamber, that the powers and responsibilities of the president of Iceland need to be defined better in the constitution. I mention this now, not because this task is more urgent than others when changes to the constitution come under discussion, but because it is the logical thing to do in the light of some recent questions that have arisen regarding the constitutional position of the president.

Earlier this summer, many people were incensed when sexual offenders were granted the so-called “restoration of honour”, the restoration of civil rights, after serving their sentences. The fact that there was a basis for this in law, and a well-established tradition of applying the procedure, made no difference. It made no difference because the legal concept of restoring honour is now considered antiquated and spurious. It should have become a thing of the past long ago. Certainly, those who have served their sentences have to continue their journey through life, despite the suffering they inflicted on others, by a path different from the one they travelled earlier. As they move on, sincere penitence would without doubt be to the good. But while people may recover their civil rights after serving their sentences, the restitution of those rights has nothing to

do with honour. There is therefore considerable sense in the suggestion that members of this house have made, that the recovery of civil rights could be subject to conditions, and it should be possible to have legislation restricting the right to such recovery in the light of the offence involved.

We must learn from this bitter experience and make improvements. The declared aim of the Althingi and the government to change the provision on the restitution of civil rights gives me the hope that we will do this. Then honour will remain with the victims of the offences who refused to suffer in silence. People in a free and democratic society ought to make themselves heard when they are affronted, not only in a public outcry but rather with arguments resting on a firm sense of justice and the conviction that, while the authorities may not allow themselves to be blown this way and that by the changeable winds of the moment, they will listen, pause and revise their position when necessary – and shoulder their responsibility.

Responsibility is vital in our society and our constitutional system. Our constitution contains a provision which states that the president is not accountable for executive acts. The president entrusts the exercise of power to ministers, and they are accountable for all executive acts. But some sort of responsibility always remains: responsibility towards the people of the country who elected him or her to be their president; responsibility towards one's own conscience and, not least, the responsibility and the duty to put things into better order where this is possible. This is the situation at the moment. We cannot accept things as they are. We cannot go on working according to the procedure that is in place and leave it unchanged.

Ladies and gentlemen: The government that took office earlier this year intends to work at the revision of Iceland's constitution on the basis of the extensive work that has been done in the past few years, not least by the Constitutional Council and the constitutional commissions.

When the Constitution of the Kingdom of Iceland was revised for the foundation of the republic in 1944, there was a unanimous desire to make only those changes that were necessary at that juncture. The intention was that the constitution would then be revised completely at the first opportunity. Thus, Sveinn Björnsson, the first president of the republic, likened the constitution to “a patched garment, originally cut to fit another country, with other attitudes, a full century ago.”

Admittedly, the Constitution of Iceland has often been amended since the foundation of the republic; the garment has been altered. But society continues to grow and evolve. There is strong support, both within parliament and outside it, for the view that provisions should be set on the protection of the environment, on the nation's ownership of natural resources and on the holding

of referendums, to name some examples. In addition, political leaders, constitutional experts and others have often admitted, not least during this century, that our constitution should give a clearer picture of current political practice. It needs to be stated clearly that ministers exercise supreme executive power, each in the areas covered by their portfolios; and it needs to be stated in plain words what constitutional powers the president really has. On this point, attention should be given to presidential functions such as mediating in the formation of coalition governments, the president's right to dissolve parliament and the part he or she plays in making appointments to various official positions. Finally, it is important that power and responsibility should go together. A constitutional provision stating that the president is not accountable, while at the same time obliged to endorse decisions taken by others, is not compatible with people's sense of right and wrong and has no place in a modern constitution.

Honourable members of the Althingi! Some of you favour a completely new constitution; others would prefer to make few changes or even none at all, and public opinion is similarly divided. In 1918 Iceland became a free and sovereign state. Two years later we received a new constitution, replacing the one that the king had presented to the nation in 1874. It would be fitting to commemorate these great milestones in our history, the centenary of our independence and our constitution, by working with serious commitment on the amendments necessary to our fundamental national covenant so as to reflect the views shared by most people regarding the environment, our natural resources, our society and its political structure, responsibility and power.

I wish you, the members of this house, success in tackling the difficult tasks ahead. Let us work together in the service of our country and its people. I now ask you to rise and honour our native land.