



**Address  
by President of Iceland  
Guðni Th. Jóhannesson  
at the opening of  
Althingi  
10 September 2019**

Members of the Althingi! I welcome you here today and wish you success in your exacting work. May optimism and breadth of vision prevail here. May you succeed in showing generosity and refinement in your dealings with each other, respecting divergent views and opinions while also standing by your own convictions and fighting for your own causes in the service of the nation.

No doubt there will then be heated debates in this chamber. That would be nothing new: it was built precisely for this purpose. Disagreement is the hallmark of a functioning parliament and a functioning society; suppression of disagreement is a tactic of the narrow-minded and a tool used by tyrants.

Optimism also characterises a healthy society, not bitterness, loathing and fear. Of course, there is always so much that needs doing better, and certainly we never know what the future will bring. Unforeseen reversals and setbacks can strike – we in Iceland know this well, living as we do in an unpredictable natural environment. And we cannot control developments on the world stage; decisions taken abroad have always had their impact on Iceland and will continue to do so.

Uncertainty is, in fact, another term for the future. To be cautious is a sensible policy; that is true. We must be on our guard against those who simply let things slide and take no thought for consequences. On the other hand, we must also beware of those who are timid, fearful and angry. Moments may come when we have nothing to fear but those who are in the grip of fear.

Members of the Althingi, and those listening at home: Earlier this century, the writer Ingibjörg Haraldsdóttir reminded us of the value of hope in a cruel world. She said:

“The world has been going to hell in a handcart for as long as I can remember. If it wasn’t the atom bomb, it was imperialism, communism, Aids,

violence, capitalism, pornography, human trafficking, drugs, the greenhouse effect, religious fanaticism, militarism, natural catastrophes, the threat of terrorism, obesity, hunger, water shortages, bird flu, the decline of Icelandic, the demise of the poem – not to mention the future we face if every Chinese household acquires a car, a fridge and a washing machine. ... something has always been looming over us, and still is. Yet we are still here, and the world is still beautiful; migratory birds make their amazing journeys and poets still write poems and feel the “deep rejoicing” that the sense of creation gives. In spite of hatred and war, in spite of everything.”

Doesn't that size it up pretty well? Shouldn't we be optimistic in spite of everything, and be courageous? Courage – what does that mean in this chamber, when dealing with political issues? One thing it does not mean is to kowtow to those who shout the loudest, those who utter curses instead of giving reasons and engaging in rational debate. People with a sense of self-respect must also consider the company they may get into and how moderate and purposeful argument can be twisted by others into exaggeration and distortion.

Now before people take offence and assume I am talking about them, I should like to ask you, my fellow countrymen and women, to remember the wisdom to be found in the best-known song of the famous singer Carly Simon: “You're so vain, you probably think this song is about you.”

Yes, the best way of protecting our democratic traditions involves debate, listening and re-assessing, not bulldozing, scorning and treating others' opinions with condescension. But the problem is simply this: We do not live in a world of simple solutions and open-and-shut truths. We can admire Bjartur í Sumarhúsum [a character in a novel by Halldór Laxness] with his tough determination and love of freedom. At the same time, we can criticise his stubbornness and selfishness – flaws in his character that bring disaster on other people. He is a character in fiction, but real life teaches us similar lessons about the complexities of the past. We can admire the vigour and dedication of our coast guard in the Cod Wars while at the same time we recognise that something more was needed to achieve victory: the evolution of the law of the sea that worked in our favour and had the additional benefit of playing a role in the struggles between East and West.

It seems now that the clock has come round and many people are saying that Iceland is once again becoming caught up in the course of world events. It is important that we distinguish clearly between caution and suspicion and stand firmly by our own convictions, not fearing the wider world.

Yes, ladies and gentlemen, there is nothing new under the sun. There are few things that link the ages in Iceland more closely than the Althingi. Founded at Thingvellir in 930 AD, it was the heart of our social and political life over the

following centuries and again after home rule, sovereignty and full independence in 1944, when we founded a Republic with a parliamentary government, as it says in Article 1 of our Constitution, the basis of our political system.

Ásgeir Ásgeirsson was the second president of the republic and the first to be elected by the people. I should like to quote from his address the first time he opened a session of the Althingi:

It is in the Althingi that the nation fights the battles for its interests and ideals. Elections and divisions into parties are the price we pay for the abolition of the law of the strongest. All parts of the country, and all classes in society, have their needs. The political parties set out their programmes and strike compromises between them when they work together in government. Then it may happen that reality takes over and limits their power. This can happen to members of this chamber, without it being in any way their fault, and governments sometimes have to do things they do not like and never intended to do. All the same, all of this represents an advance, and a high level of civilisation, compared with how things were when clan leaders called men from their vital work and rode in bands, slaying, destroying and plundering farmers' herds in the Age of the Sturlungs [the 13<sup>th</sup> century].

These words of Ásgeir Ásgeirsson's were true in 1952 and have often been quoted since then; my predecessor, for example, quoted them in his first opening address in this chamber as president. The fact is that they echo even older wisdom: a warning against turning people and parties with different views at once into enemies. Here we can also see that while we may welcome disagreement, inside and outside parliament, and that while the weight of votes must ultimately rule in this chamber, compromise is also among the hallmarks of a functioning parliament and a functioning society.

We can learn this from the age of the Sturlungs. Let us by all means keep this lesson in mind, and introduce it to new generations. Thórarinn Eldjárn, the son of yet another president, did just that a few years ago when he introduced the history of Snorri Sturluson to the youth of this land, in an abridged version. Snorri and his son Órækja sometimes quarrelled, wrote Thórarinn, before adding:

Then Snorri said that Órækja was a bully who only caused them trouble. Órækja replied with full force that Snorri was a coward.

- "Discuss, discuss, discuss," Snorri said when disagreement arose.
- "Assault, assault, assault," replied Órækja.

We must recognize, admittedly, that Órækja outlived his father and Snorri's final attempt at negotiations did not end as he would have wished. But, again: The past is a complex affair, it does not provide us with simple answers. So is the present and let us therefore be humble in our dealings with each other. Nobody is perfect, we are all flawed. And none of us is bigger than the office with which the people have entrusted us.

I repeat my wish that the members of this parliament will succeed in their legislative work, to the benefit of our country and its people. I now ask those present to stand up and honour our homeland.