



**New Year Address
by the
President of Iceland
Guðni Th. Jóhannesson
1 January 2020**

My fellow citizens,

My wife Eliza and I wish you a Happy New Year. May we all have hope in our hearts at this turning-point, and may this new year be a happy and prosperous one for us all. We should all be able to unite in such wishes; and in fact we may say that this is one of the main purposes of an address like this: to foster optimism rather than pessimism; to promote unity rather than discord. The response would hardly be good, if the person holding the office of president were to look morosely to the future, in a bad temper at this time of celebration.

No, we must have a feeling of spring in the air, although this is the darkest season of the year. But our wishes must certainly be commensurate with the reality we face and our expectations. Let us recall that the year just passed was a difficult one for many of us: some were struck by tragedy, while many had to cope with illness, and still do. Let us show care for those who are facing difficulties at this time, those who are disadvantaged.

Hope and reality tend to exist in counterpoise. Here at Bessastaðir at the turn of the 20th century lived poet Theódóra Thoroddsen, with her husband, politician Skúli Thoroddsen, and their large family. Perhaps it was here that she wrote this verse:

Over the joyful sea I speed,
though sorrow gurgles beneath the keel.
I allow hope to tell me its lies,
and live on that for now.

Gleðisjóinn geyst ég fer,
þó gutli sorg und kili.
Vonina læt ég ljúga að mér
og lifi á henni í bili.

The verse is interesting. Grumbling would be inappropriate in an address like this one – true enough. But would we be any better off with dreams and castles in the air? Isn't it obviously best to avoid unrealistic images, hubris and arrogance, while nonetheless allowing ourselves to look to the future in hope and daring?

And is there any reason to do otherwise, after all? Polls carried out in the past year indicate that the majority of people in Iceland are happy and satisfied with their lot. In international surveys of equality, security and other indicators of quality of life, Iceland is invariably placed at the top, in company with other Nordic nations. To be born and to live in this region of the world is like winning the jackpot in the global lottery.

But that good fortune did not appear out of nowhere. The older generations of our country deserve our gratitude for all that they achieved, and we should never forget it. And yes – I know – not everybody in Iceland has a good and happy life; and there is so much that went awry in our past – so much that we could now do even better.

In the world of today, it does no good to think only of ourselves. The climate crisis respects no boundaries, and we must respond to it. That was agreed by representatives of most of the world's nations at the landmark summit in Paris a little over four years ago, and the Icelandic government does not appear to lack the will to act – neither then, nor now. At the international level, no consensus is in sight regarding the next steps. But this is clear: unchecked utilisation and consumption is a spurious solution rooted in the past. Abundance here, poverty there is the problem of our times, and this new era demands new ways of thinking.

In his new book *Of Time and Water*, author Andri Snær Magnason points out this truth – but adds that all is not yet lost. “But it's not necessarily bad to be part of a generation that has to change things,” he remarked in an interview about the book. Humankind has not fallen off a precipice, although radical and realistic measures must be sought, in the short and the long term. I would especially ask you younger people to consider that message; among some of the young there is a sense of trepidation about the future, but by maintaining hope we will not be misled by our anxieties, but inspired to find solutions.

Then there is the matter of our solidarity, and the need for it. It must not be all-embracing, forced and insincere. Diverse interests, attitudes and desires are integral to our society. And that is as it should be in a free, progressive nation.

But, happily, it is true that, in spite of all our differences and all our disagreements, we have so very much in common, we who live here, the people in the place, close to the ocean and the mountains, to cite a song by Ólafur

Ragnarsson, known as “Óli Pop.” We have our language in common, and we encourage all who move here, and enrich our society, to learn to speak it. We have our cultural heritage, multifaceted and contingent on a range of interpretations; yet its unifying power always retains its attraction and hold.

And we share a history that was far from easy. Here in Iceland the struggle for life was harsh; the fisheries were perilous, and on dry land too dangers abounded: landslides, avalanches, earthquakes and eruptions – a panoply of risks and threats. Today most Icelanders live in urban communities, but our national identity has been wrought through living cheek-by-jowl with nature and its formidable forces. When this eighteenth-century poem by Björg Einarsson of Látar is recited, we hear the howling gale and see the crashing surf – and we appreciate the safety we enjoy, indoors in warmth and light:

Orgar brim á björgum,
bresta öldu hestar,
stapar standa tæpir,
steinar margir veina.

Surf shrieks against rocks,
the wave-beasts burst;
stacks are struck,
many stones moan.

(Translation Bernard Scudder)

My fellow-Icelanders: the coming year will mark the 25th anniversary of the catastrophic avalanches that struck the villages of Súðavík and Flateyri in the West Fjords. They will never be forgotten by any of us who had reached the age of understanding – just as traumatic events of past times remain in memory. Volunteer rescue teams and others on the scene did all they could to find survivors; national leaders and the entire nation joined in prayer; we stood together.

No disaster of this nature has, fortunately, occurred since the turn of the 21st century. Avalanche barriers have been constructed, and precautions enhanced. Happily, we have generally succeeded in responding to traumatic events, learning from tragic experience. In a land of ice and fire, it is important to be ready for anything.

Yes, it is an old saying, and a true one, that the future is uncertain. The poet Hulda, who commemorated the foundation of the Republic of Iceland in 1944 with the much-loved poem *Hver á sér fegra föðurland?* (Who has a Fairer Fatherland?), put the idea very well: “Nobody who is warmed by the sun’s rays knows whether they will see it in the morning.” And no doubt many will

recognise that spirit of gratitude and stoicism in a more recent form in a song by Bragi Valdimar Skúlason: “Watch every sunset as if it were your last.”

My dear fellow-Icelanders: my electoral term as president is drawing to a close. More than three years have passed – eventful and memorable ones. What will happen next? Only fortune can tell. But I feel it is appropriate and timely to make known that I intend to stand for re-election to the presidency.

Such a decision can never be a matter of course. It must be made after careful consideration, in light of experience, in consultation with family and friends. In the past, when presidents found themselves in this situation for the first time, they would generally announce their candidacy closer to the prospective election day; but in this world change is inevitable. Those who hold this office form it according to their own preferences and the spirit of the time, taking account of custom and tradition, within the framework permitted by the constitution. A constitutional committee is now at work, as so often before. Committee members have suggested introducing a limit on how long a president may remain in office. They have also discussed other changes to constitutional provisions on the work of the president. This must all be welcomed.

It is well known that in recent years the overall revision of the constitution, which was originally to be carried out after the Republic of Iceland was founded in 1944, has been a matter of dispute. The most radical change is advocated by those who favour the new Constitution drawn up in 2011 by the Constitutional Council, while others feel little or no revision is necessary. The issue will be resolved by the will of the electorate, and the representatives they elect to Alþingi (parliament). It is natural for the person serving as president at any time to keep up with developments, and make a contribution if deemed necessary.

My dear fellow-Icelanders: Every day I am conscious of the responsibility that this office entails; every day I am conscious of the great honour that has been bestowed on me. My wife Eliza and I are grateful for the affection we have been shown. And we are also thankful that the people of Iceland allow us, living at Bessastaðir, to enjoy privacy in our family life. Heads of state in most other countries cannot necessarily expect such consideration.

We are thankful for the welcome responsibility of promoting Iceland and its people in other countries, and increasing knowledge there of our culture and society, our history and the opportunities of today. And we are grateful for having met so many people here in Iceland, young and old; people who are recent arrivals in this country, and those who can trace their descent from such saga characters as Egill Skallagrímsson or Auður the Deep-minded; a woman who said she had voted for me, and didn't regret it; and the man who said it had never occurred to him to vote for me, but wished me success all the same.

I am also thankful for the goodwill of my predecessors here at Bessastaðir, Vigdís Finnbogadóttir and Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson, and for good interaction with government ministers, parliamentarians of all parties, and other social leaders. But above all I am grateful for the privilege of feeling the pulse of life in our wonderful country; for observing my fellow-Icelanders in their daily lives, and rejoicing with them – with people in business, innovation and science, in culture, education and sports.

The person who holds this office also has a duty to be supportive of those who have suffered blows in their lives; to assure those who may be overlooked, who have faced adversity, that we all have our right to exist. We are all entitled to respect, and the opportunity to do our best.

Yes, we are all unique. On close scrutiny, none of us is “like most people,” in the Icelandic phrase. As Nobel-prizewinning author Halldór Laxness wrote: “The oddest one of all is oneself.” Yet we can find elements in common, national traits of a kind – although we must always beware of prejudice and judgementalism in that context.

But we Icelanders can be argumentative, undeniably. “No nation on Earth... flies into such rages... so often,” remarked one of our fellow-countrymen last year – a maverick who does not hesitate to speak his mind. And that, in fact, may be seen as another national trait – often a positive one; but it is another matter, and less positive, to blurt out opinions without thinking about them first.

We can also find it hard to work together, to be disciplined, to keep in step with each other. “It’s just not part of our central nervous system,” asserts musician Páll Óskar Hjalmtýsson – who certainly knows what he is talking about, after many years of observing Icelanders on the dance floor.

To outsiders we may appear reserved, taciturn, hard to reach. Yet we have long been praised internationally: praised for the liberalism of our society, for our daring and courage. “Icelanders just don’t have it in their DNA to give up,” remarked a foreign national team coach recently, vividly describing the passionate drive of “our girls” and “our boys”, our squads who go out to compete with the best.

We can unite in times of difficulty, and we can turn our smallness into a strength. There are not many countries where everybody seems to know everybody else – which is this context I see as a virtue, although it can entail obvious risks of corruption, nepotism and other temptations. But there are not many countries where one can inadvertently invite one-third of the nation to a sewing-club meeting, simply by posting to the wrong Facebook group – as happened here last year. There are not many countries where more than one

percent of the population were candidates in local government elections, as was the case here the year before last. The gap between the public and government is smaller here than in many other countries.

My dear fellow citizens: During the time when I was working on this address, I was asked a simple question: What is your greatest fear for the future of Iceland? After a short pause for thought, I replied that my greatest fear was that disputes and conflict might overwhelm our unity regarding our fundamental values; also that our general optimism and diligence might gradually give way to pessimism and apathy.

And what is required, to prevent that happening? What are our fundamental values? What can form a basis for hope? Not lies. There can be no unanimous answers, but if we find ourselves unable to unite on the following, the prospects will be dim: We must safeguard and nurture a society which provides equal opportunities to all to do the best they can, while at the same time obliging all to make a fair contribution for the public good. Nobody can be permitted to avoid that obligation, least of all by chicanery. We must have a society where those who need help receive it; where no-one in need is reduced to holding out a begging-bowl. We must have a society of broad-mindedness, tolerance and justice, a society of diversity, freedom and peace.

With a broad consensus on these factors, we can safely look to the future with hope. On behalf of my wife Eliza and myself, I wish you all good fortune. Happy New Year.