



**Address by
President of Iceland
Guðni Th. Jóhannesson
at a celebration of
the centenary of the Supreme Court of Iceland
at the National Theatre
16 February 2020**

Eminent judges!

This moment will surely be deemed a momentous hour in the history of the Icelandic nation. The moment when supreme judges in Icelandic cases once again take their places to judge on our native soil. This event ... must give rise to jubilation in the hearts of all Icelanders ... Hereafter Icelandic cases will no longer be referred to any higher court than this eminent court.

President of the Supreme Court, Prime Minister, President of the Alþingi, government ministers and members of parliament, representatives of foreign nations, and other guests: With these words advocate Sveinn Björnsson (later Iceland's first president) commenced his address at the inaugural session of the Supreme Court of Iceland on 16 February 1920, exactly a century ago. Before that, the president of the new court, Kristján Jónsson, had declared the court open, concluding his words with good wishes for the court: *Qvod felix faustumqve sit!*

The judges wore long dark blue robes with a white stole. The clerk of court wore a robe of the same design in pale blue, and advocates wore their own uniform of black robes with blue trim.

The robes remain largely unchanged, although today Latin is rarely heard in the courtroom. In a steadfast judicial system two main streams flow side by side: the calm waters of custom, and the faster-flowing current that seeks out new courses and may even tumble over rapids, where it is hard to tell what lies beyond the next bend in the river. Assuredly, it can be hard to steer a vessel through such rough waters. I leave it to those present here to imagine a crew of

judges in their billowing robes navigating still or stormy waters – and now I shall take my metaphor no further.

But that is how the history of the Supreme Court of Iceland has progressed for a hundred years. Some things change, others do not. All the judges were male, for example, when the court was first established. Our excellent chair here today, Guðrún Erlendsdóttir, broke the ice, as well as the glass ceiling, by her appointment to the court. In matters of equality the Supreme Court has been proactive, often taking the lead. And the court has lent its support to other progressive issues, furthering human rights and enhancing the rule of law of Iceland.

No-one is infallible, as experience has shown. History is invariably complex, and there are always issues to be resolved as we look to the future. Individuals in positions of power tended to assign undue weight to their own political views and personal interests when making appointments to the Supreme Court. There is still no provision in the Icelandic Constitution regarding the autonomy of law courts. Adjustments are required after the introduction of a new judicial level in Iceland. And while the supreme judicial authority certainly resides in Iceland – “on our native soil” – the Republic of Iceland is also a party to international bodies and agreements, with their concomitant rights and obligations.

Ladies and gentlemen: at this milestone in our history, I wish all good fortune to the Supreme Court. Yes, may it be happy and auspicious, as the court’s president Kristján Jónsson wished in Latin a century ago. But let us not forget his sage advice to the advocates of the new court: “Good men, please do not start giving long speeches... How are we to remember all you may say? One may even be tempted not to listen.”

Sveinn Björnsson took that advice to heart. He later remarked that we, who have our Sagas of Icelanders, should be able to master the art of speaking concisely. In the *Saga of Njáll*, for example, just a few words sum up one of the principles of a just society – relevant in the middle ages, still relevant today, and at the dawn of a new century for the Supreme Court of Iceland: “With laws shall our land be built, and not laid waste by lawlessness.”

I reiterate my wishes for good fortune for the Supreme Court, and all those under its aegis.