



**Address
by President of Iceland
Guðni Th. Jóhannesson
at the Opening of
Alþingi
12 September 2023**

Members of Alþingi!

I welcome you to parliament and wish you well in your demanding responsibilities. Busy times, as ever, lie ahead; there is much that requires attention as we look to the future. During this parliamentary session, and for the whole of next year, we will have many occasions of remembrance. Thus it is appropriate to mention here in the halls of Alþingi that the year 2024 will mark the millennium of an important parliamentary speech, at least according to *Heimskringla* (Orb of the World), Snorri Sturluson's history of the kings of Norway. Einar of Þverá spoke out against King Olaf Haraldsson's proposal to take possession of the island of Grímsey off Iceland's north coast, and to receive the allegiance of the Icelanders. Einar's arguments, as reported by Snorri, have proved to be enduring, and been applied in the campaign for self-determination and in political debate: while this king might be a good king, worse ones might succeed him; Iceland would never emerge from that state of servitude, and many a cottager would feel the hand of oppression. Einar wanted, however, to maintain good relations with this foreign power – and Snorri agreed with him, for that matter; they were no isolationists.

It is also a thousand years since the death of Viking warrior Þorgeir Hávarsson, according to *Fóstbræðra saga* (the Saga of Sworn Brothers). “Never should a true fighting-man bring on himself the shame of having chosen peace, when there was strife to be had,” remarks Þorgeir's mother Þórelfur in *Gerpla* (The Happy Warriors, transl. Katherine John), Halldór Laxness' scintillating parody of the saga. The antihero Þorgeir's wrongheaded glorification of power has a message for us today, when Russian leaders seek to demonstrate their might by a violent invasion into a neighbouring country.

Thus, past and present come together. And further historic landmarks await us in the coming months. January 5 next year will be the 150th anniversary

of the day when King Christian IX of Denmark and Iceland granted assent to the first constitution for Iceland – the fundamental laws which were presented to Iceland by Denmark, when Iceland was defined as an inalienable part of the Danish realm, with certain specific territorial rights.

Another, and even more momentous, occasion is to be commemorated, after the end of this parliamentary session in all likelihood: 17 June 2024 will mark the 80th anniversary of the foundation of the Republic of Iceland. Even though Iceland had been a sovereign nation since 1918, the powers of the sovereign had not been transferred from abroad for good. In 1944 the presidency was established, and a new constitution was approved. But it retained many features of its origins in royal rule, of being written for a kingdom, not a republic. Much remained to be done on constitutional matters; on this the president of the new republic, parliamentarians, the people of Iceland and juridical experts were all in agreement.

Finally, I come to a landmark closer to our own time. On 1 January 2024, thirty years will have passed since the European Economic Area agreement came into effect. Shortly afterwards law professor Sigurður Línðal spoke truly when he called this “a greater change than has taken place in Icelandic legislation since the 13th century with the enactment of *Járnsíða* and later *Jónsbók*.”

It is also true to say that over recent decades Iceland has been, in many ways, transformed. Today a large proportion of the population are of foreign origin. People come to Iceland for work, or in search of safety; and if we perform our tasks well, our society will become more diverse, flourishing, dynamic and progressive. At the same time we must ensure that unity always prevails about the essential principles of our lives here: freedom of speech and action for all, the rule of law and mutual support – a society in which people can fulfil their potential, for their own good and that of others; and also receive all the help they need at any time.

At the same time we can nurture those aspects of our culture and community that serve to unite the people who live here. We have a language that enables us to understand words written on parchment nearly a thousand years ago – *Heimskringla* and *Fóstbræðra saga*, *Járnsíða* and *Jónsbók* (the Orb of the World, the Saga of Sworn Brothers, the *Járnsíða* and *Jónsbók* lawcodes) – and all our cultural history down the centuries. And into that continuous thread of Icelandic new, fresh strands are constantly being spun, so that it retains its strength, in the long term and the short.

Members of Alþingi: these truths have been spoken by others, better than I can express them. Ísak Harðarson was one of Iceland's foremost devotional poets of our time – though he composed verse on a wide range of subjects. Hear how he expresses the power of language in his poem *Til móts við Orð* (Towards a Word, transl. Anna Yates). I cite part of it here:

When Ingólfur Arnarson set off
from the orb where men lived in his time
and sailed with his people and his beasts in search of the land
that was said to lie in the outermost north
he was not heading for a land
– but a Word.

...

Doggedly sailed the ship
wave after wave after
century after century
for eleven hundred years.
Boldly sailed the ship ...

And here
we sail on
through deep space on a blue orb
driven by solar winds

towards a Word.

Thus spoke the poet; and may the words and our language continue to live. We can all do our bit, and naturally the government should take the lead. The constitution could state (what is already provided in law) that Icelandic is the national language of the Icelanders, and Iceland's official language. A resolution of that nature may even be deemed appropriate in the 80th anniversary year of the Republic. Ideally, public enterprises should always prioritise the Icelandic language, as is natural, at airports, public institutions, and elsewhere. There is little point in complaining about increasing use of English, the *lingua franca*, if we ourselves grant it unwarranted precedence over our own language.

Furthermore, we must offer those who move to Iceland better opportunities for learning the language; provide more courses, more study material; even be more flexible and willing to help in the workplace. This will be of benefit to us all.

Esteemed members of Alþingi: There are, of course, many other subjects that might be touched upon. In a complex society, so much requires attention. And in the end what we say to each other is of more importance than the language in which we say it.

Now, at the start of a new parliamentary session, I express the hope that you may have the good fortune to work well in the interests of our country and its people. Parliament must, assuredly, be a forum for disagreement and dispute, as occasions arise. And no doubt some people will identify with the words of popular singer Bríet in her song about Mt. Esja: that we are “travelling on a single-lane road that leads in the wrong direction”, and “everything repeated over and over, yet so much left unsaid”. Nonetheless, we may hope that the atmosphere in this building will be a good one, that differing views will be respected, that parliamentarians will be able to enjoy times of respite between the conflicts, that jokes will be cracked, and that there will be a sense that, in spite of everything, there is so much more that unites us, here in this country and in this chamber, than divides us.

Finally, I ask you all to rise in honour of our homeland.