



Address
by President of Iceland
Guðni Th. Jóhannesson
at the opening of
Althingi
1 October 2020

Honoured members of Alþingi! I wish you good fortune in your demanding tasks. I hope that the work of this parliament will be successful, in the interests of this country and its people. A little over a year has passed since the last opening of parliament. At that time none of us imagined the adversities that have come upon us. A year ago, the deadly virus had not yet made its appearance. Our minds were on other matters then.

But now everything has changed. The virus has come to be a defining influence on all our lives. Here in Iceland and elsewhere, lives have been lost and many have experienced grave illness. And our struggle with this menace is not over.

Essential protective measures against the virus have had severe consequences for the economy. Various problems arise from the situation: more increased levels of domestic violence, anxiety and discontent. People have lost their jobs; businesses and the self-employed are experiencing major problems, not least in the tourism, commerce, culture and entertainment sectors. But had we not acted we would have drifted into disaster. We decided that we would do our utmost to safeguard the lives and health of the population.

And now it is vital for us to continue to display endurance, stoicism and courage. There we can look to the example of the older generations of this nation, those who have experienced both ups and downs over a long life.

In recent months we Icelanders have had reason to show appreciation to so many people for their good works. I know I speak for all the nation when I thank staff in the health service, care and welfare for their huge contributions. And let us also acknowledge teachers and school management, school assistants and cleaners, and all the others who have ensured that education has continued to function, from preschools to universities. Retail and service staff deserve our

gratitude too; they work face-to-face with people all day long. And many more individuals have made, and are still making, their contributions, in the interests of the people and the nation.

We shall prevail in our battle with this virus. Around the world, scientists are striving to develop vaccines and seek other medications or cures for the disease. Here in Iceland, at deCODE Genetics, the National University Hospital and the universities, staff are taking part in that work. Knowledge guides us on our way, and collaboration too – international collaboration, and collaboration within our own society.

It is possible that members of this House with retentive memories may have some recollection of my address at the opening of Alþingi last year, when I stated that disagreement was the hallmark of a strong parliament and a strong society, and that suppression of disagreement was a tactic of the narrow-minded and a tool of oppression.

Those words are surely as valid now as they were then; and assuredly we have debated various contentious issues during these onerous days. Let us continue to do so, applying logical arguments and shunning false ones. The story of this pandemic in Iceland is largely a story of empathy, sympathy and solidarity. In the spring, at the start of the pandemic, we all pulled together – and we still need that unity now, for winter is coming.

Yes, unity can be praiseworthy; it can prove a potent impetus. But the opposite can also happen, when the drive for unity impedes change and leads to stasis. It would not be acceptable, on major issues, for nothing to change year after year, simply because unanimous agreement could not be achieved. That kind of veto is hardly compatible with a democratic system of government.

Conviction can be as praiseworthy as unity – but is it not a dangerous game to resist changes because they do not meet the preferences and needs of the people in every way? That kind of veto does not seem conducive to progress, either: the route to stagnation marked by rejecting compromises and progressive steps – the stubborn principle of choosing the worst option over the second-best.

Alþingi is the focus of political power in Iceland. Under our system of government, as we know, if parliament passes amendments to the constitution, a new parliament must confirm those changes, following a general election. A long lecture could be delivered here on the origins and development of the Constitution of the Republic of Iceland from 1944. The story may be said to begin from the point that almost all of those who drafted and debated the Constitution, here at the Alþingi and elsewhere, foresaw that it would be subjected to comprehensive revision. Over the intervening years various amendments have been made – generally in consensus, but not always. And it is

hardly possible to argue convincingly that, when the last major amendments were made to the Constitution late in the last century, the result was perfection. There is still work to be done – there is always work to be done. A constitution will never be set in stone.

During the coming parliament no doubt some members of Alþingi will propose that a new Icelandic Constitution be adopted on the basis of the draft produced by the Constitutional Council, which was presented to parliament nearly a decade ago and approved in an advisory referendum. We know that Bills will also be introduced regarding constitutional provisions pertaining to natural resources, protection of the environment and the Icelandic language, as well as amendments to provisions on the powers and area of responsibility of the head of state, with the intention of giving a clearer picture of the system of government as it functions in practice, but without making any fundamental change. In this summer's presidential election, it was good to see that Icelanders are contented with the position of this office in our system of government.

The overall revision of the Constitution will involve more issues, for instance, possible new procedures for amendments to the Constitution and referenda on legislation at the request of a proportion of the electorate. Thus, Alþingi's responsibilities are always great in this field. But at present the most urgent issue appears to be that members of Alþingi demonstrate in practice that they are able to discuss and vote on proposed amendments to the Constitution. It might even be argued that inability to do so would lead to extensive criticism of Alþingi.

I reiterate my good wishes to you, honoured members of Alþingi. These are, admittedly, ominous times in Icelandic society; but we have seen worse. And we are fortunate to be living in a society whose foundations are strong. We have resources at sea and on land – not to mention the wealth in our minds. So, let us take courage – though blizzards may rage all around us.

I ask all the Alþingi to stand and honour our homeland.