



New Year Address
by
President of Iceland
Guðni Th. Jóhannesson
1 January 2023

Good day, people of Iceland,
and Happy New Year.

On behalf of Eliza and myself, I thank you for the good will and friendship we have enjoyed over the past year. We have travelled extensively within Iceland, met some delightful people and hosted some wonderful guests. Our trips abroad include a productive visit to tech giants in the US. There, my team presented the need for ensuring the Icelandic language's place in the digital world. Matters are progressing well in this regard but we must maintain our efforts. Likewise, the conference I attended in Japan on gender equality proved eventful, not least because our hosts and other participants praised the achievements of us Icelanders in this area, although there remains much work yet to do.

Fortunately, we have much to offer on the international stage. But more often than not we are but witnesses to the events that play out before us. Such is the nature of small nations — small nations that rely on international law, that the will of the mighty is not the be-all and end-all. Whenever we allow might to make right, the danger is clear. We know this from history as well as present day. War still rages in Ukraine after the Russian army's invasion earlier this year. Even if we may be a small player in such warfare, we have made a real effort, taking in refugees and sending provisions. It is commendable, the dedication that Icelanders have shown in supporting a war-torn nation.

Far and wide, we see despair and all sorts of disorder. But we must not turn a blind eye to the wrongs of the world, neither beyond our borders nor here at home. Indeed, we should find compassion for those who have suffered. New Year's Eve can be a time of sorrow and loss — while for others it is a moment of great joy and celebration. Of course, we can never know what the new year will bring with it. The words written by Icelandic poet Hulda in her day still ring

true today: no one warmed by the sun's light knows whether he will see it again tomorrow. Nonetheless, we can all allow ourselves to hope for brighter times ahead. And who knows if even the cynic might agree that the small moment of sun peeking through the clouds can make a world of difference, as Icelandic musician Prins Póló so cleverly put it.

There are several signs of the better times to come for humanity. Developments in the sciences and technology are promising, including new treatments for Alzheimer's and other difficult diseases and robust research into the nervous system, just to name a few examples. Proportionally, infant mortality has never been lower around the globe than in the last year. In climate change, there has been much hope placed on prospects for carbon sequestration and other innovations, even harnessing nuclear fusion, and on increased ecological awareness and measures taken on an international scale.

This naturally brings to mind all the advantages of our country and its people — by the same token we're not doing ourselves any favours by being self-righteous or deluding ourselves, no less than clinging unnecessarily to old ways fuelled by a fear of change.

A misplaced sense of nostalgia can cloud people's vision — but so can unbridled adulation for innovation, the 'fanatic belief that time's course leads ever higher' as the poet Sigurður Pálsson wrote insightfully in his New Year's Poem (Nýársljóð). But doesn't it all come down to balance when you think about it, a balance of tolerance and reflection, moderation and discipline, realism and respect for different points of view?

Because what would Iceland and Icelanders be without a common cultural and religious heritage, and what would be without diversity in culture and society, religion and philosophies of life?

What would we be without the freedom to disagree and exchange points of view? And what would we be without that solidarity we rely on when the need arises, in the face of brutal natural forces, a virulent pandemic and other disasters? What would Iceland be without its volunteer search-and-rescue teams and others who provide help in dire need? What would we be without the tenacity and perseverance that helps us up life's steepest slopes?

Exactly! What would we Icelanders be without faith in our own ability as a nation? But likewise, what would we be without dedicated partnerships with other countries, without the influx of ideas from abroad that shape society? And what would Iceland be without all those who have moved here from across the world to do their part for the nation?

Indeed, what would Iceland be without the accomplishments of all those who excel, both here and abroad, in the fields of culture, art, science and sports?

But what would the country be without all those who did not enjoy such luck, without all those who never got the chance to show what they're made of?

Those who have difficulty in making their voices heard, they still have a voice. Here I quote some students at Hringrás, an educational institution for people who wish to begin studying or working after a break due to illness, accidents and other crises. 'I came in full of doubt with my head hung down,' said one student, 'and knowing exactly what the floor looked like, feeling like I didn't matter, and that society had no use for me.' – 'I came in hunched over but walked out standing tall' said the second, and the third said this: 'I want to give back and help others in a similar situation as I was in. I can show that you can overcome problems with persistence and a positive outlook.'

These voices need to be amplified. Helping others help themselves benefits everyone. And finally, with regard to this diverse society and the need for as many of us as possible to make our voices heard: What would Iceland be without the experience and lessons of those who have passed middle age and even finished their long day's work – the challenging work of a lifetime that younger generations benefit from? *Live Now* (Lífðu núna) is the name of an enjoyable online magazine about life after middle age; the third stage of life is a relatively new concept but comes at a time when people are living longer and often better lives than ever.

Together we are stronger, as the writer and activist Hrafn Jökullsson used to say. Without the presence of all those who make up our society, Iceland would be all the poorer and drearier for it. Without solidarity and compassion, we are not a society living up to its name, not a society that creates a bright future for its children and young people — and we can now say that one of the main duties of the government at all times is to safeguard this country for the generations that will inherit it.

But we should also bear in mind that people flourish when they shoulder responsibility for their own lives and believe in their own ability and purpose. One cannot saddle others with the blame when things go wrong in one's own life. Moreover, it does good for everyone to care for their bodies and minds, and it is essential to give ourselves the best opportunity to do so. We have been making strides in this regard and I want to bolster those efforts further. Later this year the Icelandic Public Health Prize will be awarded for the first time here at Bessastaðir, with participation from the public who can nominate deserving contenders. This will serve to raise awareness around important contributions made in the field of public health. And it will hopefully serve to support a healthier nation, both its mental and physical health.

It all goes hand and hand, my fellow citizens, freedom and wellbeing, freedom and responsibility, freedom and solidarity. A little more than half a

century ago, poet Ólöf Sigurðardóttir frá Hlöðum wrote about these aspects of existence. She chimed in with these words of hope that I echo here as I wish you all prosperity and many blessings in the new year:

How good to be fledged and fine
untethered by any means.
Summery grows the turn of mind,
the soul is full of spring.

(English translation by Jonas Moody.)