



**Address by
the President of Iceland
Guðni Th. Jóhannesson
at the opening of
the Althingi
6 December 2016**

In 1845 the Althingi was restored, nearly half a century after the abolition of its sessions at Thingvellir. Carl Emil Bardenfleth, as Governor (*stiftamtmaður*) and representative of the Danish Crown, was the first to address the assembly. He began his speech with these words:

“This is a very solemn occasion, honourable citizens, now that the time has come for us to open the Althing. I doubt if there is any other word which, in Iceland, both recalls so many memories of the ancient past and arouses so many hopes for the times ahead, as does this one word: Althing.”

The restored assembly which met in Reykjavík was not a legislature or a democratic body in our modern sense of these words. It consisted of royally-appointed representatives and men from the upper class who had been elected by property-owners. It was attended by the Royal Counsellor (*konferensráð*), the Chairman of the High Court (*Jústiziaríus*) and Assessor, clergymen, rural deans and county sheriffs. Tenant farmers, itinerant fishermen and landless farmworkers did not come anywhere near it. Nor, of course, did women.

Times have changed. Yet some things have remained as they were, unaffected by the passage of the years. This is still a solemn occasion, and Icelanders still look back with respect to the Althing of the Commonwealth period. That was not a time of democracy and equality in our understanding of those terms. Yet we learned one lesson from it: that if we tear law asunder, we tear peace asunder, and also the fact that compromises are needed in the Althingi. “And now it seems to me advisable,” as Þorgeir Ljósvetningagoði is supposed to have said when Christianity was adopted, “that we do not allow those who seek most to prevail by force to settle the issue, and that we make a compromise between the two sides so that each will retain something.”

There were times when the peace was broken. About a decade after the Conversion, fighting broke out at the Althing; its sanctity was violated. This was in the aftermath of the burning at Bergþórshvoll. *Njál's saga* relates how some men were slain, transfixed by spears through their bodies or through both legs. At this point, Hallur from Síða sought peace. “Harsh things have happened here, both in killings and lawsuits,” he said: “I will now show

again that I am not big-hearted.” The conflict was brought to an end. His words were greeted “with loud approval, and everyone praised the good-will he had shown.”

The accounts of these ancient events live on, and so do their message. This session of the Althingi is opening under unusual circumstances. More than a month has passed since the election in which the Government lost its parliamentary majority and tendered its resignation. Attempts to form a new government have not yet succeeded. One has to go many decades back in history to find a similar situation. In 1942, when Sveinn Björnsson was Governor, a general election was held, as it was this year, in October. Attempts to reach agreement on a new government did not go smoothly, due to differences in policy between the parties, but also to quarrels between their leaders and even personal rivalries between individuals.

Sveinn Björnsson created the tradition by which the President is to entrust the mandate to form a government to the political leader he thinks most likely to succeed in doing so. If the first fails then the next takes over, and so the mandate is passed from person to person, if necessary, until a government is formed.

Today is the centenary of the birth of Kristján Eldjárn, the third President of the Republic. From 1978 to 1980 he had a difficult task. It would be true to say that there was a constitutional crisis for almost that entire period. The circumstances were the same as those I have already mentioned, and there was also an additional problem. During Kristján Eldjárn’s presidency, some of the political leaders who took part in the negotiations on forming a government did not seem to be concerned about the possibility that each round of negotiations would fail, since this meant that in due course it would be their turn to lead them. They would then receive the credit if they succeeded.

Kristján Eldjárn followed the principle that no party should be excluded when a government was to be formed. He was the first president to give the formal mandate to the leader of the party farthest on the left of the political spectrum. He was criticised for this, but my belief is that history has judged that in this he did the right thing. When no one person seems more likely than any other to be able to form a government, then more points of view must be taken into consideration. All members of the Althingi, and all their party groupings, should enjoy equality.

Admittedly, there was a general feeling that it was not to the Althingi’s credit how long it took to form a government in Kristján Eldjárn’s last years as President. Nevertheless, voters still trusted the Althingi. This is unfortunately not the case today. More than the banks collapsed in autumn 2008. People felt that the Althingi had failed them. Even though much has changed for the better since then, it is clear that the trust that is vital between parliament and people has not been restored. Icelanders judge their members of parliament by their deeds, their conduct and the way they work. A lot of the work of the members of this assembly takes place outside parliamentary meetings: in committees, in conversations here and there, with the voters in their constituencies. On the other hand, the attention of the media is focussed mainly on what goes on here in this chamber. And this is where change is needed. Many people share this opinion, including seasoned MPs who are hardened after years in the front line. Controversial matters need thorough discussion, but filibustering leaves most people cold or openly critical. A parliamentary majority must have the final say on matters, but those in the minority must have an opportunity to exert some influence on how things go.

A new parliament has been elected. This is most certainly the case. Never before in the history of the Republic have so many new members been elected: more than half of the chamber. Never before has the average age been lower than it is now, at just over 46 years.

Never before have the members here had such little experience of parliamentary work, now less than four years on average. Never before have so many women sat here: 47.6% or almost half the chamber. And probably there has never been such a varied range of backgrounds assembled here.

For this assembly to regain trust is both possible and a matter of urgent necessity. Now is the chance for the Althingi to enhance its reputation and earn respect – certainly, to have lively and even heated debates when this is appropriate, but to improve its working methods, the way members treat each other, its rules, and meeting procedures. Let us at the same time retain good traditions and customs, learn from history and avoid the mistakes of the past. That is what people did in past centuries. A manuscript dating from about 1500 contains an address used to open sessions of the Althingi in which an undertaking of non-violence at the assembly is called for; no doubt this was done in the light of bitter experience.

“I ... declare before all you men who come here a state of truce such as our ancestors established for our freedom and comfort and such as our law-code prescribes, so that all of you who have come here to the banks of the Öxará shall preserve peace between you, each to each, and if any man slays another or causes a grievous wound, he shall forfeit his property and his own peace, leave his land and his chattels and never return to this country.”

I wish the members of this house every success and hope that the work of this parliament in the service of the nation will be blessed by good fortune; I hope that those here will make compromises so that everyone “will retain something,” and at the same time arouse “hopes for the times ahead.” Having said which, I ask the members of the Althing to rise and honour our native land.