



**Address
by President of Iceland
Guðni Th. Jóhannesson
at the opening of
Alþingi
11 September 2018**

I wish you success in your exacting work, members of Alþingi. An abundance of tasks await you, both large and small. In the hustle and bustle of the moment we sometimes find it hard to distinguish between what is important, and the rest, which will be forgotten in time, stored away until scholars or others go in search of testimony and lessons from the past.

This year we mark the centenary of Iceland becoming a free and sovereign nation. That was certainly a milestone – a huge event that deserves to be remembered and honoured. It marked the culmination of a long process, and there is much in that story that seems bizarre in retrospect. For many years it was a matter of intense dispute, here in this building, that matters regarding Iceland and the Icelanders should be formally submitted to the Danish Council of State. Allegations of treason were made, parties were founded and splintered, all on the basis of that heated issue. But in the end it was all much ado about nothing; and in addition people were ready to change sides if it seemed worth their while.

But in 1918 Iceland attained sovereignty, and here we still are, an independent, sovereign state, more prosperous than most, in a peaceful society. The people of this country enjoy rights and quality of life which could scarcely have been dreamt of a hundred years ago. Also, surveys have shown that the people of Iceland are among the happiest in the world. At the same time, we are aware of real difficulties, anxiety and unhappiness experienced by too many of us – young and old: stress and burnout at work, substance abuse – sometimes with tragic consequences – and the rising costs of providing care for our sick, disabled and elderly people, as well as all the rest who need our care.

What is more precious than health and happiness? What is sovereignty for, if people are ill and unhappy? What matters, in the end? This summer actor

Stefán Karl Stefánsson, who has been a campaigner for a better world, died long before his time after a prolonged battle with a deadly disease. Such an experience often opens people's eyes – both those of the person who is ill, and their loved ones. “We see life in a different light,” said Stefán: “You sweep the nonsense out of the way and look at the fundamentals in life, which we ought all to do.”

We should tread carefully in citing such traumatic events in order to tell people that they should simply put up with smaller problems. Yet much may be learned from such stoicism, values and philosophy. And as we look together to the road ahead, it is to be hoped that we will have the good fortune to tackle the demanding tasks that face us, and not to become caught up in issues that will be justly forgotten in time, like the matter of the Danish Council of State – nor to expend our precious energies on bickering, but sweep the nonsense away.

In politics, it is true, it can prove difficult to distinguish the big issues from the small in the heat of the moment; and complete agreement will never be reached about which is which. It is also hard to predict what may happen in the future; but we would certainly be making good provision for ourselves, our young people and future generations by focussing increased attention on public health, mental health, and preventive and prophylactic measures. This is not to criticise what is already being done in these fields, but such steps would serve to enhance health and happiness, and would be likely to save money in the longer term.

Members of Alþingi: Disputes take place on many issues, both inside and outside these walls. And that is how it should be in a strong democratic society, in a sovereign, independent state. There is no reason to omit to mention today that ten years ago, when Alþingi was opened, there were portents that all was not right. The collapse of the banks followed, and then the “Pots and Pans Revolution”. Iceland and the Icelanders faltered under the blow, but fortunately we have come through. In national life and economics there will be good times and bad – we always have to accept that. At the same time, let us rejoice in what has been achieved over the years, and set our sights on yet more progress for all. We Icelanders are a free nation in a beautiful country. On December 1 we will celebrate 100 years of sovereignty. On that occasion let us stand together, showing ourselves and others that, in spite of everything, there is more that unites us than divides us. And let us remember that Life is Now.

I ask the members of Alþingi to stand and pay tribute to our mother country.