



**New Year Address
by the President of Iceland
Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson
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Fellow Icelanders,

I wish you all a prosperous and happy New Year. May our nation and our country enjoy blessings and fare well on their way into the future.

As we join the nations of the world in celebrating the year 2000 and look forward to a new century and millennium, we Icelanders are in the fortunate position of being able to draw insights and replenish ourselves from our ancient history of democracy, Christianity and exploration; from the quest for a new world; from faith in the Saviour and the Gospel; from the courage which lies in tackling the unknown and boldly seeking new knowledge and wisdom.

Many people regard the dawn of the millennium now as a unique turning-point between past and present, a crossroads that the Icelanders have only encountered once before. We have the good fortune to preserve early accounts of our origin as a nation, the settlement and the events that brought the Icelanders awareness about the ideals and faith which have been the mainstays of Western civilization and government.

In the New Year we recall the Christianization of Iceland and the discovery of new lands, not only in order to pay tribute to the vision and boldness of those pioneers, but also to pause and examine anew what it is that makes us into a nation, reflect individually and together on the privileges and challenges of being an Icelander during the greatest period of change in the whole history of humankind.

The milestone that has now been reached gives the nations of the world occasion to review their hopes and expectations, to sharpen their guiding ideal; to ask themselves and others where we are heading.

Democracy, Christianity and the quest for new lands are rooted in the ideal of inherent human nobility, in the solidarity with other people which serves the cause of good and improves the lot of one's nation and community.

Such an ideal sustained the people who settled here in search for freedom and control over their own affairs. It was the driving force behind the old Icelandic Commonwealth and adoption of Christianity in Iceland in the year 1000; a source of regeneration during centuries of foreign repression, hardship and poverty; an inspiration for the poets and leaders who steered the nation on its course towards independence and sovereignty; the guiding principle for the generation that created the Iceland we have inherited, those entrepreneurs and ordinary people whose confidence and energy made Iceland one of the leading nations in terms of prosperity and welfare, technology and science, education and culture – such has been the essence of our identity as a nation, even though each century has given it a new form, new tasks to deal with, new vocabulary.

And here we are now: independent and wealthy, valid participants in the community of nations, sharing in the responsibility for the fate of humankind, caretakers of a land which has unique natural beauty, resources and wilderness, creators of knowledge and the arts; we are on the crest of a wave of innovation that is sweeping the world by virtue of technology which has made the globe into a single entity and enables more people than ever to have an impact on the course of change.

Has Icelandic reality perhaps become so rich in qualities that it alone suffices us – without idealistic visions?

Are ideals about the motivation and noble origins of the Icelandic nation nothing more than relics of times gone by, or do we still need inspiration that drives us all to do good deeds?

Should we not answer, individually and jointly, questions about the Icelanders' mission and intentions in a new century, a new millennium?

What are the values we cherish the most? What are we obliged to preserve, strengthen and renew?

What is it that guides us as individuals and as a nation when we set off towards the world of wonders that greets us?

Icelanders have had the good fortune to preserve our solidarity in times of adversity, to be ready to help when setbacks and misfortune afflict our neighbours, colleagues or even strangers in distant parts of the country.

We have been a compatible family, our ethics and values based on community spirit and caring.

At present, these bonds in Icelandic society seem continually to be breaking. Loneliness and misfortune are the lot of increasing numbers of individuals, young and old alike, without the rest of us lending them a helping hand. Has the sense of compassion and help for one's neighbour, that hallmark of the Icelandic character, been so led astray that the mainstays of our nation's morality are now beginning to fray?

Do we intend to allow the plagues of growing violence, crime and harshness to destroy what has flourished and sow instead its wild seeds in the field we have cherished above all else: the very fabric of Icelandic society? Will the new century be a time of growing apathy and cruelty in Icelandic society, or will we manage to build adequate defences?

It is not only a human right to enjoy freedom of action, speech and enterprise. It is also a human right to enjoy security and peace, to create a good and sheltering home for one's children, to enjoy care during illness or old age, to be able to acquire education and maturity without the fear of violence, crime or cruelty.

Human rights are increasingly the criterion by which the performance of nations and governments are measured; not only human rights in the conventional terms laid down by laws and treaties, but also as a manifestation of morality and maturity, a testimony to a frame of mind and self-respect, to equal influence for men and women, to the consideration and confidence that the government shows towards individuals and organizations of the people themselves, and to the real right of each and every person to express his or her opinions and criticize their leaders without needing to fear reprisals or attack.

Many nations look towards us Icelanders and our cousins in the Nordic countries as a model in this area. But we also need to show that we are worthy of such confidence, both in the way we act here in Iceland and in our relations with others, in our international focuses and in our dialogues with individuals and organizations that want to talk to us.

The right to discuss and advise is becoming increasingly international and transcends national boundaries. Sometimes we are oversensitive towards outsiders who take a concern in and express themselves about issues and decisions that we consider to be exclusively under our own control. Our sense of independence and our love for our native country are so inextricably tied up with Icelandic nature that it is difficult for us to understand demands from others to have a say in the way Iceland preserves and utilizes the resources represented by its waterfalls, uninhabited areas and wilderness, the biosystems of our moors and valleys.

Questions about man's cohabitation with the environment, about evaluating the legacy that Mother Earth has bestowed upon us, are no longer confined to where we live or what nationality we are. The riches of the oceans, the rain forest belts, the continental plateaux, mountain ranges and ice caps, the diverse biosystems of flora and microorganisms – all these are increasingly regarded as the common heritage of humankind, since the fate of us all depends on maintaining balance in nature, on ensuring that the mechanism which nourishes and renews life does not shift from the only pattern for ensuring unborn generations the same rights as us.

The beauty of Iceland, the diversity of its nature and biology, its rivers and waterfalls, shores and mountains, is such a unique work of creation that, in the new century, Icelanders will be regarded more as the caretakers of nature rather than her masters. The current of international cooperation on these issues is steadily intensifying, since the future of all humankind is at stake. The norms and frameworks for making decisions will draw their strength from a common vision, and vested interests will be put aside.

We Icelanders must be positive participants in this development, utilize creatively rather than in self-defence the unique position that our land and history, culture and experience, have shaped for us.

We now have scientists and scholars, researchers and thinkers in the forefront of those who are giving the world new visions of the motive forces behind nature, of the laws of life and the nature of man himself, his characteristics and capabilities.

This vanguard is not only winning ground in prosperity and health, knowhow and technology here in Iceland; its contribution will likewise be the mainstay of Iceland's international influence in the new century, provided we have the good fortune to grant science and scholarship, education and training the place of honour which alone will secure Iceland's place in the global community – a community that will ask more about wisdom and capability, substance and mission than about formal power by virtue of wealth or weaponry.

Information now flows from all directions through the channels of technology and the Internet, granting each individual control over his or her own education, revolutionizing what was for centuries the principle on which power rested in schools and government institutions, companies and production processes. Education is no longer a task confined to the first decades of our lives, but rather a continuous process from youth to old age, from morning to night.

In the century that now greets us, information and knowledge will be the most influential determinant of prosperity and progress, living standards and wealth; and the organization, content and nature of education will be the main factor shaping success and prosperity.

We have always regarded school as a place where activities follow a fixed pattern, a lofty citadel of interests and capabilities. Now there is a pressing need to open our minds and encourage honest and frank discussion about the sweeping changes that must take place in the entire organization of schools and the educational system, the approaches and skills of teachers, if Icelandic youth is to enjoy the panoramic view that technology gives and be able to venture forth across the oceans of information in new times.

We need to initiate powerful dialogue at a national level on an educational policy for the new age; a national dialogue in which the government, businesses and the general public, professional and labour organizations, but especially parents and associations of teachers

themselves, lead the way in giving people in Iceland the education and skills that take into account the demands of a new age.

New technology has not only revolutionized the nature of education and schools; it is also rapidly abolishing all borders between work, leisure and learning. Now we can take advantage of continuous education all our lives, make our working hours more flexible and change family togetherness into a venue for continuous learning and creativity which we can all develop by and enjoy. The sharp divide that once ruled people out when they reached a certain age is becoming increasingly absurd in our new society of health and energy, knowledge and technology. Since elderly people retain their full strength for substantially longer than before, we should open new channels for them to continue with the rest of us in transforming Iceland in the new century. We cannot afford to reject their abilities and skills.

We must approach the new world with open minds, ready to reassess and change, to learn how to follow new paths, and allow neither vested interests nor prejudice to cloud our vision.

We need to take part in shaping the new technology, adapting it to our needs and circumstances, harnessing it in the service of the ideals that Icelanders have cherished most. Otherwise we run the risk of becoming its victims or playthings, no longer in command of where we ourselves are heading.

Thus it is vital for us to welcome the challenges that human progress present us with, and at the same time keep a firm grip on what has benefited our nation most.

At this milestone I wish all of you good fortune and success in your work and family lives, and hope that together we can tackle the tasks that the future holds in store.

It has been both enjoyable and constructive for me in the past few years to have spoken to young and old people alike all over the country about the interests of their local communities and the issues that appeal to people in Iceland, to sense the energy and determination within every heart.

It has been my good fortune to bear the responsibility that the nation vested in me, relying on the compassion and goodwill that I have been shown in times of sorrow and joy alike.

Life is an unfolding journey and no one knows when we meet fortune or adversity. The task is to be true to oneself and others at all times, and to prove worthy of trust and confidence.

I thank you sincerely for your warm feelings and sympathies and I passionately wish that the great qualities I have seen in the Icelandic character will accompany our nation for all time to come, in the new century and millennium.

May the ideal that has made us into a nation continue to guide and inspire us to greater deeds.