



**New Year Address**  
**by**  
**the President of Iceland**  
**Guðni Th. Jóhannesson**  
**1 January 2024**

Good day, people of Iceland.

Eliza and I wish you all a Happy New Year. May it bring you prosperity and occasions for joy and celebration. Many of us had the good fortune to experience these things during the past year. At the same time, however, we know that others encountered grief and adversity. Let us send good thoughts to those mourning and coming to terms with loss as they go about their daily lives.

Last year will be memorable for many reasons. In January, half a century had passed since the eruption in the Westman Islands, and in November, it was necessary to evacuate another thriving community, the town of Grindavík, after weeks of violent earth tremors and the threat of volcanic activity. An eruption followed in due course, and we must now prepare ourselves for continuing unrest on the Reykjanes Peninsula in the years to come.

I send the people of Grindavík our warmest wishes and our thanks to all those who have provided help and support in various practical ways. In his Christmas greeting to the community, Mayor Fannar Jónasson expressed his admiration for the resilience shown by his fellow residents in the past weeks. Surely we must all join him in this.

Past years have seen many natural catastrophes: violent storms that caused power failures and other problems in the north of the country, avalanches and mudslides in the East Fjords and the West Fjords – these are just some of the worst examples. We cannot tame the forces of nature, but we can determine how we respond in a crisis. When disasters strike, we can depend on our skilled search and rescue teams and others who provide on-site assistance. In this, we are immensely fortunate.

Then there are the actions of the human race, and their consequences. Average temperatures are on the rise all over the world and extreme weather events are becoming more common. We can tackle these challenges by changing the way we live, cutting our use of fossil fuels and generating less pollution. There seems to be an international consensus on measures to achieve this, and although our contribution will never be decisive, we here in Iceland must play our part too.

War continues to rage in many parts of the world. Nearly two years ago Russia launched a violent assault on Ukraine and more recently, a terrorist attack on Israel was answered by an invasion of Gaza. Tens of thousands of people have been killed, including thousands of innocent children.

Hopes for immediate and permanent peace in these places are, unfortunately, not very strong. Nevertheless, peace must prevail in the end: this is an objective that we must support. At the same time, we should be mindful of what it means to live in a country free of conflict and strife, to live in a country where we enjoy freedom, security and other human rights.

Now a new year awaits us, with all its opportunities and, perhaps, challenges. Of course we never know completely what the future holds; this is the beautiful unpredictability of life. That is what I said in the spring of 2016 when I first stood for election as president. I said then that if I were elected, and then re-elected, I would not wish to serve in the position for more than eight to twelve years. In this, I had in mind my own view of the office and its history, and also statements by various other people over the years.

It is a unique honour to serve as head of state. I therefore cannot deny that I thought long and hard about seeking support to continue as president for another term. On the other hand, I always returned to the conclusion that it was better to listen to my heart than to follow other arguments which, at the end of the day, must be regarded as less convincing.

Each individual has many duties to fulfil in society, but we should always bear in mind that those who wish to care for others must also care for their own well-being. Writer and poet Gerður Kristný mentioned this in an Advent address a few weeks ago; she also said the time we spend alone with ourselves or with our loved ones is perhaps even more important than we realise.

In a thriving democracy, moreover, no one is irreplaceable. Devotion to duty based on a misunderstanding of one's own importance should never be the overriding consideration; even less so should one's own vanity or private advantage determine our course of action.

Dear fellow citizens, dear friends: For all these reasons I do not intend to stand in the presidential election that will be held this summer. Instead, I choose

to leave office at the end of this term, at peace with myself, and I am sure that as before, – if I may say so myself – Icelanders will succeed in electing a president that they will support and like.

Nevertheless, I look forward to watching Icelandic society continue to thrive. Know yourself and know your people. This is the spirit in which I have approached each day as president, and I have no hesitation in saying that we Icelanders can certainly look to the future with confidence. I must, however, mention a few things that may cause concern or problems: too much hustle and bustle which can encourage pretence, materialism and stress; harsh talk in the heat of the moment (especially online); carelessness regarding our language and education and poverty afflicting some amid a society of material plenty.

However, it lies within our power to put all these things to rights. Our foundations are sound and not all is doom and gloom. We have many reasons to be full of pride and joy, optimism and hope.

Let us cultivate that which can unite us. Not least, let us continue to ensure that each and every individual can show what they are capable of, both for their own benefit and for the greater good, and also that all those who need assistance will receive it, in the spirit of cooperation and compassion. Let us uphold those traditions that have served us well, while at the same time welcoming fresh currents – in this way we can preserve the vital links between that which was, that which is and that which is yet to come.

And let us love our country, the land itself. Future generations deserve this of us; the land itself deserves it. *Land* is the title of a poem by Ingibjörg Haraldsdóttir that describes so well a healthy love of one's country at a time when our sense of national identity must be characterised by broadmindedness and affection, not by distrust or chauvinism, not by suspicion or fear of progress and diversity. The poem is as follows:

I'm not going to tell you about the land  
I'm not going to sing patriotic songs  
about the caves, waterfalls, hot springs  
the ewes and the cows  
the struggle of the nation  
the battle with the elements

no. Just stand here beside me  
in the darkness. Breathe deeply  
and feel it flow

then say:  
This is my home.

My fellow citizens: This is not the time to say farewell, but I should still like to use this opportunity of thanking you all, the many people I have met while serving as president, here at Bessastaðir, all over the country and abroad, through both happy and challenging occasions. We know there is no avoiding difficult times altogether. “It is an illusion and a pipe-dream to think that life can be, or should be, a bed of roses, a perpetual fit of laughter.” These words were spoken by Vigdís Finnbogadóttir in one of her New Year addresses, and they are certainly true.

Yes, I am saying “Thank you”. To my friends and family for their unwavering support, and to the older generations, you who, by your labour and toil, laid the foundations of the welfare state of our day. We must join together in ensuring that you will be comfortable in the evening of life.

I am grateful for having met and learned from those of you who for one reason or another are at a disadvantage in our society, who wish for fairness and justice but take life’s adversity in their stride. Much can be learned from this attitude.

I thank those who have devoted their energies to the service of others: the staff of our health services and educational institutions and all those who, in various ways, promote our physical and mental well-being. We also owe a debt of gratitude to people employed in other sectors: our farmers, fishermen and fish-processing workers, and to the many people working in business, industry and innovation, in commerce and the tourist industry – and more people could of course be mentioned.

I am grateful for the good cooperation I have enjoyed with government officials and elected representatives. Here I am thinking particularly of the prime ministers and other government ministers who have served during my presidency, as well as those who have served as members of parliament. I also appreciate talks and meetings with members of the clergy, representatives of other religious faiths and life-stance communities with whom I have spoken and got to know. Faith may comfort, support and heal, but everyone must follow their own conviction without coercion or prohibition. We are subject to a single code of law, but we may have various faiths.

I also wish to thank my predecessors, Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson and Vigdís Finnbogadóttir, for the good relations between us. I have also benefited from the legacy of the earlier presidents, Sveinn Björnsson, Ásgeir Ásgeirsson and Kristján Eldjárn.

I should like to express my admiration for those who excel in various fields in our society and carry the reputation of our country out into the world:

innovators, artists, athletes and all the others who make us feel proud that a small nation can achieve great things.

I wish to state my admiration for those who move to Iceland from abroad, in some cases after fleeing war and hunger, facing the challenge of making their way in a strange environment yet determined to be useful members of society, to make a decent life for themselves, learning the Icelandic language if they want to or need to. We must help them to do this.

Finally, I wish to thank all the children and young people I have got to know over the years, in schools and various get-togethers. Kids, you are great! You fill us older people with optimism and hope. If something is not right in your environment and your upbringing, then the fault is ours, not yours. Let's fix it together. I hope you will always manage to be true to your own convictions, that you will have dreams and set yourselves goals, that you will be motivated and confident and find what makes you feel your best in your mind and spirit. All the same, don't always choose the easy option. "It's one thing to feel tired; it's another to give up," said Kristján Eldjárn during his time here at Bessastaðir. Be determined and tenacious when determination and tenacity are needed.

My fellow citizens! "Now I am happy; the moment is good," wrote the poet and priest Hallgrímur Pétursson several centuries ago. In the same poem he went on to give some excellent advice in words that are still relevant, and still quoted, today: "In any game, it's best to bring / Things to a close while at full swing."

On behalf of my wife and myself, I wish to thank everyone again for the warmth and goodwill that we have enjoyed during my time in office. I wish you all good fortune, happiness and prosperity. Happy New Year!