

# The roots of Icelandic democracy

## A unique road to a free society?

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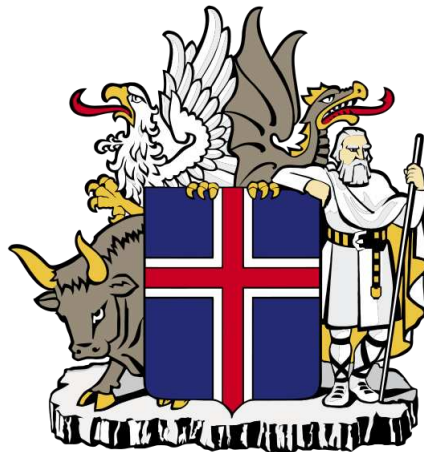


Figure 1: Coat of arms of Iceland ([Kjallakr, 2008](#))

### Abstract

The early history of Iceland had strong proto-democratic elements such as a national assembly. These were developed independent of Greek or Roman examples. Later modernisation in the nineteenth century was accelerated by this latent democratic culture. Today, it strengthens the democratic values of modern Iceland.

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# 1 Introduction

Photographers love Iceland for its beautiful colours and diverse landscape. Living in Iceland is not too bad: it scored as the most developed country in the world by the United Nations' Human Development Index. Some say that Iceland is one of the oldest democracies<sup>1</sup>. The Althing, the precursor to the modern national parliament, was founded in 930.

In 930, no main European countries were democratic, and the classic theories of democracy were unknown to the Icelanders. Most colonists originated from Scandinavia, a highly stratified society where the old pagan religion still flourished and where the influence of the Romans was very limited.

This early development towards proto-democratic structures makes Iceland interesting for political scientists. Was there a real democratic development or was Iceland just another des-tratified colonist culture? Was the assumed democratic development influenced from outside, or was it a unique home-grown Icelandic product?

So the classic examples of democracy - the Greek poleis such as Athens and the partly democratic Roman Republic - were unknown to the founders of the Althing. This was well before the European Enlightenment and the French and American models of democracy. This raises the question of uniqueness. Would the Icelandic model divert from the later French and American models of democracy? And how did the history of Iceland influence contemporary democracy in Iceland?

First, a short overview of contemporary Iceland will be given. Then follows the history of Iceland and the founding period of the state. Lastly, the concepts of democracy and state will be discussed to evaluate the uniqueness of Icelandic democracy. No prior knowledge of the reader about the history of Iceland is required or assumed - this paper is written with the reader interested in democratic theory in mind, so experts on Icelandic history might feel that too many well-known facts are summed up. I offer my apologies to the latter.

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<sup>1</sup>For example, the Dutch Wikipedia article on Iceland: "IJsland heeft van alle landen ter wereld de langste democratische traditie" Retrieved from [http://nl.wikipedia.org/wiki/IJsland#Geschiedenis\\_2](http://nl.wikipedia.org/wiki/IJsland#Geschiedenis_2) at 2009-01-29. The English Wikipedia version does not contain that statement.

## 2 Geography and climate

Iceland lies at quite a distance from the European mainland (see table 1). It has a cold oceanic climate. Summers are short and the weather is often very variable. The climate limits the agricultural possibilities, but the many rivers, lakes and the surrounding ocean offer rich opportunities for fishing. The beautiful landscape attracts some tourism. During wintertime large parts of the inland cannot be reached by motorised vehicles. Most villages and cities are located near the coast. The volcanic activity is used to generate hydrothermal electricity. Some hot springs are popular for bathing.

Place	Distance [km]
Greenland	287
Faroe Islands	420
Jan Mayen	550
Scotland	798
Norway	970

Table 1: Distances to other countries. Source: Landmaelingar Islands, Orkustofnun and Raunvisindastofnun Haskolans. Landshagir 2001.

Wintertime is not only a bad time to travel over land. Ice floes are dangerous for ships and in the past, Iceland was practically isolated during a large part of the year. [Byock \(2001, p.44\)](#) remarks: "Politically, the Island became an inward-looking country that was in contact with, but was largely independent of, the rest of Europe." Only with the advent of modern ships, satellites, and airplanes the island has become better accessible.

The remoteness of Iceland and its limited economic resources caused mainly disinterest from most European powers. The great distance from Norway was an advantage for the Norwegian settlers who wanted independence from the king. At the time of settlement around 900, Iceland was not inhabited, maybe except for some Irish monks who sought solitude.



Figure 2: Map of Iceland from Lonely Planet. Source: <http://www.lonelyplanet.com/iceland>

### 3 Historic chronology

A short historic chronology is given in table 2. I have only listed those events that seemed important to me for the subject of this study. An important period is the Free State period (930-1262), which is described in the section that bears its name.

Period	Event
330 BC	Ultima Thule is mentioned by the Greek navigator Pytheas
874	First successful Norse settler
930	Founding of the Althing at Þingvellir
999	Adoption of Christianity
1262	Norse King declared King of Iceland (Old Covenant)
1397-1523	Kalmar Union unites Denmark, Norway, and Sweden
1540-1550	Conversion to Lutheranism
1602	Denmark imposes a trade monopoly
1662	The Danish king restricts the power of the Althing
1798	Althing moved to Reykjavík from Þingvellir
1800	Althing dissolved by the Danish Crown
1843	The Althing is re-established as an advisory body
1876	Denmark grants Iceland greater autonomy
1918	Sovereign Icelandic state under the Danish Crown
1944	End of Union with Denmark; republic founded at Þingvellir

Table 2: Short chronology of Iceland (selected event). Source: 'Iceland on the web', retrieved at 2009-01-29 from [http://iceland.vefur.is/iceland\\_history/history.htm](http://iceland.vefur.is/iceland_history/history.htm)

An important name for Icelandic nationalism is Jón Sigurðsson (1811-1879), who strove to independence from Denmark. He was inspired by Romantic ideologies of mainland Europe. This can be recognised in the ideals of Icelandic nationalism: resurrection of the Icelandic Free State with its values such as democracy, freedom of the individual, and respect for the old language and the Sagas. (Ásgeirsson, 1994)

## 4 Modern democracy in Iceland

### 4.1 Parliament

The Icelandic parliament is called the Althing or Althingi. It has a website at [www.althingi.is](http://www.althingi.is) where its current structure is described:

On election day, all Icelandic citizens of 18 years of age and older have the right to vote in elections to the Icelandic parliament or Althingi. At intervals of no more than four years general elections are held by secret ballot to select 63 members of the Althingi. In elections, political parties seek a mandate from the nation to assume responsibility for both legislative and executive power, both of which are led by the governing parties.

...

Currently five political parties are represented in the Althingi: the Independence Party, the Left-Green Movement, the Liberal Party, the Progressive Party and the Social Democratic Alliance.

The Independence Party and the Social Democratic Alliance form the ruling coalition.

(Retrieved 2009-01-17)

This is a representative proportional parliamentary democracy with a multi-party system.

### 4.2 Government

The head of state is a mostly ceremonial president, so Iceland is a republic. The prime minister is the head of government. The president is elected and officially he must appoint a cabinet. In practice, the leaders of the leading parties in the Althing will work together to propose a cabinet. The government can be found online at [www.government.is](http://www.government.is).

### 4.3 Juridical

Iceland has a constitution and all executive and legislative decisions are subject to judicial review. The development and practice of judicial review is probably strongly influenced by American theories and practices (Helgadóttir, 2006). The Supreme Court also has a website: [www.haestirettur.is](http://www.haestirettur.is).

## 4.4 Statistics

The Icelanders themselves seem to be quite participative. "In the elections to the Althingi in 2007 around 211 thousand Icelanders were on the polling lists and 83.6% of them exercised their right to vote."<sup>2</sup>

A democratic constitution is nice and all, but how well does it perform compared to international norms?

In 1980, Vigdís Finnbogadóttir becomes President of Iceland - the first elected president of a democratic Republic. In 2009, Johanna Sigurðardóttir becomes prime minister, the world's first lesbian one.

The *Human Development Index* (HDI) is developed in 1980 by the economist Mahbub ul Haq and Sir Richard Jolly. It is used by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP)<sup>3</sup>. It tries to measure development by combining life expectancy, education, and standard of living. Iceland ranks first of the world in 2006. To be precise, the following reports mark Iceland as the most developed country: 2006 (2008 report and 2008 statistical update) and 2005 (2007 report and 2008 statistical update). This does not say much about the democratic system, but it proves that Iceland has a high degree of development. Note: the results of the financial crisis and the collapse of the króna will probably result in lower HDI rankings.

The *World Democracy Audit* tries to measure the democratic status of 150 countries with populations greater than 1 million. The results for Iceland are given in the table below.

Topics	Range	Ranking
Political Rights	1-7	1
Civil Liberties	1-7	1
Press Freedom	0-150	8
Corruption	0-150	n/a
overall ranking	1-150	n/a

Table 3: World Democracy Audit results for Iceland

Source: <http://www.worldaudit.org/countries/iceland.htm>  
(Retrieved 2009-01-16)

The political rights and civil liberties measurements are for 2007. The World Democracy Audit uses the Freedom House<sup>4</sup> to obtain the press freedom. I guess that the press freedom is for 2007 as well. The overall ranking is not available because the corruption score is missing.

The corruption ranking is obtained from Transparency International. Although the World Democracy Audit does give 'n/a' for corruption, Transparency International<sup>5</sup> ranks Iceland as

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<sup>2</sup>Source: [http://www.althingi.is/kynningarefni/index\\_en.html](http://www.althingi.is/kynningarefni/index_en.html) (Retrieved 2009-01-17)

<sup>3</sup><http://hdr.undp.org/en/>

<sup>4</sup><http://www.freedomhouse.org/>

<sup>5</sup><http://www.transparency.org/> (Retrieved 2009-01-16)



number 6 using a range of 179 countries (year 2007). In the same year, the Netherlands scored one place lower, ranking as number 7. But the World Democracy Audit ranked the Netherlands number 6 (year 2007).

Given the scale of 179 countries, I assume that Iceland and the Netherlands have an equal level of corruption. The Netherlands had an overall ranking of 5 on the World Democracy Audit<sup>6</sup>. We can now make a comparison:

Topics	Range	Icelandic Ranking	Dutch Ranking
Political Rights	1-7	1	1
Civil Liberties	1-7	1	1
Press Freedom	0-150	8	6
Corruption	0-150	6	6
overall ranking	1-150	>5	5

Table 4: WDA comparison between the Netherlands and Iceland

The Netherlands and Iceland are equals for political rights and civil liberties, but the Netherlands have somewhat more freedom of press. That means that Iceland should have an overall ranking higher than 5, which means that Iceland is among the 10 most democratic countries in the world.

The same World Audit also maintains an Economic Freedom index. The 2007 ranking lists 156 countries. Iceland and the Netherlands share a 14<sup>th</sup> place<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup><http://www.worldaudit.org/countries/netherlands.htm> (Retrieved 2009-01-16)

<sup>7</sup><http://www.worldaudit.org/economicfreedom.htm> (Retrieved 2009-01-19)

## 5 The Free State period

After a few decades of settlement, the Althing was founded in 930. This is the beginning of the Free State period, which would end in 1262 when the Norse King was invited to rule over Iceland.

### 5.1 Source: [Byock \(2001\)](#)

The political development of the young state is very thoroughly described by [Byock \(2001\)](#) in his book *Viking Age Iceland*. The overview given in this section is largely based on his work. Using just one source is, in general, a bad idea, but Jesse is an acknowledged expert in the field. Better, more recent, and more comprehensive sources are ill available. I will cite his work extensively: in fact, this section is mostly a quotation of selected parts of his book, with a few of my own comments added to it. This selection should give a good impression of the potential democratic level of the Free State period.

### 5.2 Stratification

The Norse Viking society was a highly stratified society. The settlers who sailed to Iceland formed a simpler society, similar to the loss of class and titles then European emigrants settled in America.

Single-household farms became the rule, and since no towns or even small villages developed in Viking Age Iceland, the society was completely rural. [p.31]

So large a number of property-owning free farmers is an indication of the social levelling that had transpired in Iceland in the centuries following the settlement. The figure also suggests the political importance of the landowning farmer class, individuals who, from all accounts, looked after their own rights and interests. [p.55]

Unlike early Ireland with its history of chieftains and warlords dating from at least the Bronze Age, medieval Iceland was not a tribal society, and the authority of its leaders did not depend on ownership of on rule over defined territorial units. ... the cultural focus was on law. [pp.72-73]

### 5.3 State institutions

State institutions can be divided in legislative, executive, and juridical branches. Early Iceland had a strong legislative and juridical organisation, but remarkably lacked an executive branch. It had no president, no king, no police, no army.

From the start, Icelandic society operated with well-developed concepts of private property and law, but, in an unusual combination, it lacked most of the formal institutions of government which normally protect ownership and enforce judicial decisions. [p.28]

... a social order that lacked many characteristics of a state structure and operated without regional or local military arrangements. [p.43]

Beyond the consensus that it was wise to be on friendly terms with the Norwegian king, Iceland for centuries had no foreign policy and no defensive land or sea force. [p.43]

Defining early Iceland is no easy task. Historians tend to describe the island as either a free state or a commonwealth ... In a straightforward manner, 'Free State' reflects the reality that medieval Iceland was independent and that the Icelanders were conscious of belonging to a single, island-wide polity. ... Iceland did have specific elements of statehood: a formal national legislature (the Lögrétta) and a well-defined judicial system that embraced the entire country. ... Although early Iceland was essentially headless, it did have distinct aspects of an embryonic state. ... The mixture of state and stateless existed because Free State Iceland was the product of two different cultural forces. On the one hand, it inherited the tradition and the vocabulary of statehood from its European origins. On the other, Iceland was headless because of the class values of the immigrants. ... Initially it 'devolved', shedding most of the aristocratic strata of Viking Age society. ... Although Iceland was not a democratic system, proto-democratic tendencies existed. [pp.63-65]

The close connection between political and legal success in Iceland was owing in part to the institutionalized concept that the government bore no responsibility for punishing an individual for breaking the law. Criminal acts were regarded as private concerns to be settled between the injured and the offending parties or their advocates. Penalties could be restitutions or fines paid in the form of damages to the successful party. The duty to exact vengeance in cases of manslaughter fell on the kin of the slain, who, if they wished to act, had to choose among the different available methods of processing a claim. Far less than a duty, violence was an option. [p.184]

It seems clear to me that a state must have institutions, of else it cannot do what a state is defined to do: enforce a monopoly over violence in its own territory. The Icelandic assemblies did control violence, and it worked for the most part, but the control was not total because of the lack of an executive branch. The existence of the two other branches and a shared identity

allow me to use the word "state" for the early Icelandic period, but it was a very weak state indeed.

## 5.4 Leaders

A leader or chieftain was called a goðar (pl.: goði). Freeman had the right to choose their own goðar, but in practice, the title became in many instances hereditary and was bound to a number of houses lying in a small region, called a goðorð. The goðar originally only had a religious function, but later also offered services to neighbouring freeman, such as conflict resolution, counselling and price setting. He became the chairman of the local thing (assembly). The freemen from his goðorð were his 'thingmen', whose views he represented in the national thing - the Althing. One goðorð could be shared by more than one goðar, so the number of goði was higher than the number of goðorðs.

The society that emerged was based on a system of decentralized self-government that functioned largely through personal relationships between leaders and followers. [p.75]

Initially there appear to have been approximately thirty-six chieftaincies (goðorð), and a higher number of goðar, since each goðorð could be shared by two or more individuals. [p.94]

... a chieftain, in accordance with Grágás<sup>8</sup>, had little power to command a thingman to act against his will. Instead, a chieftain's power rested, to a large degree, on the consent of his followers. Thingmen, for their part, could formally demand very little of their goði beyond requiring that he carry out the few duties prescribed in the laws. These responsibilities included holding thing meetings and setting prices on imported goods. Such duties assured the availability of arenas for settlement of disputes and helped to prevent friction among the farmers. In fulfilling these obligations the goðar had little latitude, for in most instances they were accountable to their followers and to other chieftains. [p.120]

Most goði were rich farmers. Their control over their thingmen was very limited, and more based on reputation than on coercion. A goðar could uphold his reputation by acting as an advocate for his thingman - for example, help coerce an outlaw to pay a fine to one of his thingmen. The goðar would probably get a percentage of the fine for his help. More advanced societies often have professional executives, paid by tax, who do such work. Although this system was economically efficient for early Iceland, it hints at the still-forming phase of the state.

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<sup>8</sup>Grágás: written law, also called the Gray Goose Laws

## 5.5 Taxation

Only two taxes were available to goðar: thingfararkaup and hoftollr. "Thingfararkaup, which means the 'fee' or 'bargained price' (kaup) for 'travelling' ('faring') to the Althing .... Poorer freeman not liable to the tax were also entitled to attend the assemblies." So a thingman could evade the tax by travelling with to the Althing - most freeman paid the tax, so the sum was probably not very high. The other tax, hoftollr, was meant to maintain the temple and religious practices. [pp.253-255]

With coercive power privatized, Icelanders did not need to pay taxes for the upkeep of state institutions of enforcement. The solution was economically efficient. ... the rights to vengeance-taking were often sold by family members to advocates. [p.74]

Note that no national tax had to be paid, because no national executive did exist. The taxes for the local executives, the goði, were minimal. This strengthens the assumption that a full-grown state did not yet exist.

## 5.6 Things (assemblies)

(Dahl, 1989, p.32) regards the things as a unique historical development: "The origins of the Viking Ting, a judicial-legislative assembly of freemen, are lost in time but clearly were independent of external influences. The creation of the Althing in 930 and the development of a quasi-democratic constitutional system unique in Europe for its time were offshoots of Norwegian Viking settlers who, it is safe to say, knew nothing of Greek democracy, Roman republicanism, or political theory of philosophy in a formal sense." Local assemblies were quite common in the Viking society, but the Icelanders elevated the assemblies to a higher importance.

Focusing on the traditional Norse-Germanic rights of freeman, the Icelanders in the tenth century developed those rights in isolation from the privileges of kings and from the other higher strata of Viking society. They expanded the ancient concept of the local freeman's assembly and, in the process, created a body of law that in its entirety was distinct from anything that had previously existed in Scandinavia. [p.170]

All Icelandic things (assemblies) were skapthings, meaning that they were governed by established procedures and met at regular, legally designated intervals at predetermined meeting places. ... the most important local assembly was the springtime thing (várthing) which met each year in May and might last a week. ... Three local chieftains were responsible for each várthing, and by law all their thingmen were required to attend. By the mid tenth century there were perhaps

twelve springtime assemblies, distributed rather evenly around the perimeter of the country. [p.171]

The national assembly was not only an assembly, but was the major national event. The national identity of Iceland is interwoven with the Althing.

The Althing was the annual meeting of all goðar, each accompanied by some of his thingmen. This crucial gathering, which met at Thingvöllum (the Thing Plain) in the south-western part of the island, lasted for two weeks in June, during the period of uninterrupted daylights and the mildest weather. Its business was more than governance of the country. At the time when travel was easiest, hundreds of people from all over Iceland, including pedlars, brewers of ale, tradesmen, and young adults advertising for spouses, converged on the banks of the Axe River, the Öxára, which runs through the site of the Althing. Thingvöllum, with its large lake and the mountains in the distance, is a site of great natural beauty. [p.174]

The Althing system made Iceland into one legal community. [p.181]

Legal assemblies became political arenas where leaders contested with one another for status. [p.183]

## **5.7 The End of Freedom**

The end of the Free State period was marked by "changes in the balance of power. As part of the evolution to a more stratified social order, the number of chieftains diminished and the power of the remaining leaders grew." Some goði became a stórgoðar, who gave leadership to large regions. A third class was born. [pp.341-343]

Not sufficiently powerful to overturn the conservative world order, ambitious stórgoðar turned to Norway's King Hakon for assistance. Hakon, however, was an uncertain ally. More interested in furthering his own ambitions than advancing the aims of Icelanders, the King throughout his long reign from 1217 to 1263 stood back, allowing one Icelandic leader to weaken another, a method that eventually assured his own success. [p.350]

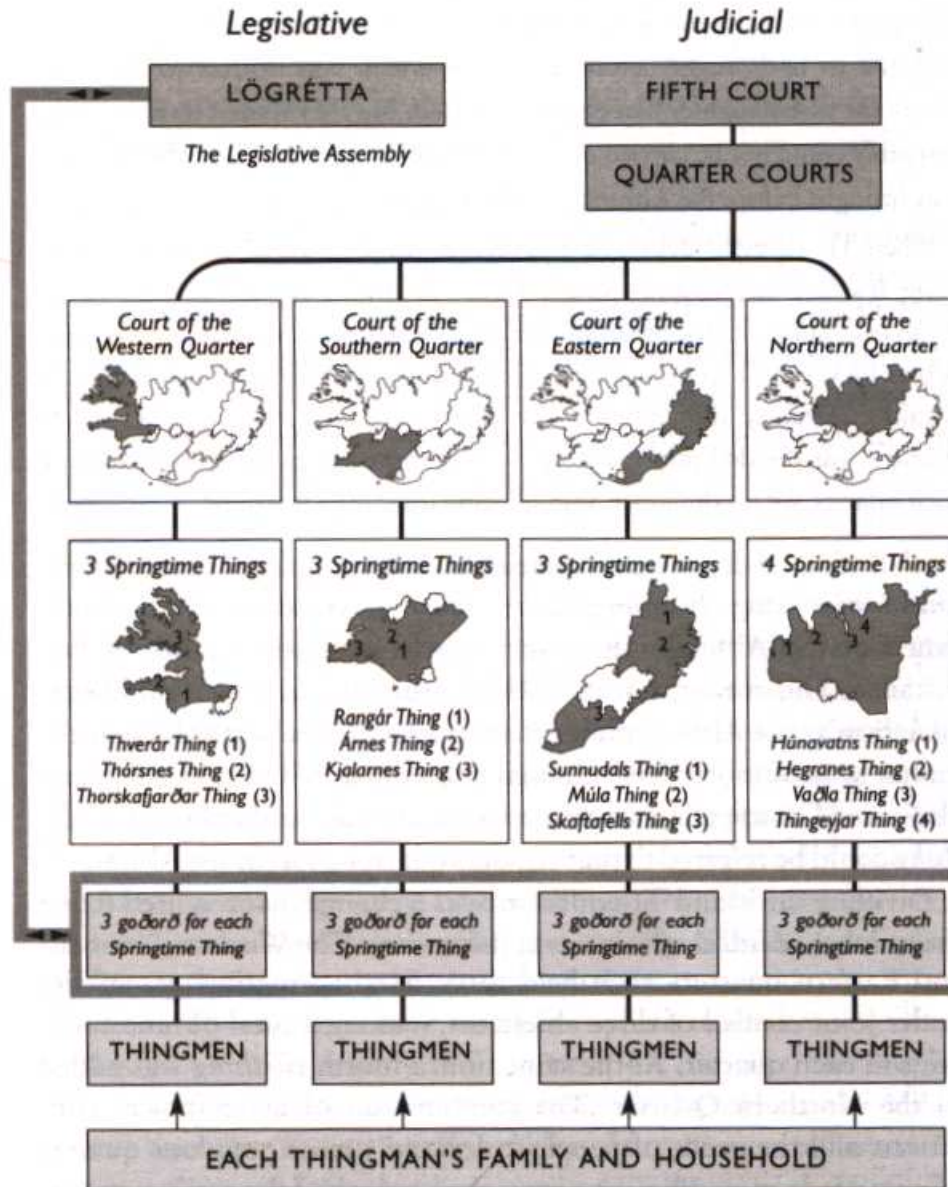
King Hakon ... in the early 1260s sent his own representatives to Iceland. Aided by Norway's archbishop, the King ... sent royal messengers to talk in person to Iceland's farmers. At a series of local assemblies from 1262 to 1264, the King's representatives offered the Icelanders an alternative to the turmoil caused by the quarrels of the stórgoðar [p.351]

The formal agreement, by which representatives from the northern and southern regions swore allegiance to the King in 1262-4, was called the Old Covenant (Gamli Sáttmáli). The rest of the Icelanders swore allegiance to the King soon after ... much of the traditional legislative power remained with the Icelanders, even though the King was free to modify older laws or to propose new ones. [p.352]

And so the Free Icelandic Republic ended. The proto-democratic structure was not strong enough, and the old ties to Norway not loose enough, to sustain an independent state. The lack of an executive state institution ultimately resulted in Norway offering such executive authority.

# THE ALTHING

This systematic picture of the Althing's legislative and judicial functions and their relationship to other governmental structures is based on information found principally in the thirteenth-century lawbooks. In reality Iceland did not operate so systematically.



9. The Governmental Structure.

Figure 3: The Althing in the Free State period (Byock, 2001, p.178)



## 6 Enlightenment and Romanticism

The nineteenth century brought a lot of change to Europe. Liberalism, enlightenment, democracy, romanticism and other ideas changed people and states. Iceland also underwent its influence. The romantic notion of the uniqueness of Iceland and its Althing, the want for individual freedom and national self-determination, and democratisation all started in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

### 6.1 Source: [Ásgeirsson \(1994\)](#)

This is well described by [Ásgeirsson \(1994\)](#) in his article *The impact of 'national myth' on the foundations of democracy in Iceland*. I will again mostly offer selected quotations. This is because I do not want re-do work already done. My selection should enable the reader to quickly get the most important developments leading to democracy in Iceland. While reading this section, please bear in mind that his main conclusion is that "a perceived strong democratic heritage ruled out the possibility of any other form of government once the people regained their independence." [p.14]

[Ásgeirsson \(1994, pp.15-16\)](#) mentions Dahl, who distinguished between a 'feudal society' and a 'free farmer society'. The latter one has less stratification and has more relative equality. Iceland is such a free farmer society. He continues with Dahl, "not only that a democratic order is possible in pre-modern agrarian societies, but also that violent revolution is not a prerequisite for democracy. In these countries, the backbone of democracy had already been established."

### 6.2 Literacy and the national myth

First, the importance of literacy for the preservation of the 'national myth' and for creating cultural equality is stressed:

This perceived 'social equality' was partly the result of widespread literacy. 'There is not probably, in any part of the world, an agricultural or pastoral peasantry so well informed and enlightened as those of Iceland', wrote Barrow in 1835. Icelandic culture was dominated by literature. The Eddic poetry, the Sagas, the history books, and the law codes written in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries were the cultural treasures of the country. Reading and citing stories and poetry were practically the only entertainment during long dark winters. [p.23]

### 6.3 Students in Copenhagen

Icelandic students had to move to Copenhagen to receive higher education. These students initiated the Icelandic independence movement:

Copenhagen was 'Iceland's window to European culture and political development'. ... Icelandic students ... between 1828 and 1841 started publishing the three periodicals that practically initiated Iceland's independence movement. ... The editors of the three periodicals that were introduced between 1828 and 1841 turned a 'traditional myth' into a 'myth of action', thus convincing the people that they were capable of selfgovernment, and presenting them with the task of resurrecting the 'golden age' by recapturing the political rights of Iceland's independent past. ... The first of the three periodicals to champion this cause was *Ármann á althingi*, which was published in four volumes between 1829 and 1832. The editor, Baldvin Einarsson, was a farmer's son from the north of Iceland, studying law in Copenhagen. [p.25]

Einarsson painted a very romantic picture of the ancient Althing. Einarsson's treatise is generally regarded as 'the first assertion of nationality in the political life of Iceland'. [p.26]

Einarsson died in early 1833 at the age of 32. Two years later, the periodical *Fjölnir* took up the thread where he had left it. The editors/publishers of *Fjölnir* were four young students in Copenhagen: Brynjólfur Pétursson (law), Jónas Hallgrímsson (natural science), Konrád Gíslason (linguistics), and Tómas Sæmundsson, who had already completed his degree in theology. [p.27]

Sæmundsson, like Einarsson before him and other Icelandic nationalists of the day, was under strong influence from the German historian Johann Gottfried Herder. He said that Herder's book, *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit*, was 'the most profound and sublime inquiry into World History which existed in German'. ... He wanted to model the forthcoming consultative assembly for Iceland entirely on the old Althing. [p.28]

What is clear is that both *Ármann á althingi* and *Fjölnir* expressed a very wide public sentiment about national affairs, as demonstrated by the many petitions sent to the king in the 1830s and 1840s - some with thousands of signatures collected from all parts of the country. The plea for the restoration of the old Althing received universal support in Iceland. [p.29]

## 6.4 Results

The above makes clear that the Icelanders had a very ‘romanticised’ idea of the earlier Free State period, and the popularity of that idea, with the Althing as the main symbol of the old democratic ideal, was universal in Iceland. This popularity began to bear fruit:

By then, the third yearly periodical, *Ný félagsrit*, had started publication. It was the organ of Jón Sigurðsson, the undisputed leader of Iceland’s independence movement. [29-30]

When the royal committee recommended, in 1841, that Iceland should have a separate consultative assembly, public support for the new Althing to be modelled on the old one and placed at Thingvellir had grown so strong that Sigurðsson felt compelled to risk his popularity by attacking the idea with full fervour. Although he was full of admiration for the political system of the Icelandic Commonwealth, claiming that it was a great achievement for its time, he insisted that it was not suited for the present age. He now played down the influence of ordinary people in the old regime, saying that the power of the chieftains was unchecked, making the regime basically an aristocracy. The proper model for a modern system of government, rather, was based on a democratic principle, he argued, because that enabled the common people to rule themselves. [p.31]

On 8 March 1843, King Christian VIII announced that the Althing would be restored as a consultative assembly with twenty selected representatives and six appointed by the king. [p.31]

## 6.5 The power of the past

Although the road to democracy was triggered by the liberal developments in the rest of Europe, the deeper motives for the Icelandic democratisation were believed to be found in the early history of Iceland. Sigurðsson even had to calm down things, because the popularity of the old Althing could lead to unpractical governmental arrangements. The citations below summarise the workings of the national myth in Iceland.

By focusing on certain features of Iceland’s independent past, such as the central importance of the Althing in the ancient regime, and by exaggerating certain aspects, such as public participation in the decision-making process, the political heritage of Iceland’s independent past was effectively represented as being democratic in nature. Thus, a political fable of the ‘golden age’ was created, which laid the foundations for all further advances in the direction of democratic independence. [p.33]

Although Iceland's independence campaign derived its strength and inspiration from the liberal ideas and revolutionary movements which convulsed Europe in the nineteenth century, not much reference was made to these foreign movements in the independence rhetoric. ... It was simply enough to refer to the time when Icelanders ruled themselves. [p.37]

## **6.6 Inevitable democracy**

The Althing was restored, although in a modernised form. Full freedom and democracy were not yet achieved, but from now on was inevitable.

The fifteen years between the publication of the Prospectus of Ármann á althingi in 1828 and the restoration of the Althing in 1845 can be seen as the most vital period of Iceland's independence movement. Hitherto, the orthodox view amongst Icelandic historians and political scientists has been to regard this period as simply a prelude to the actual independence movement, which is believed to have started into earnest when the Danish king renounced his absolute power in 1848. This article argues, on the other hand, that the development after 1848 was inevitable. [p.33]

Indeed, Iceland has become a modern democracy, ranking high on many rankings related to freedom, as discussed earlier in the section on modern democracy in Iceland.

## 7 Conclusion

Was Iceland a democratic state during the Free State period? I only partially agree with [Byock \(2001\)](#) that the word "state" is more fitting than "commonwealth". The lack of an executive branch is, in my view, a required ingredient for any full-grown state. The existence of other state elements, such as the strong legislative and juridical branches, and the existence of a national identity and culture are strong arguments against the use of the word "commonwealth". I would say that a "proto-state" is a better description.

The "proto" prefix must also be applied to the democratic system that was in use by the early Free Republic. Goði were elected by local assemblies, and the local freeman was represented in the national assembly by his local representative. This is as good as a representative democracy can get, but many goði were not elected but were a goðar by birthright. Although accepted by the local assembly, such hereditary power positions do not play well with any democratic system. Indeed, the later power struggles of the goði led to the end of the Republic.

Nevertheless, early Iceland did have much that resembles the representative liberal democracies of today. It was more than just an island culture - the democratic traits already were present in the parent society (the Viking society) and the social levelling in Iceland made a further development of that trait possible.

The sociologist Richard Tomasson argues that Icelandic society shares some of the characteristics of 'new societies' formed in later periods by overseas migrations of Europeans. In these offshoot societies, which sociologists call 'fragments' of larger and older groupings, the influence of kin and traditional community lessened, and law took precedence over kinship as the source of authority. By detaching itself from a 'whole' or parent society, a fragment may lack the stimulus to take part in the developing social issues of the mother culture. ([Byock, 2001](#), p.82)

The above passage, in which [Byock \(2001\)](#) quotes Thomasson, offers a more general view on the 'why' of the strong legislative and juridical branches of the early Icelandic system. Old structures such as stratification, authority, family and tradition had to be replaced with some new structure, and law offers a clear and neutral structure for all. Because no strong authority exists, these laws must be created in such a way that there is broad support. The Icelandic assemblies were a perfect institution for such a task. The main focus was not on government for and by the people, but on law and individual freedom. When a remote Norse king could deliver law and freedom, the Icelanders were quick to abandon their formal independence. Although early Iceland might be proto-democratic, the Icelanders of old probably were not very aware of it, and regarded law and freedom higher than political rule by the people.

The awareness of the uniqueness of the 'golden age' was later constructed by the students in Copenhagen, who were influenced by the ideas of Enlightenment and Romanticism. The

Icelanders had never forgotten their history, because a rich national culture and much written history were available. Putting this historical awareness to use for liberalisation was straightforward and led to an independent and democratic Iceland. For the Icelanders, the ideas of democracy were not alien and from the outside, but they appeared old and intrinsic Icelandic. Turning Iceland to a democracy needed no conviction.

Theories from the schools of the Classics, from the Enlightenment and from Romanticism did not have much influence during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The Romantic movement busied themselves mainly with recreation of the Althing and with theories and justifications in which the old Free State played a central role.

This proves how strong a historic background with proto-democratic elements can be. Bringing democracy to a culture with a (semi)democratic history is far easier than introducing democracy to a culture for which equality, literacy, law, and discussions are new concepts. Maintaining democracy in Iceland is easy too: democratic culture in Iceland can rest on a history and a national myth which promotes freedom, independence, tolerance and democracy.

The old Free State, without outside influence, would probably not have evolved to a modern democracy. But its history has helped the transition to a modern democracy beyond measure. I believe that this historic background still inspires a culture in which democratic values flourish, as is measurable in so many areas in contemporary Iceland. The Icelandic road to a free society is indeed a unique road.

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**Subject:** Re: paper ijsland, definitieve versie  
**From:** "J.N.M. Charmant" <\*\*\*\*\*>  
**Date:** Mon, 23 Feb 2009 00:17:56 +0100 (MET)  
**To:** "Evert Mouw" <post@evert.net>

**Evaluation in Dutch**

Beste student, Beste Evert,

Het werkstuk is zeker onderhoudend en het kan zonder bezwaar als voldoende worden gekwalificeerd. Ik heb het gewaardeerd met het cijfer zeven en een half.

Toch overheerst bij mij de indruk dat een en ander niet voldoende uit de verf komt, dan wel dat de invalshoek weliswaar interessant was, maar bij nader inzien nog geen echt overtuigende inzichten heeft gegenereerd.

Het is natuurlijk onbestrijdbaar dat die vroege geschiedenis van IJsland een interessant geval is, zij het in nogal unieke omstandigheden, wat in de wetenschap altijd een probleem oplevert, want wat moet je met een uniek geval? Het enige waar ik ook meteen aan moest denken is aan de oertijd van de Verenigde Staten (voor zover ik daar iets van weet) en met name aan de speculaties van Nozick over het ontstaan van een minimale staat uit een situatie van tamelijk geïsoleerde gelijke kleine eigenaars met een groeiende behoefte aan effectieve en efficiënte rechtsbescherming. Maar dat heeft natuurlijk meer met staatsvormingstheorie en met de filosofische problematiek van gelijkheid en vrijheid te maken dan met democratie an sich.

IK snap ook dat het al dan niet geromantiseerde/geïdealiseerde idee van die vroege geschiedenis een hoofdrol heeft gespeeld bij de ontwikkelingen in de 19e-eeuw, maar ook daar zie ik toch vooral een link met zelfbeschikking- hetgeen natuurlijk niet los hoeft te staan van democratie, maar ik heb de indruk dat we hier vooral met de mythologie van de volksgemeenschap te maken hebben en minder met de watermerken van de liberale democratie, zoals polyarchie in de zin van Dahl en de nadruk op het individu als eigenstandig besliscentrum. Ik kan me vergissen, natuurlijk, maar dat vereist meer materiaal dan nu voorligt.

Wat me ook wantrouwig maakt is dat de IJslandse democratie ondanks eigen vroege historie en de rol daarvan bij de herinvoering van democratie wel heel snel heel erg is gaan lijken op andere Europese democratieën, inclusief de gangbare makkes daarvan. Als je door de recente jaargangen van Scandinavian Political Studies scanned dan zie je dat ook in IJsland de democratie laboreert aan vervreemding van de kiezer (lidmaatschap van politieke partijen is dramatisch afgenomen, invloed van de kiezer op de regeringsvorming is minimaal), etc, etc.

Niettemin, ik heb weer wat nieuws opgestoken - ik wist niks, van IJsland, Daarvoor mijn dank.

Ik hoop dat je je kunt vinden in mijn oordeel. Anders hoor ik het wel.

Met vriendelijke groet,

hans charmant  
I

Hierbij dan de definitieve versie van de paper over de IJslandse democratie (deze keer met de spellingsfouten eruit). De papieren versie zal ik proberen morgen op de bus te doen. Veel leesplezier!

Hartelijke groet,  
Evert