

ALTHINGI

Althingi and Democracy
History of Althingi
Elections to Althingi
The Role of Althingi
Althingi Administration
Parliament House
Institutions of Althingi



ALTHINGI

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PARLIAMENT AND DEMOCRACY



The public gallery is open when Althingi is sitting, providing an opportunity to observe parliamentary business.

The Constitution of the Republic of Iceland is based on the principle that power originates with the people, who assign that power to their elected representatives. This system is termed representative democracy. Every fourth year the electors choose, by secret ballot, 63 representatives to sit in parliament. These Members of Althingi jointly hold legislative powers, and also fiscal powers, i.e. the power to make decisions on public spending and taxation. It is important that the people should know what decisions are made in parliament, and how they are made, as the electorate and their representatives are responsible for maintaining democracy in action. The right to vote may be said to be the basis of democracy in Iceland, and Althingi is its cornerstone.

Other features of the democratic system are e.g. that the Government is answerable to parliament for its actions, and its work is monitored by parliament. Iceland is governed by rule of law; the judiciary is autonomous, and the courts are to judge solely on the basis of law, and are not subject to any authority of the executive branch. Those who hold executive power are without exception to comply with the law, and they are bound by the law.

Constitutional provisions on freedom of opinion, free expression, and rights of association and assembly are also clear indicators of the democratic system. These factors are in fact necessary to democracy, so that the citizens of the nation are guaranteed the right to participate in national affairs.

Decisions made in parliament have an impact upon the daily lives of all Icelanders. The aim of publishing this information booklet on Althingi is to explain parliament's organisation, work and history. The booklet should be helpful to all who want to know more about Althingi.



Icelandic history and nature come together at Thingvellir, which provides a unique view of geological history, along with a remarkable natural environment. The foundation of Althingi (parliament) at Thingvellir in AD 930 marked the beginning of the old Icelandic Commonwealth. Althingi continued to meet at Thingvellir until 1798.



After the general election of 2009, five parties are represented in Althingi: the Citizens' Movement (subsequently the Movement), Independence Party, Left-Green Movement, Progressive Party and the Social Democratic Alliance.

Political parties

Political parties constitute a link between parliament and the electorate. Parties come into being when a group of people decide to join forces in order to influence society by gaining election of the members to parliament and by participation in government. In their manifestos, parties explain which issues they regard as important; these manifestos clarify differences in their ideologies.

Participation in party activities is one of the public's main means of influencing policy. One of the principles of democracy is that members of the general public influence social development, and have a real possibility of making their ideas and views known.

The role of the media is to disseminate information on important issues to the public, including information on political parties and politicians.

The Icelandic citizen's right to free expression, the right of association and the right of assembly are established in the Constitution. The Constitution overrides other legislation, and serves to safeguard democracy.

How can you have influence?

By participation in the work of a political party.

By participation in the work of trade unions and other organisations.

By participation in non-government organisations in a sphere which is important to you.

By speaking to Members of Althingi, local councillors and others in responsible positions in society.

By writing in the media, and by giving tips to journalists.

THE HISTORY OF ALTHINGI

Althingi is the nation's oldest institution, and the highest. Its foundation at Thingvellir (Parliament Plains) in 930 AD marks the birth of the Icelandic nation. Althingi was an assembly of the nation, where the leading chieftains met to discuss various matters. Althingi passed legislation and dispensed justice. Althingi assembled around the middle of June for a session of about two weeks, and all free and law-abiding citizens could attend. Those attending the assembly dwelt in temporary camps known as búdir during the session. Sanctuary during the session was intended to ensure freedom to observe the proceedings. Althingi was well-attended, as it was the centre of power and interaction.

Lögrétta (the Law Council) was at the heart of Althingi's proceedings. The Council ruled on legal disputes, enacted new legislation, and granted exemptions from law. Lögrétta comprised chieftains (godar), and in due course bishops. They were accompanied by non-voting advisers. Decisions were made by simple majority. After the country was divided into four quarters around 965 AD, quarter courts (fjórðungsdómar) were established at Althingi, one for each quarter. Each comprised 36 judges; for a valid verdict, 31 had to be in agreement. A fifth court (fimmtardómur) was established early in the 11th century, which served as an appeals court of sorts. It comprised 48 judges appointed by the godar of Lögrétta, and reached its verdicts by simple majority.

The Icelanders celebrate major national occasions at Thingvellir. In 1874 the millennium of the settlement of Iceland was celebrated, and in 1974 the 1100th anniversary. The millennium of the foundation of Althingi was marked in 1930 (right). The modern Republic of Iceland was founded at Thingvellir in 1944, and the 50th anniversary of that occasion was marked in 1994. In the summer of 2000 the millennium of Iceland's adoption of Christianity was celebrated.



TIMELINE 930-1800

| 900 | 1000 | 1100 | 1200 | 1300 |
|---|---|------------------------------------|---|--|
| 930 Althingi founded 965 Quarter Court founded | 1000 Adoption of Christianity 1005 Fifth Court founded | 1122-33 Book of Icelanders written | 1262 Icelanders swear fealty to the King of Norway 1271 Járnsíða law code 1281 Jónsbók law code | 1397 Formation of Kalmar Union under one King in Denmark |

The Law Speaker (lögsögumadur) was the highest official of Althingi. His role included reciting the laws of Iceland at Althingi, in the days before Iceland had a written language. He recited the laws of parliamentary procedure, chaired sessions of Lögrétta, and settled disputes. The Law Speaker is believed to have addressed the assembly from the Law Rock (Lögborg), which appears to have been where verdicts were announced, important speeches made, and where the assembly was formally opened and dissolved. Much remains unclear about the assembly and the role of the Law Speaker; the Old Commonwealth was a time of change in Icelandic society, and disputes over power and religion made their mark on society and on the work of Althingi. The Book of Icelanders (Íslendingabók), written in 1122-33, is one of the most important historical sources on the foundation of Althingi.

Royal rule

Icelandic chieftains submitted to the authority of the Norwegian king in 1262 after nearly 20 years of civil war. Peace was established, and the royal authorities introduced a new system of government by the enactment of new law codes: Járnsíða (Ironside) in 1271 and Jónsbók (Jón's Book) in 1281. The legal codes were drawn up on the king's initiative and accepted by Althingi.

Althingi continued to convene at Thingvellir, but in a new form. Lögrétta now comprised 36 members, nominated by regional sheriffs, and the Law Speaker was replaced by two Law Men. Lögrétta became primarily a court of law, to which cases from the regions could be appealed. Its rulings in turn could be appealed to the king. One Law Man was appointed to the south, the other to the north, and hence Lögrétta as a law court was divided into two divisions, over which the two Law Men presided. Lögrétta could also enact legislation, but this was subject to royal consent. New royal legislation and decrees were generally submitted to Lögrétta before being introduced. The hearing of court cases became the central function of Althingi, and over time it ceased to enact new law.

From 1271 Althingi convened on 29 June for three or four days, although occasionally longer. By the middle of the 17th century sessions might last up to two weeks. After 1701 Althingi was scheduled to commence on 8 July and sit for two weeks, or longer if necessary. Sessions of Althingi at Thingvellir came to an end in 1798.

In 1799 and 1800, Lögrétta alone convened at Hólavellir School in Reykjavík. Under a royal decree of 6 June, 1800 Althingi was abolished, and superseded by a High Court. Comprising three men, the High Court assembled in Reykjavík. It was Iceland's court of highest instance until the Supreme Court was established in 1920.

Towards the end of the 14th century, when the kingdoms of Norway, Sweden and Denmark united to form the Kalmar Union, Iceland came to be ruled from Denmark. Royal authority was increased after the Reformation of the 16th century, and in the Danish realm the king gained absolute power. Absolutism was introduced in Iceland in 1662. This led to the abolition of certain ancient rights. The same laws and duties were meant to apply throughout the realm, but the Icelanders retained certain privileges.

Public demand for influence on government increased throughout the course of the 19th century, as nationalist consciousness intensified. The response of the Danish king,



Jón Sigurdsson (1811-79) was the leader of the Icelanders' campaign for independence in its first phase. His work yielded fruit in the first constitution, issued in 1874. His memory was honoured by the Icelanders when they chose his birthday, 17 June, to found the modern republic in 1944. Since then it has been Iceland's National Day.

| 1400 | 1500 | 1600 | 1700 | 1800 |
|------|----------------------|---|-----------------------------------|------|
| | 1550 The Reformation | 1662 King of Denmark takes absolute power | 1798 Last Althingi at Thingvellir | |

an absolute monarch, was like that of many other absolute rulers: he summoned an estates-general, an assembly of the several classes in society. Such assemblies had functioned before the period of absolutism. Icelanders wanted their own assembly, and in due course the King consented to the foundation of an advisory assembly in Iceland. Althingi was re-established by a royal decree of 8 March 1843, followed by the first election in 1844, and Althingi convened for the first time on 1 July 1845. It comprised 26 Members: 20 were nationally elected, one from each electoral constituency (county), and six royal appointees. The right to vote and to stand for office was, following the Danish model, limited to males of substantial means and at least 25 years of age, which initially meant only about 5% of the population.

Iceland became a sovereign state on 1 December 1918, sharing a king and foreign policy with Denmark until 1940. The occasion was marked by a modest ceremony at Government House in Reykjavik. By sovereignty in 1918 and the foundation of the Supreme Court in 1920, judicial, executive and legislative powers had all passed into Icelandic hands.



Althingi assembled on alternate summers in the Learned School in Reykjavík (now Reykjavík High School) on 1 July. The session lasted four weeks and could be extended if necessary. Althingi acted merely as a consultative body for the Crown: it debated parliamentary Bills at two readings: the preparatory debate was followed by a final debate, at which resolutions could be passed. Individual Members could also raise questions for discussion. Proposals passed by the House were termed “petitions.” In the period 1845-74 Althingi assembled 14 times, and it became an important forum for political debate. Copenhagen-based scholar Jón Sigurdsson, Member for Ísafjörður in the West Fjords, was a leading parliamentarian from the start, and was President (Speaker) of Althingi for much of that period.

Instead of the regular Althingi session of 1851, a national convention was held, with the main assignment of discussing what form the government of Iceland should take, and its place within the Danish realm. By this time the King of Denmark had resigned his absolute powers, and a constitution had been agreed for the Danish state which provided for civil rights and parliamentary elections. The Danish government assumed

TIMELINE 1800-1900

| 1800 | 1810 | 1820 | 1830 | 1840 |
|--|------------------------------|------|---|---------------------------------------|
| 1800 Althingi abolished 1801 High Court founded | 1811 Birth of Jón Sigurdsson | | 1835 Estates-General convened in Danish realm | 1845 Re-established Althingi convenes |

that Iceland would remain a part of the Danish realm, with a status similar to other regions; but a majority of delegates at the national convention wanted Althingi to have legislative and fiscal powers. The convention was dissolved before these issues could be debated, and Iceland's place in the Danish state, and the role of Althingi, remained unchanged for over twenty years.

Legislative assembly

In 1871 the "Status Act," on Iceland's status within the Danish state, was enacted by the Danish parliament, in spite of protests by a majority of Althingi. In due course, in 1874 Iceland was granted its own constitution, closely based upon the Danish constitution of 1849. The Constitution of 1874 granted Althingi legislative powers in domestic Icelandic affairs, such as taxation and financial allocation, while the King retained the right of veto. The Danish government was represented in Iceland by a Governor (landshöfdingi), who was answerable to the Minister for Iceland, based in Copenhagen. The Governor opened sessions of Althingi, and attended parliament, with observer status. He functioned as an intermediary between Althingi and the government in Denmark.

The number of Members of Althingi was increased and the assembly was divided into two houses, an Upper House with 12 Members and a Lower House with 24. When both Houses convened together, this was termed a session of the United Althingi. Parliamentary procedures also changed: Bills were debated at three readings in each House. Members voted on Bills before they passed between Houses; Bills had to be passed by both Houses.

Parliamentary government was introduced in Denmark in 1901; this arrangement entails that a government cannot sit if opposed by a majority of parliament. Under a constitutional amendment which took effect on 1 February 1904, Iceland gained Home Rule. The King appointed a single Minister to govern Iceland, who had the support of a majority of Althingi, and thus parliamentary government was introduced in Iceland. The first Minister, Hannes Hafstein served from 1904 until 1909, when he had to step down after a vote of no confidence in Althingi. In 1917 the number of Ministers was increased to three.

Althingi convened for the first time as a legislative assembly in 1875, and then every other year. An extraordinary session was convened in 1886, and several times after that, especially after the turn of the century. Althingi convened in the Learned School until 1881, when Parliament House on Austurvöllur was completed. The parliamentary session commenced on the first working day of July, and was scheduled to last six weeks. From 1920 parliament assembled in mid-February and sat until spring. In the early 20th century the number of Members was increased, the franchise was extended, and political parties were founded. Changes took place in parliamentary procedure, and from 1915 permanent committees were elected to deal with certain fields of parliamentary business; prior to that time committees had been appointed on an ad hoc basis.

Under the Act of Union which took effect on 1 December 1, 1918, Iceland was recognised as a sovereign state in personal union with the King of Denmark. Legislation



The first woman elected to Althingi was Ingibjörg H. Bjarnason (1867-1941). She sat in parliament 1922-1930.

| 1850 | 1860 | 1870 | 1880 | 1890 |
|--------------------------|------|---|-----------------------------------|------|
| 1851 National Convention | | 1871 Status Act 1874 Constitution 1874 Upper and Lower Houses of Althingi established | 1881 Parliament House inaugurated | |

passed by Althingi required royal assent in order to take effect, and the King retained the power of veto under the constitution. He respected the principle of parliamentary government, however, and the veto was never applied. Althingi held all legislative powers in national affairs, while foreign affairs remained in the hands of the Danish government. Parliamentary procedures changed only gradually over the following decades; for instance, the Budget was debated by the United Althingi and not the two separate Houses. When Denmark was occupied by German forces in 1940, cutting Iceland off from the government in Copenhagen, Althingi announced that royal powers would be transferred to the Icelandic government, and that Iceland would take over its own foreign affairs. A year later, on 17 June 1941, Althingi elected a Viceroy (ríkisstjóri) to serve as proxy for the King. This arrangement continued until the Act of Union was repealed and the modern Republic of Iceland was founded at a session of Althingi at Thingvellir on 17 June 1944, and Iceland's first President was chosen. The foundation of the Republic did not alter parliamentary procedures. Since 1945 Althingi has assembled in autumn, and sits until spring, with recesses. In 1991 the organisation of Althingi underwent major change with the abolition of the two Houses; since that time Althingi has been a unicameral body. This reorganisation led to major revision of parliamentary procedures, and since then further changes have been made. Althingi's scope of operations has grown considerably in recent decades, and procedures have changed with changing times. But the primary function of Althingi remains the enactment of legislation.

Voting rights and number of Members

The first parliamentary elections took place in 1844, when 19 men were elected to Althingi. The right to vote was restricted to males aged 25 years and older, who fulfilled a property requirement. It is estimated that fewer than 5% of the population had the right to vote in that first election, and only 20% of them actually voted. Each county (sýsla) was an electoral constituency; elections took place at various times, and votes had to be cast in public. The electoral term was six years.

In 1857 the franchise was extended somewhat, enfranchising the majority of adult males who were householders, paid taxes, owned property or had graduated from a university. The number of Members was now 21, plus six royal appointees.

Under the constitution of 1874 the number of Members rose to 35. Voting rights remained unchanged. In eight counties one Member was elected, while in eleven two were elected, totalling 30. A few minor alterations were made in the following decades, but the number of Members remained unchanged. Only about 10% of the population were eligible to vote, and fewer than 50% of them voted in elections.

During the first four decades of the 20th century major changes took place in the franchise, so that all Icelanders over a certain age, men and women, acquired the right to vote. Participation in elections also increased.

In 1903 voting rights were extended, mainly benefiting the inhabitants of the growing urban centres. The number of Members of Althingi rose by four, to 40. In 1908 the secret ballot was first introduced, and elections were held on the same day nationwide, with polling stations in every community. Major changes were enacted in 1915 and

TIMELINE 1900-2000

| 1900 | 1910 | 1920 | 1930 | 1940 |
|--|--|---|--|---|
| 1904 Home Rule, parliamentary government 1908 Secret ballot | 1915 Women gain the right to vote 1918 Iceland becomes a sovereign state in personal union with Denmark | 1920 Voting rights of men and women equalised 1920 Supreme Court 1922 First woman elected to Althingi | 1934 Right to vote irrespective of economic status, voting age reduced from 25 years to 21 | 1944 Modern Republic of Iceland founded at Thingvellir, 17 June |



Women celebrate their enfranchisement on Austurvöllur square at the opening of parliament on 7 July 1915.

The first woman Member was elected to Althingi in 1922.

In the general election of 2009, 27 women were elected, making up 42.8% of Members.

implemented in 1916: almost all males aged 25 years or older were enfranchised, as were women aged 40 and older. The laws also stated for the first time that a voter must have been born in Iceland, or have lived in the country for five years. Royal nomination of Members was abolished, and a system of nationally-elected Members was introduced. In the election of national Members all males aged 35 and over, and women 40 and over, were eligible to vote. Nationally-elected Members were elected for a term of 12 years, but three were to stand down after six years. Election of national Members was abolished in 1934. In 1920 women gained equal voting rights with men; all Icelanders were now eligible to vote from the age of 25, except those who had received support from public funds. The number of Members of Althingi was raised to 42 by the addition of two more Members for Reykjavík (totalling four), where nearly 20% of the population now lived. Minor changes took place in constituencies and electoral legislation in the following decades, and the number of Members rose to 52. Under the Constitution Act of 1934 the last economic barriers to voting rights were abolished, and the voting age was lowered to 21 years. Nearly 60% of the population were now eligible to vote, and participation in elections was about 80%. Before the general election of 1968 the voting age was lowered to 20 years, and in 1987 to 18 years.

In 1959 the arrangement of constituencies was radically changed, creating eight constituencies, and the number of Members was raised to 60. Proportional representation was introduced for 49 parliamentary seats. Additional eleven seats were “equalisation” seats: these serve to balance the number of Members from each party nationally, so that the distribution of parliamentary seats reflects the national vote as accurately as possible. In 1987 the number of Members was increased to 63, and the proportional distribution of seats in different constituencies was revised. The Constitution was revised in 1999, and the number of constituencies reduced from eight to six, while the number of Members remained unchanged at 63. The first elections under the new constituency system were held in 2003.

1950

1959 Iceland divided into eight constituencies, proportional representation replaces individual candidacy

1960

1968 Voting age reduced to 20 years

1970

1980

1984 Voting age reduced to 18 years

1990

1991 Althingi becomes unicameral

2000

2003 General election under six-constituency system

ELECTIONS TO ALTHINGI



Ballot papers are transported by the police from the printer to polling stations.

At a general election, political parties seek the nation's mandate to take responsibility for both legislative and executive powers. Iceland has a strong tradition of coalition government, while the parliamentary Opposition serves as a check upon the Government.

General elections normally take place every four years. The President of Iceland can, however, dissolve parliament before the end of the electoral term, and call an election. All Icelandic citizens aged 18 years and over at the time of the election, who are or have been domiciled in Iceland, are eligible to vote. All those who are eligible to vote and have an unblemished reputation are eligible to stand for election to Althingi. Certain conditions apply to standing for election: for instance the prospective candidate must submit a stated minimum number of electors' signatures in support of the candidacy.

After the election, 63 elected Members take their seats in parliament.



Iceland is divided into six electoral constituencies: three in the capital area, and three regional constituencies.

The number of parliamentary seats for each constituency reflects the population of the region.

Constituencies

Iceland comprises six constituencies: the Northwest, Northeast, South and Southwest constituencies, Reykjavík North and Reykjavík South.

Each constituency has at least six constituency seats in parliament. Constituency seats are allocated to candidacies in the basis of the result of the election in the constituency in accord with the d'Hondt principle. The additional nine "equalisation" seats are allocated to parties so that representation in parliament will approximate as closely as possible the result of the nationwide vote. Equalisation seats are only allocated to parties which have received at least 5% of valid votes.

The constituency boundaries are decided by law; however, the national electoral committee may be authorised to draw the boundaries in Reykjavík and the vicinity. Following each election to Althingi, if the number of registered voters represented by each parliamentary seat, including equalisation seats, in any constituency is less than half that of those in another constituency, the national electoral committee must adjust the number of parliamentary seats in the constituencies to reduce this difference. This provision was applied in 2003, when the national electoral committee determined that one constituency seat should be transferred from the Northwest constituency to the Southwest for the following election in 2007. Numbers of constituency seats were again revised after the general election of 2009: the Southwest consistency now has eleven seats, the Northwest seven, and the others nine. Alterations to constituency boundaries and arrangements for allocation of parliamentary seats determined by law require a two-thirds majority in Althingi. The first general election under this consistency system was in 2003. Prior to that time Iceland had comprised eight constituencies, under legislation from 1959.



At the general election of April 2009, 85.1% of the electorate voted.

The opening of parliament normally takes place on 1 October each year. It commences with a religious service in Reykjavik Cathedral attended by the Members, who then process to Parliament House. Each general election is followed by a brief summer session of Althingi.



THE ROLE OF ALTHINGI

Under the Constitution, Althingi and the President of the Republic jointly hold legislative power. Presidential powers are held by the government Ministers. The principle of parliamentary government entails that the appointment of the Government is contingent upon a majority in Althingi, and the government can only function with the support of the legislative assembly. The Government, on the other hand, plays the major role in the legislative process: it prepares legislation, and is granted power to make more detailed provisions in regulations. The Government may also respond to a dispute with parliament by dissolving parliament and calling a general election.

The principal work of Althingi is to legislate. Debates on Bills for legislation take place in the chamber and on many other subjects. Parliament may declare its policy on some issue by means of a resolution, without legislating. In the chamber, questions are put to government Ministers, and these are answered orally or in writing. An unprepared question time is regularly scheduled. At specified sessions Members can be heard on parliamentary procedure.

Ministers submit reports to parliament on various public issues, either on their own initiative or in response to a request from parliament. A major aspect of parliamentary work consists of unscheduled debates, on current issues upon which unscheduled debate is deemed necessary.

The role of parliament is generally deemed to be to serve as a check upon the executive branch, both the Government (e.g. by means of questions to Ministers), and the administration as a whole. Two parliamentary bodies play an important role in this context: the National Audit Bureau and the parliamentary Ombudsman. Parliament also elects Government-appointed boards and committees.

PARLIAMENTARY PROCEDURE

Parliamentary procedure is determined by the Constitution and by Althingi's rules of procedure. Rules of parliamentary procedure make provision for a large number of factors in parliamentary procedure, such as organisation, committee work, the conduct of business, procedural rules of assembly meetings and the activities of party groups.

Opening and adjournment

Althingi convenes on 1 October each year, commencing in each instance a new legislative session. The session lasts until the same time the following year.

Under a revision of the parliamentary rules of procedure in 2007, the parliamentary year now comprises four terms: the Autumn parliament lasts from 1 October until the Christmas recess; the Winter parliament from after Christmas until Holy Week (the week before Easter); the Spring parliament from Easter to the beginning of June; and finally meetings of parliament and committees in September. Althingi is in recess from 1 July to 10 August.

Following a tradition unbroken since the modern Althingi was established in 1845, the Members begin each session with a church service in Reykjavik Cathedral, after which they process to Parliament House, where the President of Iceland opens the session. Prior to the foundation of the modern republic, parliament was opened by the royal representative.

The parliament chamber

In the parliament chamber of Althingi debates are held, laws adopted and issues resolved. At the commencement of each session Members draw lots for their seats, with the exception of the Ministers who sit in Ministerial chairs. Substitutes take the seat of the Member they replace, while alternates replacing Ministers have special seats.

The Speaker, or one of the Deputy Speakers, presides over the debate in the chamber. He/she is assisted by the Secretary General and other staff of the Administration.

Althingi debates are open to the public. Radio, television and newspaper reporters have special facilities to follow parliamentary activities.

Parliamentary Gazette

The Parliamentary Gazette (Althingistíðindi) comprises two sections: Section A, which contains official documents from Althingi, and Section B, reporting parliamentary debates.



Each autumn Members, other than ministers and Speaker, draw lots for seats using numbered spheres.

Rights and responsibilities of Members

Members of Althingi are guaranteed important rights and privileges by the Constitution. They are to be guided by their own conscience and not by pressure from their constituents. A Member cannot be prosecuted for statements made in the parliament chamber except with the authorisation of the assembly. Naturally enough, the position of a Member of Althingi also involves numerous obligations. Members are required to attend all sittings, unless necessity prevents. They shall be present for votes and participate in them. Furthermore, they are required to submit to the authority of the Speaker during all sittings. Occasionally a Minister may not be an elected Member: such a Minister has the right to submit Bills and other matters to the House, and may address the House, but cannot vote.

*A new Speaker and Deputy Speakers
are elected for the duration
of the electoral term.*

*Ásta R. Jóhannesdóttir was elected
the Speaker of Althingi in May 2009.*



The Speaker

The Speaker of Althingi is responsible for the business of parliament, determines the agenda of parliamentary meetings, and takes the initiative in drawing up a schedule for parliamentary business and meetings. The Speaker also supervises the work of committees and international delegations, and questions to Ministers are subject to the Speaker's approval. The Speaker rules on matters of dispute in parliamentary procedure, and unscheduled debates are subject to his/her consent.

The Speaker is responsible for the operations of Althingi, and is the highest authority of its administration. The Speaker represents Althingi publicly, and participates in international activities by parliamentary Speakers. The Speaker is one of three deputies of the President of Iceland and, together with the Prime Minister and the President of the Supreme Court, assumes the presidential functions in case of the absence or incapacity of the President of the Republic.

At the first meeting after elections, Althingi is to choose itself a Speaker and Deputy Speakers.

Parliamentary business

Bills

Proposed legislation may take the form of Government Bills, introduced and supported by the Government at the instigation of the Minister concerned, or Private Members' Bills, introduced by one or more Members of Althingi. Occasionally Bills can be introduced by a parliamentary committee, sometimes at the request of the relevant Minister. The Presidium and party groups can also introduce Bills.

Parliamentary resolution

Althingi can declare its position or decision on an issue without passing legislation. This is done through a parliamentary resolution, which may urge the Government to carry out a certain project, prepare legislation in one area or another or investigate some matter.

Questions

Written questions can be put by Members to a Minister regarding official matters, and are answered either orally at Question Time or in writing. Question Times at which Members can question Ministers without prior notice are also regularly scheduled.

Reports

A number of reports are presented to each session of Althingi. The Ministers may present reports voluntarily, or Members may request that a Minister report to Althingi on official issues. Ministers may also give oral reports. Parliamentary committees may also submit reports of their activities or investigation of a certain matter.

The political parties have as a rule reached agreement beforehand on their choices. The Speaker and Deputy Speakers form the Presidium, which handles diverse issues affecting Althingi. The Speaker also cooperates with the chairmen of the party groups in planning the agenda of the assembly and the organisation of debates.

The Speaker presides over the meetings of Althingi. He/she may participate in the debates like other Members, in which case he/she must temporarily relinquish the chair to one of the Deputy Speakers. The Speaker retains the right to vote. The Speaker directs the activities of Althingi. He/she must often strike a balance between varying points of view and must protect the interests of various groups. The Speaker may not give preference to the views of his/her own party, but must ensure that the requests of all Members are treated fairly.

Sessions of Althingi

The Presidium, in consultation with the cabinet and party groups, decides upon the schedule of business at the commencement of each session. The agenda of parliament for each week is prepared at meetings of the Presidium, while the Speaker ultimately decides the agenda of each meeting. Staff of the Administration handle preparations for the meetings.

Parliamentary debate

Debates in Althingi are governed by clear rules specifying how often a Member may speak at each reading of a Bill or debate, and for how long. At the first reading of a Bill, it is debated in general terms, after which it passes to the committee stage. When the committee has completed its work and submitted a committee opinion, the Bill goes to its second reading, at which individual provisions are debated. At the third reading, the Bill is discussed as a whole. After a speech, a brief reply may be given immediately, lasting up to two minutes.

Unscheduled (urgency) debates are subject to the consent of the Speaker and are permitted if the matter in question is considered important and in urgent need of discussion. Members can thus open debate on an issue with little prior notice.

Members speak from the rostrum in the chamber, directing their words to the Speaker, who is addressed formally, for instance as “the Honourable Speaker,” “Mr. Speaker” or “Madam Speaker.” Remarks are not to be addressed to individual Members, but to Althingi as a whole. The Members are referred to as “the Honourable Member” from their constituencies, or by their full names. Ministers are referred to by their office, for example, as “the Right Honourable Minister of Agriculture.”

All debates in the assembly are digitally recorded, word processed and published in the Parliamentary Gazette, Althingistidindi.

The public sometimes comment that only a few Members are present at debates. There are various reasons for this. Members of each party tend to divide their responsibilities, specialising in certain fields.



The proceedings of Althingi can be observed from the gallery, on TV, and on the Internet. All debates are recorded and published on the parliamentary website www.althingi.is and in Althingistidindi (Parliamentary Gazette).

Speaking Time

Bills

Proposed legislation is given three readings. Debating time is limited at all readings, but the Member proposing the Bill, spokesmen of committees and Ministers are allowed more time than others. At the second reading Members may speak as often as they wish, but if they speak more than twice their time is limited to five minutes on each occasion.

Parliamentary resolutions

Parliamentary resolutions are given two readings. Debating time is limited at both readings, but at the second reading Members may speak as often as they wish; if they speak more than twice their time is limited to five minutes on each occasion.

Broadcasting from parliament enables people to observe proceedings without being in the Chamber. And the work of a Member of Althingi requires that he/she attend various meetings, whether official events or private interviews. A considerable amount of parliamentarians' time is also devoted to preparation, and to producing reports and committee opinions.

Voting

Votes in Althingi are normally cast by electronic means. When a vote is to be held the Speaker activates a signal which is heard throughout the building to call the Members to the chamber.

Parliament cannot pass any resolution unless more than half the Members are present and participate in the vote. Decisions are made by majority vote. If the majority is narrow, and if it is clear that some Members are unavoidably prevented from attending the vote, chairs of parliamentary party groups occasionally resort to requesting a Member from an opposing party to withdraw for the duration of the vote. This is done in order that normal absences of individual Members will not skew the results of votes on specific matters. The chairs of party groups collaborate effectively on such matters, which are handled similarly in the parliaments of most of Iceland's neighbouring countries.

Members of Althingi cast their vote by pressing one of three buttons on their desk. These indicate whether the Member is for or against a matter, or abstains from voting. A vote may also be taken by a show of hands. Members can request that the Speaker call the roll and ask each individual Member whether he/she is for or against. When voting is carried out electronically or by roll call, Members have the opportunity to give a brief explanation of their position from the rostrum. If the Speaker expects all Members to be in agreement on a certain question he/she may declare that it will be brought to a conclusion without a vote if no one objects. This procedure is generally used on points of order rather than matters of substance. The results of all voting are recorded and published in the Parliamentary Gazette, *Althingistíðindi*.

Party groups

The Members of each party represented in Althingi form a group and choose themselves a chair to act on their behalf in dealings with the Speaker, other political parties and other Members. At least three Members are needed to form a party group in Althingi, and no Member can be affiliated to more than one group. There are no other provisions regarding party groups in the rules on parliamentary procedure. In their party group, Members of the same political persuasion plan a course of action. It is here that Members are allotted various responsibilities at Althingi and Ministers chosen. The role of the group may vary somewhat depending upon whether the party concerned is in government or in opposition.

The members of the group decide who is to serve on the various parliamentary committees and as spokesmen on certain issues. Meetings of the party group discuss new business which Members intend to submit to Althingi, review the situation in the various committees and take a position on individual Bills and proposed amendments to them. In this way the Members can follow the course of events in other areas than those in which they themselves are active. Groups usually meet twice a week during a session of Althingi. The groups have a very strong position within the relevant political party and thus exert a major influence on political policy.

The process of a parliamentary Bill

When difficulties arise in Icelandic society, people often remark that it is high time Althingi intervened in the matter. This is evident from blogs, readers' letters and editorials in the press, radio and television interviews, discussions in the hot tubs of swimming pools, and at the dinner tables of the nation's homes. It is, however, up to the politicians to decide whether legislation is the proper response to the difficulties at hand.



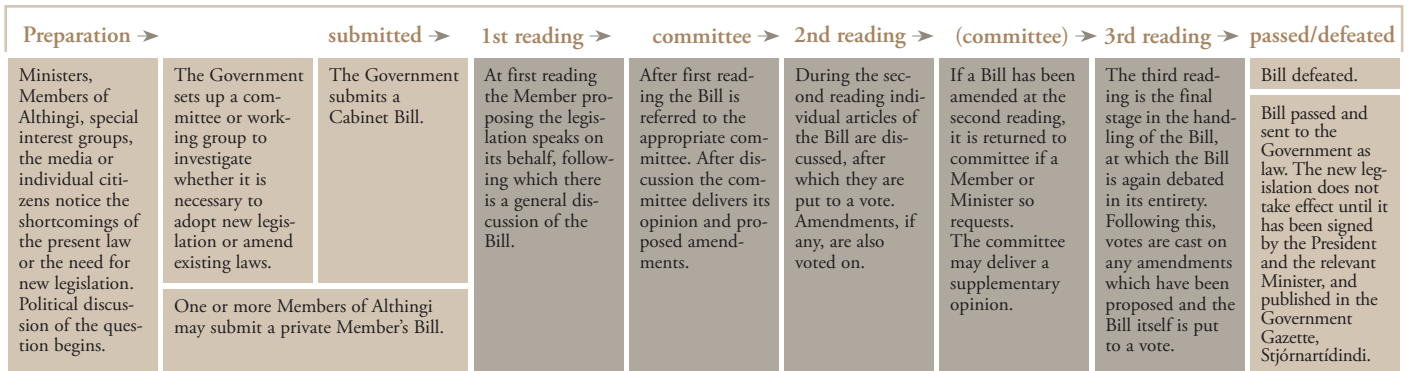
Members vote by pressing one of three buttons on their desks. An illuminated board in the chamber displays the results of the vote, and how each Member voted.

Althingi in session

Meetings of Althingi can be observed from the public gallery, and are also broadcast on TV and on the Internet.

Althingi normally convenes four days a week, from Monday to Thursday: on Monday at 3 pm, on Tuesday and Wednesday at 1.30 pm, and on Thursday at 10.30 am.

The progress of business in Althingi



Initiatives for new legislation can spring from various sources. Stakeholders seek to influence the preparation of legislation, often through the media. Individuals too can make their views known, for instance by writing an article, or contacting politicians. All Members are entitled to submit a Private Member's Bill, but Cabinet Bills invariably outnumber Private Members' Bills at each session.

Legislation proposed by the Government is drawn up by committees appointed by a Minister or by Ministerial staff. By creating a committee to draw up legislation a Minister attempts to ensure that both stakeholders and specialists will be able to make their voices heard.

According to the Constitution no Bill may be passed until it has received three readings by Althingi. The rules of procedure of Althingi ensure that Members have time to familiarise themselves with the Bill after it has been submitted, and Bills are generally referred to committee between first and second reading. This procedure is intended to prevent Bills from being put to a vote at very short notice.

Bills must be submitted within six months of the commencement of the session, i.e. before 1 April, but a majority of Althingi can admit a Bill which has been submitted after this deadline. Bills to be dealt with before the Christmas recess must be submitted by the end of November.

The above diagram shows the progress of a Bill through Althingi. At first reading a Bill is debated in general terms. When debate has concluded it is usually referred to the relevant committee, which discusses it in detail and calls upon experts and stakeholders for their opinions. When a committee opinion has been completed, the Bill is given a second reading, at which individual articles of the legislation, and amendments, are debated and voted upon. If the Bill has been amended at the second reading it returns to committee if a Member or Minister so requests.

During the third reading the Bill as a whole is examined, after which a vote determines whether it is passed as law. About half the Bills submitted to Althingi are passed, the vast majority of them Government Bills.

How can you have influence?

You can write to Members of Parliament on important issues. Their e-mail addresses are listed on www.althingi.is
Postal address:
Althingi, 150 Reykjavík.
You can telephone Members of Parliament to put your point of view.
Tel.: (354) 563 0500.



Members of Althingi swear an oath of loyalty to the Constitution when they take their place in the House for the first time.

The Credentials Committee at work at the start of the 137th session of Althingi, when the credentials of Members and deputies were verified.



Standing committees

Althingi has twelve standing committees: the Budget Committee, Economic and Tax Committee, Education Committee, Environment Committee, Fisheries and Agriculture Committee, Foreign Affairs Committee, General Committee, Health Committee, Industry Committee, Social Affairs/Social Security Committee, Trade Committee and Transport and Communications Committee, in addition to the Credentials Committee, whose principal role is to examine the electoral credentials of newly elected Members of Althingi and substitutes.

The Budget Committee comprises eleven Members, while other committees have nine Members. The Foreign Affairs Committee also has nine substitutes. The fields of responsibility of committees are broadly similar to those of the government ministries, and their names indicate the matters for which they are responsible; for example, the Environment Committee deals with matters of environmental protection, the Foreign Affairs Committee with foreign affairs, and so on. The General Committee deals with matters under the aegis of the Ministry of Justice and Human Rights and partly the Prime Minister's Office, as well as those which do not fall within the field of any other committee. The Industry Committee deals with regional matters, in addition to industry.

Both Cabinet and Private Members' Bills are referred to committee following the first reading.

A Bill may be sent to committee at any stage. Parliamentary resolutions are also referred to committee after the first reading.

Committee procedures

The procedure of standing committees is to call upon stakeholders and experts on the matter at hand to give their opinions, either in writing or by attending a meeting with the committee. When a committee has concluded its discussion of a Bill or resolution it delivers a written opinion on its recommendations, or separate opinions if the members of the committee are not in agreement. A committee opinion gives an account of the committee's work on the relevant matter, and states the views of the committee members. The committee may also publish various accompanying documents, such as letters from stakeholders or ministries. Proposals for amendments, if any, are submitted in writing. If a Bill is returned to committee after the second reading, it may submit an additional opinion.

Committee Members may decide to submit a Bill on behalf of the committee in fields under its aegis. Committees may, furthermore, take up matters on their own initiative, and submit a report to parliament.



Meeting of the Environment Committee. Standing committees often call upon experts, stakeholders and others to consult on issues under discussion.

Election to committees

Standing committees are elected at the first parliamentary session of Althingi after a general election.

By and large, the composition of standing committees reflects the relative strength of the various political parties. Parliamentary party groups reach agreement on which Members are to be elected to the committees. Generally two lists are submitted, one for the Government, the other for the Opposition, each with the same number of names as the members of the committee.

If a group does not have a Member elected to a certain committee, the committee may decide to admit an observer from that party. Each committee elects a chair and vice-chair. These are normally members of the parties which are in government. The Committees have a fixed time for meetings, four mornings a week while Althingi is in session, and can also meet at other times. The Foreign Affairs Committee is in a special position; its role is to advise the Government on important questions of foreign policy. Such questions are to be referred to the committee whether or not Althingi is in session at the time. Each committee has an administrative secretary, who prepares its meetings, writes the minutes, provides assistance with the preparation of committee opinions and amendment proposals, and gathers and processes information.

How can you have influence?

You can write to standing committees which are dealing with a matter in your field of work or interest.

E-mail addresses of the committees are listed on www.althingi.is
Postal address:

Althingi, 150 Reykjavík, Iceland.

You can apply to meet with a parliamentary committee to discuss a matter under consideration.

Tel. (354) 563 0500.



Meeting of the Health Committee. When a committee has completed its consideration of an issue it produces a written opinion on how it believes the House should handle the matter. If the Members disagree, more than one opinion may be written.

Althingi's annual meeting with the European Parliament took place on 16 November 2009. The agenda included discussion of Iceland's application for membership of the European Union.



International organisations

Althingi participates in a variety of forms of international co-operation. The most extensive co-operation is that of parliamentary international committees in international parliamentary associations to which Althingi is party. These are termed Iceland's delegations to the organisations.

The nine permanent delegations are:

- the Icelandic delegation to the Inter-Parliamentary Union,
- the Icelandic delegation to the EFTA Parliamentary Committee,
- the Icelandic delegation to the Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly,
- the Icelandic delegation to the NATO Parliamentary Assembly,
- the Icelandic delegation to the Nordic Council,
- the Icelandic delegation to the West Nordic Council,
- the Icelandic delegation to the Western European Union Parliamentary Assembly,
- the Icelandic delegation to the Conference of Parliamentarians of the Arctic Region,
- the Icelandic delegation to the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly.



Presidents of parliaments of small European nations with a population of under one million met in Cyprus in November 2009.

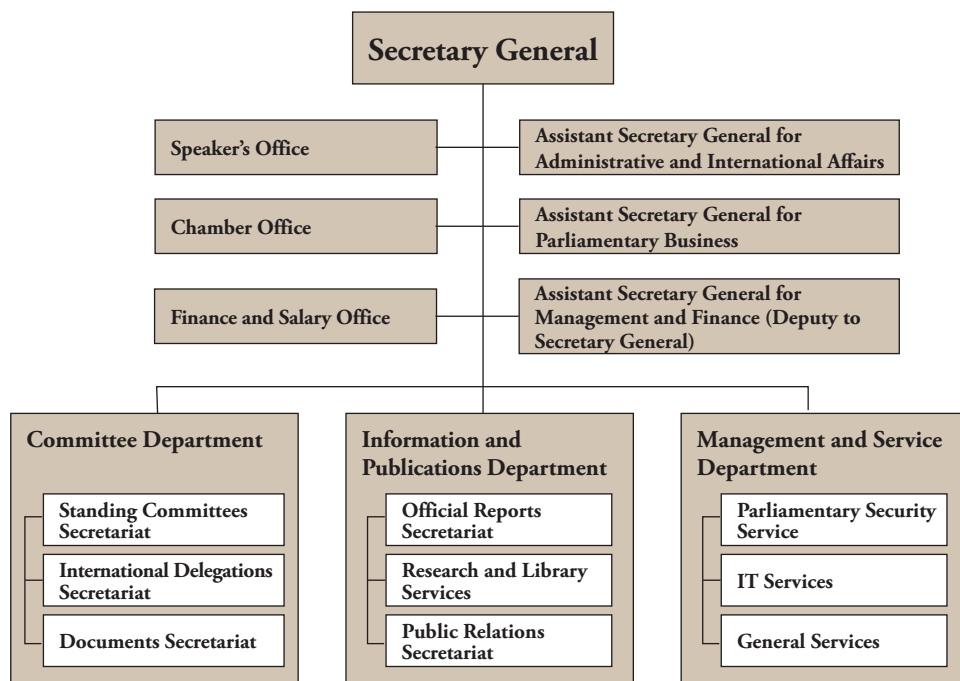
At the first sitting of each parliament, Members are elected to the delegations. Three to seven delegates are elected, and an equal number of substitutes. The function of delegations varies according to the position and nature of the international organisations of parliamentarians to which Althingi is a party. Some international organisations of parliamentarians function alongside a council of Ministers, which is a forum of cooperation between governments. In such cases the parliamentarians' organisation has a formal status, and rights and responsibilities vis-à-vis the council of Ministers, to which it submits proposals and resolutions. Other parliamentarians' organisations cooperate informally with governments or international agencies. The delegations of Althingi attend meetings and conferences of international parliamentarians' organisations, as representatives of Althingi. Delegates use such opportunities to put the Icelandic point of view, as appropriate. International parliamentarians' organisations prepare reports and pass resolutions and proposals which are submitted to governments or international agencies. Parliamentarians' organisations are also a forum for Members of national parliaments to exchange views and information. The Icelandic delegations also organise meetings and conferences of parliamentarians' organisations in Iceland.

Delegations and Members submit brief reports on their trips and meetings, and each delegation submits an annual report to Althingi on its work, which includes a summary of the delegation's work over the past year.

Standing committees also participate in international collaboration, e.g. the Foreign Affairs Committee is in regular contact with the European Parliament, and Members of the Environment Committee have participated in activities of parliamentary environment committees of EEA nations.

THE ALTHINGI ADMINISTRATION

The Althingi Administration provides a variety of services for the Members of Althingi and others who seek information or have business with the assembly. The Secretary General of Althingi is Head of the Administration, responsible for implementing decisions of the Speaker and the Presidium. The Secretary General is assisted by three Assistant Secretaries General (Management and Finance, Administrative and International Affairs, and Parliamentary Business). Together these four form the executive board of the Administration. The Assistant Secretary General for Management and Finance also deputises for the Secretary General. He/she is responsible for finance, works, management and human resources.



The Assistant Secretary General for Parliamentary Business supervises those activities of the Administration which are most closely connected to parliamentary activities. This involves, for instance, the organisation and administration of parliamentary business. The Assistant Secretary General for Administrative Affairs supervises services to the Speaker and international co-operation, along with matters of information and publications. Each Assistant Secretary General heads an office; the Speaker's Office, the Chamber Office and the Finance and Salary Office, each of which has its own director. Otherwise the Althingi Administration comprises three main departments, the directors of which are answerable to the Secretary General. The Committee Department provides assistance to standing committees and international delegations, assists Members in drafting Bills and handles the publication of parliamentary documents as well as secretarial and other services. The role of the Services Department is to provide security, IT services and other services. The Information and Publications Department is responsible for publications, information and research services, and public relations.

Parliament House stands on Austurvöllur square. It was built in 1880-81. The Skálinn annexe was opened in 2002.



PARLIAMENT HOUSE



In the ground-floor vestibule of Parliament House is a painting by Gunnlaugur Blöndal of the National Convention of 1851. The Convention took place in the assembly room of the Learned School (now Reykjavik High School), where sessions of Althingi were held in alternate years from 1845 to 1879.

Parliament House, which stands on Austurvöllur square, was built in 1880–81. Two annexes have been added to the original building, Kringlan (the Rotunda) in 1908 and Skálinn in 2002. The garden of Parliament House is Iceland's oldest public garden. Dating from 1893-5, it was largely the work of parliamentarian/bank director Tryggvi Gunnarsson.

In 1867 Althingi resolved to mark the millennium of the settlement of Iceland by holding a national festival in 1874, and by building a Parliament House in Reykjavík, of Icelandic stone. There was some debate on a location for the new building: suggestions included the Arnarhóll grassfield (where a statue of the first settler, Ingólfur Arnarson, now stands) and Bakarabrekka (between the present Bankastræti 7 and Laugavegur 1), but Austurstræti was the final choice.

Danish architect Ferdinand Meldahl (1827–1908), director of the Academy of Fine Arts in Copenhagen, designed the building, which was erected during 1880–81 of hewn basalt from Skólavörðuholt hill (site of the present Hallgrímskirkja Church). The exterior of the walls is of bare dressed stone, while the interior is plastered.

The façade (north side) of the building bears ornament, most noticeably the crown and crest of King Christian IX on the roof. Under the eaves the date 1881 is marked in metal numerals interspersed with stars. Over four of the second-floor windows Iceland's guardian spirits are depicted in low relief: a giant, a great bird, a bull and a dragon.

Inaugural ceremony

When Parliament House was ceremonially inaugurated on 1 July 1881, the parliamentarians assembled in the new building before attending a religious ceremony in the Cathedral. Afterwards Governor General Hilmar Finsen (1824–86) delivered an inaugural address. He recounted the building history, and various problems that had occurred during the process, and then added: "... but now the building is completed, at the time agreed, and now stands as the most beautiful and sturdy building ever constructed in Iceland, a credit to our country and people, and a reminder to our descendants of the fact that, in the first electoral term of political freedom, the Icelandic parliament, in collaboration with the Government, had the will and ability to make this magnificent and beautiful building a reality."

Since 1881, all meetings of Althingi have been held at Parliament House, with the exception of ceremonial meetings held at Thingvellir, the site of the ancient Althingi, in 1930 (millennium of Althingi), 1944 (foundation of the Republic), 1974 (1100th anniversary of the settlement), 1994 (50th anniversary of the Republic) and 2000 (millennium of Christianity in Iceland).

The building

Initially Parliament House was not only home to the Althingi, but also housed three national collections: the National Library, the Antiquities Collection (precursor of the National Museum), and the National Gallery. An annexe known as the Rotunda (Kringlan) was added in 1908. Originally a reception room for Ministers, it was later a coffee-room, and is now a lounge. When the University of Iceland was founded in 1911 it was given the use of premises on the first floor of the building, as two of the collections had been relocated. The University moved to its own premises in 1940. The office of the Viceroy, and subsequently of the President of Iceland, was located in the building 1941–1973. Parliament House has long since ceased to provide sufficient space for all parliamentary activities, and at present Althingi owns or rents several additional buildings in the immediate vicinity. On the ground floor of Parliament House is the office of the Speaker, along with facilities for parliamentary party groups and meeting rooms. On the second floor are the parliament chamber, Members' lounge, the office of the Secretary General and the Chamber Office. On the third floor is the gallery, and facilities for journalists. The main entrance to Parliament House is now via the annexe, which also houses various service facilities for Members, staff and guests, such as meeting rooms, restaurant and kitchen. The annexe was designed by the architectural studio Batteríð.

Parliament Garden

Parliament Garden was Iceland's first public garden. Tryggvi Gunnarsson (1835–1917), parliamentarian and bank director, was appointed to supervise the making of the garden which remains almost unchanged from its original form. Work began on the garden in 1893. Gunnarsson began by having the soil of the garden site replaced, and draining the site. He purchased plants both from Iceland and abroad. A willow species that Gunnarsson imported into Iceland, *Salix smithiana*, is named *thingvídir* (parliament willow) in Icelandic.

During the following years Gunnarsson devoted endless time to working on Parliament Garden, and at his own wish he was buried there. On his grave is a bust of Gunnarsson by sculptor Ríkarður Jónsson (1888–1977).



The Rotunda was added to Parliament House in 1908.



South view of Parliament House and the garden.

INSTITUTIONS OF ALTHINGI

National Audit Bureau

The National Audit Bureau is primarily responsible for auditing the accounts of the National Treasury, together with public institutions, funds and other bodies whose expenses or accounting losses are financed by the Treasury under the Budget or from other public revenues under special legislation. Furthermore, the National Audit Bureau is responsible for auditing the accounts of enterprises and organisations which are 50% or more publicly owned or subject to the Treasury, including corporations. It can also carry out administrative reviews, both of government bodies and of other parties which sell services to the government, or receive state funding. Finally, the Bureau monitors the implementation of the Budget, and assists parliamentary committees in matters of public finances.

The Presidium appoints the National Auditor for a six-year term. He/she has autonomy in his/her work, and is not subject to government direction regarding individual aspects of his/her work. Parliament may, however, request reports from him/her on specific matters under the aegis of the National Audit Bureau.

Parliamentary Ombudsman

The role of the Parliamentary Ombudsman is to monitor national and local government and safeguard the rights of citizens vis-à-vis the administration. The Ombudsman may take up a matter following a complaint, or on his/her own initiative. The Ombudsman is elected by open nomination by Althingi for a four-year term.

Jón Sigurdsson House

Jónshús (Jón Sigurdsson House) on Øster-Voldgade in Copenhagen has been owned by Althingi since 1967. It was presented to parliament by businessman Carl Saemundsen and his wife Johanne Saemundsen in memory of Jón Sigurdsson, leader of the Icelanders' campaign for independence in the 19th century, and his wife Ingibjörg Einarsdóttir, who lived in the house from 1852 until their deaths in 1879. The Jón Sigurdsson House was opened in 1972, and it is now a social centre for Icelanders in Copenhagen, with a library and a museum about Jón and Ingibjörg. The Icelandic Students' Association, the Icelandic Society and the Church of Iceland in Copenhagen also have facilities in the house, as do many other organisations. The manager of the house lives in an apartment in the building. In 1991 a scholars' apartment was purchased on Skt. Paulsgade 70; prior to that time scholars' accommodation had been in the Jón Sigurdsson House itself. The House has a study for scholars. The board of the Jón Sigurdsson House manages the house on behalf of the Speaker and the Presidium. Sabbaticals in the scholar's apartment are allocated by a special committee.

A Jón Sigurdsson Memorial Day has been an annual event since 2008 at the Jón Sigurdsson House on the First Day of Summer (according to Icelandic tradition). The object of the Memorial Day is to honour the memory of Jón Sigurdsson and ensure that his deeds and ideals are not forgotten. It is organised by the board of the House, with the cooperation of the Speaker and the Presidium. The Jón Sigurdsson Prize is awarded at the Memorial Day, commemorating his service to Iceland and the Icelanders. The prize is awarded for achievements relating to the ideals and work of Jón Sigurdsson, whether in the field of scholarship, business, education or culture.



Jónshús (Jón Sigurdsson House) on Øster-Voldgade, Copenhagen.

INFORMATION ON ALTHINGI

Legislation, other parliamentary business, debates and other information on the work of Althingi is accessible on the www.althingi.is website, which also provides information on Althingi, the Members, the services provided by the Administration, the history of Althingi, and its role and procedures. During parliamentary sessions the agenda of business for the day, and schedules for committees, appear on the website. Information on current parliamentary business, debates, etc. appears only in Icelandic.

After each general election a handbook is published, containing information on the Members and various statistical data on the work of Althingi. A report on the work and operations of parliament is published each year.

Visits to Parliament House

Information officers organise visits to Parliament House for those who wish to learn about Althingi and its work.

Requests for visits should be made by e-mail to heimsoknir@althingi.is or on tel. (354) 563 0500. The public can observe debates in the parliament chamber from the public gallery. Parliament House is located at Kirkjustraeti 14 on Austurvöllur square. The main entrance is via the Skálinn annexe. The gallery entrance is on the east side of the building.



School parliament is Althingi's teaching centre for pupils in years 8-10 of compulsory schooling (aged 14-16). It aims to enhance the youngsters' understanding and knowledge of the work of parliament. The photo shows pupils in School Parliament at the first meeting of their "parliamentary party."

School Parliament

Skólathing or School Parliament is Althingi's teaching centre, aimed at pupils in the final three years of compulsory education (aged 14-16). At School Parliament pupils play the roles of parliamentarians, observing the rules of procedure of the real Althingi. Visits are arranged for one class of pupils at a time, for a session of about two-and-a-half hours. Pupils undertake some parliamentary matter, and follow it through the process of discussion in the parliamentary party group, in committee and in the House. They also listen to the views of advisers. This process gives them insight into the relationship between events in society, formation of opinions, political decision-making and the work of Althingi, and shows them how the public, experts, the media and stakeholders influence legislative work. The pupils reach their conclusions by hearing differing views, expressing their own opinions, establishing where they stand, and reaching a compromise.

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Ágúst Breiddal, National Museum of Iceland (p. 6)
Bragi Thór Jósefsson (p. 4, 5, 14, 15, 16, 17, 19, 20, 21, 24, 25)
Gudmundur Ingólfsson (p. 7, 9, 25)
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