ALTHINGI

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Parliament and democracy

The Icelandic constitution clearly demonstrates that Icelandic government is democratic. The government is based upon the principle of representative democracy, that power originates with the people, who delegate this power to their elected representatives. Every fourth year, the electors choose, by secret ballot, 63 representatives to sit in parliament. These members of parliament jointly hold legislative powers, and also fiscal powers, i.e. the power to make decisions on public spending and taxation. Universal suffrage may be said to be the basis of democracy in Iceland, and the Althingi is the cornerstone of this democracy.

Other features of the democratic system are e.g. that the electorate elects the president by a direct vote, and that the government is answerable for its actions and is subject to monitoring by parliament. 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 the 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 participation in national affairs.

The Icelandic flag flies over Parliament House when parliament is sitting.

Parliament House, at Austurvöllur in Reykjavík, was built in 1880–1881.

As the Icelanders are few in number, closer relations are possible between individuals and members of parliament than in most other European nations.

Candidates of five political parties were elected to Althingi in the 1999 general election: Progressive Party, Framsóknarflokkurinn *(12), Liberal Party,* Frjálslyndi flokkurinn *(2), the Alliance,* Samfylkingin *(17), Independence Party,* Sjálfstæðisflokkurinn *(26) and Left Green Movement,* Vinstri hreyfingin – grænt framboð *(6).*

Political parties

Political parties constitute a link between parliament and the electorate. Parties come into existence 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 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 of assembly are established in the constitution. The constitution overrides other legislation, and serves to safeguard democracy.

VINSTRIHREYFINGIN
grænt framboð

FRAMSÓKNARFLOKKURINN

SJÁLFSTÆÐISFLOKKURINN

Samfylkingin

FRJÁLSLYNDI FLOKKURINN

Historical background

The Althingi is both the oldest and greatest national institution. Its establishment, as an outdoor assembly held on the plains of Thingvellir from about the year 930 AD, laid the foundation for an independent national existence in Iceland.

To begin with, Althingi was a general assembly of the nation, where the country's most powerful leaders, called *goðar*, met to decide on legislation and dispense justice. As all free men could attend, the assemblies were usually the main social event of the year and drew large crowds of farmers and their families, parties involved in legal disputes, traders, craftsmen, storytellers and travellers.

Those attending the assembly dwelt in temporary camps known as *búðir* during the session. Within the bounds of Althingi everyone was entitled to sanctuary.

The centre of the gathering was the *Lögberg*, or Law Rock, a rocky outcrop on which the Lawspeaker *(lögsögumaður*) took his seat as the presiding official of the assembly. His responsibilities included reciting aloud the laws in effect at the time, one third of the entire corpus each year. It was his duty to proclaim the procedural law of the Althingi to those attending the assembly each year.

Major national celebrations are held at Thingvellir, the Icelanders' most revered historic site. This is where the millennium of Icelanders' settlement was celebrated in 1874, the 1100th anniversary of the settlement in 1974 (photo at right), the millennium of Althingi in 1930, the foundation of the modern Republic in 1944 (photo above), and the 50th anniversary of the Republic in 1994.

Lögrétta

Public addresses on matters of importance were delivered at the Law Rock and there the assembly was called to order and dissolved. The *Lögrétta*, the legislative section of the assembly, was its most powerful institution. It was comprised of the 39 district *goðar* plus nine additional members and the Lawspeaker.

As the legislative section of Althingi, the *Lögrétta* took a stand on legal conflicts, adopted new laws and granted exemptions to existing laws. Althingi of old also performed a judicial function and heard legal disputes in addition to the spring assemblies held in each district. After the country had been divided into four quarters around 965 AD, a *fjórðungsdómur*, or quarter court, of 36 judges was established for each of them at Althingi. A fifth court (*fimmtardómur)* was established early in the 11th century. It served as a supreme court of sorts, and assumed the function of hearing cases left unsettled by the other courts. It comprised 48 judges appointed by the *goðar* of *Lögrétta*.

The tenth century Althingi convened on Thursday of the tenth week of summer, according to the ancient calendar, or about the middle of June. Thereafter the assembly met a week later, with sessions lasting two weeks, until about 1271.

The monarchy until 1800

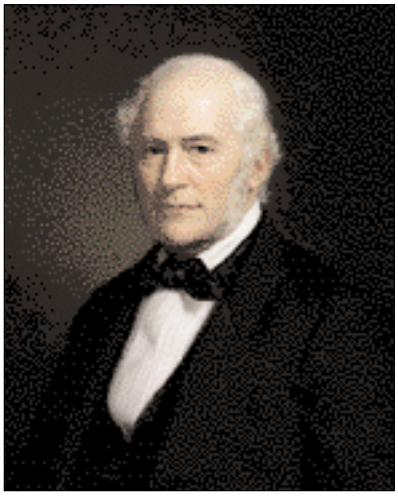
When the Icelanders submitted to the authority of the Norwegian king by the terms of the "Old Covenant" (*Gamli sáttmáli*) in 1262–1264, the function of Althingi changed. The organisation of the commonwealth came to an end and the rule of the country by *goðar* disappeared. Executive power now rested with the king and his officials, the Royal Commissioners (*hirðstjórar*) and District Commissioners (*sýslumenn*). As before, the *Lögrétta*, now comprising 36 Members, continued to be its principal institution and shared formal legislative power with the king. Laws adopted by the *Lögrétta* were subject to royal assent and, conversely, if the king initiated legislation, Althingi had to give its consent. The Lawspeaker was replaced by two legal administrators, called *lögmenn*.

As a result of these changes *Lögrétta* acquired a judicial function as well, while the former courts were abolished. The hearing of court cases became the central function of Althingi. After 1593 judgements by *Lögrétta* could be appealed to the Court Superior (*yfirdómur*) of Althingi or to the king.

Towards the end of the 14th century royal succession brought both Norway and Iceland under the control of the Danish monarchy. With the introduction of absolute monarchy in Denmark, recognised by the Icelanders at a special assembly held in Kópavogur in 1662, the Icelanders relinquished to the crown the meagre remains of their autonomy, including the right to initiate and consent to legislation. After that Althingi served almost exclusively as a court until the year 1800.

From 1271 onwards Althingi convened on June 29 and generally lasted from three to four days, although occasionally longer. By the middle of the 17th century meetings could last up to two weeks. After 1701 Althingi was scheduled to commence on July 8 and sit for two weeks, or even as long as three weeks. Meetings at the Thingvellir site by the river Öxará ceased in 1798. In 1799 and 1800, the assembly met in a school building, Hólavallarskóli, in Reykjavík. A royal decree issued June 6, 1800 declared that Althingi should be abolished.

In the entrance hall of Parliament House is a painting of the eventful National Assembly of 1851, by Gunnlaugur Blöndal.



Painting of Jón Sigurdsson by Danish artist August Schiött.

The period 1800–1845

The functions of Althingi were taken over by a High Court established by this same royal decree. Located in Reykjavík, it took over the functions of *Lögrétta*. The three appointed judges first convened in Hólavallarskóli on August 10, 1801. The High Court was to hold regular sessions and function as the court of highest instance in the country. It operated until 1920, when the Supreme Court of Iceland was established.

Consultative assembly: 1845–1874

A royal decree providing for the establishment of a new Althingi was issued on March 8, 1843. Elections were held the following year and the assembly finally met on July 1, 1845. It comprised 26 Members sitting in a single chamber. One Member was elected in each of 20 electoral districts and six "royally nominated Members" were appointed by the king. Suffrage was, following the Danish model, limited to males of substantial means and at least 25 years of age, which to begin with meant only about 5% of the population. Althingi was to meet in the Latin School in Reykjavík (now the Reykjavík Grammar School) every other year on July 1. A regular session lasted four weeks and could be extended if necessary.

During this period, Althingi acted merely as a consultative body for the crown. It examined proposed legislation and individual Members could raise questions for discussion. Draft legislation submitted by the government was given two readings, an introductory one and a final one. Proposals which were adopted were called petitions.

Instead of the regular Althingi session of 1851, a national assembly was held with the main assignment of discussing the form of government for Iceland.

The new Althingi managed to effect a number of improvements to legislation and the administration of the country. In Jón Sigurdsson, a Copenhagen-based intellectual representing the Ísafjördur district, the assembly had during its first three decades a strong leader who served as its president for much of the period.

Legislative assembly from 1874

The Reykjavík Grammar School, where parliamentary sessions were held 1845–1879.

The Constitution of 1874 granted to Althingi joint legislative power with the crown in matters of exclusive Icelandic concern. At the same time the National Treasury acquired powers of taxation and financial allocation. The king retained the right to veto legislation and often refused to consent to legislation adopted by Althingi.

The number of Members of Althingi was increased to 36, 30 of them elected in general elections in eight single-Member constituencies and 11 double-Member constituencies, the other six appointed by the crown as before. No alternates were elected. Althingi was now divided into an upper and a lower chamber. Six elected Members and the six appointed ones sat in the upper chamber, which meant that the latter could prevent legislation from being passed by acting as a bloc. Twenty-four elected representatives sat in the lower chamber. Sessions involving both chambers were referred to as sessions of the United Althingi.

From 1874 until 1915 ad hoc committees were appointed. After 1915 seven standing committees were elected by each of the chambers.

Regular sessions of Althingi convened every other year. A supplementary session was first held in 1886, and these became more frequent after the turn of the twentieth century. Althingi met from 1881 in the newly built Parliament House.

Althingi convened on the first working day of July and sat at first for six, then for eight weeks from 1903 onwards. The Governor-General *(landshöfðingi*) was the highest representative of the government in Iceland and was responsible to the Advisor for Iceland *(Íslandsráðgjafi*) in Copenhagen. It was he who convened Althingi and attended the assembly ex officio, serving as its liaison with the government in Copenhagen.

Home rule

Changes to the Constitution which took effect February 1, 1904 gave the Icelanders Home Rule and parliamentary democracy. An Icelandic Minister, appointed by the crown and resident in Reykjavík, was responsible to Althingi and needed the support of the majority of its Members.

In 1903 the number of Members of Althingi was increased by four, making a total of 40. At the same time eligibility to vote was extended somewhat, to include heads of households in towns and villages, placing them on a more equal footing with landowners. Elections to Althingi had traditionally been public – voters declared aloud which of the candidates they supported. In 1908 the secret ballot was adopted, with ballot papers on which the names of the candidates were printed. A single election day for the entire country was at the same time made mandatory.

With amendments to the Constitution in 1915, the royally nominated Members of Althingi were replaced by six national representatives elected by proportional representation for the entire country for a twelve-year term. These national representatives sat in the upper chamber. At the same time women and servants were granted voting rights for the first time.

Iceland became a sovereign state on 1 December, 1918 by a treaty with Denmark, the Act of Union. The occasion was marked by a modest ceremony at Government House in Reykjavík.

Members of Parliament and the Governor-General in front of Parliament House in 1894.

Sovereign state

The Act of Union which took effect on December 1, 1918 made Iceland a sovereign state in personal union with Denmark. Althingi was granted unrestricted legislative power. Foreign affairs continued to be in Danish hands, in addition to coastal and fisheries surveillance, especially in the years immediately afterwards. In 1920 the number of Members of Althingi was increased to 42 and amendments to the Constitution that same year provided for the assembly to be convened annually on February 15. Since 1945 Althingi has customarily assembled in the autumn.

With the Constitutional Act of 1934 the number of Members was increased by seven and the system of national representatives abolished in favour of one providing for eleven seats used to equalise discrepancies between the parties' popular vote and the number of seats they received in Althingi. Members of Althingi were thus 49 in all. In 1934 voting age was also lowered to 21. Further changes in 1942 provided for additional three Members and introduced proportional representation in the double-Member constituencies. The constituencies were then 28 in number, 21 single-Member constituencies, six double-Member constituencies and Reykjavík, which elected eight Members. With the additional eleven equalisation seats, the number of Members was thus 52.

A view of the Upper House of Althingi in 1908–1911. Parliament has been unicameral since 1991.

Republic

When Denmark was occupied by Germany on April 9, 1940 the union with Iceland was effectively severed. On the following day Althingi passed two resolutions, investing the Icelandic cabinet with the power of Head of State and declaring that Iceland would accept full responsibility for both foreign affairs and coastal surveillance. A year later Althingi adopted a law creating the position of Governor-General to represent the crown. He was elected on June 17, 1941. This situation prevailed until the Act of Union was repealed and the Republic of Iceland established at a session of Althingi held at Thingvellir on June 17, 1944. In 1959 the system of electoral districts was changed completely. The country was divided into eight constituencies with proportional representation in each, in addition to the previous eleven equalisation seats. The total number of Members elected was 60. In 1968 Althingi approved the lowering of voting age to 20 years. A further amendment to the Constitution in 1984 increased the number of Members to 63 and reduced voting age to 18 years.

Major changes were introduced in Althingi itself in May of 1991 and the assembly now sits in a single chamber. Its standing committees are 12 in number. By a constitutional amendment of June 1999, the constituency system was changed. The number of constituencies was cut from eight to seven; constituency boundaries are to be fixed by law.

Elections to Althingi

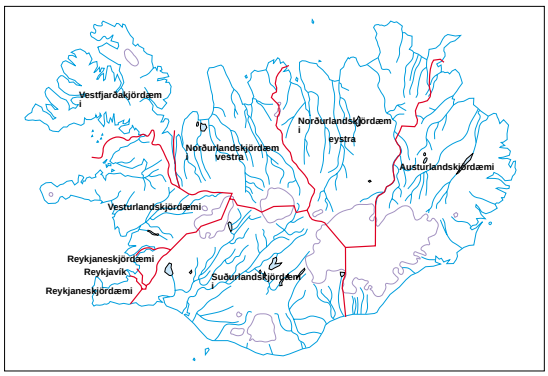
At the general election of 1999 just over 200 thousand Icelandic citizens were registered voters.

Public meeting at Reykjavík Town Hall before the general election of 1999.

The Icelandic democratic system is one of representative democracy. This entails that power springs from the people, who assign the handling of this power to their elected representatives. On the basis of election results, the president of the republic requests some party to form a government.

The right to vote in general elections extends to all Icelandic citizens aged 18 years or over at the time of the election. At the time of the 1999 election, the electorate numbered about 200,000 people, of whom 84.1% voted.

Five political groups are currently represented in parliament: Progressive Party: *Framsóknarflokkur* (12), Liberal Party: *Frjálslyndi flokkurinn* (2), Alliance: *Samfylkingin* (17), Independence Party: *Sjálfstædisflokkur* (26) and Left-Green Party: *Vinstri hreyfingin – grænt frambod* (6).



Constituencies 1959–1999.

Constituencies

In the last election Iceland was divided into eight constituencies, which were defined by the Constitution and to some extent also function as administrative regions. The widely varying population of the constituencies is reflected in their number of parliamentary seats, with a guaranteed minimum of five seats for each of the more sparsely populated regions. In each constituency most of the seats are divided among the political parties by proportional representation. A final quarter of the seats in each constituency were allotted on the basis of the country-wide vote of each party.

According to new constitutional provisions on constituencies, enacted in June 1999, constituencies shall number at least six, and a maximum of seven. The boundaries of these constituencies shall be decided by law, but the national electoral committee has authority to decide on constituency boundaries in the Reykjavík area. Alterations in constituency boundaries shall take into account population changes within the constituencies.

Within each constituency shall be at least six constituency seats, which shall be allocated in accord with the results of the election in the constituency.

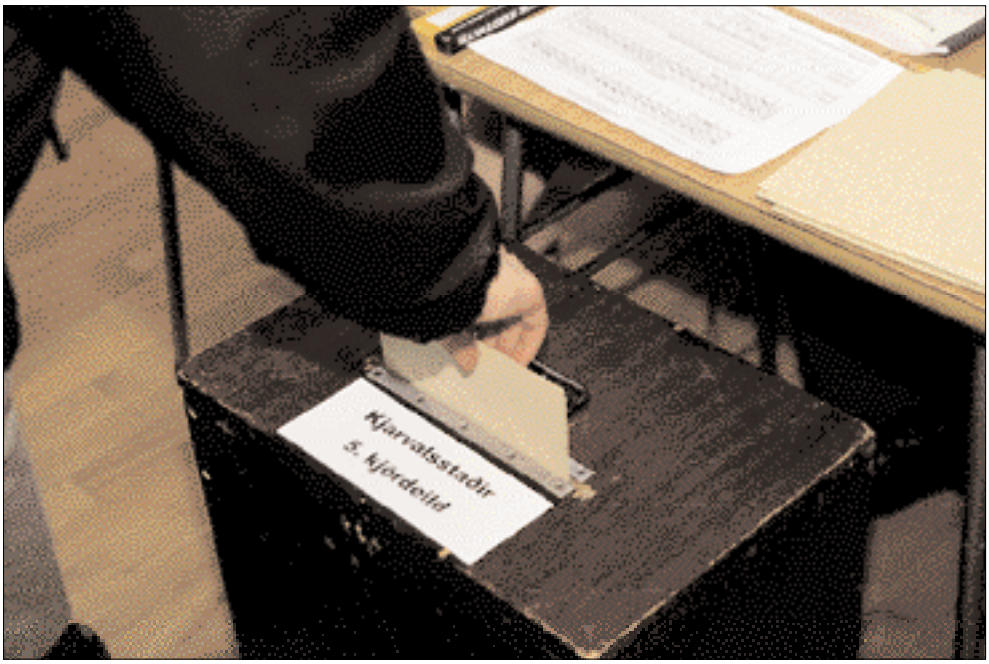
Seats other than constituency seats shall be allocated among the constituencies in order to ensure a balance between political groups, so that their parliamentary representation accords as closely as possible with their overall proportion of the vote nationwide. However, these additional seats are only allocated among parties which have received at least a 5% share of valid votes nationwide.

If the number of voters on the electoral register for each parliamentary seat, including equalisation seats, are, following a general election, half as many in one constituency as in some other constituency, the number of the constituency's parliamentary seats shall be reduced in order to reduce this discrepancy.

All Icelandic citizens 18 years of age and older on election day have the right to vote.

How can citizens have influence?

By participation in the work of a political party, Icelanders can have influence on issues they regard as important.
By participation in trade union activity.
By participation in public association.
By speaking to local government representatives and others in responsible positions in local communities.
By writing to the media, and by contacting journalists with information.



At the last general election, 84.1% of the electorate voted.

The Prime Minister's policy address is delivered at the beginning of each session of parliament, detailing the government's policies.

The role of Althingi

Althingi (parliament) and the president of the republic jointly hold legislative power; government ministers and the president jointly hold executive power, and judicial powers lie with the judiciary.

The system of parliamentary democracy entails that the appointment of the government is contingent upon parliamentary majority, and that parliament may censure the government, or compel it to resign by means of a motion of no confidence.

The principal work of Althingi is to legislate. Debates also take place in the chamber on many other subjects than bills for legislation. 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. Ministers submit reports to parliament on various public issues, whether on their own initiative or in response to a request from parliament. A major aspect of parliamentary work consists of unscheduled debates, on issues upon which urgent debate is deemed necessary.

The role of parliament is generally viewed as being to monitor 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 influential government-appointed boards and committees.

Along the window side of the parliamentary chamber are seats for cabinet ministers, six on either side of the seat of the President of Althingi.

Parliamentary procedure

Parliamentary procedure is determined by law, i.e. the Constitution and the rules of procedure, which provide for the various functions of Althingi, its organisation, the work of committees, the conduct of business, procedural rules of assembly meetings and the activities of the party groups.

The parliamentary session

Althingi convenes on October 1 each year, commencing in each instance a new legislative session. The session lasts until the same time the following year, although it is usually adjourned each May until the following autumn. Althingi may be convened if necessary during the recess.

The President of Iceland officially opens each session. Following a tradition unbroken since the modern Althingi was established in 1845, the Members begin each session with a church service in the Reykjavík Cathedral, after which they proceed to the assembly hall where the President of Iceland opens the session. The Member who has served in Althingi the longest presides over the meeting until the President of Althingi has been elected.

When parliament assembles each autumn, Members other than ministers and president draw lots for seats, using numbered spheres.

The assembly hall

Debates are held in the assembly hall of Althingi, 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. Alternates take the seat of the Member they replace, while alternates replacing ministers have special seats.

The President of Althingi, or one of the Vice-Presidents, presides over the debate in the assembly hall. He or she is assisted by the Secretary General and other staff of the secretariat.

Althingi debates are open to the public and everyone is entitled to observe the proceedings from the gallery. Radio, television and newspaper reporters have special facilities to follow parliamentary activities.

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 assembly hall 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 obey the directions of the president of Althingi during all sittings. In most instances the ministers come from the ranks of the elected Members and have the same rights and obligations.

The proceedings of Althingi can be observed from the gallery, on TV, and on the Internet. All debates are recorded and published in the parliamentary record Althingistídindi.

The President of Althingi

The primary responsibility of the President of Althingi is to ensure that constitutional provisions regarding Althingi and its rules of procedure are followed. The President of Althingi is one of the deputies of the President of Iceland and, together with the Prime Minister and the President of the Supreme Court, assumes the presidential functions in his or her absence.

The first task of each new session of Althingi is to choose itself a President and four Vice-Presidents. The political parties have as a rule reached agreement beforehand on their choices. The President of Althingi and the Vice-Presidents form the Presidium which decides issues affecting Althingi. The President also cooperates with the chairmen of the party groups in organising the agenda of the assembly. The President presides over the meetings of Althingi. To participate in the debates like any other Member, he or she must temporarily relinquish the chair to one of the Vice-Presidents. The President retains the right to vote.

The President directs the activities of Althingi. He or she must often strike a balance between varying points of view and must protect the interests of various groups. The President of Althingi may not give preference to the views of his or her own party but must ensure that the requests of all Members are treated fairly.

On many occasions the President represents Althingi and participates in international cooperation among the presidents of national parliaments.

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 Member's bills, introduced by one or more Members of Althingi. Occasionally bills can be introduced by a parliamentary committee and, in such case, often at the request of the minister involved.

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 a question.

Questions

Written questions put by Members to a minister regarding official matters must be answered either orally at question time or in writing. The president may also authorise Members to question ministers without prior notice.

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. Finally, the parliamentary committees may submit reports of their activities or investigation of a certain matter.

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 the assembly meetings for each week is prepared at meetings of the Presidium but the President of Althingi ultimately decides the agenda of each meeting. The staff of the secretariat handles preparations for the meetings.

Parliamentary Sittings

Althingi generally sits four days a week, from Monday to Thursday.
Sessions begin at 3 pm on Monday, 1:30 pm on Tuesday and Wednesday and 10:30 am on Thursday.

Parliamentary debate

Debates in Althingi are subject to clear rules specifying how often a Member may speak at each reading of a bill or debate and for how long. A Member proposing legislation or committee spokesman may not speak more than three times at each reading and other Members no more than twice. A minister who is responsible for the field concerned may speak as often as he deems necessary. In addition, Members may make brief responses to other speeches, lasting no more than two minutes in each case, directly after they have been delivered.

Unscheduled debates are subject to the consent of the President of Althingi 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 assembly hall, directing their words to the President of Althingi, who is addressed formally, for instance, as “Mr.” or “Ms. President” or “Honourable President”. 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 using 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 tape-recorded, word processed and published in the parliamentary record, Althingistídindi.

The comment is often made that 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. And party groups have often already reached a conclusion and agreement on a certain issue before it comes to be debated. A closed-circuit TV system in Parliament House enables members to observe debates from elsewhere in the building. And the work of a Member of Althingi requires that he/she attend various meetings, whether official events or private interviews.

Parliamentary record

Althingistídindi is divided into two sections, Section A, which contains official documents from the Althingi, and Section B, reporting parliamentary debates.

The Presidium and the Secretary General at work in the office of the President in the autumn of 1999.

Speaking Time

Bills

Proposed legislation is given three readings and referred to the relevant commitee after the first reading. Speaking time is limited at first reading but there are no limits to the length of speeches made during the second and third reading.

Parliamentary resolutions

Parliamentary resolutions are given two readings, between which they are referred to the relevant committee. The length of speeches made at first reading is limited, but unlimited during the second reading.

Unscheduled discussions

There are two types of unscheduled discussions, short and long. The short type of unscheduled discussion lasts for half an hour. In the longer discussions the rule is that the Member introducing a matter and the minister concerned may speak for a maximum of 30 minutes each, other Members for a maximum of 15 minutes and everyone may speak twice.

Over 600 different items of parliamentary business are dealt with by Althingi each year. Written questions put by members to ministers are the most frequent type of business, followed by draft legislation.

Voting

The results of votes are shown on lighted panels in the assembly hall which indicate how each member voted.

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

A vote is not valid unless over half of the Members are in attendance and cast their votes. If the majority is a narrow one and it is obvious that one or more Members can not attend, party group chairmen may sometimes respond by asking opposing Members to absent themselves from the assembly while the voting takes place. This is done in order that the unavoidable absences of individual Members do not prevent the known will of Althingi from being manifest in the voting.

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. Members can request that the president call the roll and ask each individual Member whether he or she is for or against. When voting is carried out electronically or by roll call, the Members have the opportunity of making a short explanation for their position.

If the president expects all Members to be in agreement on a certain question he 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 record, Althingistídindi.

Information from Althingi

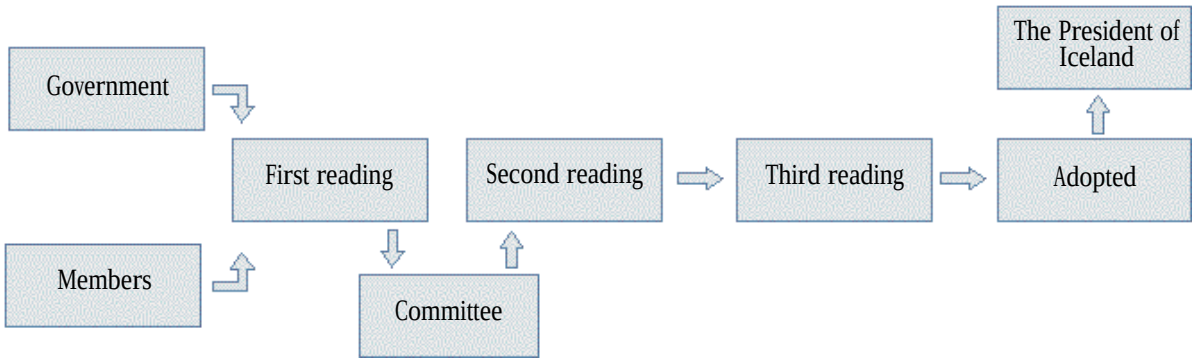
There are a number of ways to follow the activities of Althingi. All documentation is available from the document office of Althingi after it has been distributed to the Members. The Parliamentary record is also available at the same location. The web site is: www.althingi.is

Party groups

The Members of each party represented in Althingi form a group and choose themselves a chairman to act on their behalf in dealings with the president, other political parties and other Members. At least two 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.

Group Members 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 each political party and thus exert a major influence on political policy.



The progress of business in Althingi

When difficulties arise in Icelandic society, people often remark that it is high time Althingi intervened in the matter. This is evident in letters to the editors of daily newspapers and commentaries, in radio and television interviews, and even at the breakfast 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.

Initiatives for new legislation can come from various directions but most often it is the politicians themselves who start the ball rolling. All Members are entitled to submit a Private Member's bill, but cabinet bills are usually more than twice as many as Private Member's 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 interested parties and specialists will be able to make their voices heard.

According to the constitution no draft legislation may be adopted until it has received three readings by Althingi. The rules of procedure of Althingi make sure that Members have time to acquaint themselves with the bill after it has been submitted, and the bills are generally referred to committee between the first and second reading. This procedure is intended to prevent bills from being put to a vote at very short notice.

All proposed legislation is to be submitted within six months of the commencement of the session, i.e. before April 1, but a majority of Althingi can admit a bill which has been submitted after this deadline.

The above diagram shows the progress of legislation through Althingi. The investigation it receives becomes more thorough as the process advances. At first reading a bill is debated in general. When debate has concluded it is usually referred to the relevant committee. After this committee has reached a conclusion on the matter and submitted its opinion the bill is given a second reading, where individual articles of the legislation are debated. During the third reading the legislation as a whole is examined, following which a vote is called, the outcome of which determines whether the bill will become law. Less than half of the draft legislation submitted to Althingi each session is adopted by the assembly.

How can citizens have influence?

They can write to Members of Parliament on important issues.

E-mail adresses are listed on: www.althingi.is

Address:
Althingi,
150 Reykjavík.

They can telephone Members of Parliament.
Telephone: (354)563 0500.

Standing committees

The Industry Committee at a meeting. Names of committees indicate the scope of their work.

Althingi has twelve standing committees: the General Committee, Economic and Trade Committee, Social Affairs Committee, Budget Committee, Health and Social Security Committee, Industry Committee, Agriculture Committee, Education Committee, Transport and Communications Committee, Fisheries Committee, Environment Committee and Foreign Affairs Committee, in addition to the Credentials Committee, which has the sole responsibility of investigating the electoral credentials of newly elected Members of Althingi and alternates.

The division of responsibility among the committees is roughly the same as among the ministries. Their names indicate which matters fall under their jurisdiction. The General Committee discusses questions concerning the Ministry of Justice in addition to regional policy and other questions which do not fall within the jurisdiction of any of the other committees.

Both cabinet and Private Member's 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

Committees hold meetings in camera. They may request that interested parties or specialists in a matter either submit their opinion in writing or attend certain meetings. When a committee has concluded its discussion of a bill or resolution it delivers a written report on how it considers Althingi should deal with the matter, or separate reports if the Members of the committee are not in agreement.

Any proposals for amendments must be submitted in writing. If the bill is referred again to the committee between the second and third readings, the committee may submit an additional opinion. Committee members may decide to submit a bill on behalf of the committee in areas which fall under its jurisdiction. Committees may, furthermore, take up matters on their own initiative.

Meeting of the Environment Committee. Committees have fixed meeting times, four mornings a week during sessions of parliament.

The Budget Committee at work.

Meeting of the Foreign Affairs Committee, which advises the government on important foreign affairs issues. These must be submitted to the committee whether or not parliament is in session.

Four of nine members of the Agriculture Committee. When a committee has completed its work on an issue, it submits a written report on the committee's recommendations to parliament. If members of the committee are not unanimous, more than one report may be submitted.

How can citizens have influence?

Citizens can write to standing committees.

Individuals and groups can apply to meet with parliamentary committees or write to them.

E-mail addresses of the committees are listed on the web site:
www.althingi.is

The address of Althingi:
Althingi
150 Reykjavík
Iceland
Tel. (354) 563 0500
Fax (354) 563 0520

Election to committees

The composition of the standing committees elected at the beginning of each session reflects by and large the relative strength of the various political parties. 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 chairman and vice-chairman. They may be Members of the ruling parties or the opposition. The committees have a fixed time for meetings, four mornings each week while Althingi is in session. 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.

Membership of international organisations

The meeting of the Political Committee of the European Council was held in Reykjavík in September 1999.

Members of Althingi participate in a variety of forms of international cooperation, the most extensive of which is the Nordic Council. The eight permanent delegations are:

- The Icelandic delegation to the Inter-Parliamentary Union,
- the Icelandic delegation to the Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly,
- the Icelandic delegation to the Committee of Members of Parliament of the EFTA countries (and to the EEA Joint Parliamentary Committee),
- the Icelandic delegation to the North Atlantic Assembly,
- the Icelandic delegation to the Nordic Council,
- the Icelandic delegation to the West Nordic Parliamentarians' Council,
- the Icelandic delegation to the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly and
- the Icelandic delegation to the Western European Union Assembly.

At the first sitting of each parliament, three to five delegates are elected to such international bodies.

They prepare reports on various issues, pass resolutions, prepare proposals, and provide a forum for parliamentarians to exchange views and information. Members of Althingi often use such opportunities to put forward the Icelandic point of view, generally working as an Icelandic unit, within party groupings or as parliamentarians. International committees and Members submit brief reports on their trips and meetings, and each international committee submits an annual report to Althingi on its work, which includes a summary of the committee's work over the past year.

In addition to international committees, parliament also participates in various other international collaboration. Some of these take place regularly, such as the committee of parliamentarians of the Arctic region, and the Icelandic delegation to the UN General Assembly each autumn. The Presidium supervises all parliament's international activity, and some such activity is directly under the aegis of the Presidium, e.g. visits to other parliaments, or the reception of visitors from abroad.

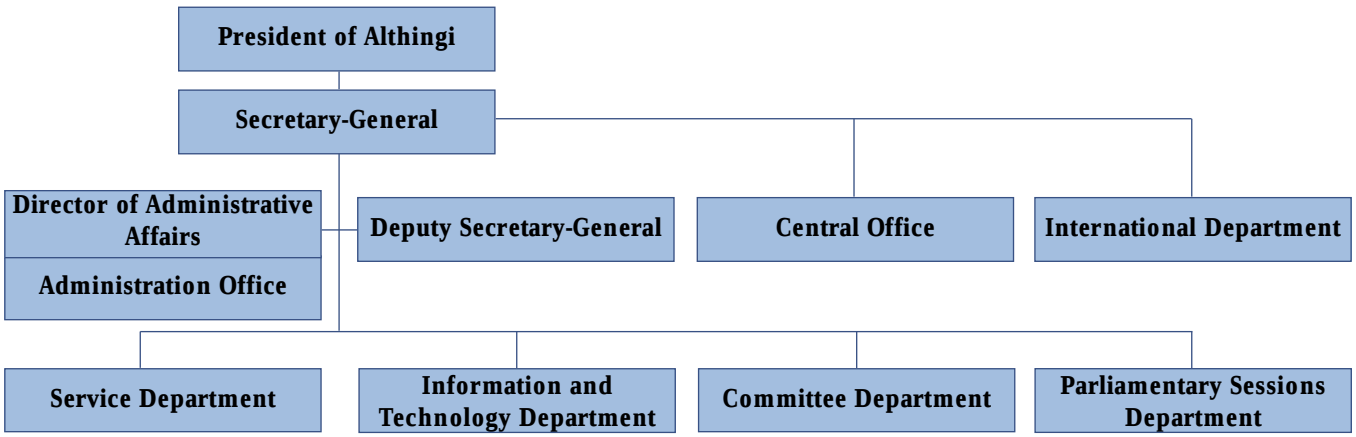
Standing committees also participate in international collaboration, e.g. the Foreign Affairs committee is in regular contact with the European Parliament, and members of the Environment Committee have participated in Globe, a parliamentarians' association on environmental issues, and also in joint activities of parliamentary environment committees of EEA nations.

Visit of the Prime Minister of Japan to Parliament House in June 1999.

Secretariat of Althingi

The Secretariat of Althingi 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 Secretariat. Subordinate to him are the Deputy Secretary-General of Althingi, who is responsible for those activities of the Secretariat which are most closely connected to parliamentary activities, and the Director of Administrative Affairs, who is responsible for day-to-day administrative operations at Althingi which are not connected to parliamentary activities as such.

The Secretariat is divided into six departments in addition to a separate operations office responsible directly to the Director of Administrative Affairs.



The role of the Central Office is to assist the President and Secretary-General of Althingi.

The Administration Office assists the Director of Administrative Affairs in carrying out his responsibilities. The office compiles operating budgets and work schedules, it is responsible for personnel affairs, and also for the operations and maintenance of Althingi property.

The Parliamentary Sessions Department provides a variety of support services for meetings of Althingi itself. They include, in particular, preparations for sittings of Althingi, registration of official documents, recording and broadcasting of proceedings and editing of parliamentary debates.

The role of the Committee Department is to assist the parliamentary standing committees and provide expert assistance in dealing with specific matters and assist with compiling committee reports and proposals for amendments. The Committee Department also assists Members in drafting bills and resolutions, handles the publication of parliamentary papers and the document section of the parliamentary record Althingistídindi, as well as updating the official legal codex, Lagasafn.

The Information and Technology Department is responsible for Althingi's computer system and programming, computer services for users and technical communications with external parties. It is responsible for the technical aspects of information dissemination, including Althingi's homepage, as well as providing library and information services for parliamentarians and Althingi Secretariat staff, and supplying documents for the general public. The department also deals with public relations of Althingi.

The role of the International Department is to assist Althingi's delegations to international organisations, provide the President of Althingi and the Presidium with assistance in foreign relations and exchanges and assist in the reception of foreign delegations.

The Service Department provides most types of general office services for Members of Althingi.

Information from Althingi

The secretariat of Althingi provides information on the agenda and what stage various bills have reached in the legislative process.
Following each election, Althingi publishes a handbook containing information on the Members and statistics on the activities of Althingi.

Parliament House

Parliament Garden was Iceland's first public park.

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. Public donations were collected for the project, and parliament subsequently allocated funding.

Danish architect Ferdinand Meldahl (1827–1908), director of the Academy of Fine Arts in Copenhagen, designed the building, which was erected during 1880–1881 of hewn basalt, a volcanic rock. The exterior of the walls is of bare dressed stone, while the interior is plastered.

About 100 Icelanders are believed to have been employed on the construction of Parliament House. The master builder was F. Bald, a Dane, who was accompanied by several stone masons from Bornholm and masons from Copenhagen.

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. 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.

Guided tours

The information officers of the secretariat give guided tours to groups that want to learn about the workings of Parliament and see the house.

Inaugural ceremony

When Parliament House was ceremonially inaugurated on 1 July, 1881, the parliamentarians assembled in the new home where Governor General Hilmar Finsen (1824–1886) 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 to celebrate the millennium of Althingi, in 1944 to mark the foundation of the modern republic, the 1100th anniversary of the settlement of Iceland in 1974, and the 50th anniversary of the Republic in 1994.

The History of the House

To begin with the building was not only the venue of Althingi but also housed the National Library and Antiquities Collection, and later the National Gallery. An annex known as the Rotunda (*Kringlan*) was added in 1908. When the University of Iceland was founded in 1911 it was given the use of premises on the first floor of the building, as the museums and archives had by then been transferred elsewhere. The University moved to its own premises in 1940. The office of the Governor-General, subsequently the office 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 either owns or rents several additional buildings in the immediate vicinity.

The Rotunda is more richly ornamented than other parts of Parliament House. Originally a reception room, it is now a lounge.

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. It remains almost unchanged from its original form. Drawings of the garden are preserved in the National Archive, while plans on which the actual project was based are in the Central Bank's archive; these bear the handwriting of Tryggvi Gunnarsson.

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 *þingvíðir* (parliament willow) in Icelandic.

During the following years Gunnarsson devoted endless time to working on Parliament Garden, and he expressed a wish to be buried there. His wish was respected, and the garden was consecrated as a private burial ground. Tryggvi Gunnarsson lies at the southern end of the garden, under a rockery of Icelandic flowers and plants. On the grave is a bust of Gunnarsson by sculptor Ríkarður Jónsson (1888–1977).

The banisters in Parliament House are of turned wood, ending in a spiral. The rails on the landings are of iron, painted brown with gilded palm leaves.

The Ministers' room is between the assembly hall and the former Upper Chamber, now the Members' lounge.

The old ministers' and president's chairs are beautifully carved.

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 financed by the State. 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 joint stock companies and banks. It shall ensure that the national budget is followed properly and assist the parliamentary committees and senior administrators of government in matters of public finances.

The presidium appoints the National Auditor for a six-year term. He pursues his role on an independent basis and is not subject to government direction regarding individual aspects of his work.

Parliamentary Ombudsman

The Ombudsman, on behalf of Althingi, is to supervise and control the national and local administrations and protect the rights of citizens dealing with the authorities. He may investigate questions which are referred to him or select issues on his own initiative.

The Ombudsman is elected by open nomination by Althingi for a four-year term.

One of the functions of the parliamentary Ombudsman is to safeguard the rights of the citizen vis-à-vis the nation's government.