

Honourable representatives.

Dear guests.

Ladies and gentlemen.

The Estonian people have elected a Parliament for the seventh time since the restoration of independence.

Each Parliament has faced a different set of responsibilities, all of them weighty. The main objective is always the same, as the people decided when they adopted the Constitution:

With unwavering faith and a steadfast will to strengthen and develop a state created to protect the peace and defend the people against outside aggression, and as a pledge to present and future generations for their social progress and welfare.

The irrevocable reforms passed by Parliament from 1992-1999 put the country on a fast track to development. While not all individuals felt that the increase in well-being and social security was sufficient, objectively and comparatively speaking, Estonia's growth has indeed been rapid. A comparison with many of the former captive nations confirms that the decisions have been the right ones.

At the time, the decisions caused some discomfort and insecurity, and the decision-makers paid with the loss of their reputation and poorer showing at the subsequent elections. Some of them paid with their health as well. That is the fate of statesmen – the greatest among them are rarely recognized during their lifetimes, let alone during their term in office. Their destiny is indeed their greatness.

The 9th Parliament, which served from 1999-2003, brought Estonia into the EU and NATO. The 10th Parliament, in session from 2003-2007, mastered its new roles related to EU membership. In the ensuing four-year term, the 11th Parliament made a praiseworthy cooperative effort to bring Estonia out of the economic crisis.

If we look at the record of the 12th Parliament that has just left office, what do we see? Perhaps it will be remembered as a period in which citizens' voices started calling more assertively for the right to participate in the everyday work of parliament. The Citizen's Assembly helped to bring those voices into this chamber, and to some extent, those voices were heard. This is a sign of a mature society.

One reason I took a moment to recall Estonia's past legislatures is that we are now marking another major milestone. In the years prior to the occupation, Estonia managed to elect only six Parliaments.

Ladies and gentlemen,

unfortunately, Estonia's current political climate is rife with politicking, populism in the bad sense of the word, and saving one's own skin.

There's too much excessive, profligate legislative drafting. The state budget process has become more bureaucratic and rigid. Often, ill-considered decisions are being made just to curry favour. This also includes arguments about things that aren't worth arguing about, while issues that do deserve more discussion are quietly rubber-stamped on through.

For instance, the Planning Act, an important piece of legislation with long-term impacts that will help to determine the geographic development of Estonia, was passed after very limp discussions by a margin of [pause] 27 to 18 – in a parliament of 101 members! At the same time, the chamber of public opinion seethed with criticism from specialists in the field. No, they weren't in favour of keeping the status quo and opposed to changes. On the contrary: they demanded a fundamental change for the better.

But the new act does not guarantee this outcome. And yet a great deal of taxpayer-funded legislator-hours, experts' time and energy were expended over the years. The Parliament has the power to say "no" to legislative busywork, but didn't do so.

I hope that the election coalition currently being formed will be unanimous about this: laws are a means to an end, not an end in itself. Rewriting laws just for their own sake will not help address people's concerns.

Dear members of Parliament,

if you find that errors were committed in the past, assume that the people who made them acted out of good intentions nonetheless. Don't look for culprits. Just fix it.

I ask you to tackle the actual real-life problems one by one and look for the best solution, while respecting everyone's opinion. To do this, I believe we need more listening, and only then more talking. We need to bring different interests and views to this place, to the halls of Parliament, into debates that respect deputies and their constituents. You will need to debate, be precisely up to date with the actions of the Cabinet, and if needed to ask questions and dispense criticism. As appropriate to any mature democracy, showing how things could be done better.

Anyone can say what not to do, and what could go wrong. Instead, let there be competition between many visions of how to do it and how to succeed.

All that should also be explained to the people in an understandable way. Even the wisest decision adopted with the noblest intentions can crumble because it was poorly explained. How many times did we see the fruits of failed communication last year? The Law Enforcement Act was one such occasion. The topic of employment for disabled people was another.

Honourable members of the 13th Parliament,

the implementation of a number of important reforms will coincide with your term in office. Bringing disabled people back to working life and the new Child Protection Act are just a few examples. I mention these separately, because it is precisely the weakest members of society who need special protection; they don't need their very understandable fears amplified even further.

Also, where on earth did the idea come from that the Cohabitation Act would change anyone's sexual orientation, bring people together or split up couples, or change the fact that very many children are already being raised outside of wedlock? The duty of the state should be constrained to creating the possibility for everyone to arrange their private relationships in a reasonable manner.

Again: why say a piece of legislation has a significance that it in no way possesses?

Serving as an MP will test the conscience and civic responsibility of each one of you. Ahead of you all are many discussions, where there will be no place for slinging words, provoking partners or self-aggrandizement. Estonia can't permit itself to be saddled by conspiracy theories.

The border treaty with Russia awaits ratification. I hope that the decision will not founder in an attempt to score short-term political points.

We need a national defence system built on solidarity and encompassing all of society. We need effective action to counter malicious propaganda. In national defence, we will continue to need a balanced decision-making process, not a select few people rushing into decisions.

I stress: Members of Parliament have the responsibility to keep abreast of topics and international developments related to Estonian security. To the European Union. To information technology. The interest of a deputy should not start waning if there's an 'e-' or 'i-' prefixed to a topic or solution.

Even those who are not in committees dealing with those topics should consider them important. The Riigikogu is also the parliament of an EU and NATO member.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I hope very much that the public administration and local government reform will not lose its way as it has before, with the formation of new committees, mapping the situation and additional analysis of the capability of the municipalities. We've already seen all that. We all understand what such a scenario actually means. It means that this Parliament and Cabinet will also fail to undertake anything in this area.

The time is ripe for government and administrative reform. We know what is not working and where the problems lie. The Estonian state has to offer its people a good standard of living, emphasize its unique points, not try to become a clone of another country. We have to refrain from making the mistakes others have made, and we could even take advantage of the lessons learned. This is an urgent business, truly urgent.

But there's hope. It was reflected in the pre-election discussion. All parties have pledged to take up these topics. To distinguish the priorities from the less important, and to look for solutions that are right for Estonia in particular.

Also, let's think about why we have our state in the first place. Is a state a management company that makes sure the lights are on, water in the taps, the lock on the door is secure and the janitor has made his rounds? But is that really enough?

The Parliament taking its oath of office today and the Cabinet; which will also soon do so, has hard work cut out for it. But a celebration is on the way as well – the national centennial.

In early 2018, Estonia will hold the presidency of the European Union. That, too, will behave us to demonstrate what a small e-state can do with diligence and agility. Our aim can't be merely to avoid being crushed by that burden of responsibility. Our duty is to contribute – visibly, in real terms – to the future of the European Union. That is a great task, a huge responsibility, and for all of you, the work and responsibility begin now, and not a second later.

History will surely give great statesmen and -women their proper due. Lightweights will remain on the fringes of the big narrative.

I wish you courage, wisdom and conscience, honourable members of the 13th Riigikogu.