



Speech
by
the President of Iceland
Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson
at a State Dinner
in Honour of
the President of Estonia
Toomas Hendrik Ilves
and
Madame Evelin Ilves
Bessastaðir
10 June 2010

Your Excellency
President Toomas Hendrik Ilves
and Madame Evelin Ilves
Honoured Guests

On a beautiful summer evening, with our surroundings bathed in broad daylight, as they are also in your homeland, it is a pleasure for us in Iceland to receive a visit from valued friends.

The recent past has in many ways been a difficult time for our two nations, testing our stamina and our willingness to learn from bitter experience, yet at the same time offering us the opportunity to lay the foundations for a successful future.

The friendship between our peoples is based on the solidarity that was expressed so powerfully some twenty years ago, when Estonia was breaking the shackles of domination, of terror that had muzzled democracy and the freedom of speech and action. At that time, Iceland was unanimous in offering help, recognizing the right of the three Baltic States to independence and participation in the global community of nations.

Solidarity between small states, our position in the new Europe and our contribution to progress all over the world have since been the guiding considerations in our discussions and mutual relations.

We have had to tackle challenges and complex problems in the wake of the financial crisis, and it is therefore a source of great pleasure that the first visit by a foreign head of state to Iceland since the watershed of autumn 2008 should be yours. A visit which gives us the opportunity to review our experiences, discuss what we have learned and exchange words of counsel.

Earlier today you visited Höfði House, where our friendship was sealed by the declaration of August 1991, and gave an interesting and informative lecture in the House of Culture on Estonia's position in Europe and the world at large. Your message has given us perspectives to keep in mind when we survey the path that lies ahead.

The Nordic countries and the Baltic States are fortunate in having cultivated cooperation, forming a team of eight nations in Northern Europe that has collectively achieved significant results. Our solidarity within various international organizations, such as the United Nations, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, has achieved a great deal, and therefore there is every reason to develop it further.

In the same way, membership of NATO – where Sweden and Finland are in a different position – and of the European Union – with Norway and Iceland still connected through the European Economic Area, though the Althingi has given approval to open negotiations on full membership – has brought this eight-nation team in the north many new tasks and responsibilities which are easier to shoulder thanks to the friendship and mutual trust that has prevailed between us. The agreement between the European Union, Russia, Iceland and Norway on cooperation in the north is also a sign of the changes afoot and the opportunities that may lead to positive changes.

The challenge of climate change has now become the task of all nations. Research indicates that it is taking place more rapidly here in the northern regions than in most other parts of the world. We have also been reminded recently that a release of the forces of nature in one place can temporarily bring air transport in far-away countries to a standstill. All this serves to illustrate that man is dependent on Nature; not her master.

Tomorrow, we shall introduce you to the research by Icelandic scientists into the melting of glacial ice and how we have transformed the energy economy of our country, largely replacing fossil fuels with clean energy sources, a transformation which has been of substantial advantage

in dealing with our present economic situation; serves as an illustration of what can indeed be done.

You will also have the opportunity to learn about our responses to the volcanic eruption in Eyjafjallajökull, the contribution made by the rescue teams formed by volunteers and about the predicament of the farmers whose grassland has been spoiled by falls of volcanic ash.

Through the centuries, the forces of nature have exerted a powerful influence on Icelandic history, on our culture, literature and poetry. Joy at the bounty of the summer light and fresh green woods has also inspired your people to use music and songs to keep the flame of freedom burning in their hearts.

Not many people believed, when the independence movements in the Baltic States challenged the might of a super-power, that in two decades it would be possible to consolidate the liberty of those three nations and bring them as active participants into the creation of a new Europe.

This achievement is one of the political miracles of our age; a proof of how much the power of democracy can achieve.

It has been a pleasure and a privilege for us in Iceland to enjoy the friendship of Estonia during those historic times and to be able to deepen our cooperation in so many ways.

It is in this spirit of gratitude that we welcome you here tonight and I ask you all to rise and drink a toast to our honoured guests, President Toomas Hendrik Ilves and Madame Evelin Ilves, and to the continued friendship between our nations.