



**Speech by
The President of Iceland
Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson
at a Gala dinner offered by the
Governor of Canada
Adrienne Clarkson
Winnipeg
4 August 2000**

Your Excellency Adrienne Clarkson Governor General
Distinguished guests
Dear friends

In this historic year when we celebrate the thousandth anniversary of the heritage of discovery and exploration which binds our countries together, this invitation to visit Canada is a great honour for Iceland. For this gesture of friendship and cooperation the Icelanders are both grateful and moved. Your words here tonight have indeed reflected the significance of our shared history and our determination to strengthen even further our joint progress in the times ahead.

The Icelandic discoverers who dared to cross the harsh ocean, who risked their lives in order to further the knowledge of unknown lands and succeeded in making Europe for the first time aware of this great continent, provide us with guidance and inspiration in the new millennium when we explore and try to chart science and technology, the environment and outer space. To maintain the balance and clarity which are the essence of open and free democratic society in an age of endless discoveries, it is important to retain the vitality of our roots and thus be better equipped to make our societies and the lives of all people richer in value and experience.

The Icelandic people take great pride in sharing with Canada one of the important explorers of our time, the astronaut Bjarni Tryggvason, born in Iceland and trained in Canada, an inspiration to the young in both our countries and farther afield. He follows in the footsteps of another

great Icelandic-Canadian explorer, Vilhjálmur Stefánsson, who furthered our knowledge and appreciation of the indigenous people of the North, their culture, their needs, their achievements.

The people who moved to Canada more than a century ago, in the most significant migration my country has experienced, succeeded in building strong and lasting bridges between our countries. While becoming good and productive Canadians they were inspired to honour the tradition and the values of the Icelandic people, moulded by a long history and culture going right back to the days of the Viking settlement and the establishment of the Althingi, the oldest parliament in the world.

Here in Winnipeg and elsewhere in Canada they published newspapers and books, wrote poems and told stories, established societies, clubs and congregations, initiated debates and public meetings on all aspects of progress and the human condition.

Their contributions were widely known in Iceland and had considerable impact on the nature of the Icelandic independence movement as it advanced towards Home Rule and sovereign status.

My visit to Canada is thus not only to commemorate the great discoveries of a thousand years ago and to strengthen our joint journey towards the future, but also to honour with profound respect the Canadians of Icelandic origin who have enriched both our countries in so many ways.

Earlier today I showed our gratitude by conferring the Order of The Falcon, the highest award my nation can bestow, upon some of the distinguished Icelandic-Canadian citizens who are now contributing to making this legacy an enriching experience for the years ahead.

We are now inviting annually groups of young Icelandic Canadians to visit the country of their forefathers and foremothers. This programme is called the Snorri Programme after the first Icelandic boy, indeed the first boy of European origin, to be born on this continent when his mother, Guðríður Þorbjarnardóttir, the first person in world history to visit both America and Rome, came to these shores shortly after Leif Eriksson's historic journey.

We have also shown our determination to strengthen the basis of our future cooperation by supporting many of the efforts initiated by the Icelandic-Canadian community, by deciding to open a new embassy in Canada, by sending many of our artists and scholars to your great country

and by publishing in English for the first time both the great collection of medieval Sagas of Icelanders and also recent works which describe the fate of the Icelandic people who migrated to Canada during the closing decades of the nineteenth century.

We further desire to expand the cooperation based on our shared history to include all the significant aspects of the evolution of the Northern Regions, that important part of the globe which ranges from the northern parts of Canada ,across Greenland and the Atlantic Ocean to Iceland and the other Nordic countries, and beyond to Russia and the Baltic States.

These Northern Regions are now experiencing vibrant changes, like spring arriving to break the ice which covers lakes and rivers; suddenly there is movement everywhere and the newly released currents move forward with force and vigour.

New states and regional organisations have been created, and across the Arctic, the Atlantic, the Barents Sea and the Baltic, we are experiencing significant innovations in political and economical cooperation with a firm emphasis on environmental protection and social progress.

These new challenges call for active cooperation and Canada and Iceland are uniquely placed to influence the success of these developments, as our cooperation in the Arctic Council and other Northern fora has already demonstrated.

It is of fundamental importance to Iceland to see Canada, in the new century, continue to contribute successfully to cooperation in the Northern Regions, and we see our dialogue with both the federal and the provincial authorities in Canada to be particularly significant in this respect.

We have high hopes that the free trade agreement between EFTA and Canada which soon is to be concluded will enhance productive economic and business relationships between our countries. The results which we have already seen since Icelandair began regular flights to Canada show us what can be achieved with both frequent air connections between more parts of Canada and Iceland and the establishment of the proper framework for trade.

Iceland and Canada have, since the foundation of NATO, been solid partners in providing security and peace and we hope that new ideas

within European institutions will not lessen in the future the significance of defence cooperation across the Atlantic.

We have greatly admired the leadership Canada has shown in establishing international agreements on disarmament and human rights; and your sustained participation in peace-keeping and social development within the framework of the United Nations. Canada has often taken the lead when others have hesitated in the campaign for a more civilised and democratic world.

The discoverers who came to these shores a thousand years ago were moulded by the democratic commonwealth founded in Iceland almost a century before, by the Christian vision of the early missionaries in the North and by the daring which inspired the exploration of the unknown.

These ideals must also be the inspiration of our times, the spirit which enables us to aspire to noble deeds.

It is with these hopes that we come to Canada, with the desire to make our cooperation in the future worthy of the great historical legacy which binds our countries together.

With these words I ask you all to rise in honour of Her Majesty The Queen, the Governor General and the great achievements of the Canadian people.