



Speech
by the President of Iceland
Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson
at a State Dinner in honour of
the Governor General of Canada
H.E. Adrienne Clarkson and
H.E. John Ralston Saul
10 October 2003

Your Excellencies, Governor General Adrienne Clarkson
and John Ralston Saul
Ladies and Gentlemen

For a thousand years the Icelanders have preserved stories of the efforts that our forefathers and foremothers made to settle the New World; calfskin manuscripts from Iceland contain the world's first written records of the vast land that we now call Canada and the continent of America.

Leif the Lucky, Guðríður Þorbjarnardóttir and their companions were bold pioneers; explorers of the first order. Their story is still alive for us, as numerous events in the year 2000 so firmly demonstrated; the bonds that link us together are tightly woven.

Many of the Icelandic settlers who flocked to Canada just over a hundred years ago saw their journeys in the same light as the ancient sagas, as is clearly illustrated by the autobiography of a farmer from Winnipeg who began recounting the life of Leif the Lucky before describing his own.

The settlement in Canada is closely connected with the Icelandic identity: the toil and tribulations of family and friends are familiar to everyone in this country; journals and books were read on both sides of the Atlantic; at one stage more books and journals were published in Icelandic in North America than in the mother country; the poets who wrote in the prairies or at the foot of the Rocky Mountains struck chords in Icelandic hearts, and still do, earning them the accolade of "poets of the nation" although living abroad.

“Though you travelled far, trod
and traversed every land,
your mind and heart bear
still your homeland’s mould.”

Stephan G. Stephansson’s well known poem “From the Icelanders’ Day Address” captures the emotions that we too feel and we are still enchanted by him. Last week saw the 150th anniversary of his birth in the north Icelandic countryside, and the occasion was marked by an international conference at the University of Iceland on Stephansson and the literature of the Icelandic pioneers in the New World. We welcome in particular that an in-depth biography of the poet in two volumes has now been published.

One indication of how much the heritage of the settlers remains a living part of Icelandic culture is the number of books published in recent years – academic studies, fiction, biography and collections of letters – dedicated to the lives of our cousins in Canada, and all these works have been very popular here in Iceland. We also keenly watch the literature and scholarly work being produced by Canadians of Icelandic descent and greatly appreciate how many of them regularly visit our country.

We take a pride in preserving and paying tribute to this heritage, as witnessed by the growth of the Icelandic Heritage Centre at Hofsfós, which has made that village into a shrine for the pilgrims who retrace their roots.

We Icelanders have been accustomed to focusing on the Nordic countries when we consider the nations with which we share kinship and history, but in some respects Canada lies closer to us, especially in the creation of the modern society that we have built up – and it is impossible to record the history of Iceland in the first part of the last century without taking into account the role played by Icelandic Canadians in terms of culture and business alike. It was also a symbolic gesture that “New Iceland” was the name chosen for the autonomous area on the Great Prairies.

Thus we extend a wholehearted and special welcome to the Governor General of Canada here this evening, the representative of a uniquely friendly nation, and we deeply appreciate how much our cooperation has strengthened in recent years. The establishment of embassies in Ottawa and Reykjavík were milestones that marked out a clear course, and within councils and organisations dedicated to the northern regions we are now engaged in partnership that significantly

broadens the basis on which our contact takes place. For half a century we had already been allies within NATO, building bridges in European-American relations, when in the last decade we took part in developing the Arctic Council in which Iceland currently holds the presidency and Canada has always been a solid participant.

It is highly significant that the Governor's visit is confined to three countries in the northern regions. She has arrived here from Russia and Finland, where increased cooperation between the northern nations was the focal point of her agenda. This will also be the case here and the Governor's visit to Akureyri will be devoted to discussions of the future development, economy, technology, environmental conservation, culture and education of people who live in the North – in the vast region that stretches from Iceland to Scandinavia and on through the great expanses of Russia to Alaska, across the whole of Canada to Greenland and here again, a region where the great nations, the United States and Russia, now have the opportunity of new and closer cooperation in the company of Canada and the Nordic countries.

The University of Akureyri and the Vilhjálmur Stefánsson Institute are the centres of this new cooperation in our country and Akureyri is also the headquarters of the Northern Research Forum which was established in Iceland in 2000 and will next convene in Yellowknife at the invitation of Canada.

The Governor General of Canada will also pay a great tribute to the memory of the remarkable explorer Vilhjálmur Stefánsson by delivering a lecture dedicated to his memory in Akureyri, and we are all delighted that his widow, Evelyn Stefánsson Nef, has visited Iceland on this occasion, is with us here this evening and will be in Akureyri as well.

Vilhjálmur Stefánsson was an explorer of world status, exploring territory that was like a closed book to rest of the Canadians, a remarkable son of Iceland, held so dear by our nation that many people wanted him to be the first President when our Republic was established.

First and foremost, however, he was the herald of the North, an untiring spokesmen for these regions who clearly saw the opportunities they offer. He pointed out the abundant energy resources in the North which probably account for a quarter of all that remain unutilised on Earth, he advocated opening new Arctic shipping routes to join distant continents, a project to which Icelanders have now given priority; but above all he was the person whose sympathy and dedication served to increase our knowledge of the customs and culture of the inhabitants of the North, and our respect for their ways of life.

The Governor General's visit to Iceland, and to Russia and Finland, is a powerful declaration of Canada's desire to strengthen Northern cooperation in the new century, which we Icelanders welcome in particular.

We also applaud the opportunity to secure yet again the bonds that history and culture have bestowed upon us and consolidate the progress we have achieved in business and technology. Icelandic companies have been winning a growing profile in commerce, fish processing and software development in the company of Canadians, and we are eager to strengthen these relations in the years to come.

The new century presents us with numerous opportunities to consolidation the collaboration between our countries and we wish their Excellencies Governor General Adrienne Clarkson and John Ralston Saul a heartfelt welcome to Iceland, while thanking them at the same time for the friendship and vivid interest they have shown towards Iceland in recent years.

I would like to ask you all, Ladies and Gentlemen, to rise from your seats and raise your glasses in honour of their Excellencies, the Governor General of Canada Adrienne Clarkson and John Ralston Saul, and to the friendship between our nations in the future.