



**A speech
by
the President of Iceland
Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson
at the ASF Gala Dinner
New York
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Kæru vinir

Er ekki gaman að vera Íslendingur hér í kvöld? – þó það nú væri, enda fundum við Ameríku! – eigum við ekki að ítreka það og lofa öðrum gestum að heyra kröftugt móðurmálið, segja öll í kór: Við fundum Ameríku ! (endurtekning) !

Yes, ladies and gentlemen, this was the Icelandic choir proclaiming that we discovered America, in the language which was spoken on this continent a thousand years ago – to remind you all that we discovered America – but as we sometimes say back home: were wise enough to leave it.

We kept it a secret from the rest of the world, wrote the account of the journeys on calfskin in a language which nobody else understood.

This is the first principle of Icelandic success: Keep great discoveries to ourselves. Don't even let the Norwegians know about them – and especially not the Norwegians.

First they tried to claim Leif Eriksson as their own, but as we know he came from Eiríksstaðir í Dalasýslu – and I see from the Norwegian faces here tonight that they don't even know how to pronounce it. Then they tried to hijack Snorri, who wrote the history of the Norwegian kings even though he was born in Iceland 300 years after the Norwegians crossed the ocean.

We have always had problems with the Norwegians. Understandably since the most energetic, the most independent and the most daring Norwegians decided to leave, crossed the ocean to settle in Iceland, while the more obedient Norwegians, those who were willing to pay taxes to

king Harald Fairhair stayed behind. The daring Norwegians who settled in Iceland established what was a thousand years ago the first tax haven in the world. That may be why we have so many successful Iceland companies represented here tonight.

Later the Danes tried their hand at ruling Iceland – and what a story. They soon got into trouble, although admittedly the Danes were more civilised and more commercially minded colonisers than the British or the French. Imagine what America would look like if Danish salesmanship had replaced the British dominance in the early history of this continent.

The Icelanders, however, wanted to be independent in the true spirit of the Vikings and it took us one hundred years to get rid of the Danes. We did it in the true Nordic tradition: Nobody was killed, nobody was imprisoned, the campaign was based entirely on our democratic tradition, our weapons the pen and the spoken word.

I am not forgetting the Swedes; yes, in the old days they used to fight all over Europe, but Iceland was, thank God, too far away. Luckily for us the Swedes were not particularly good sailors so we escaped their reign, unlike the Finns who have, however, always remained our friends. mainly because like us they speak a language which nobody else understands – so when the Finns and the Icelanders meet the result is the pleasure of a mutually enjoyed silence.

Our cousins in the Faeroe Islands often complain that they tend to be forgotten in these gatherings but we always remember them, remember that when the daring Norwegians thousand years ago crossed the ocean for Iceland those who got sea-sick demanded that the Viking ships should stop in the Faeroe Islands where the sea-sick then decided to stay. Therefore those sea-sick Norwegians became the stock from which our Faeroese friends spring. Of course the Faeroese retaliate by saying that only the stupid ones decided to continue to Iceland.

Yes, dear friends, such is the deep rooted harmony and warmth among the Nordic nations that a President can come here tonight and attempt to poke fun at the others without risking a diplomatic incident or a major international crisis.

The Nordic nations are in the modern world a symbol of peace and democracy, of progress and well-being, of equality and excellence, of entrepreneurship and business success.

We are the envy of many. They see in our reality their dreams of a better future. Our everyday existence is the core of their vision.

The history which I have so light-heartedly described here tonight reminds us that there have been conflicts in our past, even wars and cruel domination, sacrifices and the deaths of many. Our forbears fought each other and the results were not pretty.

But we succeeded in transforming our existence, to create a model which is now the image of success, of democracy and human rights.

If we could do it – so can others. That is our message to a troubled world; that their dreams can indeed come true.

Democracy and peace, progress and welfare are not the privilege of the few. They can be the achievement of the many, of the entire world. That is the challenge at the dawn of this new century, the Nordic mission in a world torn by fear and terror, plagued by poverty and hunger.

We have been blessed by outstanding achievements and in our global times the Nordic business communities are succeeding as never before, claiming outstanding international achievements in many different fields.

We have here tonight representatives of Icelandic companies which have established remarkable track records in areas where nobody ten or twenty years ago thought we could excel. In addition to the marketing of fish and the growing airline business, Iceland is represented here tonight by companies in banking and financial services, in pharmaceuticals and prosthetics, in genetic research and information technology, in those areas and others, where our cultural heritage has created a clear competitive advantage.

Entrepreneurship fostered by the Viking spirit.

Creativity encouraged by the poets and the storytellers of previous times. The Icelandic term used to describe a pioneer or entrepreneur is “athafnaskáld”, meaning “the poet of enterprise”, tells it all.

Emphasis on results, the tendency to go directly to solving the task at hand, and a reluctance to allow bureaucratic processes to slow the pace of success – traits rooted in the spirit of farmers and fishermen who in earlier times collected the hay when the weather demanded and handled the fish as soon as the boats came to harbour. In this sense Iceland is more of a “frontier society” than the old continental countries in Europe, more influenced by a spirit similar to that which has been a key element in the American achievement.

Furthermore, the importance of trust and integrity inspired by a community spirit where everyone knows they have to work with

everybody else, inspired by personal trust celebrated in the ancient Edda poem which reminds us that though wealth might wither away, our reputation stays with us forever.

These characteristics and others enriched by our cultural heritage, are now giving Icelandic companies a competitive edge in the modern global market.

They enable our entrepreneurs to move faster and more effectively, to be more original and more flexible, more reliable but also more daring than many others.

Therefore we are now witnessing a remarkable renaissance of Icelandic success, demonstrating that in the interconnected world smallness is a blessing not a curse, that there are no longer any hindrances on our road to achievement, that globally successful companies can now originate from anywhere, even from the small saga island in the far north of the stormy Atlantic. The same is of course true of all the Nordic nations – by global standards we are all small states. But our smallness is our greatness – and we feel even greater still because of the bonds between us.

There is much to suggest that, in the new economy, the small state can be a profitable basis for business innovations, a basis where it is easy to see how elements link up, how to establish cooperation between different fields, gain access to information and experience, grasp solutions to difficult tasks. The small state serves as a laboratory or research station in precisely those sectors which are increasingly dominating the economy of the new century.

These are indeed exciting times and I believe that the new century will be an extraordinary epoch in the history of American-Nordic relations. Never before have we had such opportunities to bring to our cooperation so many fantastic endeavours.

It is in that spirit that we come here tonight and Dorrit and I thank you for the honour of being your guests, and for this splendid and enjoyable evening.