



Address
by
the President of Iceland
Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson
at the opening
of the European Headquarters
of Avion Group
Crawley, England
24th February 2005

Distinguished guests
Dear friends
Ladies and Gentlemen

It all began with a single plane, bought by an unknown but enterprising pilot and sold by the Icelandic Minister of Finance under the glaring, cynical light of the Icelandic press. The plane had been called “the Nation’s Jet” and as the Minister of Finance at that time I had repossessed it as collateral. Then this unknown pilot appeared on the scene, stated in his soft voice but with determination: “I want to buy it! – and I will create a successful airline”. There were many who found this hard to believe.

As I walked from the signing ceremony in the Ministry following the hostile questioning from the Icelandic media I said to my Chief of Staff: “This pilot had better deliver on his promises, otherwise I will be hanged from the highest political lamppost” – and being at that time the most unpopular politician in the country I could indeed do without such risks.

But he certainly did deliver and I am still alive and kicking, and instead of hanging from the lamppost I was rewarded a few years later with the highest office of the land. So I can bear witness to the fact that it does indeed pay to do business with this man – and likewise with his companions in this great endeavour, this extraordinary journey which today has brought us to these splendid new European Headquarters, a journey which in recent years has created the largest airline of its kind in the entire world – and yet we are only witnessing the beginnings.

Arngrímur Jóhannsson, the founder of Air Atlanta, has been blessed with brilliant partners and the entry of a new generation of Icelandic business leaders into the company in recent years has witnessed fantastic expansion, bringing the company into new venues and challenging endeavours.

Magnús Thorsteinsson, the chairman of the board of Avion Group, was fostered in the closely knit and socially responsible regional community of the Icelandic cooperative movement in the heyday of its business; and was subsequently hardened by his survival and success in the competitive and tough territory of the new Russia in the 1990s. He has brought with him a team of young and daring, innovative and hungry professionals, building on the Air Atlanta experience and transforming it into Avion Group, using globally trained professionals and Icelandic entrepreneurship in a promising combination, thus laying the groundwork for a strong international performance by the Avion Group in the coming years.

The opening of the European Headquarters here today with Excel Airways as their primary focus is a strong indication of how globally successful this company will continue to be.

I know that the British business community, the press, the Times, the Telegraph, the Guardian and others, are perplexed by the Icelandic invasion and alliance with promising British partners, perplexed by, the success of the new generation of entrepreneurs who have set off from our country to these shores – even the Economist was hard put to explain it last week.

We understand that these developments are indeed a mystery to our British friends and I am not going to reveal the secret here today – that would certainly harm our competitive advantage. We prefer it to be dressed in a mysterious disguise.

But for courtesy's sake let me give you a few hints all the same: The ethic of work and persistent effort which is engrained in traditional Icelandic culture through the tough tasks that faced farmers and fishermen in times of old; the priority given to results rather than the bureaucratic process; the willingness to take inspired risks; the emphasis on personal trust and reliance on the competence of our partners; the entrepreneurship fostered in the competitive Icelandic market – all these characteristics are deeply rooted in the Icelandic experience and have given us a competitive edge in the new global market.

The experience of Air Atlanta, now part of Avion Group, is splendid proof of how brilliantly this formula can work – and I can assure you here

today, especially our British friends, that as the old Hollywood saying goes: “You ain’t seen nothing yet!”.

Somehow the airline business has suited us Icelanders well – maybe because of our Viking heritage as explorers and discoverers a thousand years ago, crossing unknown oceans and successfully arriving in virgin lands.

In the 1950s and the 1960s the Icelandic airline, Loftleidir, was in fact the first low-cost airline in the world, enabling young Americans and Europeans to cross the Atlantic in their student days, an experience Bill Clinton has admitted that he never forgets.

Similarly Cargolux, a cooperative effort between two small European countries, Iceland and Luxembourg, became in the final quarter of the twentieth century a strong leader in its field. And now in regular passenger services our country can take pride in operating more daily flights to America than all the other Nordic countries – Norway, Sweden, Finland and Denmark – combined.

It has been half a century of success in the airline business but in this remarkable history Air Atlanta, and now Avion Group, is – to use an expression from the days of the British empire – the jewel in the crown, an extraordinary example of global achievement: an airline based in Iceland but connecting all continents of the world, a prominent player in Asia and in the Middle East, in Europe and across the Atlantic, a splendid proof of what is possible, that indeed the sky is the only limit.

With the transformation of Air Atlanta into the Avion Group and with the addition of Excel Airways the groundwork has certainly been laid for even more impressive growth, for new chapters in this extraordinary saga of global success.

It is a pleasure and an honour for Dorrit and myself to be with you here today and to celebrate together a new landmark in your inspiring journey.

The people of Iceland are profoundly proud of your achievements and I bring you here today their heartfelt congratulations and best wishes.