



Keynote speech
by
the President of Iceland
Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson
at
the Lions International Convention
Boston, U.S.A.
3 July 2006

Honourable President,
Distinguished Lions,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a profound honour to address you here today and pay tribute to the inspiring work of the Lions the world over, in countries large and small, in continents far apart, in communities of all races, religions and creeds.

The world is indeed changing in challenging ways, these changes bringing in their wake transformation and progress, cooperation and friendship.

The pace is at times breathtaking, often making us perplexed, even not fully understanding where we are heading.

In the historic house which the Icelandic nation made the President's home, a house surrounded by fields and the ocean, bathed in the rich and gentle light that the summers bring to the North – there we preserve two gifts which every day remind us of how the world has been transformed, how together we can aspire to achieve what others before us thought beyond their dreams.

The gifts are from President Ronald Reagan and Secretary-General Mikhail Gorbachev, and were given to the people of Iceland on the occasion of the Reykjavík Summit 20 years ago.

At that time, the chill of the Cold War was so deep that it was earth shattering news that the two leaders were even going to meet – but the dialogue which they established in my country laid the groundwork for

the transformation which we have witnessed: the end of the nuclear arms race, the arrival of freedom and democracy in Central and Eastern Europe, the independence of nations that used to be in chains, a new framework for cooperation between East and West, North and South, which up to then had been made impossible by the barriers of the Cold War.

The symbolic gifts I mentioned were these: President Reagan brought a statue of the American owl, the bird of wisdom that can see in darkness; Secretary-General Gorbachev brought a beautiful Russian clock, decorated by a craftsman from a tiny village. Together, the gifts remind us to use our time wisely, to remember that we must hasten our journey from darkness towards the light.

And so we have indeed, and the Lions Clubs have been active participants and successful promoters of the opportunities which the new times have offered – demonstrating how associations of citizens, free and open, have become important instruments of change and cooperation.

The end of the Cold War, the growth of globalisation and the revolution in information technology have completely transformed the rules of international engagement, constructing new and exciting fields which allow us to work together in more productive ways.

I have in fact come to the conclusion, based on my experience and dialogue with many different leaders, that we are now in an era when individuals, and the organisations that they have freely created, are perhaps the most dynamic forces of progress, more so than states or international governmental organisations can ever hope to become.

In this respect we are enjoying the opportunities created by a new world order. Admittedly, we will still be burdened by problems, challenges, threats to our security and survival – but the new era allows global movements, like the Lions, and other associations of citizens from all walks of life, to become successful agents of positive change.

Your experience, the lessons that can be drawn from the work of the Lions, whether in Europe, the Americas, Asia, Africa or other parts of the world, provide us with a wealth of examples of what can indeed be done.

It has been for me both a privilege and an inspiration to participate in many Lions projects that have involved members from my own country as well as many others.

Six years ago the Lions in the Nordic countries brought the Nordic Heads of States together – the Kings of Norway and Sweden, the Queen

of Denmark, the President of Finland and myself – to support actively as patrons a joint Lions project dedicated to improving the health and the lifestyle of the elderly, using funds collected publicly for this noble cause.

Never before in the more than thousand-year history of the Nordic countries had these heads of state cooperated in such a way. It was the vision of the Lions that brought us together, so indicating how new ways of working together could be used to strengthen worthy causes.

This endeavour was extremely successful and my colleagues were proud to be of help in such a manner. Let me also add that the project demonstrated the respect and the trust which our nations have developed for the Lions; without this, the Queen, the Kings and the Presidents would not have agreed to follow their leadership.

I hope this experience will become an inspiration to others. Let me therefore, here and now, urge Lions Clubs from different parts of the world to attempt similar undertakings, to approach leaders from neighbouring countries as well as their own, or from different regions – presidents or prime ministers, royals or religious leaders, corporate chiefs or public heroes – anyone of high political, social, cultural or entrepreneurial standing, to lend their influence and prestige to worthy causes, inspired and led by the Lions movement, following this successful Nordic example.

In such a way, the Lions can indeed become both path-breakers and initiators of new forms of cooperation, advancing worthy goals for the benefit of the needy, contributing to friendship and understanding between nations and communities that have hitherto been divided or opposed, whether because of war or conflicts or due to different religions, traditions or cultures – the Lions being a force for harmony and positive change.

Another example I have witnessed is the global contribution that the Lions movement has made to the Special Olympics, the sports for mentally disabled people. This was created by the Kennedy family more than forty years ago and now reaches all parts of the world. Besides staging national and regional games in different parts of the globe every year, this movement will be bringing participants from at least 150 nations together at the Special Olympic World Games scheduled to take place in Shanghai, China, in 2007.

The Special Olympics is an inspiring endeavour which moved me to tears when I first witnessed the games in North Carolina and saw the mentally disabled people who were out there competing but who would otherwise have been locked away in mental institutions, judged helpless

and unworthy if the Special Olympics had not demonstrated the miracles that can be achieved.

As a member of the International Board of the Special Olympics, I thank you here today for your contributions towards the partnership that was set up in 2001 between the Lions Club International Foundation and the Special Olympics, dedicated to expanding the Opening Eyes screening programme, which so far has provided service for nearly 100,000 Special Olympics athletes worldwide.

I remember a mentally disabled athlete from New Zealand who turned to his mother and declared: "Mom, now I can see you. You are so beautiful," and a Mexican youngster who said: "I have never before seen the finishing line; I just followed the blur in front and waited until other competitors got there before me; but now I can see and finish first." These are two examples of how the Lions and the Special Olympics together have helped thousands of people – helped those who are the most disadvantaged among us, helped them to see life from a new perspective, given them hope and an enduring vision.

The Lions have also helped to lead our countries in new directions, providing people with solidarity and a sense of achievement, even at times becoming the conscience of our nations.

Through numerous projects and nation-wide campaigns, the Lions Clubs in Iceland have provided our people with a sense of unity and purpose, achieving what a governmental programme could never attempt, showed how a free and democratic association of citizens is, in the long run, a far stronger instrument for positive reform than a formal programme initiated by the offices of the state.

Let me also share with you here today a few lessons from Iceland, lessons which illustrate how the Lions Clubs worldwide could be strengthened in the years to come, lessons which demonstrate the democratic strength of your movement.

Many of you might think that Lions Clubs can only exist in cities or larger towns, but the Icelandic experience shows that even the smallest villages can become fruitful grounds for successful Lions activities.

When your president, Mr. Ashok Mehta, came to Iceland, I insisted that on his way to the airport, admittedly at 5 o'clock the next morning, he should stop in a small fishing village of 1500 people, a community of fishermen and fish-processing workers. There, the Lions Club would receive him in the Lions House acquired by the Club members and give him a hearty and healthy breakfast.

All over Iceland, in communities which in most countries would be deemed too small for the establishment of a Lions Club, we have had successful Lions operations for decades, and in a world where more than two billion people live in similarly small communities, the Icelandic experience could inspire the Lions to bring the message to each and every person among them. Imagine how the world would change if the billions who live in villages in India and China or elsewhere had the opportunity to become active members of the Lions movement!

Another lesson from Iceland that could be of benefit to the Lions movement is to encourage those who are made to retire from active work, either by law or company rules, to join the Lions and thus bring their energy and experience to the benefit of your movement.

In all our countries, people are now growing older while still enjoying good health. These people could become a tremendous asset to the Lions, especially since they have a lot of time on their hands and are eager to bring their energy to the service of worthy projects.

A close friend of mine who lives in south-western Iceland had been economically and socially active all his professional life. He was recently obliged to retire, but found a new channel for his efforts in the Lions. Within a year he was asked to become the president of the local club since the other members realised that he was younger in spirit and had more free time than most of them.

Perhaps the old people in all our countries, who are now living longer and enjoying better health than ever before, will emerge as a new social force in the future and exercise an important influence on human progress in the years to come.

I know that many of you have been more concerned about how to recruit the young, but let me assure you that their time will come, since there are forces of change now at work that will give the young a renewed community spirit, making them aware that professional and financial success does not, by itself, bring either happiness or fulfilment, and that only in serving a greater cause in the company of others can life be given a sense of purpose.

Yes, dear friends, the future is indeed exciting, and the potential of the Lions movement is enormous if you build on your experience and welcome new endeavours with an open mind.

I have attempted here today to offer a series of lessons:

- That the new century will be an era when non-governmental organisations will become more important than ever.

- That citizens working in cooperation with each other can be a stronger force for improvement than states or international bodies can aspire to be.
- That the changes that have occurred since Reagan and Gorbachev met in Iceland demonstrate how dramatically the world can indeed be transformed.
- That, by bringing heads of states or other leaders together in the service of worthy causes, the Lions can build new bridges and bring nations and regions together.
- That cooperation between movements like the Lions, the Special Olympics and others, can work wonders for those who most need our assistance.
- That no community is too small to benefit from the establishment of a Lions Club.
- That your movement and others like it must aspire to reach people wherever they are.
- That the elderly are an untapped reservoir of talent, and that all age groups can in fact work together.
- That the young are now gradually aspiring to be of service.

We are all in this world together, and our future and that of our children depends on how well we support and encourage each other.

I am grateful and honoured to be with you in this great assembly and wish you and the entire Lions movement ever-greater success. Be assured that future generations will bless you for your endeavours.