



**Keynotespeech**  
**by**  
**the President of Iceland**  
**Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson**  
**at**  
**the Icelandic National League Annual Convention**  
**Winnipeg**  
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Distinguished representatives  
of the Icelandic communities in Canada and the United States  
Dear friends

To be with you once again to celebrate our heritage, our traditions and the history which unites us is for me both a pleasure and a privilege – a pleasure owing to the shared memories that bind us together, a privilege because of the opportunities which the future holds for our children. Our common roots are still so strong that they enable us to greet the new century determined more than ever to celebrate our heritage in productive and challenging ways.

In my first Inaugural Address after signing the Oath of Office eleven years ago, I emphasised the importance for us in Iceland of this close relationship with the people of Icelandic descent in North America and hoped for fruitful cooperation and active cultivation of our common heritage.

I consequently gave priority to advancing a new programme of cooperation and brought that message to Canada and the United States during the first full year of my Presidency.

Allow me to quote a short passage from the speech I made at Íslendingadagurinn in Gimli on 4<sup>th</sup> of August 1997, nearly ten years ago:

“I have used the concept “the Icelandic community” to indicate the broad association of all people of Icelandic descent wherever they live. Our common sense of belonging to one community is indeed stronger than any formalities that determine where we pay taxes or how we go

through passport control at international airports. To strengthen the sense of family among all people of Icelandic descent is indeed a part of my mandate, to offer the service of the Icelandic Presidency to you all."

These words have indeed been the core of my effort, of the bridge building, the initiatives, the dialogue, the encouragements, the willingness to examine any idea, any proposal, to explore avenues previously uncharted and to discover new territories in the true spirit of the Icelandic discoverers who came to this continent more than a thousand years ago.

I have sometimes remarked, light-heartedly, that we are indeed the nation that discovered America five hundred years before Christopher Columbus – but did not tell anybody about it; only wrote about it in a language that nobody understood except ourselves and kept the ancient accounts in books made of calfskin hidden away far out in the North Atlantic.

No other settlers in North America can refer to such ties or still use a language which sounded on these shores, in the woods, in the fields, amongst the lakes and the rivers centuries before English or French became the language of domination over the native Americans whose home this land truly was.

The friendship between the Icelandic settlers who came here in the last decades of the nineteenth century and the Indian tribes is an important chapter in our story which still remains to be written in the way it definitely deserves.

The legacy of the Icelandic settlements provides us all with profound inspiration. Rarely during my Presidency have I been as moved as in my many visits to your communities, by participating in your celebrations and important events; listening to your stories and sensing your emotions, your pride and your vision, witnessing your homage to your mothers and your fathers, to your grandmothers and your grandfathers, to the heroic struggle of those who came here first.

On my visit in 1997 to Winnipeg and Gimli, to Spanish Fork and Salt Lake City, to San Francisco and Seattle, I brought with me a strong message from Iceland, that there was now in the old country a new awareness of the need to give priority to the relationship with our relatives in North America, to build on our shared history an extensive and modern co-operation which could provide new generations with a profound experience of their personal roots.

I mentioned ideas and projects which, ten years ago, began to influence our plans for the future. Let me mention a few:

- That the museum centre in Hofsós, dedicated to showing the lives and journeys of those who travelled across the ocean, would be an effective nexus for all people of Icelandic descent who desired to strengthen their contacts with the old country.
- That the Government of Iceland had decided to coordinate the work done by different departments to further our relationship in constructive ways.
- That the Icelandic Soil Conservation Service had invited you all to become partners in an extensive environmental network dedicated to rebuilding the ecological health of Iceland.
- That we should evolve special programs dedicated to giving young people of Icelandic origin a deeper understanding and knowledge of our culture, introducing them to modern Icelandic society and the beauty of the landscape.
- That the Icelandic Sagas, which had recently been published for the first time in a comprehensive English edition, would be made available to homes and libraries in your respective countries.
- That we should be innovative in using the Internet and other means of modern technology to bring the richness of our cultural heritage – letters, life stories, poems and pictures – to everyone who desires to strengthen his or her roots in a world dominated by dramatic forces of cultural change.

Looking back over the ten years which have passed since this programme was outlined, we can indeed rejoice in our mutual achievements, in how together we have strengthened our bonds and built new foundations for future progress. The actions derived from these ideas have, at the opening of the new century, given our heritage a strong sense of direction and purpose.

We were invigorated by the celebrations in the year 2000, which through the splendid exhibition "Vikings in the West" and extensive media coverage established a wide-spread public recognition of our earlier history.

We sent the Viking ship Íslendingur from the birth place of Leifur Eiríksson in western Iceland across the Atlantic Ocean to North – America, where it was received with great interest and acclaim.

We presented the statue of Guðríður Thorbjarnardóttir, the mother of the first European child born in North – America, as a symbolic gift to the Canadian people.

We initiated the Snorri Programme, named after Guðríður's son, allowing young people of Icelandic descent to visit the country of their foremothers and forefathers, enabling them to seek their roots through personal experience and meet their extended families and relatives in Iceland. It is a special occasion each year at Bessastaðir, the President's Residence, when I have receive the Snorri delegates and learn first hand about their unique journey.

Iceland also provided financial help for the new centre in Gimli and for the teaching of the Icelandic language at the University of Manitoba.

The Heritage Museum in Hofsóss has been strengthened by generous financial support which just a few weeks ago was reconfirmed through a new agreement enabling this unique centre to develop further.

We expanded our diplomatic representation in North America by establishing the Consulate in Winnipeg as the first permanent diplomatic office of Iceland in Canada and then consequently by opening an embassy in Ottawa.

We have cultivated relations with many provincial and national leaders in both Canada and the United States by inviting them to Iceland and by sending official representatives to meetings, events and gatherings in your respective communities.

We have put increased emphasis on engaging artists and scholars in our cooperation, on supporting exhibitions and concerts, welcoming the publication of new books, both novels and biographies, dedicated to our unique common history; we have done our utmost to make them available in English as well as Icelandic.

When all of this is taken together, we can certainly conclude that the vitality and dynamic potential of our relationship are now stronger than decades ago, and that we have together succeeded in modernising our cooperation in such a way that the future holds many fascinating opportunities.

Modern Iceland is now better placed then ever before to offer you all new avenues of cooperation by utilizing the advances that have been made in business and the arts, in science and in technology. We can now develop additional activities which will enable new generations to strengthen their sense of heritage by linking their interests and professions to the opportunities that modern Iceland now offers.

It is of the utmost importance that our relatives and friends in Canada and the United States should take pride in modern Iceland while at the same time celebrating their North American heritage.

Let me briefly illustrate some of the new opportunities which we can jointly explore.

Entrepreneurs of Icelandic descent in numerous different fields can now establish productive connections with Icelandic companies that have obtained a strong global presence and are active in the American, European and Asian markets. For the first time in our history, Iceland can now be a constructive partner for many North American companies and thus provide material for strengthening the financial bonds in our relationship. We witnessed evidence of this change in the opening of the Landsbanki branch here in Winnipeg earlier today.

Secondly, the thriving artistic and cultural scene in Iceland brings a new epoch into our cooperation, creating opportunities to enrich our relationship by giving talented young people opportunities to enjoy their connection to Iceland in ways that harmonise with the essence of modern culture. The “Núna Now” Art Festival which takes place these days in Winnipeg is an excellent example. We have a multitude of talents to choose from and in the years to come we must give priority to cultural exchanges, to exhibitions and concerts inviting brilliant artists on both sides of the Atlantic to share their work with others.

Thirdly, the growth of the scientific community in Iceland, with the establishment of new universities and research centres in many different disciplines, enables us to strengthen new forms of cooperation dedicated to scientific and technical progress, bringing new dimensions to active dialogue, academic exchanges and concrete projects created by scientists and researchers in our respective communities.

In this we are helped by the growing awareness of climate change and the need for new and greener energy all over the world. Iceland is central to the monitoring of climate change which can be observed through the retreat of the glaciers and the alterations in ocean currents and the behaviour of fish stocks, through the warming of the winters and the extension of the summers.

But Iceland is also at the cutting edge of the global debate on energy transformation because of how, in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, we succeeded in transforming our energy base, from being predominantly dependent on coal and oil in the 1940s and 1950s to being, as we are now, the leading clean energy country in the world, with 100% of our total electricity production based on clean energy and over 70% of our entire energy needs, including road transport and shipping, being served by clean energy resources.

We have become a global leader in geothermal energy, enjoying cooperation with California and China, Russia and India, Central Europe and East Africa, as well as other parts of the world.

Furthermore, the Icelandic hydrogen project has played a crucial role in the international cooperation on hydrogen economy. Our experience in soil conservation in our struggle with the largest desert in Europe has also provided valuable lessons to others, especially to nations in Africa and Asia. This autumn, our success in this area will be celebrated by an important international conference on soil conservation which will be hosted in Iceland, commemorating the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of our Soil Conservation and Forestry Agencies, the oldest such state institutions in the entire world.

Yes, modern Iceland has a lot to offer our friends and relatives in both Canada and the United States, to entrepreneurs, artists, scholars, scientists, interested citizens, activists who desire to utilize the Icelandic connection to further their occupation and everyday concerns. Never before have we been blessed with such a multitude of opportunities to reinvigorate, renew, expand and strengthen our relations.

We can now explore many ways in which to allow new generations of Canadians and Americans of Icelandic descent to proudly celebrate their Icelandic roots by learning about the modern achievements of the Icelandic nation, about the music, the literature, the arts, the science, the business; how the Icelandic nation has grown from being a community of the poorest farmers and fisherman in Europe to becoming one of the most technologically advanced and prosperous open democratic societies in the entire world.

We invite all of our relatives and friends on this great continent to share in these Icelandic achievements, invite you to treat modern Iceland as an inspiration as well as an encouragement, to accept the beauty and the magnificent landscape as your own, to draw from the unique Icelandic environment nourishment for your soul.

It has been a profound privilege to be a part of your enjoyments, to participate in the celebrations and events which you have organized so well, to learn from your experience and your wisdom, to be touched by your emotions.

All this has influenced my views and transformed my vision and for those great gifts and your friendship I am extremely grateful.

Let us resolve to achieve in the years to come even greater things than ever before.