



**Address by  
Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson  
President of Iceland  
on Íslendingadagur í Gimli  
August 4<sup>th</sup> 1997**

Þó þú langförull legðir  
sérhvert land undir fót,  
bera hugur og hjarta  
samt þíns heimalands mót,  
frænka eldfjalls og íshafs!  
sifji árfoss og hvers!  
dóttir langholts og lyngmós!  
sonur landvers og skers!

Distinguished Icelandic-Canadians  
Ladies and Gentlemen  
Dear friends and fellow countrymen

This poetic vision by Stephan G. Stephansson in his speech on Icelanders' Day almost a century ago crystallizes better than anyone else has done, how wherever we go we carry the uniqueness of Iceland in our hearts.

The poem has become a patriotic symbol. Created in Canada in a world which has now vanished, it has, in modern Iceland, inspired a harmony between our homeland and the dramatic changes now transforming the Globe.

A year ago at my Inauguration in the Icelandic Parliament House this poem was my choice for the song which traditionally proceeds the oath of office, signifying my desire to bring together all the people of Icelandic descent wherever their formal residence might be.

It is therefore with deep satisfaction and happiness that Guðrún Katrín and I join you here today.

We salute you all, your families, your parents and grandparents. We admire your loyalty to the people who in the previous century endured difficult journeys from the valleys of Iceland to establish new homes in Canada.

The message that brings us here today is not only to pay homage to the Icelandic heritage and to convey greetings from the people of Iceland. Our message is also to give a new emphasis to the relationship between the modern Icelandic nation and the descendants of the Icelandic settlers in Canada.

During my first year of office I have emphasised the need to forge active bonds between all those who share in the unique heritage that over the centuries has enriched the Icelandic people.

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.

There is now in Iceland a new awareness of the need to give priority to the relationship with our relatives in Canada, to build on our shared history an extensive modern co-operation which could provide new generations with a deep sense of personal roots.

Let me mention a few ideas and projects that now influence our plans in Iceland, not only to inform you but mainly to encourage you to put forward your own ideas, proposals and projects.

First, the Museum Centre in Hofsfós in Northern Iceland, dedicated to showing the lives and journeys of those who travelled from Iceland to Canada, has now during its first year of operation become an effective nexus for all people of Icelandic descent who desire to strengthen their contacts with the old country.

Second, the Government of Iceland has decided to create an interdepartmental co-ordination of the work done by different government departments to enhance the relationship between us in

Iceland and your communities here in Canada. Our distinguished Ambassador Einar Benediktsson who has served so ably here on the American Continent, will when he returns to Iceland later this year, be entrusted with the task of managing this project.

Third, the Icelandic Soil Conservation Service has formally agreed to invite you all to become partners in an extensive environmental network dedicated to rebuilding the ecological health of Iceland. It could indeed be a splendid way to visit the old country if at the same time you could see how the woods and the fields which you have sponsored are gradually creating a new Iceland. By formally joining this program, you can help in regaining the soils and vegetation in the valleys and fjords where your great-grandfathers and grandmothers were born and bred.

Fourth, to develop in different regions in Iceland, especially in those areas from which most of the immigration to Canada originated, a new and effective system of welcoming those of you who want to discover your relatives in Iceland and visit with your families the birthplaces of your forefathers and foremothers, to stay at farms or villages where they lived more than a century ago, to pray in the small churches in their home valleys surrounded by the beautiful mountains which are coloured by the symphony of the summer sun. Such family re-unions in your ancestral communities, made unforgettable by your Icelandic hosts, could become unique events, especially for the younger generation who want to experience at first hand how it all began.

Fifth, the evolution of special programs called “Youth and Heritage”, dedicated to giving young people of Icelandic-Canadian origin a deeper understanding and knowledge of Icelandic culture as well as introducing them to modern Icelandic society and the unique beauty of Icelandic nature.

Sixth, the Icelandic Sagas, the very foundation of our culture and identity, have now only last month been published for the first time in a complete English edition. The sagas have for centuries been the source of ancient wisdom for every Icelandic home. Together with the Bible they have accompanied us wherever we have travelled. Now they are available in English to every home in Canada where people of Icelandic descent want to enjoy the old stories.

Seventh, to use modern technology, the Internet, video and films, to bring the richness of Icelandic-Canadian culture, the letters, the life stories, the poems, the literature, the pictures and the paintings to everyone who desires to strengthen his or her roots in a world dominated by dramatic forces of change.

In all these efforts that I have now listed we will furthermore be helped by the approaching anniversary of a milestone event.

When mankind welcomes a new millennium, evaluates the past 1000 years and envisages what lies ahead, what could be more fitting than to celebrate the most important discovery made in the very year when mankind last passed such a milestone? Nothing that happened in the year 1000 is of such value and inspiration for us today as Leifur Eiríksson's journey to this continent, an event that invokes the daring human spirit, the courage and the determination that has led mankind from the ancient village to the seas, across the ocean to new continents, from earth to the moon and farther into space.

The Viking voyages to the American continent can give us a platform for examining the importance of discovery, the spirit of pioneers in our civilisation and the forces that drive us to explore the unknown, to reach for new heights.

It is indeed a tribute to the tradition of discovery that in a few days time, Bjarni Tryggvason, born in Iceland and brought up in Canada, should join the exclusive club of astronauts and enjoy on our behalf the spectacle of seeing Mother Earth from outer space.

In my Inaugural address as President last year I called for co-operation between the United States of America, Canada and Iceland to celebrate in the year 2000 the momentous discovery of the American continent by the Vikings exactly 1000 years before.

The joint celebrations on both sides of the Atlantic in the year 2000 could involve a re-examination of the Viking civilisation, the Vikings' knowledge of the oceans, their skills, wisdom and learning. Their achievement can teach us many things in today's world, where so much is taken for granted.

The modern spirit, the public imagination and the world of the media could be inspired by a series of events.

Let me offer you some ideas.

- A big event with global media involvement to be staged at Leifur Eiríksson's birthplace, Eiríksstaðir in West Iceland.
- Voyages on Viking ships along the known Viking route from Iceland through Greenland and on to Canada and the United States.
- A film in the Pocahontas style about the first European boy born on this continent, the boy Snorri, the son of Leifur Eiríksson's sister-in-law. He was the first child of European origin to begin life, walk, run and play in this part of the world. The life of the Viking boy Snorri in Canada could complement the film about the Indian girl Pocahontas as a source of fascination to children the world over.
- Furthermore, a series of events such as adventure travels and visits organised from Canada to the birthplaces of Vikings in Iceland, exhibitions on Viking civilisation and documentaries for television, schools and other educational institutions, conferences and forums for scholars and researchers.
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I have come here today to ask for your co-operation and involvement. Together we can certainly create memorable events and enhance the impact of the Icelandic heritage in Canada.

My message is also to invite you all to share with us in Iceland the history and the culture of the homeland, to enjoy the uniqueness of Icelandic nature.

Iceland, the country of creation, where the dramatic spectacle of the forces of nature is on display every day of the year.

Fire and ice, the horizon of volcanoes and glaciers, the green valleys and the crystal clear water of rivers and lakes are an unparalleled demonstration of the glory of creation that inspired our ancestors, and shaped their souls and ours forever.

Það er óskaland Íslenzkt,  
sem að yfir þú býr,  
aðeins blómgróin björgin,  
sérhver baldjökull hlýr,

frænka eldfjalls og íshafs!  
sifji árfoss og hvers!  
dóttir langholts og lyngmós!  
sonur landvers og skers!

With these concluding lines from Stephan G. Stephansson's patriotic poem I thank you deeply for your warm welcome and wish you all a happy day and a prosperous future.

I honour you all who have not only been good Canadians but also cultivated your Icelandic origins.

I salute Canada, the homeland of the Icelandic-Canadian community, which has fostered you all so well.