



**Speech by
Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson
President of Iceland
at
the Icelandic National League Gala Dinner
in Winnipeg
August 5th 1997**

Kæru Vestur-Íslendingar
Distinguished guests
Ladies and gentlemen

“Heima er best” is an old Icelandic saying. To be at home is our happiness. Such is the essence of these three Icelandic words.

They summarise the reception you have given Guðrún Katrín and me during our visit to Gimli and Winnipeg.

We have been deeply touched by the strength of the Icelandic heritage in Canada and the dedication shown by young and old alike to preserve the richness of the Icelandic-Canadian culture.

The essence of that kinship has certainly been in evidence wherever we have been. We all clearly belong to the same extended Icelandic family. Our days among you have reinforced my dedication to serve the broad Icelandic community wherever the formal residence of its members might be.

I take this opportunity to thank the representatives of the Icelandic community in Canada for all their efforts in organising our journey. Their work and good will has made our visit a tremendously enriching experience, equipping us to serve better all the people of Icelandic descent.

In my speech at Gimli yesterday I indicated that there is now in Iceland a new awareness of the need to give priority to the relationship between the Icelandic nation and the Icelandic community in Canada.

The ideas, projects and proposals which I mentioned in the Gimli speech are not however a complete list of all that has been discussed. There are many more ideas and proposals in the air, providing material for further discussions and evaluations.

My main message to you all however is that in my work as President of Iceland, in the decisions by the Government of my country and in the willingness of local authorities, various associations, groups and individuals in Iceland, there is an even firmer determination to give priority to consolidating our ties with the Icelandic community in Canada and the United States.

I have therefore come not only to enjoy with you the celebrations for Íslendingadagurinn in Canada but also to ask for your co-operation and help in making these ideas and projects into a splendid success.

The anniversary in the year 2000 of Leifur Eiríksson's pioneering voyage to a continent which he called Vínland but which has subsequently been known as America, provides us with a unique opportunity to enhance the presence of the Icelandic-Canadian inheritance.

Although a European nation, the Icelanders resemble the Canadians in many cultural aspects. Basically because we are both nations of settlers.

Our societies were created by people who crossed the ocean to settle in a new land. The spirit of discovery, the energy of the pioneers, became the bulwarks of our civilisation. Although Iceland was settled by the Vikings 700-800 years before large-scale European emigration to Canada and America began, the similarities are striking.

In my Inaugural address as President of Iceland on August 1st last year I called for co-operation between the United States of America, Canada and Iceland to celebrate in the year 2000, at the dawn of the new millennium, the momentous discovery of the American continent by the Vikings exactly 1000 years before.

It was of tremendous importance to receive on the Icelandic National Day the 17th of June this year, in a message from President Clinton an undertaking by the President of the United States to join us

Icelanders in celebrating in the year 2000 the anniversary of Leifur Eiríksson's historical voyage.

It is fortunate that in our approach to the celebrations in the year 2000 we will be helped by the new English edition of the Complete Sagas of Icelanders. Written down by literary craftsmen, few of whom bequeathed their names to posterity, the sagas have been an endless source of knowledge and wisdom, entertainment and brilliant language. They created a rich heritage which was treasured by the Icelandic nation and the vision which they fostered has in this century brought Iceland independence within the community of nations.

The sagas are a unique literary phenomenon and can be compared with the masterpieces of classical Greece and Rome. Their authors were firmly rooted in the Nordic heritage, but also sought material from contemporary European culture. They charted the fate of individuals, heroic deeds and tragedies. They provided us with classical human wisdom and breadth of mind which are relevant to all people at all times.

While the rest of Europe was under the sway of the Church and the Latin language during the Middle Ages, Icelanders were sitting in their turf farmhouses, writing down immortal works of literature in their native tongue. The setting for their action was not only Iceland, but the whole of Europe from the White Sea to the shores of Spain, from Constantinople to the glaciers of Greenland and the shores of the New World.

It would indeed be appropriate prior to the celebrations of the Viking voyages to bring this new English edition of the Icelandic Sagas into the homes of every family of Icelandic descent both in Canada and the United States, so that through the English language the new generations could share in the cultural heritage which has fostered the Icelandic nation through centuries of hardship, empowered us as a nation and brought us independence and sovereignty.

I would like to take the opportunity here tonight to reiterate what I mentioned yesterday concerning our co-operation in regaining the soil and vegetation in the valleys and fjords where our ancestors were born and bred. The struggle for survival through the centuries was at an enormous cost to the Icelandic ecosystem. More than half of the

original vegetation and almost all of the woodlands have been lost since the early centuries of settlement. New research shows that about 40% of the land falls under the definition of desertification. The degraded state of the ecosystem combined with continued soil erosion is regarded as the most serious environmental problem in Iceland.

Through 90 years of successful soil conservation, much has been accomplished. We are proud of exceptionally widespread participation in volunteer work carried out by thousands of Icelanders. However, this immense task is almost overwhelming for the limited resources of a small nation.

The Icelandic Soil Conservation Service is therefore seeking co-operation with the people of Icelandic descent in Canada and the United States to aid in the important work of halting the erosion and restoring the lost resources of vegetation and soils. I strongly believe that such an extensive environmental network consisting of the Icelandic communities on both sides of the Atlantic would be a fitting way to show our respect for the old country where our shared roots lie.

The relationship between the people of Iceland and the Icelandic-Canadian community has in recent decades been primarily influenced by history, culture and direct family reunions. It is worth remembering however that in the early part of this century the Western Icelanders were directly involved in the economic development of Iceland and contributed to the foundation of Eimskipafélag Íslands, the Iceland Steamship Company, which became the Icelanders' main commercial and transport link to the outside world.

I strongly believe that the changes which in the last ten years or so have modernised the Icelandic economy and the transformations which are taking place in the global financial markets have together opened up the potential for a new era of economic co-operation between entrepreneurs in the Icelandic-Canadian community, their companies and various enterprises in Iceland.

I have therefore also undertaken this journey to emphasise the scope for economic co-operation between the modern Icelandic nation and the people of Icelandic descent in Canada and the United States, to point out the opportunities for joint enterprises in the fields of advanced technology, finance, industry and commerce. The

descendants of the Icelandic settlers in America could thus become modern pioneers, demonstrating how we can explore together the sources of wealth available in the new century.

The Icelandic stock market has in recent years offered the highest rate of return according to an analysis in a recent issue Barron's, the financial magazine. Our economy is one of a few European economies that already meet the strict European Union criteria of economic excellence, inflation is only 1-2% and the unemployment rate is below 4%.

Icelandic companies are also turning out to be interesting partners in establishing new market potentials in Asia, Latin America and Africa. Free from the negative associations of the huge multinationals, they provide unique access to these parts of the world. This trend has been demonstrated by a multitude of global partnerships that Icelandic companies have established in recent years.

It would indeed be fitting if the younger generation of entrepreneurs and businessmen from the Icelandic-Canadian community were now to reverse the route taken by the Icelandic settlers in Canada and cross the ocean to explore economic partnerships in modern Iceland. I am sure that entrepreneurs, financiers and managers from the Icelandic-Canadian community would receive a warm welcome in Iceland. By establishing joint enterprises in the fields of industry and finance the cultural bonds between our communities, the joint historic roots, would be given a new dimension in the coming century.

My message is also to extend an invitation to you all, to the Icelandic families in Canada to return our visit by coming to Iceland, to visit the land of our ancestors where the magnificent creation of the Earth is still going on, where the display of 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 Iceland.

We now live in times of change and creation that dominate all human activity; technology, trade, politics, culture and the arts.

Maybe the Icelanders, whether we live in Iceland or in Canada, are especially responsive to this transformation because in Iceland the creation of the Earth influenced our heritage in a unique way.

We are told in the Bible that God created the world in six days and rested on the seventh. Whether or not we believe in this literally, Iceland seems to have been an afterthought, or maybe the Almighty forgot to rest when it came to Iceland.

Last autumn a volcanic eruption below the largest glacier in Europe demonstrated the forces of creation in a very dramatic way. For the first time in the modern age, people could watch a mountain being formed and rising up through the surface of a glacier. The volcano melted a 600-metre layer of solid ice and split the glacier apart, creating floods that covered the black sands with huge blocks of ice the size of some of the biggest buildings here in Winnipeg.

The Mid-Atlantic rift, separating the European and the American continents, is nowhere visible above sea level except in Iceland. The two continents are moving apart, by an inch every two years, and Iceland spreads across the rift as they do so, providing an ongoing demonstration of the forces that are still transforming Mother Earth. At the site of our ancient parliament, Thingvellir, we can literally walk from the American continent to the European continent in less than one hour.

With growing interest in the environment and the future fate of the Earth, Iceland is proud to provide a “live show” of those forces that are much greater than us all. To witness the creation of the Earth at first hand is a humbling but exciting experience.

The soul of the Icelanders who settled in Canada was certainly shaped by those forces. The farmers and the fishermen survived in the new homeland because the discipline from the old country was the backbone of the Icelandic heritage.

I pay tribute to those pioneers and salute all their families which for so long have been true to the Icelandic tradition.

Guðrún Katrín and I thank you all for the warmth and friendship that has greeted us everywhere. We hope that our visit has contributed

to the furtherance of the Icelandic-Canadian relationship. For us it has been an unforgettable and unique experience.