



**Speech by
Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson
President of Iceland
at a dinner
in Calgary, Canada
July 26th 1999**

Your Excellency Bud Olson, Lieutenant Governor of Alberta
and Mrs. Lucille Olson.
Distinguished guests.

I have come to honour the journey made by the Icelanders who continued to love and respect their motherland, enrich our culture and broaden our vision while gradually becoming energetic and productive Canadians.

My visit to Alberta now, following the time which my late wife Guðrún Katrín and I enjoyed in Gimli and Winnipeg two years ago, is also a manifestation of the determination by the people of Iceland, the Presidency and the Government to give enhanced priority to cultivating our ties with our relatives in Canada, the extended Icelandic-Canadian communities everywhere in this magnificent and vast country.

But I have also come to listen to your ideas and suggestions, to learn from your experiences and draw lessons from your visions and hopes for the future.

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 North 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.

Both 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 various parts of Canada, the Icelanders were pioneers in their settlements. Many broke ground in more than one place. Those who came here just before 1890 arrived from other Icelandic communities in Canada and the USA. Some were trying to build for themselves new lives and homes in North America for the third time. They were poor people whose lives had been hardship and ceaseless toil on two continents, first in the country of their birth and then here. Resourcefulness and faith, the yearning to be independent and free, to ensure for their children education and a better life, were the noble qualities which they passed on to their descendants, who have preserved and cherished them up to this very day.

We are grateful for the honour which you have shown to the memory of the great Icelandic-Canadian poet Stephan G. Stephansson, who lived in North America for all his adult life, most of the time here in Alberta, and is now ranked with the greatest poets ever in the Icelandic language – a farmer and manual labourer for all his life, who when dusk fell and his day's labours were done sat down to write his literary masterpieces.

There is now in Iceland a strong awakening of interest in the epic history of the migration to the New World. We need to learn from those who founded our nations. We need to look back at the values and motives that have made us what we are today. Only by knowing where we have come from can we influence where we are heading.

The spirit of discovery, the respect for pioneering courage, the desire to explore the unknown, could certainly be key elements in our testament for the new century. Democracy, inspired by the spirit of discovery, should indeed be the model for civic society in all parts of the world.

The history of the Icelanders from the days of the medieval democratic commonwealth – which produced the oldest national

parliament in the world – through eleven centuries to modern times, and likewise the adventure of the Canadian experience, both bear witness to the enduring success of a true democratic society.

In my Inaugural address as President of Iceland on August 1st 1996 I called for co-operation between Canada, the United States of America 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.

In my meetings with President Clinton and Vice-President Gore in July 1997 I outlined the basic ideas that could lead to joint American-Icelandic celebrations and the President and the Vice-President welcomed those proposals. So too did representatives of the Canadian government who learned of our ideas in the following months. Since then, formal frameworks have been created for co-operation on the millennium festivities between Iceland and Canada and Iceland and the United States respectively, embracing exhibitions, artistic events, television programmes, filmmaking, conferences and forums for discussions and explorations of how to interpret our heritage in the new century.

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. 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 is a further tribute to the unique place which the Icelandic sagas share with the literature and the philosophical texts of ancient Rome and Athens that Penguin, the leading international publishing house, has decided to begin next year to publish the bulk of the Icelandic sagas in editions based on those new translations. This will include eight volumes in the Penguin Classics series to appear over the next four years, while the first publication will be a selection comprising ten sagas and seven tales.

The opening volume of the new saga series will give pride of place to the accounts of Guðríður Þorbjarnardóttir, the extraordinary Icelandic woman who after being brought up in Iceland married Leifur Eiríksson's

brother and then after his death another explorer, Þorfinnur karlsefni. With him she travelled to the North American continent where she had a baby boy, Snorri, the first child of European origin to be born in America. Guðríður Þorbjarnardóttir later travelled back to Iceland where she farmed. Being a devoted Christian, she decided late in life to make a pilgrimage and journeyed to Rome, thereby becoming the first woman in world history to visit both America and Rome and in fact the only person to do so for the following half a millennium before Christopher Columbus even thought about his voyage. Her life spanned almost the whole known western world at that time, and she was an independent woman and architect of her own fate, who with characteristic modesty took her place among the great female heroes of history.

During my visit to Canada two years ago I described a number of projects and proposals dedicated to enhancing and modernising the ties between the Icelandic community in Canada and the people of Iceland. It is with great satisfaction that I can now report to you about their successful implementation, confirming the determination of the Icelanders to make the opening of the new millennium a period of revival in co-operation between the two branches of the Icelandic tree, the community of Icelandic-Canadians and the Icelandic nation in the old country.

We have decided on a number of joint events and celebrations in the year 2000: exhibitions, theatre productions, festivals of Viking ocean voyages, memorials, concerts and gala performances, film festivals, conferences and forums for examining our joint heritage.

During my present journey I want to encourage you all – as I do my own people in Iceland – to build upon these successes and aim for even greater progress and achievements.

In this respect may I mention two important areas: first, the cultivation of Icelandic-Canadian economic, trade and business co-operation; and second, the importance of bringing Canadian people, especially those of Icelandic descent to Iceland, to witness the unique splendour of our nature, to visit the land of our ancestors where the magnificent creation of the Earth is still going on, where the spectacle of fire and ice, the horizon adorned with volcanoes and glaciers, the green valleys and the crystal-clear water of rivers and lakes, are an unparalleled demonstration of nature at its most glorious.

Only two years ago 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 in your cities. Another eruption on a smaller scale took place beneath the same glacier, in fact, over Christmas last year.

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 in the land of our ancestors is indeed a humbling but also an exciting experience.

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

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

In the language of the Icelandic settlers *bið ég heiðraða gesti að rísa á fætur og hylla hennar hátign drottninguna.*

May I ask you to join me in a toast to Her Majesty the Queen of Canada.

Drottningin! The Queen! La Reine!