



**Speech by  
Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson  
President of Iceland  
at a  
Dinner in Regina, Canada  
July 28<sup>th</sup> 1999**

Your Excellency John Wiebe, Lieutenant Governor of Saskatchewan  
and Mrs. Ann Wiebe.  
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. They showed by the examples of their lives how it is possible to be rooted in two national traditions and enrich the new homeland with the heritage from the old country.

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.

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.

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.

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.

It is a tribute to precisely this tradition of discovery that Bjarni Tryggvason, who was born in Iceland and brought up in Canada, should have joined the exclusive group of astronauts and enjoyed on our behalf the spectacle of seeing Mother Earth from outer space. It certainly gave the Icelandic people great pleasure and pride to welcome Bjarni and his family back to Iceland last year.

In my Inaugural address as President of Iceland on August 1<sup>st</sup> 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 these celebrations we will be helped by the new English edition of the Complete Sagas of Icelanders. Now for the first time the descendants of the Icelandic settlers in North

America can contribute to this country the magnificent heritage which is their birthright no less than that of the people of Iceland today, thus enriching Canada's renowned cultural mosaic.

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.

The opening volume of the new saga series which Penguin, the leading international publishing house, will launch early next year, 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.

Guðríður Þorbjarnardóttir occupies such a unique position in world history that she is clearly the greatest woman explorer of all times. She embraces and symbolises the independence, the talents, the daring, the culture and also the beauty of Icelandic women who, from the early decades of the settlement in the 9<sup>th</sup> century and throughout the dramatic history of the Icelandic people all the way to modern times, have played a unique and inspiring role in the evolution of Icelandic society and are indeed largely responsible for the respect that the Icelandic nation has earned in the world.

During my visit to Winnipeg and Gimli 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 report to you that the Icelandic and Canadian Governments have now established an extensive and continuous dialogue on strengthening the Icelandic-Canadian ties and Iceland has sent a distinguished representative to serve in Canada in order to further our joint interests in the fields of culture, trade, economic progress and cultivation of our heritage.

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.

My message is also to extend an invitation to you to return my visit by coming to Iceland, to visit the land 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.

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.

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.

The Mid-Atlantic rift, separating the European and the American continental plates, 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 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!