



**Speech by  
Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson  
President of Iceland  
at the Foam Lake Community Hall  
Foam Lake, Canada  
July 29<sup>th</sup> 1999**

Distinguished Icelandic-Canadians.  
Dear relatives, friends and honoured guests.

I bring you joyful greetings from the land of our forebears and thank you profoundly for the warmth of your welcome.

I have come to honour the journey made by your ancestors who continued to love and respect Iceland, enrich our culture and broaden our vision while gradually becoming energetic and productive Canadians. I have also come to tell you how the people of modern Iceland desire to strengthen our bonds with the Icelandic-Canadian communities; how we wish to seek jointly with you new ways towards maintaining our common heritage in the new millennium; how we want to allow new generations of Canadians of Icelandic descent to proudly celebrate their Icelandic roots by learning about the achievements of the Icelanders during the twentieth century, our modern contributions to global progress, our music, our literature, our arts, our scientific achievements, and the way that the Icelandic nation has grown from being a community of poor farmers and fisherman to become one of the most technologically advanced and prosperous open democratic societies in the entire world.

My visit to Alberta and Saskatchewan 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.

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

It has been an informative and fascinating experience for me to explore the history of the Icelandic settlements in your part of Canada, for example the accounts in the Almanak, founded by Olafur S. Thorgeirsson in 1895. Those accounts are living history, infused with profound knowledge and the authors' sincere love for their new home. Just before the turn of the century word began to spread that here was a promising place to make a new home, with plenty of good land, pastures and fields. By 1907 over seven hundred Icelandic settlers were in your area, many coming directly from Iceland but others from existing communities in North America, particularly North Dakota. They were capable farmers, many already familiar with the skills needed to live in this part of the world, and they certainly flourished.

It was typical of the Icelandic settlements in Saskatchewan that their first task was to build a school followed by a church and then a community hall. Above all they were motivated by giving their children a better life and they saw education to be the key to advancement. Gunnar Johannesson, writing about the first settlers in Gerald, sums up the attitude that guided virtually all the settlers in this area:

“After the settlers had erected a covering for their heads and taken some steps in arranging things about them, they realized that the first step to be taken as an immediate necessity was to erect a school for the children.”

In the Foam Lake district, the first school was built in 1899, made from logs with a single roof. The yearning to be independent and free, to ensure for their children education and a better life, were the noble qualities which first settlers passed on to their descendants, who have preserved and cherished them up to this very day.

I have often used the concept “the Icelandic community” to indicate the broad association of all people of Icelandic descent. Our common sense of belonging to one community is certainly 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.

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.

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.

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.

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 the 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.

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 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.

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.

Taken together, all of this shows formidable progress in the two years which have passed since my late wife Guðrún Katrín and I visited Canada in order to initiate discussions on new ways in which we could enhance and modernise our traditional bonds together and also seek commitments to carry out new projects and proposals.

During my present journey to Alberta and Saskatchewan 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.

My message is also to extend an invitation to you all, to the Icelandic families in Canada, 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.

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 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. I would like to do so by

reciting the first verse of the poem by Stephan G. Stephansson, a poem which has become for all of us a patriotic symbol:

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!