



**Speech by
Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson
President of Iceland
at
The Wynyard Civic Center
29th July 1999**

Honoured members of the Wynyard Town Council.
Distinguished Icelandic-Canadians,
Dear relatives, friends and honoured guests.

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. 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.

I have 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.

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.

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.

The essence of that kinship has certainly been in evidence wherever I have been. We all clearly belong to the same extended Icelandic family and my time among you has reinforced my dedication to serve all the members of the Icelandic community wherever their formal place of residence might be.

It has been an informative and fascinating experience for me to explore the history of the Icelandic settlements in your part of Canada. It reminds me of the accounts printed in the Almanak which Ólafur S. Thorgeirsson founded in 1895. There, the exploits of contemporary pioneers here in Canada are portrayed in a way remarkably similar to the familiar accounts from the medieval Book of Settlements which our joint ancestors compiled during the early centuries of the Icelandic commonwealth and is in fact unique in European culture as the historical record of an entire nation's origins.

The accounts in the Almanak trace the origins of the Icelandic-Canadian community, describing the search for new land to settle, local topography, voyages of the first settlers and the boundaries of their land, giving detailed personal accounts of the settlers themselves, their ancestry, their lives, families and descendants.

Records of the origins of the settlement in your region can be found in editions of the Almanak dating from World War I, written by Friðrik Guðmundsson, Helgi Árnason and Jón Jónsson from Myri. These 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.

The pioneering settler in Thingvalla was Jón Magnússon, who made his home there in 1885. A year later fifteen families arrived, mostly from Winnipeg although some came straight from Iceland. 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. But the mothers here, as elsewhere, played an important role in the education of the young ones; the children learned hymns and poetry from the old country, heard folktales and stories based on the rich literary heritage of the Icelanders. Poetry was important, and there were poets everywhere.

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.

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 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. 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.

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.

The opening volume of the new saga series which Penguin, the leading international publishing house, is launching 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 9th 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 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.

May I mention briefly some of the advances since I last visited Canada and also suggest some areas for further progress in the near future.

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.

The Heritage Center in Northern Iceland, dedicated to depicting the lives and journeys of those who travelled from Iceland to Canada, has now become an effective nexus for all people of Icelandic descent who desire to strengthen their contacts with the old country.

A special youth programme has been created in order to give 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. This summer the first group of young Icelandic-Canadians visited Iceland under the auspices of this new programme and it is a pleasure for me to tell you that their visit was an outstanding success. Thus, we have now systematically begun to cultivate the young generation and give young people an understanding of their roots in Iceland and also some knowledge of modern Icelandic society.

Furthermore, we can now choose from a multitude of Internet material dedicated to Icelandic-Canadian topics. A number of television and film projects are being undertaken; some of them have in fact already been finished.

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.

It certainly gives me great pleasure and satisfaction to see how much has been established since my earlier visit.

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.

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 people of Icelandic descent to Iceland, to witness the unique splendour of our nature. In today's world Iceland is indeed one of the unique ecological wonders of our planet and we in Iceland and our relatives in Canada are certainly blessed in a special way to be able to treat Iceland as our special heritage.

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

It would indeed be fitting if the younger generation of entrepreneurs and businessmen and businesswomen from the Icelandic-Canadian community were now to reverse the route taken by their forebears 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 industry and finance, the cultural bonds between our communities, our shared historical 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 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 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. I honour them and you all with the closing verse of Stephan G. Stephansson's patriotic poem which in modern times has become the unifying symbol of all people of Icelandic descent.

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!