

Opening Address by
the President of Iceland
Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson
at the Conference
“Rediscovering Canada”
University of Iceland
5th August 1999

Distinguished Canadians
and other visitors to Iceland
Ladies and Gentlemen
Dear friends

It is a gratifying confirmation of the way Providence seems to be working in favour of the Icelandic-Canadian relationship that my first official task here in Iceland after a fascinating and fruitful visit to Canada should be to open your interesting and stimulating conference.

I journeyed to Canada to honour the Icelanders who continued to love and respect Iceland, enrich our culture and broaden our vision, while gradually becoming energetic and creative Canadians. They showed by the examples of their lives how it is possible to be rooted in two national traditions and enrich the new home with the heritage from the old.

The purpose of my Canadian visit was also to manifest how the people of modern Iceland desire to strengthen our bonds with Canada; how we wish to seek in league with the Canadian people, especially those of Icelandic descent, new ways towards maintaining our common heritage in the new millennium.

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.

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 civilization. I was indeed 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 our joint culture.

The world has changed in such a fundamental way that 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, should become 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 parliament in the world – through eleven centuries to modern times, and also the adventure of the Canadian experience, both bear witness to the enduring success of true democratic society.

At the cross-roads which the millennium represents, the legacy of the Viking explorers who were fostered by the democratic commonwealth described in the Icelandic sagas could serve as an inspiration not just to look back, but also to look forward. They can give us platforms for examining the importance of discovery, its roots in democracy and the spirit of pioneers in our civilization, as well as the forces that drive us to explore the unknown, to reach for new heights.

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 the North American 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 indeed a tribute to this tradition that Bjarni Tryggvason, who was born in Iceland and brought up in Canada, should now have joined the exclusive club of astronauts and enjoyed on our behalf the spectacle of seeing Mother Earth from outer space, the first Nordic-Canadian person to do so.

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.

During my recent visit to Alberta and Saskatchewan and also during my visit to Winnipeg and Gimli two years ago I furthermore described a number of projects and proposals dedicated to enhancing and modernising the ties between Iceland and Canada. It is with great satisfaction that I can now report to you many successful implementations of these ideas, confirming the Icelanders' determination to make the opening of the new millennium a period of revival in co-operation between Iceland and our friends and relatives in Canada.

The Icelandic and Canadian Governments have now established an extensive and continuous dialogue on the strengthening of 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 conference which opens here today fits splendidly within this new framework of extensive co-operation between my country and Canada. The Nordic Association for Canadian Studies should indeed be congratulated for having brought the conference to Iceland in order to further the re-discovery of Canada through this international forum; a forum which brings together

scholars and experts from many different parts of the world, directing our attention towards the forces of change which are now fundamentally altering the economic and political map of the Northern Regions, an area which embraces a large part of Canada, Greenland, Iceland, the northern part of Scandinavia and Russia as well as the Baltic States. Thus defined the Northern Regions are now witnessing social, economic and political transformations which affect every aspect of our daily lives, the family, the workplace, the schools and the seats of power.

For the first time in our history there is now in existence an interlocked network of organisations embracing the entire area from Russia across the Baltic States and the Barents Sea through the Nordic countries, over the Atlantic Ocean and Greenland into Canada and the United States.

Although the Baltic, Barents and Arctic Councils are all different in composition and purpose, they constitute together a new structural reality in the North. They show how the end of the Cold War has fundamentally changed the political and economic landscape and brought the Northern Regions into key positions, influencing strongly the success of the new Europe and the stability of the Russian-American relationship, with Canada and the Nordic States potentially playing key roles in this evolution.

I hope that during your conference and your stay in Iceland you will take time to reflect on the challenges facing not only Canada and Iceland but also all the other states and territories in the northern part of the globe.

We now live in times of dramatic change and challenging creation which dominate all human activity: science, technology, trade, politics, culture and the arts.

Maybe the Icelanders and our relatives in Canada are especially responsive to this transformation because in Iceland the creation of the Earth has influenced our heritage in a unique way.

We are told in the Old Testament 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.

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. That display of fire and ice, the horizon of volcanoes and glaciers, the green valleys and the crystal clear water of rivers and lakes, are a parallel demonstration of how the glory of the creation has been blessed in Iceland.

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

I witnessed last week how that spirit has survived among our friends and relatives in Canada and how it is now inspiring the young generation to seek new challenges and aspire to great achievements.

I hope this same spirit, moulded by our ancestors and inspired by the forces of creation, will reach all of you during your stay in Iceland and remain with you forever: giving you all the desire and daring to influence the creative processes now transforming the entire world.

I wish you success in your deliberations and discussions and I am indeed looking forward to learning from your conclusions.