



**Speech by  
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President of Iceland  
at the Annual Meeting of  
the British-Icelandic Chamber of Commerce  
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Distinguished members  
of the British-Icelandic Chamber of Commerce  
Ladies and Gentlemen:

It is indeed fitting to salute and celebrate the Fisheries Exhibition which will open in Reykjavík tomorrow by holding the Annual Meeting of the British-Icelandic Chamber of Commerce. No product has surpassed fish as the mainstay of trade and commerce between Iceland and the United Kingdom, not only in modern times but also throughout the centuries, even for a thousand years or more.

During the Viking settlement in Iceland, and the mediaeval democratic commonwealth which was established together with the Althingi in 930 and consolidated by the introduction of Christianity in the year 1000, the markets in Britain provided the ancient republic with a welcome alternative when our cousins in Norway tried to drive too hard a bargain.

Long before Christopher Columbus discovered America the Icelanders, especially those living in Western Iceland, together with the Icelandic settlers in Greenland, built strong commercial ties with Bristol and other British towns. Some scholars have even argued that it was due to the knowledge available to the seafarers in Britain, as the result of this long standing trade with Iceland, that Christopher Columbus learned of the great continent across the ocean, and consequently managed to convince the leaders of Europe and the Catholic Church that he had discovered America. Since the royal courts and the Vatican provided a better PR network in those times than the Icelandic farmers and fishermen

could afford, the world has generally honoured this false claim, but now we in Iceland are setting the record straight, especially with the publication of the entire Sagas of Icelanders in English, and we expect great help from our friends and trading partners in Britain.

It is remarkable to reflect on how the majesty and the mystery of the oceans has inspired civilisations to bring new visions to our existence and both Icelandic and British history and culture preserve great examples of this influence.

In ancient times the sea defined the boundaries of the world, and still, despite great discoveries which this century have taken man to the Moon and brought us towards the genetic essence of our own being, the oceans retain their mythical aura.

In the words of the great English poet Auden the sea is “the alpha of existence” and to Thomas Mann it provided “the experience of eternity”. Great thinkers and artists of all times have in their thoughts, poems, paintings and musical fantasies given us glorious visions of the seas and profound interpretations of the boundless forces and the ever-changing beauty of the oceans.

It is indeed a paradox how little attention this dominant feature of life on Earth has been given in modern times by the scientific and technological communities and how reluctant global and regional institutions have been to deal with the challenges posed by successful management of the oceans. The great explorer Thor Heyerdahl of Kon Tiki fame, who was my guest here in Iceland last Christmas, has stated that the direction of scientific research in recent decades has been such that mankind now knows far less about the oceans than about the Moon.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century the international community faces the monumental tasks of how to obtain the necessary knowledge about the nature of the oceans, and how to conclude multilateral agreements in order to preserve the ocean resources in a responsible way.

Effective management of the ocean resources has provided us in Iceland with one of the highest per capita incomes in the world, at nearly 25,000 USD; a life expectancy which is among the highest anywhere; and such a degree of equality in living standards and availability of education and health services that all families – in rural areas and fishing villages as well as in the main urban areas – are offered the same opportunities and access.

In examining this achievement, which is primarily based on responsible fisheries, it tends to be forgotten that until a few decades ago the Icelanders were primarily a nation of very poor farmers and fishermen who for more than a thousand years had fought food shortages, poverty, hardship and the destructive forces of nature. Plagues and natural disasters had often taken a severe toll and the population remained very low as a result.

Every generation of Icelanders, up to and including the generation of my own grandparents, knew food shortages, even at times hunger. My parents were familiar in their youth with the struggle to maintain an adequate store of food throughout the hard winter. In my own childhood, staying with my grandparents in a small fishing village of 300 – 400 people in north-western Iceland, I helped with drying the fish, harvesting potatoes, and smoking and salting the meat to make sure the family had enough provisions of food to last through the dark winter months.

The history of the Icelanders in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century can serve as a lesson in how to transform a community of poor farmers and fishermen into one of the most affluent, high-tech oriented societies in the world, how resources from fishing were used to build the foundations for economic progress and social welfare. The odds against this success, the odds created by the tough terrain, glaciers, volcanoes, deserts, lava fields and the merciless storms of the cold North Atlantic Ocean, were certainly formidable.

I believe that our history in Iceland can offer some important lessons and guidelines for the development of fishing communities in other parts of the world, not only in Asia, Africa and Latin America, but also within the European Union. Although conditions are different everywhere there is sufficient universality in the course of such development to offer frameworks of wisdom and general principles.

Furthermore, a small country is often a suitable field to examine the interactions of crucial factors. It is closer to being a laboratory situation, a model to be studied, than the larger nations and states where the boundaries of bureaucracy and the complexities of external factors make it difficult to reach fundamental conclusions.

The emphasis on preserving the fish stocks and on controlling the utilisation of ocean resources in a responsible way is of primary importance to the Icelandic nation. The advice of marine scientists and the quotas formally recommended by the Marine Research Institute have always been the foundation of government policy. Long-term

sustainability of natural resources has been as important to the Icelandic nation as sovereignty itself. Every Icelander knows that without preserving the natural resources of the ocean, the nation would not survive. Responsible ecological management and sustainable use of ocean resources are as fundamental as our own political independence.

The pride taken in the quality of fish has been ingrained in our culture and also in the marketing and technological development of the fishing sector. To fail to fulfil the strictest quality standards is presented both as a national and a personal disgrace. So advanced has this obsession with quality become in modern times that if, for example, a British, American or Asian consumer buys Icelandic cod or shrimp products in his or her local supermarket and finds the quality lacking, that specific product can be traced to the plant of origin in an Icelandic fishing village and also to the specific worker who initially handled it.

Although Iceland has, like all countries, special characteristics to some degree, I believe our experience offers important lessons for the development of fishing sectors in other parts of the world, lessons of how to achieve economic progress, prosperity and welfare based on balanced use of the ocean resources.

We are probably the only developed nation which has succeeded in building a highly profitable market-oriented fishing industry without destroying the fish stocks and without a system of state subsidies. The absolute emphasis on sustaining the fish stocks and the guiding role of global market orientation are the two fundamental pillars of the Icelandic success story.

We have consistently advocated responsible stock management and tried to lead other nations in that direction. Our primary argument during the Law of the Sea process and in the campaigns for the recognition of first the 12, then the 50 and finally the 200-mile economic zone – a campaign in which Britain played an historic role – was that these international regimes were prerequisites for preserving the ocean resources.

The importance of scientific knowledge, of research by marine biologists and of formal advice from respected ocean research institutions must be the firm basis for both international and national policy-making. The system of quota controls must furthermore be economically viable, and based on sound market premises and solid principles of economic growth. All elements of national and international fishing regimes and

control systems must also be based on mutual confidence, transparency and the most advanced systems for gathering information.

May I in this respect emphasise five conditions which are especially important with respect to international fishing and oceanic co-operation and management, conditions which Iceland and Britain could jointly advance in the international arena.

1. Priority must be given to concluding multilateral – and in particular regional – agreements on preserving those fish stocks which go beyond the national boundaries of the 200-mile economic zones. It is of utmost importance to build up the stocks that pass through international waters.
2. The most important step towards responsible fishing is to abolish the various systems of state subsidies to the fishing sector which exist in both developed and developing countries. No other single action could bring such positive results in a short time towards achieving sustainable developments in fisheries. There is, for example, a direct correlation between the excess capacity of fishing fleets and the volume of state subsidies. The elimination of government subsidies is therefore the key to success.
3. Surveillance of fishing, both in national and international waters, must be increased. International organisations should receive sufficient and detailed information on all fishing which takes place in the respective regions of the world. It is now possible through satellite and computer technologies to make data on the catches and the location of individual vessels, large and small, available at all centres where information is gathered. Such an open data system would ensure transparency and build trust not only among the member states but especially within the fishing communities – and let us not forget that the co-operation of fishermen is an essential ingredient for success.
4. An important contribution towards progress would be to establish a global system of free trade in fish and fish products, and to abolish import quotas, customs duties and technical obstacles to trade.
5. The best way to secure the interests and well-being of fish consumers, and likewise maintain high prices of fish products, would be to introduce throughout the world uniform quality systems based on international standards such as Codex Alimentarius.

These five elements of regional and international co-operation to preserve the ocean resources are indeed in line with the centuries-old interest which the Icelanders and the British have taken in the oceans, and reflect how we have been able to utilise the oceans to increase our trade and economic prosperity.

The history of Iceland and of the British Isles also demonstrates how island communities can transform the challenges inherent in the oceans into opportunities for prosperity and wealth.

In the light of our traditional respect for the ocean it is fitting that Britain and Iceland should provide leadership within the global community on how to harvest the oceans and manage their riches in ways which preserve the wealth of the seas for all generations to come.

In the Holy Bible we are faced with the challenging question: “What shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?” At the crossroads of the new millennium we can similarly ask how humankind will benefit from the exploration of space and the discovery of the genetic properties of life itself, if we lose control over the essential nature of the oceans, over the currents which encircle the continents and preserve our climate in a condition man can live in; and if we lose control over the great food source of the future and the vital elements of the Earth’s biosystem provided by the oceans.

In greeting the new century we must resolve to give the oceans the highest priority in global co-operation and to seek in determined ways solutions to the challenging tasks of preserving the nature and the riches of the seas.

I thank you for giving me the opportunity to share these thoughts with you and I wish you all great success in furthering the co-operation between the people of our countries.