



100TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE ICELANDIC NATIONAL LEAGUE, NORTH AMERICA

**Speech by
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**Winnipeg
17 May 2019**

Mr Brian Pallister, Premier of Manitoba, Mrs Pallister,
Madame President of the Icelandic National League of North America,
Madame President of the Icelandic Canadian Frón,
Vestur-Íslendingar,
Ladies and Gentlemen:

First, my wife Eliza and I would like to thank you for the goodwill and warmth we have encountered on our visit here in Canada, in Manitoba and in Winnipeg. I also bring you greetings from Iceland, from the people of Iceland.

It was here, in this city, that a meeting was held just over one hundred years ago – a meeting of the newly-founded Icelandic National League of North America. We commemorate the founders' initiative and congratulate all members of the league on this historic occasion. This year also sees the hundredth anniversary of the founding of the Icelandic Canadian Frón here in Winnipeg, and that of course is also a cause for celebration.

Dear friends! ‘The Icelandic National League of North America’ has a fine Icelandic name, ‘Þjóðræknisfélag Íslendinga í Vesturheimi’. *Þjóðræknisfélag* means National League and the Icelandic word *þjóðrækni* is a beautiful compound. The first element, *þjóð*, suggests a grouping of people who share many traits – not everything – from previous experience, and who choose to be regarded, in most ways, as a distinct entity in the present, working for a better life for themselves and their descendants.

For us in Iceland, the language is an important element here – our unique language, Icelandic, which we must use and develop in daily life if we wish to continue to be a nation among other nations, a people who have something to offer in the varied fields of human culture. We are small and without our language, we would lose part of our character and special position.

The country itself also looms large in our national consciousness and image, with its rough and terrible beauty and, at the same time, its natural resources that we own in common as a nation. Indeed, I hope this common ownership will be enshrined shortly in our constitution.

Those Icelanders who decided, a few generations back, to seek their fortune out here, bore witness to the qualities I have mentioned here. They used their language in their daily lives; so too did their descendants, though to a lesser extent, of course, as the years passed. But newspapers were published here in Icelandic; church services were held in Icelandic and people quarrelled here in good down-to-earth Icelandic. And people missed many things about the old country – even the features that had made life so difficult there: the violent weather, the barren soil.

So, the first element in the Icelandic word *þjóðrækni* is *þjóð*, nation. The second element is, appropriately, from the verb *að rækja*, to cultivate or nurture. It is also found in the word *frændrækni*, an interest in cultivating the bonds of one’s family relatives. *Frændrækni* is praiseworthy and positive; the same cannot be said of *frændhygli*, ‘nepotism’ – securing unfair advantages for your relatives at the expense of others. Another pair of contrasts is *þjóðrækni* – a healthy sense of national identity and heritage – and *þjóðremba*, ‘chauvinism’ – a sense of superiority on purely national grounds, an attitude of condescension or even antagonism towards others. *Þjóðremba* promotes ill-will; *þjóðrækni*, by contrast, leads to tolerance, broad-mindedness and respect for one’s neighbour.

Yes, let us by all means welcome healthy cultivation of our national heritage, but let us reject chauvinistic nationalism. At the same time, we can respect the cultural achievements of all nations and uphold classic virtues such as solidarity and compassion – virtues which the Icelandic settlers in this country certainly needed in the early days. And let us remember with respect the sacrifices that previous generations made. They made them so that we, who were to follow, could enjoy greater security and greater quality of life.

Dear friends, Vestur-Íslendingar and others! We are here today to mark an anniversary and to call the past to mind. It was in 1875 that the first Icelanders arrived in the areas where they were to settle around Lake Winnipeg, in Gimli and other parts of New Iceland, *Nýja Ísland*. Of course, they were not the first people there. First Nations peoples lived in the region. It was their land and that is also a part of this story of emigration from Iceland to North America.

For a wave had started. Thousands sailed in the wake of the forerunners. Volcanic eruptions and sea ice, frost and famine: this was what the forces of nature visited on our hard-pressed people. Moreover, many of the younger generation felt they had no chance in the stagnant and authoritarian society of the time – particularly when a bright future seemed to await them in the west. One morning, Sigríður Erlendsdóttir, a teenage girl in Iceland, went up to her father, put her arms round his neck and said: “Dear father, I have decided to go to America. I can’t see any future for me here.” Their parting when she boarded the ship was a painful moment; both had tears in their eyes. Father and daughter were never to see each other again.

We share this history, we Icelanders and you Vestur-Íslendingar of the present time, who do us such honour through your *þjóðrækni*, the cultivation of your heritage. And we can use this common history as a source of optimism. After all, our history, in Iceland, and your history, our kind Canadian hosts, in the Icelandic settlements and in North America as a whole, has mostly been one of progress. “I can’t see any future for me here,” said the girl. In 1915 women at last gained the right to vote in parliamentary elections in Iceland. On that occasion, Bríet Bjarnhéðinsdóttir, the great leader of the women’s rights movement, said: “We welcome a future in which men and women will work together on all national issues, both in the home and in the Althingi.”

By that time, Iceland had already secured home rule; sovereignty was on the horizon and the foundations had been laid for social progress, equal

opportunities and welfare, which we have since striven to bring into being, consolidate and develop. And notwithstanding all our disagreements, our in-fighting and our different needs and expectations, it can still be said of Icelanders that we are united in more ways than we are divided.

And this applies to you too, Vestur-Íslendingar and our kind hosts, the good people of Canada. I am sure you have heard how you are described as the most polite people on earth, extremely friendly and courteous. One should, of course, avoid generalisations, and particularly when they have become clichés. Nevertheless, I do want to say that here in Canada I have encountered only goodwill and warmth.

I think a more impartial deduction would be that the open-mindedness and solidarity, evident in so many places in Canadian society, can be attributed to the fact that Canada is, in large measure, a nation of immigrants.

In this respect, Iceland has made its contribution to the building of Canadian society. For decades, Canadians and Americans of Icelandic descent have served in positions of responsibility and done much to strengthen their communities. You are still doing this and will probably continue on the same path. This fills us with healthy pride; our sense of family relationship – *frændrækni* – comes out in this.

What qualities, then, came to you from us? What was our contribution? I have sung the praises of the true cultivation of one's heritage, and I am proud of my country and its people, but I have also pointed out the need for candour and a realistic narrative rather than a photo-shopped picture. Thus, I have to admit that while my fellow countrymen and women are certainly friendly, in general, it doesn't often happen that we Icelanders are praised for being excessively polite and courteous. This Canadian virtue must have originated elsewhere. It did not pass through the Icelandic immigrants.

So, what are we like, we Icelanders? Or, to put the same question in another way: What are you like, you Vestur-Íslendingar, you North Americans of Icelandic descent? For is it not true, what the old Iceland proverb says, that ancestry influences character? About a thousand years ago, Icelanders were described as “living in holy simplicity ... in which they demand nothing more than what nature gives them ...”.

Apparently, we were also apathetic and slow. Yet somehow we survived: we lived through famines, natural catastrophes and shortages, century after century. In the latest novel by the writer Hallgrímur Helgason, which is set in Iceland in the years when the emigration to North America was at its height, Icelanders are described as: "... tough in times of challenge, resourceful, helpful and good at coming up with a solution; world champions when it came to dealing with unexpected situations but nothing causes them greater torment than definite figures, well-prepared decisions, fixed contracts and concrete plans ...".

Can we still find these traits in today's Icelanders? Well, we are sometimes said to be eagerly materialistic with a great interest in the latest gadgets and playthings, so the "holy simplicity" seems to have gone out of the window. On the other hand, certain characteristics remain that kept us alive through the centuries, and I think they served the emigrants to North America well too. I am thinking of stamina and stubbornness, the ability to stand together when this is called for, even though we squabble at other times, and the contradictory combination of a lack of discipline and a certain stoicism which gets us into all sorts of messes but also gets us out of them again. This has been summed up in the expression (much used in Iceland): *Petta reddast!* "It'll work out!"

Dear friends! Will it go on working out, as it has up to now? Here we are celebrating the centenary anniversary of the Icelandic National League of North America. Will our descendants gather here in a hundred years' time? Obviously, we cannot know: the future is unknowable; therein lies its beauty. But we do know that we face threats or challenges. "Nature is our chapel," says Björk, one of our best known artists, as she continually reminds us of our duties towards the country that we have been entrusted with to sustain, not destroy.

And what is the future of our language, Icelandic? Will it continue to flourish in a globalized world? Gradually, the Icelandic communities in North America stopped speaking it. "*Lest*", the Icelandic word for "train" quickly became "*trein*" – and "*treinið*" with the definite article. True, some words survived, such as "*afi*" and "*amma*", and some underwent minimal changes: "*kleinur*" became "*kleiner*", to take one example. That is the way languages can buckle and break; it was, of course, inevitable that people would adapt to the new reality in their new environment. There is no need for us to go so far in Iceland, however, and I think you would be bitterly disappointed – as I would – if we were to do so. A few years ago, when I was teaching History at the

University of Iceland, I greatly enjoyed receiving visitors from here as part of the Snorri Project, which Ásta Sól Kristjánsdóttir administered so successfully. In my new position I have continued to have this pleasure, though in a slightly different form.

Dear friends! Your continued cultivation of your Icelandic heritage is something that fills us with pride and, I hope, makes us more determined to protect and develop our language and our cultural traditions. But this pride must be healthy, and the protection must not become rigid and intolerant.

So, which will win out in the future that is hidden from our sight: healthy celebration of cultural identity, or chauvinism and nationalistic extremism? Nearly 150 years ago, the settlement of *Nýja Ísland* was established not far from here. A new Iceland is now growing up in the old country. In recent years and decades, Icelandic society has undergone a transformation. More than one Icelander in ten is now of foreign origin.

Our definition of “the Icelandic people” has to take account of changing times. Our definition has to be broad and open. This can be to everyone’s benefit, as is best described by the new Icelanders themselves. One such person is Ana Stanićević. “I am Ana ... with one n,” as she described on the radio on our national day, 17th June, five years ago: “... Icelandic people call me Ana, with a long first a, and decline it (Ana – Önu) which is just fine! When you take my name and run it through the Icelandic declensional system, you are taking me into your hearts. This is where I want to be; this is my home. Side by side with the volcanos and the glaciers. Caught in the excitement of ice and fire. In the struggle between light and darkness!”

Yes, dear friends, it may be possible. It may work out, *þetta reddast!* You good *Vestur-Íslendingar* have demonstrated this for well over a hundred years. Let us go on demonstrating it, in this admirable country and also in Iceland, without nationalistic bombast but full of pride in our diverse heritage. Once again, I congratulate you on this great occasion and I wish you all good fortune in the future.