

Pirate Parties and Transparent Politics: Iceland's Experiment

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“... [B]ecause Robin Hood was a pirate, we want to take the power from the powerful to give to the people.” — Birgitta Jónsdóttir, *New York Times*, Oct 31, 2016

Getting transparency advocates into parliament and assemblies has proven to be a great challenge in modern politics. Iceland has led on that point, giving the world political punditry much to discuss in the good fortunes of the four-year old Pirate Party. Hacktivist politics, in other words, is slowly becoming a parliamentary platform, though it remains a murmur in most states.

In the weekend elections, the party led by “poetician” and WikiLeaks activist Birgitta Jónsdóttir came in third in what will be a complex patchwork of governing parties. Suggestions that it would storm into the top tier were misplaced, but this could hardly detract from what was a remarkable achievement.

Jónsdóttir found fame in 2009 as a member of the Citizens’ Movement Party, when she won a seat in the 63 member Parliament. Prior to that, she was directly connected with the efforts of WikiLeaks to release the now infamous footage featuring the murderous exploits of an Apache helicopter crew in killing a Reuters journalist, his driver and assistant, not to mention other civilians in Baghdad. By 2012, when she was re-elected, she had embraced the black flag of the Pirates. “I’m crossing paths with nerds as I’m such a nerd myself.”[1]

Jónsdóttir was philosophical about the result, which netted upwards of 10 seats. “Our internal predictions showed 10 to 15 percent, so this is at the top of the range. We knew that we would never get 30 percent.

The conservative Independence Party also made gains, but will have to consider the heft of the left-leaning parties. In addition to the Pirate Party’s solid performance came gains for the Left-Green Party and its allies, the combined total which fell just short of a majority.

What mattered most was how much of a battering the political centre in Iceland had taken. The governing Progressive Party collapsed, falling to eight seats from the 19 it held from the 2013 election, forcing prime minister Sigurður Ingi Jóhannsson to resign.

Transparency politics has certainly had its impact, with Jóhannsson’s predecessor, Sigmundur Davíð Gunnlaugsson, a casualty of the Panama Papers back in April. Massive disclosures of impropriety, or at least perceived impropriety, has value. In that instance, 600 Icelanders, among them cabinet ministers, business figures and bankers, were found to have lucrative offshore accounts created in the name of tax minimisation.

As for the Pirate Party’s own platform, transparent government, wedded to a redistribution

of wealth platform, is all the rage. To this can also be added refuge for Edward Snowden, and the improved prospects for digital currencies. But even more fundamentally, their members insist on improving the democratic line between electors and the workings of the political process, one long frayed in many states claiming to follow its precepts.

There is no cynicism about lynch mob democracy here – the party as even gone so far as to insist on a “crowd-sourced constitution”, an idea blocked by the Icelandic Parliament in 2013. Such ideas have certain value, given fears that 2008 might be repeated. That particular annus horribilis saw a rampantly unregulated banking sector ruin an economy that continues to pay the price of credit bingeing. What Jónsdóttir wishes for is a genuine “trickle-down” economics, one freed from illusion and propaganda.

The Pirates find themselves riding a populist wave, a global movement that has it nipping at the heels of establishment politicians. Across Europe, the roar is being felt on both the right and left of politics, assuming an often ugly nativist form. In the United States, the pugilists promise mayhem if they are not heard.

The great modern dilemma in politics is how best to re-engage the estranged voter. Donald Trump’s somewhat unsophisticated approach is belligerent defiance spiced with totalitarian undertones. In Britain, a degree of provincialism has accompanied the anti-EU vote for Brexit.

In Iceland, this experiment is less indignant and more tempered, an example of restorative democracy in the face of crisis. Central to that is the vital role played by revealing information about political practice: those in power who are watched tend to behave better.

In these elections, there is little doubt that information, leaked or otherwise, mattered. The Robin Hood message, and accountability, sold well. Other countries, including the United States, have yet to see that influence play out. But the Pirates have set a precedent.

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Notes:

[1] <https://www.ft.com/content/5e9f86ee-9b7c-11e6-8f9b-70e3cabccfae>

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