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Celebrating victory: (left to right) Brynhildur Flovens, Ingibjörg Hafstad, Magdalena Schram, and Sigríður Dúna Kristmundsdóttir.

ICELAND'S FEMINISTS: POWER AT THE TOP OF THE WORLD

By Joanne Edgar

The photo caught my attention immediately—four women, leaning forward with expectation, smiles on their faces—right there on the front page of my *New York Times* one morning late in April. Who are these happy women and why are they smiling?

I was smiling too by the time I finished reading. The four women were celebrating a surprising victory: their feminist political party had just won enough seats in Iceland's parliamentary elections to hold the balance of power in the government.

Over the next few weeks, I scanned the newspaper for progress reports. The success of the Women's Alliance, or *Kvennalistinn*, had been dinner-party talk in American feminist circles, but after the initial splash of attention, the press was silent. Had this band of intrepid political feminists

made a difference or not? What in the world was going on up there?

I decided to go find out. In July I learned what Icelanders think of this unpredictable new party, which has no leader and makes decisions by consensus. I also discovered a nation where people really know their politics: there wasn't one person I talked to who didn't have an informed and usually detailed opinion about *Kvennalistinn*.

A cook I met in a swimming pool has a typical response: "I like them," he says, "but they're not political." And indeed they are not, at least in the traditional sense of the word. In fact, they prefer the term movement to political party, because they have something much bigger in mind than conventional uses of power. They want to change the entire social system; and they're playing hardball politics to do it.

Before I went to Iceland, my recent awareness of this country about the size of Kentucky was limited to last year's failed U.S.-Soviet summit meeting held in Reykjavík. But I also remember cheering back in 1975 when I heard that Icelandic women had virtually closed down the country by going on strike for a day. They called it

"Woman's Day Off," to dramatize the importance of female labor in and outside the home, and an estimated 90 percent of the female population participated. Twenty-five thousand attended a rally in Reykjavík; not bad for a country with only 244,000 inhabitants.

Then in 1980, the nation chose its first female President, Vigdís Finnbogadóttir. She was also a single mother with an adopted daughter. She serves today, though her position is primarily ceremonial, with real power residing with the Prime Minister. In a Reykjavík shop window, I saw President Vigdís's face painted on a plate, just like the Queen of England. But, unlike the Queen, the President is elected, and what her victory revealed was an electorate with a lot of feminist energy. This energy had survived the 1970s, when the leading Icelandic feminist organization had grown ineffective and divided over class issues, and a much-heralded equal rights bill turned out to have no teeth and little effect.

In the early 1980s, when a few dissatisfied feminists in Reykjavík began to discuss new directions for action, they came up with the suggestion to run an all-women's slate of candidates for the Reykjavík City Council in the 1982 elections. Unknown to them, feminists in the northern town of Akureyri were making similar plans. What was soon to become *Kvennalistinn* was backing into national organizing in true revolutionary fashion—from the bottom up.

I spoke with some *Kvennalistinn* members in their movement headquarters, a lovely old red corrugated iron house in the center of Reykjavík, a building they share with a well-designed feminist magazine, *Vera*, and several other women's groups. The *Kvennalistinn* offices are strewn with toys, political posters and banners, and are home to a seemingly hollow thermos of coffee. Children run in and out, a four-year-old plays on a rocking horse. There are worries that the house, which is slightly run-down, will be demolished and replaced with a modern "high rise" (in Iceland usually an ugly concrete slab of four to five stories).

At the beginning, says Sólrún Gísladóttir, a Reykjavík City Council member and one of the initial organizers, "we were all a bit afraid of what we were doing, because there was a lot of aggression against us. The other parties used their women to speak out against us. We said we have

REUTERS/BETTMANN NEWSPHOTOS

nothing against women running in other parties, but we also think that what matters is that women have a special view on women's issues." In fact, all-women's slates were not unknown in Iceland—suffragists had run them early in the century—but the 1982 groups developed policy positions based on the explicit assumption that women's experience and values were a necessary force in the political world, a departure even from the gender-equality focus of their feminism in the 1970s.

After an encouraging open meeting that drew 500 supporters in Reykjavík followed by an untraditional campaign, complete with political choir and street carnival, the women stunned the other parties by taking two city council seats their first time out. The women's list of candidates in Akureyri also won two seats. Still, they didn't see themselves as forming a political party at the time. "We thought it was just an action," says Sólrún, though "it was in the back of our minds that we could do it again."

The next logical step was Parliament, or the Althing, an ancient as well as anciently patriarchal body in which only 12 women had ever served. National elections were due in 1983. By running for Parliament they could become eligible for state funding that goes to all political parties.

Some were reluctant to go "that far into the system" explains Guðrún Agnarsdóttir, one of Kvinnalístinn's first members of Parliament. "The jobs in the local government were so demanding, and we had too little time to prepare." Going national also meant taking positions on foreign policy issues—including Iceland's controversial participation in NATO and the U.S. military base just 45 minutes south of Reykjavík—that could threaten Kvinnalístinn's broad spectrum of support. Heated discussion finally ended in a vote, the first and only ever taken among this group that strives for consensus, and those who wanted to move into the Althing won by a margin of two. With only weeks to go before the election, they decided to focus on three of the country's eight districts.

But they lacked a list of candidates. "We all intended to support someone else," laughs Guðrún, a medical doctor who would find it difficult to leave her research in virology and immunology. She agreed to put her name on the list, but she assumed she wouldn't be elected. "I was safely in seat number two; I wasn't really worried." (In Iceland's parliamentary system, voters choose a party, and that party's total number of votes determines how many candidates on its list are actually sent to the Althing.)

Sigríður Dúna Kristmundsdóttir, an anthropologist, hadn't intended to run either. But she had been involved since the beginning in the theoretical discussions that led to Kvinnalístinn, and "when the thumbscrews were put on," she explains. "I felt I had no moral grounds to say no. How could I advocate this without being willing to take the responsibility myself?" She ended up at the top of the list and faced the "rather horrifying possibility of being the only one of us elected."

She wasn't the only one. Helped by Iceland's proportional vote system that benefits small parties, Kvinnalístinn sent three members to the Althing in 1983—from Reykjavík, Guðrún and Sigríður Dúna, and from Reykjanes, a region south of the capital, journalist Kristín Halldórsdóttir. None had any previous political experience. These three plus three women from other parties joined three who were returned to their seats, thus tripling the number of women members in one election. Last April's election, the one that put Kvinnalístinn on the front page of the *New York Times*, doubled that membership to six and brought the total number of women in the Althing to 13—currently 20 percent of the 63-member body.

In their early days in the Althing, recalls Sigríður Dúna, "I was very tense—on guard against roars from any parts of the jungle." Though they were treated with "a

certain kind of respect for having made it," she adds, they were seen as "definitely strange. Nobody could actually say we were stupid—one of the things they respect is education and we had that—but they said we had funny ideas and were completely devoid of any touch with practical reality." Kristín laughs in agreement: "The men in the Althing would say, 'We understand your concern about wages and day care, but, really, you don't know about politics.'"

Kvinnalístinn's style was definitely different. For instance, Sigríður Dúna abandoned traditional format for her first parliamentary speech and told a personal story about a single mother who worked full-time in a factory and took in sewing at night to make ends meet. "I told about her concrete life experience, what it feels like on her body," she says. "I'm not aware that anybody had done that before. It's so easy in Parliament to be completely removed from what it is like to survive in this economy. The reality of women could have been on the moon for them."

Guðrún Helgadóttir, a veteran member of the Althing from the leftist People's Alliance Party, confirms that the three were viewed with curiosity, if not suspicion. They "acted a bit like a religious sect," she recalls, and didn't "mix much with the others." Sigríður Dúna explains they formed a close support group out of

necessity, as they immersed themselves in the issues, consulting with the overall Kvinnalístinn membership every step of the way. Among the three of them, she says, "it was like a marriage. Sometimes you hate it, but most of the time it was a lovely marriage."

Political parties are supposed to have leaders—but Kvinnalístinn doesn't. The fledgling party rotated the leadership function in Parliament among the three women and built up and trained a slew of roving representatives to send to meetings and campaign debates; for the real novices they would provide a selection of speeches until they felt ready to write their own.

Such active mentorship is essential to another Kvinnalístinn principle: no officeholder serves longer than six to eight years. Sigríður Dúna did not run for reelection last April; thus the current six members of the Althing include four newcomers. Kristín and Guðrún plan to resign from Parliament mid-term, as does Sólrún from the city council. Some Icelanders feel, however, that this policy of rotation could damage their support in the long term, since voters have clearly developed confidence in the veterans. Kvinnalístinn isn't fazed by this argument, insisting that its ultimate goal isn't political power for a few but a change of policy and process.

Kvinnalístinn's principle of consensus is another way of assuring that individual members are controlled by the issues, not the other way around. The country is small, but it still takes a lot of work—and a lot of meetings—to make sure the party's policies reflect a broad base. Guðrún Helgadóttir of the People's Alliance is sometimes impatient with the Kvinnalístinn process: "If I want their support for some issue, it has to be discussed so broadly that sometimes you get fed up waiting to see if they're going to say yes or no."

She also wonders about her colleagues' stubbornness. On the issue of maternity leave, for example, Kvinnalístinn wanted to extend the current three months. "They said six months or nothing," Guðrún says. "But we in the People's Alliance supported four. You support anything that goes in the direction you want." In this case, though, just before last April's election the Althing passed a bill for six months' leave by 1990. It didn't meet the payment standards Kvinnalístinn had set, and another party took the credit, but the six-months principle won out, perhaps because the very presence of Kvinnalístinn causes the established parties to scramble for the women's vote. Salóme Thorkeisdóttir, a veteran Althing member from the conservative Independence Party, dis-

The Party Line

Kvinnalístinn is known for its stand on traditional women's issues, such as child care, sex education, and salaries. But it has also stressed the need for a women's viewpoint on all domestic and foreign issues. Kvinnalístinn's platform tackles each issue based on the economic model of a housewife who uses resources cautiously and balances her budget.

• **The Economy.** There is an equal-pay law in Iceland, but women most often hold the jobs that pay the least: in the fish factories, clerical work in offices, and health services positions. So, while more than 80 percent of Icelandic women are employed full- or part-time, they take home only about 60 percent of the salary that men do. Kvinnalístinn was the first party in Parliament to urge a halt in the increase of heavy industry, arguing that it is responsible for more than half of Iceland's foreign debt, causes pollution, and the jobs that were created weren't worth it. The party advocates more development of small industry.

• **Children.** Iceland is tied with Japan and Finland for the lowest infant mortality rate.

But there is a serious lack of child-care facilities, a problem compounded by the fact that schools don't have uniform hours. Many of the country's 7,000 unmarried mothers are single mothers by choice; they suffer no social stigma, though many are under economic pressures.

• **Social Issues.** Abortion is legal, and Iceland has the lowest rate of all the Nordic nations. But there is very little formal attempt to teach young people about sex, a problem that Kvinnalístinn tackled early on, increasing its efforts since AIDS has become an issue. (Three men in Iceland had died of AIDS by the fall.)

• **The Military.** This peaceful nation has no army, navy, or air force of its own, and the only riots that ever took place were in reaction to the 1949 decision to join NATO. Kvinnalístinn takes a strong stand against all nuclear weapons and calls for an end to military alliances; many of its members are active in the international peace movement. Nevertheless, it does not call for an immediate withdrawal from NATO, recognizing the impact of the base on the country's economy. —J.E.

agrees with the entire premise of a women's party. But she admits that Kvennalistinn "had even helped in our party by opening the eyes of the men. They cannot ignore women anymore." And although Guðrún Helgadóttir says she would have liked to have the Kvennalistinn members in her party, she admits they would not likely have been elected there. Traditional politicians can hardly be expected to give up their safe places at the top of the lists; which is, of course, exactly the point.

Despite its reputation for resisting politics as usual, Kvennalistinn still shocked Icelanders when it turned down an invitation to join the government and assume power.

The April elections brought no two parties enough seats to form a majority—not an unusual circumstance in Iceland, which has been ruled by various coalitions of four main political parties since World War II. The need for a three-party coalition left Kvennalistinn potentially holding the balance of power. The party's victory at the polls—doubling its electoral support and maintaining its visibility and freshness—made it a political asset to a new government. Kvennalistinn members could look forward to a role in determining policy as well as control of a certain number of ministries to administer that policy.

The conservative Independence Party, together with the centrist Social Democratic Party, made overtures, with the aim of forming a right-center-feminist ruling coalition. The trick was to agree on a policy statement outlining the goals of the proposed government, statements that were by tradition full of general promises and frequent references to policy review committees. Kvennalistinn was suspicious of the process, but after much internal debate agreed on a few key issues it would not compromise on and put a toe in the murky political waters of coalition building.

"We were ready to take part in the government," explains Kristín, "but only if it would really matter. We didn't want to be flowers to make the government look good to the world." Kvennalistinn members of the Althing, often accompanied by their nonelected colleagues, held intense discussions with other party officials by day and attended emotional open meetings of their own constituency by night.

The issue that immediately surfaced was salaries. In fact, Iceland has a relatively high standard of living, with an average wage of 41,250 krona per month (about \$1,030). Kvennalistinn wanted to bring what it maintains was actually only a small number of workers—probably about 3,000 or 4,000 and many of them employed by

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he men were used to spending most of their time on the phone or in the toilet."

the state—up to what Guðrún Agnarsdóttir describes as "a meaningful minimum wage that would meet the cost of living." Kvennalistinn had unsuccessfully introduced minimum-wage bills into the Althing for the past two years. The Independents and the Social Democrats were not necessarily against raising wages but were opposed to enshrining minimum wage in law. They were afraid that an avalanche of salary demands from workers up the line would trigger inflation—a perennial problem in Iceland—which had been decreased by the last government (albeit on the backs of those who earned the least, according to Kvennalistinn).

Kvennalistinn was accused, once again, of being unrealistic, though members insist they had suggested several specific sources of income to pay for the additional wages. In the end, the women believed they were being offered nothing but "goodwill and a committee," according to Kristín, and that wasn't enough.

Salóme Thorkelsdóttir of the Independence Party sees the decision as an unwillingness to be responsible: "They should have gone in." Guðrún Helgadóttir of the People's Alliance is more blunt: "I think they lost courage. They should have tried to make compromises as we all have to do. After all, they are only six and the Independence Party eighteen. How in heaven could they dream of being able to tell them what to do?" (A current ruling coalition was formed in July among the Independents, the Social Democrats, and the centrist Progressives; it has only one female cabinet member.)

Sigríður Dúna insists that they were willing to form a coalition if the negotiations had worked, but she agrees with Guðrún Helgadóttir on one point: being a "minority within the majority" would not have been easy for Kvennalistinn. "In the final analysis they can overrule you easily, in spite of all the gentlemen's promises. You will have to go along with things you don't want, and that in the end is much

more dangerous to your goals than being able to speak freely in the opposition."

The public response to Kvennalistinn's decision was divided. A medical technologist I met in a restaurant says: "All politicians make promises they don't keep and people understand that. They should have said they'd go in and try their best." But an elderly housewife tells me she agrees with their decision: "The men who are heads of the parties are only interested in power for themselves." An Icelandic employee was also thankful that the women had held out. "Those in the government are always selling themselves," she says.

Do they ever see themselves as taking power? How could they reconcile their leaderless philosophy with choosing a Prime Minister?

"If we got the mandate to form a government," replies Guðrún Agnarsdóttir, "we could do it and we could do it well, providing we wouldn't have to compromise on our major issues."

Kvennalistinn's future continues to be a hot topic of debate. "They'll do well," a young mother tells me, "especially if they can get the salaries up." "They've peaked," says her husband. One woman who was not a supporter says they had at least got the male members of Parliament to show up. Before, she says, the men "spent most of their time on the phone or in the toilet."

A women's studies professor, Sigríður Erlendsdóttir, thinks their electoral base is solid. "They've done their homework better than the other members of Parliament and have proved they belong there," she says, adding that a lot depends on the new women they move into the system. "It's more important for Kvennalistinn to have good people than the other political parties."

Kvennalistinn has set itself a hefty goal: working within the system as members of Parliament in order to change that system ideologically—two tracks that are difficult to keep parallel. But the women have realized from the beginning the historic nature of their task. When they were first debating on running a list for the Althing, Guðrún Agnarsdóttir stood up to speak. "I didn't know these women well at the time and I didn't feel very comfortable about speaking out," she recalls. "But I felt so keenly that time was calling us, that what we were doing was so much bigger than this old dilapidated red house in a little square in a town on the Northern Atlantic on the edge of the inhabitable world. So I stood up and spoke. When the timing is right, we can work miracles."

JOANNE EDGAR is a "Ms." founding editor.



JOANNE EDGAR

Amid lava columns, the author keeps dry.

Icelanders have a riddle:

Q: What do you do if you're lost in an Icelandic forest?

A: Stand up.

Only 1 percent of the island is covered with forests and those few trees—mostly birch—are short indeed. The 45-minute drive from the brand new international airport to Reykjavík reveals a vast expanse of moss-covered lava fields. Over half the country is considered wasteland; the rest is used for grazing with only 1 percent cultivated. But the colors of this land are spectacular—the browns, rusts, and greens—especially when the sun comes out.

Which brings me to another thing I noticed immediately upon arrival: the weather. Every day I spent in Reykjavík, I heard the same forecast: gray skies and drizzle. I was told the country had enjoyed weeks of clear weather just before I arrived, but as one Icelander reassured me, she had gotten "a little bit tired of all that sun." The July temperatures from 5 to 12 degrees Centigrade (41 to 58 degrees Fahrenheit) may seem cold, and I did develop an intense relationship with my long underwear while I was there. But Iceland, unlike its name, actually has a temperate climate given its latitude, especially in the winter. It sits just under the Arctic Circle, and the Gulf Stream meets Arctic currents around its shores.

Most Americans who touch down in Iceland are on their way to Europe, and of those who do venture out of the airport most do so for only one or two days. That's not enough time.

If you really want to "experience" Iceland you have to leave its modern, pleasant capital city Reykjavík and go into the interior, Iceland's version of the "outback." No one lives here, and there are no permanent roads. I took something called the "heartbreaker" tour—although a better title might have been "backbreaker," since it involved 14 hours on a bus up to the northern town of Akureyri and 14 hours back, with one day of sightseeing in between. But I don't regret it for a moment. We traversed deserts and drove right through glacial rivers—there are few

bridges since these rivers change course so often—and I counted nine rainbows in one day. We drove past glaciers, bubbling mud pots, huge waterfalls, and volcanos. Some 200 are in various states of activity, with an eruption every five years or so. Icelanders are very resourceful in handling their volcanic emergencies. In 1974, when lava flows from an erupting volcano threatened an important fishing port on the island of Heimaey, Icelanders rigged up a system of pumps to spray cold ocean water on the molten lava, and for the first time in history diverted the power of a volcano. Now, 13 years later, they're tapping the still hot volcano for heat.

Natural hot springs explain this Arctic country's "banana belt," and also provide most of the nation's heat (a pollution-free boon in a cold country) as well as its famous swimming pools, where Icelanders swim all year round—outdoors. The pools are huge, and very clean, with spacious locker rooms. There's a cute little chart on the locker-room walls reminding you which key spots to wash during your requisite, preswim shower.

Iceland is difficult for a low-budget traveler, although Icelandair has good fares. You can stay in hostels or in moderately priced hotels, but the price of food and internal travel is quite hefty. I had trouble finding any restaurant meal for less than \$10—even soup and salad—though on one lucky occasion the cheapest item on the menu was a delicious shrimp and caviar salad.

I loved the fish in Iceland, and I tried puffin, a bird that tastes something like calf's liver. The dried fish, a specialty, tastes a whole lot better than it smells, served with butter as an afternoon snack. (I didn't try another one of their specialties, *hrútsprungar*, sheep's testicles soured in whey.)

Wine with meals was out of my budgetary range; it's imported and very expensive. So I stuck to beer, which is an Icelandic curiosity. They sell a "light ale" up there, which is, by law, virtually nonalcoholic, presumably an attempt to combat alcoholism. They *make* alcoholic beer, but just for export. However, the law doesn't limit sales of hard liquor. (A local drink is called Svarti Daudi, which means "black death.")

A woman traveling by herself seems perfectly normal to Icelanders and you don't have to deflect sexist comments on the street, where I felt completely safe.

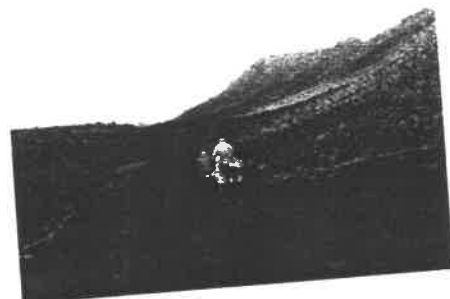
Women in Iceland keep their own name after marriage. Surnames are almost always expressed as daughter of their father—Agnarsdóttir is daughter of Agnar—but last names aren't really very important. The phone book is alphabetized by first names; even the

President is President Vigdís, or just Vigdís.

The language is Nordic and, because of geographic isolation, it remains the same today as it was when the first settlers arrived in the ninth century; schoolchildren can read the original sagas. To preserve the language, official policy prevents "loan words." Instead of the word AIDS, for example, a recent public opinion poll chose the Icelandic word *eydni*, which means wasting or destruction. My own attempts to pronounce a few words in this difficult language met blank stares, but most Icelanders speak at least some English and many are fluent.

Iceland is a particularly nice place for hikers. Hiking alone, however, is distinctly *not* recommended, and there are several Icelandic hiking groups that welcome foreign guests on trips of a variety of difficulties and lengths. A hike leader on one of my walks doubled as storyteller. She told a folk tale about a heroic woman who swims, carrying two children, from her home on an island in the middle of a very cold fjord to the mainland, where she climbs up the crevice of a cliff to safety. The island is named for her husband; the crevice is named for her.

—J.E.



Bikers pedal through volcanic ash.

An old house at an outdoor museum near Reykjavík.

Bubbling mud and sulfur pits make an eerie landscape.

