

SUNDAY FEATURES

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Icelander's campaign is a joke, until he winds up as mayor

Iceland's Best Party included in its campaign manifesto a pledge to furnish the zoo with a polar bear display. But that idea isn't as daft as it sounds. Because of global warming, several of the animals swam to Iceland and were shot. Better to put them in the zoo than kill them, said Jon Gnarr, Reykjavik's new mayor.

PHOTO: EPA

Just because Jon Gnarr is funny doesn't mean he isn't serious about politics

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PHOTO: EPA

A polar bear display for the zoo. Free towels at public swimming pools. A "drug-free Parliament by 2020." Iceland's Best Party, founded in December by a comedian, Jon Gnarr, to satirize his country's political system, ran a campaign that was one big joke. Or was it?

Last month, in the depressed aftermath of the country's financial collapse, the Best Party emerged as the biggest winner in Reykjavik's elections, with 34.7 percent of the vote, and Gnarr — who also promised a classroom of kindergartners he would build a Disneyland at the airport — is now the fourth mayor in four years of a city that is home to more than a third of the island's 320,000 people.

In his acceptance speech he tried to calm the fears of the other 65.3 percent.

"No one has to be afraid of the Best Party," he said, "because it is the best party. If it wasn't, it would be called the Worst Party or the Bad Party. We would never work with a party like that."

With his party having won six of the City Council's 15 seats, Gnarr needed a coalition partner, but he ruled out any party whose members had not seen all five seasons of *The Wire*.

A sandy-haired 43-year-old, Gnarr is best known here for playing a television and film character named Georg Bjarnfredarson, a nasty, bald, middle-aged, Swedish-educated Marxist whose childhood was ruined by a militant feminist mother. While his career may have given him visibility, however, few here doubt what actually propelled him into office.

"It's a protest vote," said Gunnar Helgi Kristinsson, a political science professor at the University of Iceland.

In one of the first signs of Europe's financial troubles, Iceland's banks crashed in 2008, plunging the country into crisis. In April, voters were further upset by a report that detailed extreme negligence, cronyism and incompetence at the highest levels of government. They were ready for someone, anyone, other than the usual suspects, Kristinsson said.

"People know Jon Gnarr is a good comedian, but they don't know anything about his politics," he said. "And even as a comedian, you never know if he's serious or if he's joking."

But as Gnarr settles into the mayor's office, he does not seem to be kidding at all.

The Best Party, whose members include a who's who of Iceland's punk-rock scene, formed a coalition with the center-left Social Democrats (despite Gnarr's suspicion that party leaders had assigned an underling to watch *The Wire* and take notes). With that, Gnarr took office two weeks ago, hoping to serve out a full, four-year term, and the new government granted free admission to swimming pools for everyone under 18. Its plans include turning Reykjavik, with its plentiful supply of geothermal energy, into a hub for electric cars.

"Just because something is funny doesn't mean it isn't serious," said Gnarr, whose foreign relations experience includes a radio show in which he regularly crank-called the White House, the CIA, the FBI and police stations in the Bronx to see if they had found his lost wallet.

The polar bear idea, for example, was not totally facetious. As a result of global warming, a handful of polar bears have swum to Iceland in recent years and been shot. Better, Gnarr said, to capture them and put them in the zoo.

The free towels? That evolved from an

idea to attract more tourists by attaining spa status for the city's public pools, which have seawater and sulfur baths. For accreditation under certain European Union rules, however, a spa has to offer free towels, so that became a campaign slogan.

Gnarr, born in Reykjavik as Jon Gunnar Kristinsson to a policeman and a kitchen worker, was not a model child. At 11, he decided school was useless to his future as a circus clown or pirate and refused to learn any more. At 13, he stopped going to class and joined Reykjavik's punk scene. At 14, he was sent to a boarding school for troubled teenagers and stayed until he was 16, when he left school for good.

Back in Reykjavik, he worked odd jobs, rented rooms, joined activist groups like Greenpeace and considered himself an anarchist (he still does). He also wrote poetry and traveled with the Sugarcubes, Bjork's first band. He said he hated music but was a good singer, and he began his career with humorous songs punctuated by monologues.

"I didn't have many job options," he said. "It was a way of making a living and still having fun."

His wife, Johanna Johannsdottir, a massage therapist, is Bjork's best friend.

Gnarr said his idea for the Best Party was born of the profound distress and moral confusion after the banking collapse, when Icelanders fiercely debated their obligation to repay ruined British and Dutch depositors.

Practically speaking, Gnarr said he had no qualms.

"Why should I repay money I never spent?" he asked, a common sentiment here.

But on a deeper level, he had misgivings.

"I consider myself a very moral person," he said. "Suddenly, I felt like a character in a Beckett play, where you have moral obligations towards something you have no possibility of understanding. It was like *Waiting for Godot* — I was in limbo."

Last winter, he opened a Best Party Web site and started writing surreal "political" articles.

"I got such good reactions to it," Gnarr said, "and I started sensing the need for this — a breath of fresh air, a new interaction."

The campaign released a popular video set to Tina Turner's *The Best*, in which Gnarr posed with a stuffed polar bear and petted a rock, while joining his supporters in singing about the Best Party.

"A lot of us are singers," said Ottarr Proppe, the third-ranking member of the Best Party, who was with the cult rock band HAM and the punk band Rass.

Proppe now sits on the city's executive board, where he will be deciding matters like how much money to allocate for roads.

"Making a video was very easy," he said.

At a recent budget meeting, Proppe, who has a wild red beard, ran his hand through his bleached-blond hair as he studied the fiscal report from behind tinted, gold-rimmed glasses. His old band mate, S. Bjorn Blondal, quizzed the city's comptroller, Heida Helgadóttir, who ran the campaign and is now assistant to the mayor, wore a diaphanous minidress and typed notes.

Gnarr, who comes across as thoughtful and reserved, did not speak often. When he did he had the whole room, including the strait-laced Social Democrat, in stitches. Still, he is not just playing a cutup; friends describe his move to politics as a spiritual awakening. He agreed.

"Of all the projects I've been involved with, this one has given me the most satisfaction, the greatest sense of contentment," he said.