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Joking Seriously: The Artful Political Science of *Besti Flokkurinn*: An Interview with the Best Party's Heiða Kristín Helgadóttir

By Andrew Pendakis

Besti Flokkurinn (The Best Party) is a political party that was founded in the anxious aftermath of Iceland's 2008 financial collapse. Originally envisioned as a parodic, "anarcho-surrealist" response to the incompetence and short-sightedness of Iceland's governing elite, the party immediately set about promising everybody everything — trips to Disneyland, a polar bear for the zoo, "sustainable transparency" — in an attempt to isolate and render visible the hollowness of contemporary political culture. Led by a comedian/artist named Jón Gnarr with no pre-existing interest in politics and accompanied by a handful of equally inexperienced representatives who included avant-garde musicians, a carpenter, and a well-known Icelandic architect, the party unexpectedly captured the mayoralty of Reykjavik in 2010 with 37 percent of the vote. It is now preparing to contest elections on a national level and many believe it likely to be the next governing party of Iceland.

Gnarr and the party he leads have generated no small amount of controversy and skepticism. On the night he took office he deadpanned "Welcome, hooray for all kinds of things." Asked about possible solutions to the financial crisis in Iceland he has suggested — half-ironically, half-sincerely — that people should listen to Lady Gaga as a means of shaking off their depressionary mindset. At times, his answers border on an almost Warholian naiveté: "I hope they will smile more. And laugh a lot," he answered when asked about the political changes he envisioned for the citizenry of Reykjavik. For political scientists, the party's success has been mostly attributed to the frission and ephemerality of protest; far from replacing or challenging the existing political order, it is seen instead as only temporarily altering its basic pace and tone. Yet the party insists that it is better able to govern than its competitors, that its "cultural" (aesthetic) approach to politics and total inexperience place it closer to the population and its actual needs.

It is in the transition from ironic outside to full-fledged governance that the party

has had to set about moving beyond its original mandate as a “huge work of art” and into the information-dense, protocol-laden, highly “literal” space of policy. Does Besti Flokkurinn represent a new axis of politics, a new style and practice of the political, or are its claims to novelty simply the latest in a long line of post-political gestures? How does a leader who admits that he would abolish capitalism in Iceland if he had the power govern within the quotidian limits of a mayoralty? I interviewed Heiða Kristín Helgadóttir, the party’s general secretary, in Calgary in February 2012 in the hopes of clarifying some of these issues and getting a basic sense for the ideals of the group.

Heiða, could you please begin simply by telling us a little about your own personal and political history? Where did you grow up? What early relationship did you establish with politics?

I was born in Washington, DC while my father was studying journalism there. I think from an early age I had this curiosity about politics and had a sense that there was more at stake in politics than the usual, miserable bickering. I don’t know if this originates with my experience of Washington, but I was very fascinated by that city and the scale of its energy as well as by American politics and history more generally. After I graduated, I went to university back in Iceland and got a B.A. in political science. While I was studying I had two children, which is not that uncommon back in Iceland. Women there do a lot of things while they’re having kids. And most of us have children very young and then create a whole other family when we’re older [laughing].

I had always had this fascination with politics and come from a family who are all very passionate and clear about their political positions. But I had never found anything that I was happy with, never really believed in or supported a particular party or leader. Politics fascinated me, but only as a possibility, as something I hadn’t yet experienced, as something I could only imagine. After I graduated, I wasn’t quite sure what I would do with my degree. Like many of my generation, I wandered a little and couldn’t find anything that really gripped me. I was looking for jobs with the Social Democratic Party, but didn’t ultimately want to be associated with them. I didn’t feel, to be honest, that they meant what they said; I didn’t feel that what they represented was heartfelt. We sometimes forget how powerful sincerity remains, how necessary it is to politics and life. I thought they were more a union of people interested in securing their own individual futures, that it was a means for them to get what they wanted personally. Politics for the Social Democrats seemed like a hobby or simply a career. This was not the kind of politics I dreamed of. I wanted politics to be closer to life and to the feeling of being alive.

Of course, during this time, the crash had happened in 2008, and this also had an effect. It was not as if my whole world collapsed; I had never really believed in the boom to begin with. I always had this sense that there was something off about it, a trick, and I didn’t understand why all these bankers were suddenly being touted

as economic geniuses. The growth was too easy. How can one trust something so effortless? Building up a history of banking is something that happens over generations; you have to know what you're doing and it has to be done with respect, a sense for the fact that you are using somebody else's money. There was something magical about this money. When the collapse came there was a general feeling of fear and panic — people had become accustomed to the easiness. I did, of course, fear for Iceland. The journalists threatened apocalypse. But I knew that things were at once very serious and yet, oddly, at the same time, that things would be fine. It was important to see through the whole discussion of crisis and understand that we could still build a future without this false money.

After graduation I worked in an A.I. lab for a time. Then my friend Gaukur Úlfarsson, who is the director of *Gnarr*, a documentary made about the Best Party campaign, mentioned that he would like to introduce me to this guy named Jón, who was always going on about this political project he had envisioned. He used to work at a youth center. When I did eventually meet Jón he thought that he was running for prime minister [*laughing*], not the mayor, so he was not really sure about all the levels and protocols of government. But he did have a very clear idea about what he wanted to do: he wanted to make a mockery out of everything, the whole existing political process in Iceland. He had never followed politics until the crash. He then watched with horror all the things that were happening, this huge amount of rage and public fury. Nobody was willing to take any responsibility within the existing government — they were just pointing fingers and evading responsibility.

Jón's own history is very interesting and, in one sense at least, is representative of the membership of the Best Party as a whole. Though it will sound strange, he, like a good many other members of the party, participated in the Alcoholics Anonymous program. I think this is important to note, however funny this may seem. It means that a significant segment of our party can be said to have had a certain kind of "spiritual awakening," some kind of collective, therapeutic experience or "self-help" encounter. Many have known real addiction and weakness and powerlessness. In part, this explains the whole worldview that we have, our sense that our joint well-being is more important than our individual selves, that we can only get to ourselves through each other.

And that was Jón's idea; he didn't understand where we were heading as a nation and he felt it would lead to something terrible or at least very boring. Jón has a phenomenal talent, an amazing ability to spread joy, to make people laugh. He loves doing it. And I simply was immediately drawn to his idea, the notion that we could create a "Best Party" that would parody existing political practices in Iceland. The name itself is ridiculous. Everybody promises everything: there is this false sense that you can tie your trust to a politician and that they will save you. We were suspicious of the genre of the political promise, its tone. We distrusted its scope. At the same time, I found all of this, the whole project, very entertaining and funny. If nothing

else we would have some fun.

But on a deeper level I thought it would immediately serve a purpose simply to spread some joy into an atmosphere that was so crippling and dry and fearful. There is a difference between this political joy — joy that fills the street, joy that means something — and some stupid, catchy commercial. Many Icelanders left or considered leaving the country at this time; we felt that this psychological atmosphere had to be changed. It was not as if anybody had died; there was an economic collapse, but people were framing it as if they had been through a holocaust or something. We wanted to show that this crisis was at once very real, but also something invented — something we had to believe in for it to threaten us.

Tell us more about this atmosphere of catastrophe. What kinds of reactions did it generate in the public?

Everybody immediately began to downsize, save, and think through things differently. The reduced opportunities were something very present and visible. But at the end of the day we still had lines at the Apple Store when the new iPad came out [*laughing*]. And at the same instant, people are screaming over the fact that we are raising taxes a little bit to be able to afford day care for the citizens of Reykjavik. It was, then, on some level a healthy change. Cheap growth is not good for anyone. It feels pleasant at the time, but it leaves society hollow and empty. One gets used to having it all, is if by magic. It creates a certain kind of greediness, a lazy greed that isn't even aware of itself. We needed to face the fact we couldn't keep on going forever taking and taking without contributing back. That is not a society. We were accustomed to the fact that we had handed over our power to some kind of political thing, some entity, that was just supposed to take care of us. Then, when it didn't, we were stupidly angry. This crisis showed us just how much we'd given up, just how much the boom had cost us. It wasn't free. And it was hurting us even before the crash.

What is specific to Icelandic neoliberalism? What about the politics of the nation in the years leading up to the crisis?

Well, the funny thing is, is that it was the same people over and over again. There was this one prime minister who was the mayor of Reykjavik before he became prime minister. He was a prominent figure in the privatization of the banks (in 1999-2000), which were once state-owned. That whole process was, to say the least, compromised. The government set up committees that had the appearance of legitimacy, but which were often simply staffed by friends of the parties in government. These assets were divvied up politically: one bank was handed over to friends of the Independent Party, another to friends of the Progressive Party, and so on. This propped up our system of coalition government by spreading out the “benefits” of governance. We were members of the European Economic Community, so we had regulations, but we

had very weak political and bureaucratic infrastructures, because many of the best overseers and regulators simply got hired by the banks themselves on the promise of higher salaries, bonuses, and so on. The regulators initially told them that there were instabilities in the system, but the political elite kept insisting that the regulators themselves simply didn't understand the complex structure of "new banking." They lacked "sophistication."

Of course, it turned out this banking was too sophisticated for the bankers themselves, that many of them simply had no idea what was going on [*laughing*]. But I think this played a big role in the crisis itself: the simple inability of people to admit that they didn't understand something, but also the use made by finance of this impression of sophistication. Nobody could admit to ignorance. Professional knowledge became a screen behind which there was a lot of manipulation, but also shame. We are in many ways raised to be smarter than the next person, to compete, and we often fear the admission of weakness. We want to avoid the shame of failure or error of failure. In this case, something personal like shame became political and public and very dangerous.

Truly ironic was the fact that just as the crisis was beginning our prime minister, Geir Haarde, was on a tour of the United States trying to convince people that the media coverage of the situation in Iceland was exaggerated. The banks, he said, were actually okay. And then they collapsed. There was simply no oversight. There were some warnings that came from abroad and some investigative journalists who felt that Iceland was a deck of cards waiting to fall. The prime minister, however, wrote all this off as jealousy, foreigners coveting the Icelandic miracle.

Just as in the United States and Britain, financial services have constituted a high percentage of the new growth in Iceland in the last twenty years. The onset of the sovereign debt and currency crisis in 2007, however, has decisively ended this finance-based model of growth and with it any clear future prospects for growth in the country. Do you not think, Heiða, that it is time for countries like Britain and the United States, but also France and Iceland, to concede to their populations that the era of continuous growth has ended and that this is not the catastrophe it is thought to be? That there is life — perhaps not quite capitalist life — after growth?

How will your party on the national level deal with this question? Rather than continuously invoking the need to expand demand, might the party be interested in the idea of attempting to attune the population to an era of diminished expectations, and to see this not as disastrous loss, but as a kind of opportunity — a way of getting out of the growth-centric policies of the last thirty years and a return to a politics built around a new set of values?

I think this is a very important question. That is one of the most important issues facing politics globally today. As I mentioned above, it is the expanding growth-centrism that has driven us to this breaking point in the first place. We as citizens

are demanding infinitely more and at the same time want to pay less and less for it. It doesn't add up. So what was and still is the key to what it is that we are doing is that we must see ourselves as servants to the life of our city. I believe that in order to be able to turn this growth train around we have to do it at a very micro level — each of us needs to take a good look at what we are demanding from our society and what we as citizens can do for ourselves.

Though you've touched a little on this, could you speak to us a little about the formation of the Best Party?

We have crashed and burned a lot in Iceland. We have our own little currency, our own little monopoly money. We are a nation of fisherman that export fish, so if everybody is buying seafood we're good; if not, things get scarce quickly. Ups and downs are parts of this dependency. It gives the people a certain mindset. We have had crashes and good times, but the financial crisis was on a large scale, very global and public.

Despite everything, however, maybe even because of this context, we have always been a nation of poets and writers, artists and musicians. However odd this might sound, the Best Party really has its origins in this tradition and in a love of creativity, and this was definitely a factor in Jón's desire to found the party. He considers himself an artist first and foremost and has been able to do phenomenal work. Artists are always wealthy, even if they never have any money. They run on some other fuel. Shouldn't we learn from this? Our group feels that artists in Icelandic culture have not been given the credibility and respect they deserve. For example, Halldór Laxness, one of our great novelists, was given a Nobel Prize in literature in 1955. When he arrived back in Reykjavik after having received the award people lined the shores to greet him, but there was a conspicuous absence of officials. This great author returned to Iceland greeted only by the people. He was a Communist, he had spent time in the Soviet Union, and he was frowned upon by those in power. So there was no official acknowledgement, even though he had received one of the highest awards of cultural excellence.

We have so many incidents in which great artists' achievements have gone ignored by officials. This shows us where a government's heart lies; it is a symptom of a much bigger problem having to do with the role of bureaucracy and boredom and money in government today. Our government's attention, especially in the last twenty years, has been reserved for the bankers. Why are we surprised when a system built around such priorities fails? A system that focuses on money becomes more and more like money itself.

Why not instead become more like art? Or music? This was something, from the beginning, that Jón wanted to highlight. What if power governed closer to art, if it learned from art? Essentially, Jón envisioned *Besti Flokkurinn* as a huge piece of art. Jón was a piece of performance art, an image of the falseness of today's politician. He took on the appearance of the smooth, power-hungry politician, the false smiles and

gestures, the greedy underbelly. He kissed babies. He would say that he was running for office because it was about time he got a raise in salary. And all the while, he didn't know what he was doing in terms of practical politics. He knew nothing about politics. He thought that we needed fifty members for a clear majority until I told him it was eight. He had no interest in politics at all. He thought of it as performance.

Is it true that he had anarchist sympathies, but not anything in the way of an active political history?

Jón was basically an old punk. He mostly read poetry at punk concerts. He's always seen himself as an anarchist; we actually describe *Besti Flokkurinn* as an "ancho-surrealist party." We googled it and as far as we can tell this configuration doesn't appear to exist, so we may have to trademark it [*laughing*]. Jón has always really been a surrealist, always very close to the tradition of surrealist art and poetry. So much of his work comes from a fear of boredom, fear of an everyday life without joy and surprises. He's just written a play that is going to be premiered in March. It's called "Hotel Volkswagen" and is about a former Nazi guard who is hiding away in Argentina at a hotel called the Hotel Volkswagen. I tried to read it — it made no sense at all, but it is really, really funny.

The emergence of what we might call "gag politics" — the Pirate Party in Germany, the Beer Lover's Party in Poland, and now *Besti Flokkurinn* in Iceland — arguably reflects not just the exhaustion of Western democracy's various political establishments, but the waning of an entire sensibility, of a mode of address long imagined as the condition for the possibility of legitimate political speech. This was, of course, the way of earnestness, the politician bound to transparency, authority, and universal promise. Though wit has always very subtly inflected the tone of modern politics in the West — think of Harold MacMillan or even Thatcher in England — the shift I am speaking to is that of a transition from one regime of meaning to another, a quantitative inflation that in some sense becomes a qualitative change. Wit was once thought necessary to decorate or fringe an oration, a rhetorical exception to the rule of plain speech; today, these parties seem, rather, to come from irony, to live and die by it. I wonder, Heiða, how you understand this phenomenon and what you think may be its possibilities and limits?

I ask this because it would be possible to comprehend irony today as the form, par excellence, of ideology: every advertisement or sitcom today begins at the border of its own existence as representation, tipping us off to its artificiality. What can protect *Besti Flokkurinn* from this satirical spiral, which leaves it in a place indistinguishable from the already self-parodying properties of the existing parties? In other words, what kind of power, today, is the joke and what do you see as its limits and possibilities? Is the joke — your party's promise to buy a new polar bear for Reykjavik's zoo — merely an electoral gag or a spirit which you imagine

to inform the party from within, a new way of doing and thinking about politics for Iceland? What would this involve concretely? Is there a limit to the politics of irony?

We started out not knowing if anybody would find this the least bit funny or if they'd get the underlying joke and the seriousness of purpose beneath it. We kept being asked everywhere by journalists, "Is this a joke?" And, of course, at the beginning it was! We were playing. We were mocking everything, making a mockery of a system that was itself a bad joke, a circus.

But we began to think there might be more, that there was this power in us and this possibility that we hadn't yet imagined. Everything had already started by the time we found out what we could be. We didn't know it beforehand. Because Jón was a stand-up comic he has this incredible ability to read a room, to sense what can and cannot be said, to intuit the mood of a room. I think our mandate changed out of this reading of rooms and this real sense of hunger for change amongst the population. There was pain and need in these people, even in their laughter. We had many ideas, but we relied on Jón's stand-up comedian sense of timing and experimentation to work through what we should and shouldn't do.

We started out very flamboyantly; he was promising goats for farmers and everything that he could think of. Our press conference was announced as happening in a place it wasn't. This was to capture people's attention and to get them talking. Then we slowly managed to add to what we were doing. Our first electoral lists were really just his friends. We phoned up all his friends and guilted them and tormented them into running [*laughing*]. When I first got to the party it was just a couple of his friends. So we needed to branch outwards and find people who could actually contribute politically. We started broadening our horizons. I phoned my friends. They talked to theirs. And before long we suddenly realized that we had something, that we were more than the sum of our intentions, that something political and necessary was being created. We were a set of values, not merely a joke or a punch line or a few flashy headlines. This was a remarkable feeling.

When we won, we were struggling just to maintain our energy and unity. Everyone was watching us, waiting for us to make mistakes. We had no idea how to run a municipal government. We had to learn, so to speak, on the run. Our opponents know how to play the game, they know the rules of the game — that political game that goes on behind the scenes to manipulate events in one's favor. We not only lacked technical knowledge about the system, but this secondary knowledge of the game. The temptation to play this game by their rules is immense. So we set up some rules for ourselves, some basic principles. We didn't want "them," and by this I mean this logic of the game and its players, to overtake and defeat us. We wanted to preserve a distance: to keep our heads and hearts intact. This is extremely difficult, to protect one's difference from the system. If you begin making choices on the basis of what you think the other political players are doing, suddenly all of your time vanishes and,

along with it, even one's correct intentions. Time gets lost in strategies.

Instead, we tried to ask ourselves again and again, without thinking about the consequences, what the best way to do something was. Are we remaining faithful to our values and focusing on the immediate task (rather than re-election)? If you let their rules shape what you do, they win, the system wins. It may seem obvious, but this is a big part of contemporary political culture. Everybody will tell you that you are doing something wrong, that things aren't done that way. Staying your course in such a context is incredibly difficult. So we built a cocoon around what we were doing. We joked to each other that everybody was happy and everybody was talking about how successful we were.

This mental separation is what has saved us to date. It is a principle of distance and it is a little psychotic. It is a question of playing, but not believing in the game or maybe making new rules while one's playing it. We have been able to focus on our project, to keep its spirit, which is something one can do only through work. It is an everyday work, keeping faith with this positive energy. We have never publicly insulted our opponents. We don't allow ourselves to get sucked into pettiness and hatred. People were so hungry for this positive approach, a politics without spite and pettiness. You may laugh at such an idea, but our smiles are different and have a different power than those of the politicians. Certain smiles have a power and a possibility that others don't: even something so tiny as a smile is political. So maintaining this positive energy is a project that most parties would entirely overlook. What has saved us is our sense of humor, our joy. Without it, I think, a politics is blind. Perhaps, we are practicing a politics of joy and comedy rather than one of irony.

So in some ways it was a network, a shared space and way of life, before it was a set of explicit political commitments?

Exactly. Yes. These were all people who had some kind of pre-existing connection to each other. We shared spaces or interests or jobs or friends. Our worlds were connected and intact. And we just started meeting up and talking. We just shifted our focus and energy a little. And from there the seriousness of the joke deepened. We were joking, but seriously. We recognized that so many people were feeling the same way, experiencing the same sense of dissatisfaction with Iceland's political system. Many of us had no prior connection to or interest in politics. But we were able to run a list which included musicians, artists, carpenters, teachers, as well as a prominent architect. These were people from a genuine range of sectors who had never been active before politically. This is really what allowed us to break through that first impression of unseriousness.

Once people got a sense for the characters of the people who were on the list it simply wasn't possible to continue believing it was a joke; it was clear that they could not do half as bad a job as the people already in power. They were not professional politicians; their character, some quality, became visible to people and made it possible

to trust them. Maybe it was the fact that they were just good, regular people. They lacked the stiffness of the politician. They were imperfect. Nobody, however, believed they could do worse. The whole environment politically was like that of a circus. In the last four years we had had four mayors in Reykjavik. Everything was up in the air, people were stabbing each other in the back. One mayor ended up in an insane asylum; his mental soundness was in question. It was a circus. Politics had lost every last trace of dignity and authority.

Of course, we had to build the trust of the voters, but the context and the nature of our experiment made it much easier to do this than it might in other circumstances. The bar was set very low [*laughing*]. Jón portrayed himself in the beginning as this exaggerated, surreal character, and some of what he did left you wondering if he was joking or not. But what one could not doubt was his sincerity. These things, even today, matter; maybe they matter more than ever. Maybe sincerity isn't old-fashioned at all. In his ambiguity, one never lost sight of the fact that he loves the city and that he loves what he does. This too is rare today: he loves what he does. How many politicians love what they do? And when they do, one almost gets worried, because what is it about what they are doing that they love? The money? The prestige? For Jón, this love of his life and work made it easier for people to trust him. He wasn't just another politician.

One of the decisive moments in the campaign, one which changed the way many perceived us, came when one of the leading newspapers in Reykjavik carried articles written by each of the campaigning leaders describing their platforms and viewpoints. Most candidates simply stayed within the domain of the normal dry, political material. They promised things. They addressed the city's "problems." Jón's article, however, was just incredibly beautiful. I actually wept when I read it. It was just him telling the story of what it meant for him to grow up in Reykjavik, and how he loved the city and its people. He wrote about what it meant to experience a first heartbreak in the city or how it felt to be a lonely teenager in Iceland in the 1980s. There was a humanity to the words he wrote.

It is really important to emphasize that we would have very likely given up the whole thing had we sensed that the other parties were willing to learn from what we were doing or gave some indication that they were listening. But these articles showed very clearly that they were still promising all of the old banalities. Growth, jobs, blah, blah, blah. They'd learned nothing from the crisis! And they had not even noticed that an old way of doing politics was dying, that they were already dead. The strange thing about the whole experience is how easy it was. We had nothing. We had no money. No experience. We ran no ads in the paper and no ads on the television. We ran a couple of radio ads. We did buy a few personal ads in which we ironically promised readers "brighter futures." I think our ad budget was around one hundred dollars. We also used social media extensively. Perhaps our most successful promotion was the video we produced. It went viral and we were suddenly getting calls from the *New York Times*.

What mattered, then, was that there was something immediately believable about Jón. He's known to Icelanders, not only through his art and comedy, but personally, literally, on the level of friends and acquaintances. He has a huge network of acquaintances and this itself can't be underestimated.

If we had to reduce our objectives to four master concepts I would say: culture, nature, humanity, and peace — that is what we have set as our four pillars. But that in itself is not very descriptive of what it is that we stand for. We are a group of people who came together to do what we can to make things a little brighter, in every sense of the word. So I would say that humor is one of the key elements that keeps us together and focused. That being said, most of the people who make up the party are artists, so our focus on cultural issues and the importance of cultural aspects in society is very important to us, as well as bringing a more human, no-bullshit attitude towards solving problems that are at hand.

Can you speak a little about some of the challenges that you have encountered after winning the mayoralty in Reykjavik?

The main challenge has simply been to ensure we actually continue to exist. The pressures were so intense and the expectations so high that we had to be sure that people didn't simply give up and leave the party. We knew that there would be a moment when expectation became reality, when we would need to begin to deliver on our promises. This was a difficult moment, that moment after the momentum of campaigning when you are expected to simply govern. Suddenly, we had to tackle real issues, very present, very necessary issues.

For example, we have a geothermal power plant in Reykjavik that the city owns. It's run by a board of directors. For many years, the board had been selected wholly on political criteria, which meant that the directors had absolutely no idea how to run a power plant. It was on the verge of insolvency; all of this technology and technological know-how were there, but were not being maximized. So we advocated to replace this politically selected board with people who were technologically and professionally competent. We refinanced its loans as well. One of the conditions for refinancing this loan was that changes would be made to the hiring practices of the plant. And so we had to let go some of the employees who worked at the plant — including my father! Let's just say I wasn't very popular that Christmas [*laughing*].

But this is a real problem for Iceland. We are a tiny nation and nepotism is everywhere. People put their fathers and uncles in positions all over the place. It is nepotism and malpractice to death. I could probably have saved my father's job. But I wanted to create a different kind of political culture. Needless staffing public services won't get us anywhere. One can't just ignore these issues and rest content in the fact that one's own political sensibility opposes downscaling.

In another example, we were forced to downscale the school system and make cuts to it. In any given neighborhood one might have a kindergarten, a primary

school, a high school, and an afterschool program, and each had a separate overhead. Keep in mind that the crisis had really erased our budget (one big outcome of the financial crisis for civic governments: a huge decline in available tax revenue. In this respect, Reykjavik was no different from other cities on the planet). What were we to do? So we tried to combine these different services creatively in the same space. But suggesting this was like moving a mountain. We were given no help from the inside. The school system was wholly opposed to these changes. The power plant was something people could see as a technical issue. But this was different: it hit a social nerve, one very close to home. Not our schools! People would scream at us: “But what about the children! We must think about the children!” [laughing]. But there was no erasing the crash. The crash was an event, something real, something effective in a real, personal way. It changed our circumstances. So we tried to make choices which were intelligent without giving into the resignation of austerity. Just giving money to schools will not create better outcomes, even if it might make us feel good to do so. Sometimes reducing overhead is thinking about the children. Sometimes a new, creative arrangement must be imagined that doesn’t obey the old conversations.

Everyone today, it seems to me, “thinks outside the box.” No one is either merely left or right, but claims a middle ground that is ostensibly more sophisticated, measured, and yet at the same time more radical and inventive than the existing poles. Corporations and banks frame their activities as little more than gestures of nonconformity, innovation, and research. Politicians invoke a “third way” somewhere between socialism and unmitigated free-market policies, not less or more government, but “smart government.” Individuals increasingly frame themselves politically as “independents.” John McCain was “the maverick”; Sarah Palin, “the rogue.” The impression one gets is of a great profusion of knowledge and critique. Yet these are really clichés, their claims to newness often little more than a predictable return to what are essentially Victorian economic policies. In other words, what passes for a position beyond the political spectrum almost always finds itself very predictably tethered to and by it: what passes for an end to politics merely perpetuates it.

How does the Besti Flokkurinn fit into this picture? Does it articulate itself according to this common centrist or third-way ideology or does it make an attempt to clearly demarcate its policies as leftist/social democratic/anarchist/etc.? What do left politics look like in a country like Iceland in a global context in which capital controls, regulated finance, management of the business cycle, mixed economies, even the welfare state itself appear handcuffed by neoliberal globalization? Is the objective of the Best Party to invent a politics able to survive this period or one built to actually transcend these conditions? Is this latter option even possible?

We have never wanted anyone to box us in such a way, but Jón describes himself as

a liberal socialist, and we have described the party, as mentioned above, as anarcho-surrealist. We genuinely believe that the left and right struggle is a politics of the past — at least in Iceland anyways — with this being due mostly to the fact that class struggles don't apply here to the same extent that they used to. The debate over the welfare state, as well, is not very lively — it is more or less accepted that there should at least be a minimal social net but that gets us to the point I made earlier about a certain culture of taking. Have we gone too far? Has the political elite transformed us into takers that want easy answers and infinite, easy growth? I believe it is very important to start tackling these issues. We need to turn the political debate around so that we make people more responsible for their society and their own future.

So where is the Party going from here, Heiða?

We're working towards next year's national election. We've formed a party called "The Brighter Future." We would often say: "Do you want a Brighter Future or do you want to destroy Reykjavik?" We offered this ironic choice between perfection and destruction. At this point, the Best Party is less a political party than it is a state of mind. I am the only full-time employee. So we needed to invent a formal infrastructure for a party that could exist on a national level. We don't want to formalize it to the point where this spirit is lost, but just enough to make our work on a national level possible. We don't want to sacrifice the sense that we all have that this is an adventure. To function on a national level, however, we will need a clear platform and a specific stance on a whole set of global issues. You can skip them on the municipal level. You don't really need an opinion on the European Union. We'll be running in the parliamentary election in April 2013 — an election that could come even earlier. And we hope to win.

