

THE MAYOR OF THE POLITICS OF DAILY LIFE

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Telos: In Italy the Prime Minister is indicated by the Parliament. However, every time there are talks about changing the Constitution and go for a direct popular election, people use the expression 'The Mayor of Italy'. This seems to imply that Mayors have more power to impact on their citizens' everyday life even than the Head of the Government. Does this apply also to Iceland?

Dagur B. Eggertsson: Yes certainly. The services are much closer to the citizens than they are at a national level. Therefore, local politicians and especially mayors forge a closer relationship with their voters, which can be very rewarding. Each and every day you, as a citizen, come in some contact with our services at one point or another. Be it when picking up your child from pre-school or school; throwing garbage in the waste bin; applying for building permits, affordable housing or public works of all sorts. So, I would say that local government and being the Mayor of a capital city is the politics of daily life. The late Benjamin Barber wrote the book *If Mayors ruled the World* a few years ago where he talked about dysfunctionality of nations towards the challenges of today. Terrorism, climate change, poverty and human trafficking are the problems that the nation state can't deal with. He said that mayors and cities approach challenges with pragmatism, civic trust, participation, indifference to borders and sovereignty, and a democratic habit for networking, creativity, innovation, and cooperation. I think he was right because there are so many factors that make a good city and so many breaking mechanisms that are intertwined within the nation state. The key is not to move power to the "Mayor of Italy" but as close to the people as possible, to the cities and to the citizens.

The crisis of the political parties is probably the origin of the globally spread anti-political sentiment. However, this theory seems to be less true in the relationship between citizens and Mayors. Do you agree?

Yes and no. I actually think that all politics deal with decline in trust, all around the world. Strong cities and democratic control of an efficient running of the cities is a part of the answer to the problem. To get things done is key. Mayors and cities are in a much better position to meet those expectations, if not stopped in doing so by the national Governments. The Government has to understand the role and opportunities in working with cities and their mayors. Strong and prosperous cities are a key in creating a strong and prosperous country. You cannot do it without them. So, you can win back trust by proving that politics can be both effective and democratic as good city politics can be and I would argue that you can't raise trust in politics without effective cities.

According to many immigrants, Iceland is the least racist country in the world. Emblematic of what happened in 2015, when it took only one day for 10,000 Icelanders to sign up on Facebook for the event *Kæra Eygló Harðar - Sýrland kallar* (Dear Eygló Harðar, Syria is calling). How have you, as Mayor of Reykjavík, contributed and are contributing to this process?

I am very proud to be the Mayor of a city where its citizens call out for more immigrants and more refugees. The national Government at the time was xenophobic towards immigration so that prompted that reaction. We did challenge the national Government to take more refugees and handle the situation directly. The City Council agreed, it was agreed upon by every party which was a powerful statement. Sadly, the Prime Minister at the time wasn't up for the challenge. Within the city we try to make their life of everyone as good as possible. We work in close cooperation with the Red-Cross, and have been reaching out to refugees in Reykjavík in all possible ways with somewhat good results. The refugee crisis showed us the best and worst of European politics and sadly, Iceland at the time didn't play their part although we in Reykjavík and in many more places across the country were pleading the Government to take part. I actually think that Iceland still could do more in the field. Racism in everyday life is also a sad fact that needs to be addressed.

New pre-school system, crowdsourcing ideas to cocreate its Education Policy 2030, citizens are having their say by suggesting policies through Better Reykjavík, important targets on climate change (carbon neutral by 2040), today the city is best in Europe when it comes to youth drinking, smoking and use of drugs and the list could go on for ever. How is such vibrant participation possible in a country where there was complete distrust in all politics after the crash of the banks in 2008?

That is a good question. First, I want to stress that trust that collapses because of something that happens will not be gained back with words, but only with action. We have since the collapse of the banks in '08 tried to be increasingly transparent in our policy and decision making. We ask our citizens to participate in a number of fields, often with very good results and enthusiasm on both parts. We use digital platforms that were developed by private citizens and grassroots movements after the collapse of the economy but have now integrated them into how the city works. We then opened a webpage called betrireykjavik.is (Better Reykjavík) when we formed a new coalition to run the city in 2010 where we offered people to put

forward ideas that we could put in our political platform. And we did use the ideas. That went very well so we continued on that path asking people to put forward ideas to strengthen their neighbourhood. In preparing a new master plan for the city and all the connected strategies we had an extensive consultation leading to a very progressive green plan for the densification of the city, change of travel modes towards bicycles, pedestrianisation and better public transport systems. Our Education policy was in part crowd-sourced on one hand, and resting on consultation with the best local and world leading experts in the field, including Pasi Sahlberg of Finland and Andy Hargreaves from the UK. Their voices mixed and entered into discussion with councillors, our head masters, our teachers and of course the children and youth of Reykjavík which, I repeat over and over, is by far the best generation that have walked the streets of Reykjavík. The main focus of our Education policy is that every child, every student should have the opportunity to make their dreams come true. And the responsibility of the school system and leisure opportunities is to support them, inspire and make it happen. But the work of developing a city for the better never ends, and in each step the City Government and the citizens have to work together. In no field we know this better than the field of prevention against teenage drinking, smoking and the use of drugs. There we went from being the city in Europe with the worst outcomes in 1998, to being the best in 2013 with systematic and empowering approach based on participation and evidence from the field of public health and social science. But that story is a whole new interview in itself!

Marco Sonsini

Editorial

PRIMOPIANOSCALA^c is planning to continue its #SeriesOnMayors even in 2020, following up on a plot line started back in 2019. In this issue, we'll be taking a look at a country way up north: Iceland. Our guest is Dagur B. Eggertsson, several times the mayor of Reykjavík. The main talking point of the interview is one that's very dear to many Icelanders: participatory democracy. This isn't the first time PRIMOPIANOSCALA^c has ventured into the land of geysers to take a more in-depth look at this issue.

Already back in 2012, in an interview with **Guðjón Már Guðjónsson** we got our readers to 'participate' in the 'Iceland Experiment', an uncommon example of participatory constitutional reform. The country took that extraordinary experience to heart – you can refresh your memory by going back and reading the interview – and as Eggertsson explains to us *"We ask our citizens to participate in a number of fields, often with very good results and enthusiasm on both parts. We use digital platforms that were developed by private citizens and grassroots movements after the collapse of the economy but have now integrated them into how the city works."* The last example he gives is of the preparation of the new master plan for the city, in which world-renowned urban planners and architects participated along with the city's young people. The realisation of a sort of contemporary Utopia.

And something that seems equally utopic is indeed the result achieved regarding Iceland's youth, also and mainly thanks to good city government: in fewer than twenty years Iceland has managed to do a Herculean task: free its adolescents from **their dependence on alcohol and drugs** and transform them into health nuts. Eggertsson, as a Mayor and physician specialised in public health, is very proud of this accomplishment, and rightly so *"we went from being the city in Europe with the worst outcomes in 1998, to being the best in 2013 with systematic and empowering approach based on participation and evidence from the field of public health and social science."* And this brings us back to the leitmotif of this interview: participation.

I'm sure the first response to this month's issue will be: Big Deal! All of this can work because Iceland is an island with only 320,000 inhabitants: the least populated country in Europe if you don't count the microstates. A city like Bari spread out over a 100,000 Km² area, a third of all Italy. Reykjavík has just over 120,000 inhabitants. And even despite the 2008 crisis, they're rich. This is all true, but what truly makes them rich is their civic-mindedness.

Now, let's not fall prey to the usual 'whataboutism'. Let's face it, we Italians aren't civic-minded. And this is neither a casual statement nor a stereotype. Take a look at the study published by the Italian National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT) in March 2019 under **'Civicness: Attitudes and Behaviour of Citizens in Everyday Life'** and you'll find the proof.

Another element we keep coming back to, this time in a rather unexpected way, is Eggertsson's reference to Benjamin Barber and his book *If Mayors Ruled the World*. It is without a doubt one of our favourites and we even quoted from it in the first lines of the editorial of the interview with the former Mayor of Madrid **Manuela Carmena**. We're proud of this feeling we share and don't want to hide it.

With Eggertsson we are also kicking off our 2020 cover series: cities and the animals that represent them are our new graphic theme. Graphically speaking, the first letter of the city is in the shape of the animal that represents it, either because that animal is typically found in the city's natural environment or because it's one of its local symbols. We were inspired by scarfs, which often use felines, birds or horses in their patterns, and as in the old-fashioned alphabet primers, the animal takes on the shape of the first letter of the city.

The design will 'genetically modify' it to represent the transformation urban centres must face in complex times like those of today.

For Reykjavík we've chosen a puffin, a sort of 'pop' version of a penguin that lives in the city's bay. A small black and white bird with a brightly coloured beak and short wings, which cause it to fly in a very funny way, flapping its wings up 400 times a minute to stay in the air.

Mariella Palazzolo

Dagur B. Eggertsson has been the Mayor of Reykjavík since 16 June 2014. He is backed by a centre-left coalition formed in the City Council after the administrative elections held the previous May – made up of the Social Democratic Alliance, the liberal party Bright Future, the eco-socialist party the Left-Green Movement and by the Pirate Party. Re-elected in 2018, his administration follows the one led by Jon Gnarr, a comic actor whose challenging candidacy for mayor in 2010 was unexpectedly successful and resonated significantly throughout the rest of Europe. This is Eggertsson's third mandate as Mayor. In fact, he was appointed as the First Citizen way back in October 2007 but was ousted just a few months later in



January 2008 when some majority councillors who had previously backed him changed sides and joined the opposition. A prominent spokesperson for the Social Democratic Alliance, of which he was also national vice-president, he has been on the Reykjavík City Council since 2002 and was also chairman from 2010 to 2014. Parallel to his career as a politician, Eggertsson also has a professional career in the medical-healthcare field. He graduated in medicine from the University of Iceland and from 2000 to 2004 worked as a physician in various departments at the Landspítali University Hospital in Reykjavík. From 2005 to 2007 he held conferences at the university on public health.

He's the author of the three-volume biography of the former prime minister of Iceland, Steingrímur Hermannsson.

He was born in Árbær, in the suburbs of the capital, and is 48 years old. He's married to Arna Dögg Einarsdóttir and has 4 children. There's one curious fact about him that we just can't help mentioning: the US online political satire and gossip magazine **Wonkette** baptised the mayor of Reykjavík 'the New Justin Trudeau'. I guess it's enough to look at his picture to figure out why.

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