

Two Women who Made it to the Top: Gro Harlem Brundtland, P. M. of Norway & Vigdís Finnbogadóttir, President of Iceland

by Noreen Stuckless



The Norwegian Prime Minister Gro Harlem Brundtland visiting Addis Abeba, July 1987.

Photo: VG-FOTO A/S

Scandinavia can boast of two daughters who are serving their countries as the first women in their elected positions. Their roles, however, are very different. Gro Harlem Brundtland, the Prime Minister of Norway, is the chief legislative officer in this constitutional Monarchist government. By contrast, Vigdís Finnbogadóttir, the elected President of Iceland, fulfils the duties of a head of state and leaves the actual governing to their Prime Minister. They have different qualifications and training, but each demonstrates the value of her earlier experience in gaining and carrying out her duties. Moreover, the very fact that they are the first women to hold their respective posts adds another dimension to their importance.

Gro Brundtland has headed a minority government in Norway, a nation of over 4 million residents, since May, 1986, although she became the first woman to hold that post for a few months in 1981. Her earlier training and experience helped prepare her for her responsibilities. She graduated from the Medical School at the University of Oslo in 1963 and proceeded to complete a master's degree in public health at Harvard in 1965. She was a medical officer in the Norwegian Directorate of Health when she was appointed Minister of the Environment in 1974. Surprisingly, Brundtland hadn't been very active in politics, although as a child of seven she had joined the *Framfylkingen*, the Labour Party's association for juniors, and as a student, she took part in political debates. After her appointment and subsequent election, she then held various positions in the Labour Party and Parliament, until she became Prime Minister. Not surprisingly, her chief interests are health and the environment.

Prime Minister Brundtland has extended these interests beyond the borders of her country. She is Vice President of the Socialist International and a member of the Independent Commission on Disarmament and Security. Most especially, she is the head of the UN's World Commission on the Environment and Development, where she stresses the need for international cooperation to ward off destruction of the environment, and to fight poverty. A statue of her was erected in Japan in the spring of 1987, in recognition of her achievements in this field.

Brundtland believes that whether men or women govern makes a difference, and



President of Iceland Vigdís Finnbogadóttir, 1986.

Photo: Consulate of Iceland

stated that, "a natural balance of men and women makes prejudiced decisions less likely and provides the greatest possible breadth of experience." The Prime Minister has pushed for equality for women politically by appointing 8 (40 %) women to her cabinet, although all but the Minister of Agriculture hold stereotypically female positions such as Health and Education.

Ironically, from a woman's viewpoint, her government finds itself criticized for the shortage of daycare and kindergarten facilities, which leaves Norwegian children in a worse situation than the rest of Europe.

As a person, Brundtland evokes varying responses. Her opponents complain about her hot temper; her supporters applaud her keen intellect. She says that she has no problems with her husband, Arne,

who is an active member of the opposition Conservative Party, though they have "stimulating debate." They have shared domestic responsibilities since they were in university and had their children between exams. She has to spend a considerable amount of time working, both in Norway and abroad and, as with women the world over, she has paid a personal price. She admits that it was difficult to combine the role of mother with that of politician, and says, "Now I feel that I missed out in a way, because there was much that I could not follow closely enough from day to day as my (four) children were growing up." Gro Harlem Brundtland has most certainly been fully occupied with her tasks of governing Norway and being involved with international concerns. She must now face the electorate after four years to see if they agree with

her goals and results.

Vigdís Finnbogadóttir has a very different position. When the last President of Iceland retired, the wish he expressed in *The Atlantica and Iceland Review* for his successor was that he maintain the quiet esteem of the Presidency. The person who emerged victorious in 1980 wasn't a man, however, but the world's first woman elected head of state in a free general election. On August 1, 1984, she was sworn in for a second term after being unopposed. Politically, the chief influence of the office is in "the bargaining process when a new coalition government is formed." In addition, she must sign new bills before they become law.

Vigdís Finnbogadóttir's chief responsibilities are to provide a unifying force for the Nation of Iceland and its 200,000 people, and to represent Iceland to others. Her background is admirably suited for this task. She successfully directed the Reykjavík Theatre Company, is Chair of the Advisory Committee on Cultural Affairs in the Nordic Countries, and headed the Tourist Guide-training for the Icelandic Tourist Board. As well, she

has worked for Icelandic State Television, and taught and is fluent in French, English and Icelandic. Therefore, she is very conversant with her country, its people and culture.

The President has represented Iceland to such world leaders as President Reagan and the Queen of Denmark, but she has also added her expertise to special small gatherings such as learning to speak fluent sign language with her country's deaf citizens. Although her duties are mostly ceremonial, she isn't simply an acquiescent figurehead. On October 24, 1985, when the UN Women's Decade ended, she stayed away from her office to join 18,000 women at a mass meeting. She was reluctant to mar "such a day" with legislation, and she almost started a constitutional crisis when she pondered a few hours before returning to sign a bill that had been rushed through parliament.

Though they fulfil very different roles in their countries' governments, Brundtland and Finnbogadóttir both represent the growing political power of women in Scandinavia.

Sources

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