

## Iceland: from reluctance to fast-track engineering

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**Maternity leave:** there is no separate maternity leave. Part of parental leave is reserved for women and women must take 2 weeks of this leave following birth.

**Paternity leave:** there is no separate paternity leave. Part of parental leave is reserved for men.

**Parental leave:** 9 months at 80% of earnings up to a ceiling on payment of ISK535,700 a month. Leave can be taken on a part-time (50%) basis and extended in length. Three months are reserved for mothers and 3 months for fathers. The remaining period is a family entitlement and may be taken by either mother or father.

**Leave to care for sick children:** none

**Other:** each parent has the right to 13 weeks' unpaid leave until the child is 8 years old.

Iceland is a Nordic country, but not a member state of the European Union (EU). It does not have separate maternity, paternity and parental leaves, but a single system of 'birth leave', the period of leave divided equally between mothers, fathers and a family portion to be divided as parents choose. Prior to the recent introduction of the father's quota, few fathers took any leave. But the latest figures (for 2006) show that now most take leave: 88 fathers take leave for every 100 mothers taking leave, using on average 100 days compared with 185 days for mothers. This means that most fathers take the part of parental leave reserved for fathers, but only a small minority (19% in 2005) took any of the period that parents can share: 90% of mothers took some or all of this period.

### Introduction

Parental leave in Iceland has been developing since the Second World War. Until recently it was a highly complex, patchwork system that distinguished between different groups of women and men, with various entitlements and payments. The rights of women depended on whether they worked in the public or private sector of the labour market; while the system provided certain groups of men

with limited entitlements and totally excluded others. The parental leave reforms from the year 2000 brought revolutionary changes with 3 months' leave for each parent, in addition to 3 months to share – a total of 9 months. As a result, men in Iceland have the longest non-transferable father's leave quota in the world. These Icelandic reforms of the parental leave system have gained wide attention, and have moved the country from a minimal system to a fast-track engineering of parental roles. The Nordic model of parental leave with a special father's quota today has its most radical expression in Iceland.

Following a brief historical background, this chapter explores the politics behind the Icelandic leave legislation. We suggest that several factors were influential in the emergence of the new radical system. First, the limitations of the previous system meant that implementing the new system took nothing away from anyone; there was no reduction of existing rights. Second, court rulings had stated that it was illegal to discriminate between men and women concerning parental leave. It was apparent that the exclusion of men under the previous system violated the constitution of Iceland. Third, the new reform was situated within the prevalent emphasis on men in the Nordic gender equality discourse.

The fourth and most important point is the specific context of national politics in Iceland. The liberal/right-wing government in office in 2000 responded to strong pressure for gender equality measures with the parental leave reform. This reform was not launched as a family policy or welfare issue but primarily as a measure to explicitly address the gender pay gap. The broad political consensus reflects support for a fast-track social engineering approach and state intervention, exceptional in the liberal Icelandic political context that is, typically, characterised by a resentment of central authority and government (Ólafsson, 2003).

### A short historical overview

The first legislation on birth leave for women in the Nordic countries dates back to the end of the 19th and the start of the 20th centuries. The legal framework initially aimed at the protection of working mothers and their newborns, evolving in the period after the Second World War into a system covering women in paid work, establishing their rights and entitlement to payments (Valdinansdóttir, 2006, pp 4–7). The social protection system of Iceland at the time was in its infancy. In 1954, women in the civil service became entitled to 90 days of paid maternity leave, putting them in a much better position than other women. Their rights continued to be assured by special legislation, which gradually improved the length, flexibility and payment of maternity leave. Women in the civil service maintained their advantages over other women until the reforms of 2000.

In 1975, mothers in the private employment sector who were "unable to work due to childbirth" received unemployment benefit for 90 days (Gíslason, 2007, pp 6–7; see also Eydal, 2000). Next, the 1980 Act on Birth Leave (No 97) gave parents working in the private sector 3 months' leave. Dismissal of women on maternity leave was now forbidden and their payments were no longer

unemployment benefits but covered by social insurance; however, they were low, flat-rate amounts dependent on the previous extent of the mother's labour market participation (Gíslason, 2007, p 7). A Bill proposing the same rights and payments to all women regardless of their labour market position was repeatedly put forward in the Icelandic parliament during the 1980s, but without success. Hence, this somewhat arbitrary system persisted until the reform in 2000.

While the Icelandic system was arbitrary enough for women, it was even more so for men. Not only did their rights depend on their own employment sector (public or private), but also on the labour market situation of their spouse. Men employed in the public sector had no rights. Men married to or cohabiting with women who were civil servants had very limited rights, amounting either to unpaid leave or paid leave based on their spouse's income. Men working in the private labour market, and men married to or cohabiting with women working in the private market, had limited rights, which were again dependent on the entitlement and leave usage of their spouse. A clause in the 1980 Act gave these fathers a right to the last month of leave if the mother gave her permission (Gíslason, 2007, p 7). Hence, men's rights to leave were initially conditional on the situation and agreement of mothers.

The idea of some form of leave for fathers had been proposed in different quarters for decades. It was first mentioned publicly in Iceland at a conference held in 1975 to mark the United Nations (UN) Year of the Woman, where one or 2 weeks of leave for fathers was suggested by a group of women. The justifications were both the mother's need for rest and the importance of strengthening the relationship between father and child (Skýrsla Kvemnaásmefndar, 1977, p 44; Gíslason, 2007, p 7). The Women's Alliance, active from 1983 to 1999, put forward numerous Bills for maternity/paternity leave, but without success (Eydal, 2000; Jónsdóttir, 2007). In 1993, the so-called 'men's committee', a working group on behalf of the Minister of Social Affairs, put forward the demand for a separate leave for fathers (Félagsnáðaráðuneytið, 1993, p 9). In 1998, the Icelandic Federation of Labour, Iceland's largest trade union, called for paid paternity leave, and the same demand came from other labour unions as well as the employers' associations (Gíslason, 2007, p 8).

The first serious attempts to introduce paternity leave in practice were taken by the City of Reykjavík in 1996–98 with a pilot project co-funded by the EU (Einarsdóttir, 1998). Soon after, the municipality of Reykjavík introduced 2 weeks' birth leave for their male employees. In 1997, a 2-week right was granted to all men in the civil service, that is, those employed by the state and the City of Reykjavík. With an Act on paternity leave in 1998, these 2 weeks of paternity leave were extended to all men in Iceland, although payments differed according to employment sector.

Hence, the gradually evolving leave rights of men were no less arbitrary than the system of maternity leave had been for women. The structural discrepancies between men and women, and the exclusion of men from parental leave, was heavily contested in the late 1990s. The parental leave system was far behind that

of the other Nordic countries and changes in the system were overdue. Having outlined the historical background, we turn now to explore why the reformed system took the form it did, why a father's quota was implemented, and why this leave period exclusively for fathers was longer than any introduced in the other Nordic countries.

### Changes overdue – but why these changes?

The long-standing reluctance by the state to equalise the leave rights of women and expand the limited rights of men was suddenly reversed by the Act on maternity/paternity and parental leave passed in 2000. Leave was extended from 6 months to 9 in three phases from 2001 to 2003, linking 3 non-transferable months to each of the parents and leaving 3 months for the parents to divide at their own discretion. The leave can be taken part time, until the child is 18 months, with a reduction in payments. Payments to leave takers amount to 80% of gross earnings, with a fixed minimum amount and, since 2004, a ceiling on payments set at ISK535,700 a month. Those who are not active in the labour market, or work less than quarter time, receive some financial compensation from the state.

The lengthening of parental leave and the equalisation of the rights of men and women formed part of the policy statement of the coalition government of the liberal/right-wing Independence Party and the centre Progressive Party that came to office in the spring of 1999. When the Bill on parental leave was introduced in the spring of 2000, it was not preceded by long discussions or investigations. In some ways, this is characteristic of Iceland, but unlike other Nordic countries. Compared with them, the state administration of Iceland is small and weak, and there is also a less significant public sector and a lower level of domestic consensus. Expert knowledge in the state administration has, therefore, always been limited, with fewer resources and less emphasis on long-term policy making. In the Icelandic context, with coalition governments typical, this has led to individual politicians and political parties having a strong influence (Kristinsson, 1993). The Bill on parental leave, put forward by the Minister of Social Affairs, reflects this clearly.

There are several reasons behind the specific path taken in the 2000 Icelandic reform, with its sudden change of direction. The first reason is that the existing system was a poorly functioning patchwork of measures; it was a parsimonious system with rather limited rights even for those groups of women who were best covered. Hence, when the new reform was introduced it benefited all concerned. In some European countries the parental leave system has developed along the housewife/breadwinner model with relatively long maternity leave and low compensation for leave takers. Such a system can be transformed into a universal and formally gender-neutral system of parental leave, as in the case of Germany and Spain (before 2005) but without much effect. The legacy of traditional gender relations is institutionalised and there is not much potential for change (Einarsdóttir and Pétursdóttir, 2004).

While attempts to transform a traditional maternity leave system into a seemingly gender-neutral system tend to be ineffective, it is also politically controversial to shorten previously shared rights by turning some part into a father's quota, not least since the shared rights are often perceived as women's rights. In this respect, the path taken by Iceland is different from the other Nordic countries. In Sweden and Norway, the (shared) parental leave was already relatively long, up to one year, when the specific father's quota was introduced (Valdimarsdóttir, 2006). In Norway, there is no political will to extend parental leave in total, and the introduction of a longer father's quota has been hindered by a reluctance to transform part of the shared leave into a period for the exclusive use of fathers (Fréttablaðið, 2008).

But in Iceland, with its relatively complicated and limited entitlements by Nordic standards, nothing was 'taken from women' in this sense; there was no shared right that the parents perceived as the mother's right. All changes, therefore, were additions welcomed by all political players. However, qualitative research does reveal that some mothers did feel that fathers' rights had been improved while their rights had been overlooked (Pétursdóttir, 2004). In addition, before the reform women working in the public sector had the 80% benefit payment made up to their full salary, while men working in the public sector did not receive such payments. This was contested on the grounds of sex discrimination and is expected to be changed (Gíslason, 2007, pp 11–12).

A second reason for the specific Icelandic path was the need to react to challenges from the judicial system. In 1998, the Supreme Court of Iceland ruled that it was a violation of the law and the Constitution to exclude men from parental leave (Judgment 208/1997, pronounced 5 February 1998). Following this, the state recognised the right to parental leave for men in public service who were married to or cohabiting with women also employed in the public service, while other men continued to be excluded. In addition, the Complaints Committee on Equal Status came to similar conclusions on three occasions in 1999<sup>3</sup>, but without any reaction from the state. When the Minister of Social Affairs put forward the Bill on parental leave, he mentioned that it was a response to pressure from the UN and the EU which will be discussed later. But although he did not mention the challenges from the judicial system, these had become a burdensome concern for the government.

The third reason why Iceland took its particular stance was the Nordic emphasis on men in the gender discourse. The inclusion of men in work on equality had been increasing in the Nordic context since the 1980s, resulting in a plethora of publications, events and conferences (see, for example, Nordic Council of Ministers, 1987, 1995a). While the Nordic Council of Ministers' cooperation programme for gender equality for 1995–2000 did not address men explicitly (Nordic Council of Ministers, 1995b), there was a shift in the 2000–05 cooperation programme, where the inclusion of men is one of three main areas of priority (Nordic Council of Ministers, 2000).

This emphasis on men is clearly reflected in national policy documents in Iceland as well as in general discourse. The 'boys' discourse' has been prominent in Iceland (Ólafsson, 2004), and the shift is clearly visible in the Act on the equal status and equal rights of women and men from 2000 (Flóvenz, 2007). The new parental leave reform, therefore, was very much in line with the prevailing emphasis on men in the Nordic gender equality discourse. Moreover, it gave Iceland the opportunity to take the lead in the matter, as will be discussed more thoroughly in the next section.

### Fast-track engineering of gender equality

This section analyses the new reform from the perspective of the parliamentary debate around the Bill in 2000. The data used in this analysis consist of the explanatory statement accompanying the Bill (law on birth and parental leave 95/2000) and the debates that followed its presentation to parliament (Althingiðindi, 2000 125 löggjafarþing). The Bill on parental leave was introduced in the spring of 2000 by Páll Pétursson, Minister of Social Affairs and member of the centre-oriented Progressive Party (previously the Farmers' Party). In the first reading of the Bill, 10 members of parliament (MPs) discussed it in 18 separate speeches. Then the Bill went to the Committee on Social Affairs, which did not make or suggest any revisions. Back again in the full Parliament, 7 MPs discussed the Bill for the second reading in 25 separate speeches. The Bill was passed in the spring of 2000; at this point, 4 MPs discussed their vote. Interventions during these different stages amount to approximately 109 pages of written text, 82 of these being parliamentary debate.

The data was read and coded for recurring themes or discursive strands; the process was then repeated to validate their weight in the analysis. Discourse analysis was used to explore the underlying meaning of certain words and statements and how they reflect a particular system of knowledge or ideas. Discourse analysis is based on the notion of knowledge as socially constructed and needing, therefore, to be historically and culturally contextualised. According to Gill (2000), discourse analysis provides us with a critical awareness of our taken-for-granted everyday knowledge. It recognises that our language has formative powers; as individuals, we are shaped by existing discourses while taking part in their shaping and reproduction.

### Paternity leave as a gender equality issue

The explanatory statement accompanying the Bill cites an attitude survey carried out 5 years previously: "A survey carried out by the Social Science Institute at the University of Iceland in 1995 showed that most of the male participants thought that there was a *general interest* among men to balance work and upbringing of children" (emphasis added). It is worth noting that the participation of fathers in Iceland in the year 2000 is framed, as this quotation illustrates, in terms of

*interest and free will*. This is similar to the Swedish discourse when shared parental leave was introduced in 1974; the unifying idea at that time in Sweden was that parental leave was a *free choice* for men in order to make it attractive (Klinth, 2005, p 212).

Aside from the survey, no scholarly resources, inquiries or research are cited in the explanatory statement. Furthermore, the parliamentary discussion reflects a limited understanding of the issue of gender equality with one noteworthy exception – Bryndís Hlodversdóttir, a member of the Social Democratic party, who spoke during the first reading:

In my opinion fathers should, by all means available, be encouraged to participate more fully in the caring of children from early on to enable them to bond with their children from the beginning. Not only does it lay an important foundation in the emotional communication between father and child but it will also allow for men in larger numbers to care for their children and that is certainly to the benefit of the whole family.

In essence, what Hlodversdóttir is saying is that fathers sharing means fathers caring', and vice versa. By being on leave, fathers will gain valuable insight into their children's needs and will therefore contribute their fair share to caring in the future. But fathers' emotional gain is for the most part absent from the discussions in parliament and the focus is on equality matters.

Members of parliament were for the most part very enthusiastic about the legal reform. This included members of the two ruling parties, the liberal/right-wing Independence Party and the centre Progressive Party, as well as the two opposition parties, the Socialist Party and the Social Democratic Party. The Bill was supported by 50 MPs out of 63, an almost unanimous vote, as 12 MPs were absent on the day of voting and one MP was present but did not vote. Some of them talked about "a milestone" or "a turning point" in gender equality matters, aimed at fixing the inequality between men and women, with the 'daddy months' seen as a means to that end. In the words of a member of the Socialist Party, Steingrímur J. Sigfússon:

I think that everyone is clear about what is most important when it comes to equal status between men and women in the labour market and ways to mitigate the gendered inequality and the gender pay gap which exists in the labour market disadvantaging women. What is needed is a way to make the status of men and women equal regarding parental leave, children's sick leave, caring in the home etc. The way towards this goal is through increased and independent rights for fathers or men. In the light of the nature of the matter that is the *only way*. (Emphasis added)

A subtle reference to gender equality is indicated by mentioning both fathers and men. Men do not go on paternity leave without being fathers, but the formulation opens up the issue by framing it as a men's issue. In the eyes of Sigfússon, a certain period tied to men is the only way to move forward. The gender equality dimension is also visible in the words of Þráll Pétursson, the Minister of Social Affairs and a member of the Progressive Party. In introducing the Bill to the parliament, he pointed to the status of gender equality issues in Iceland by referring to the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women. Pétursson mentioned the gender pay gap "which is believed to exist here", and argued that the Bill was a significant step in its elimination. He indicated that the Bill was a response to external pressure from the UN to eliminate the gender pay gap, although he did not mention rulings and challenges from the judicial system, it was implicit.

Other equality matters were also mentioned frequently, such as the unequal division of caring and household tasks, for example in these words of Arnþjórg Sveinsdóttir, a member of the Independence Party:

It is my belief that this matter will bring us by giant steps towards increased equality between women and men.... Fathers going into their homes to equally care for and bring up their children in the first months of the children's lives will transform companies' attitudes towards their employees.... Gender equality requires realistic solutions which ensure that men and women have the same work opportunities both inside and outside the home. This has been acknowledged. One of the most important issues in that respect concerns justice, that fathers and mothers will have equal rights to parental leave. The system we are familiar with now and existing discrimination, together with prevailing views on gender division on work, hinders individual freedom of choice in respect to a career and a platform within the family.... The improvements we will achieve by this Bill are that we will attain more equal status between women and men in the labour market, more equal status between men and women in the home, the employers' costs concerning children will be more equally distributed, there will be more people paying taxes to support the welfare system and we will have improved economic rationalisation because women's manpower will be utilised.

Sveinsdóttir's speech concisely illustrates the liberal view. Legislation is used to create equal opportunities in the labour market and in the home, to equalise societal costs and to utilise women's labour power to the fullest. It is, as Sveinsdóttir puts it, "first and foremost an equality matter". These critical issues of gender equality do not arise very frequently – once every hundred years – as Drífa Hjartardóttir, also a member of the Independence Party, suggested: "The Bill is

one of the biggest and most important steps taken towards gender equality since women's right to vote".

As these passages suggest, the Bill was explicitly framed as a gender equality measure. Moreover, numerous gender equality issues were mentioned suggesting a 'one-size-fits-all' approach; in other words, it is possible to achieve equality by passing into law a Bill on parental leave, the assumption being that other gender-related issues will then fall into place. This suggests a 'quick-fix solution'. We look now at the neoliberal concerns and the more traditional views within the Independence Party.

### Correcting a market failure

In 2000, the economy in Iceland was booming. Unemployment rates were at an all-time low, so the Unemployment Insurance Fund was able to meet existing needs as well as to build a surplus. It was decided that a certain percentage of that fund would be used to finance parental leave payments. Members of the Independence Party went to great lengths to show that implementing the law on parental leave would not require cuts elsewhere to finance the programme. Some would even profit or at least public spending would be minimised, as argued by Pétur Bjöndal, an Independence Party MP:

... if this Bill has the effect it could have, that is people will be working part time for 2½ years, the need for childcare centres which are run by the municipalities will lessen. It will soon become apparent how much will be saved in that area. For parents it will also be economically sound as I pointed out earlier because they won't have to spend money on childcare.

So the argument for parental leave has been reduced to a matter of profit – inequality is costly, women's labour is not used sufficiently, and parents will use their leave to ensure that their children can stay at home for 2½ years because economically that is the most rational thing to do. Hence, everyone will profit including the employer because from a productivity perspective it is better to have people working part time, as Pétur Bjöndal also pointed out.

Bjöndal had long been outspoken on his neoliberal convictions. He was in favour of the legislation for more reasons than the savings to be made in public spending. He saw it as a way to correct a market failure, which would also save costs:

For a long time I have fought for the implementation of parental leave, for numerous reasons. If individual abilities are to be fully utilised there has to be equality on the labour market to ensure that the most talented individual is hired for the job. This is not the case today. Inequality between people, which manifests itself in inequality between men and women, is screaming out and has to be fixed by

all means available. The legislation has been cleared of all inequality except when it comes to parental leave. That is the only law which still discriminates between men and women.... When this Bill has been passed, which will even out the difference between women and men in 3 years, nothing will be left but prejudice and nepotism... men's and women's prejudice against women and particularly women's prejudice against themselves. They don't have the guts to stand in the line of fire. This needs to be fixed but that is presumably something we can't fix with legislation. Inequality is expensive; therefore it is societally viable to eliminate inequality.

As can be seen from Blöndal's highly neoliberal speech, the new legislation was meant to correct 'market failures'; there is no understanding of structural discrimination in Blöndal's view, only prejudice and nepotism.

While Blöndal justifies the social engineering of the new reform as a positive way to correct market failures, others see it as a necessary evil, a temporary measure aimed at bridging the gender pay gap. This is because the state intervention, which is built into the Bill, goes against the neoliberal convictions of some members of the Independence Party, especially the younger ones, as exemplified in the words of Thorgerdur Katrín Gunnarsdóttir:

[The Act] will be revised after a certain time to evaluate it and then we can see if we haven't attained what is very important, to increase the equality in the labour market, among other things to try to decrease the gender pay gap which exists and many surveys have confirmed. My vision for the future is actually such that some day we need to let go of the state intervention, which manifests itself in the Bill in the form of 3 months being preserved for women and 3 months for men, it is non-transferable and that is a key issue in the equality debate....

But I hope in the future we will be fortunate enough to not have to put such a clause in the law and we can say: Here you have 12 months of parental leave and you can divide it at your own discretion. That is my vision for the future ... that parents can choose.

What Gunnarsdóttir is suggesting is that the law is a temporary rectifying strategy, a form of affirmative action. But at the same time, as pointed out by Kristján L. Möller, a member of the Social Democratic Party, Gunnarsdóttir is eager to show her allegiance to the neoliberal arm of her party, by talking about abandoning the state intervention that is built into the legislation. The quote also illustrates the general lack of insight into the issue of gender equality. The gender pay gap has proved to be a persistent problem and a recent survey shows that it has not decreased in the 12 years between 1994 and 2006 (Capacent Gallup, 2006). In the neoliberal view, a social engineering measure is justified as a temporary means to eliminate the gender pay gap, but the Act could soon be revised. It is a temporary

measure because the problem can be solved quickly; a quick-fix solution, as suggested earlier, to a quick-fix problem.

Some members of parliament suggested that the law could be amended in as little as 3 years. By that time the law would be fully implemented and, therefore, revisions would be needed, as Arrbjörg Sveinsdóttir, member of the Independence Party and head of the Social Affairs Committee, suggested. Sveinsdóttir said that the clean-cut division between men and women, with a leave quota specified for each, should be temporary but was necessary now "to pin down and secure men's rights". The phrase being used to illustrate men's position and why it needs "to be pinned down and secured" (*festu í sessi*) is the same phrase used by the Minister of Social Affairs in his speeches on the matter; the phrase is also present in the explanatory statement accompanying the law.

A quick analysis of the Icelandic language reveals that the phrase refers to power, and the reign of the ruler and how secure his position is. The main burden of the phrase is power (Jónsson, 2002). The one whose power is intact is not at risk of being overthrown (Árnason, 2002). Why this choice of phrase to refer to men's position, one may ask. It might have been more appropriate to talk about creating a tradition, for example. The phrase 'pinning down and securing' suggests that men have been kept from their children and that their powers need to be pinned down and secured to enable them to utilise their legal rights.

Not all were as optimistic about the law's effect on men's behaviour as the Independence Party MPs. Steingrímur J. Sigfrísson, a member of the Socialist Party, noted that there was a long way to go before independent non-transferable rights for the father could be abolished. It was only in the year 2003, when some had proposed that the law might be revised, that fathers' rights were eventually and for the first time ever extended to 3 months. If the law is supposed to be evaluated, such as the use made by fathers of their allotted parental leave time, its full effects will not be felt for some time to come. It was, for example, impossible to estimate initial use until mid-2005, since parents have 18 months after their child is born to utilise their rights and further time is needed to allow for adaptation by parents to the new policy.

The parliamentary discussion reveals knowledge of the legislation that is being passed, not least the Social Affairs Committee that handled detailed scrutiny in the parliament. The committee concluded that savings would be made for the municipalities, as parents would be staying home for longer periods and therefore making less use of ECEC services. Pétur Blöndal, a member of the committee, suggested that parents would share the leave by both working part time alongside part-time leave.

One MP, Einar Oddur Kristjánsson from the Independence Party, did oppose the Bill, claiming that it would jeopardise societal stability. He had long been known in Icelandic politics as 'the saviour' because of his particular political views as a former spokesperson for the Confederation of Icelandic Employers. In the parliamentary discussion, he is a supporter of 'stability' in terms of both economic



and gender relations. He uses phrases such as "extremely dangerous"; "not threaten the state of competition" and "keep balance, not burden". He states:

Nobody reads the writing on the wall. For months it has been written on the wall that facing us economically are some dangers, great dangers and therefore we need to move carefully but unfortunately no one seems to notice this... People are all ready to pass this Bill even though in the Bill the financial aspect is not well thought out... I can agree and say that it is a good thing to increase the parental leave; it is a very good thing that fathers participate, young fathers... [But] how are we going to finance this? Who is supposed to pay?... The condition of the State Treasury is such, I declare, that it can't increase its expenditure... Why is the Parliament in such a hurry to pass this Bill?... Don't we have enough time to make up our minds then and then use our manhood and say who is going to pay for all this?... There is no compelling reason why this Bill needs to be made into a law at this moment.

There are some obvious gendered implications of Kristjánsson's choice of words in the passage quoted above, for example "manhood". He talks about paternity leave for "young fathers"; does that indicate that paternity leave is not for mature men? There is also a subtle reference to irresponsibility in the phrase "Who is supposed to pay?". He sees the proposed Act as threatening for the economic stability; the symbolic connotations suggestive of female irresponsibility are not hard to miss.

Kristjánsson's fellow party member, Þeórar Blöndal, is quick to point out that he is in the dark about the costs:

I think with the utmost planning the municipalities, because the need for day care centres will decrease, could save 1.5 up to 2 billion [Icelandic Krona] a year. This is not present in the explanatory statement accompanying the law. The parents themselves will save 20,000 [Icelandic Krona] each month; this has not been established either. Therefore the 80% being paid is quite ample if you take this into account. When everything is taken together it might well be the case that this Bill is not costing very much. It saves a lot elsewhere.... If the companies will focus on implementing flexible working hours and work environment, teleworking and working from home and other such measures, so the parents could of course stay at home and work but at the same time stay with their children, then this could possibly benefit the economy.

Blöndal's focus is on the labour market. His ideas about caring for an infant are also of interest, in particular how he sees the possibility of working from home

and caring for a child at the same time in such a way that it will contribute to economic growth, all in harmony with his neoliberal beliefs.

What is of interest is how the issue of parental leave becomes an issue about money. Blöndal's and Kristjánsson's contributions to the debate went on for some time. In Iceland it is more common for people of different political groups to fight over money, so we interpret these events as intra-party conflicts between Blöndal and Kristjánsson, as well as Arnbjörg Svendsdóttir, who trivialises Kristjánsson and uses patronising irony to get her point across and to calm him down: "I applaud the distinguished MP Einar Oddur Kristjánsson over this Bill. He said in the beginning that he welcomed this Bill fondly. That's what I like to hear". Kristjánsson is quick to answer back: "Unfortunately the distinguished MP did not notice correctly. I did not applaud the Bill... I have nothing against this Bill in itself. I have nothing against increasing parental leave but people have to be aware of how they are going to pay for it".

During the debate, Kristjánsson switches his wording from 'welcoming' the proposed Act to 'having nothing against' it, implying an understatement or downgrading. What the discussion reveals is an underlying resistance. Not only is Kristjánsson the watchdog of economic stability, but he is also watching out for the status quo, guarding the gender system and traditional roles, and he uses his knowledge and expertise in economic affairs to do so. He also uses an approach known in discourse analysis as agreeing with a 'but', also known as 'managing issues of stake and interest and disclaiming' (Willig, 2001).

#### National spirit

It has been suggested that a women's faction within the Independence Party used its leverage to lobby for the parental leave legislation. To get a fuller understanding of how the changes in 2000 were implemented, it is important to provide the reader with a quick insight into the national spirit of Icelanders. There is a desire, possibly also a need, for a small nation to excel, and to be seen or noticed in the global context, as a speech from Drífa Hjartardóttir, an Independence Party MP, illustrates. She referred to an article in *Morgunblaðið* (a daily newspaper tied to the Independence Party) by social scientist Ingólfrur V. Gíslason, prior to speaking at a Nordic conference:

Then Ingólfrur says, with the permission of the Speaker of the House: "When this was decided a few weeks ago I expected to be able to use for the most part old griefiáden numbers which illustrate the vile status of family affairs in Iceland and in particular the vile status of Icelandic fathers. Then Geir Haarde [then Minister of Finance, currently Prime Minister], Ingbjörg Pálmadóttir [Minister of Health] and Páll Petursson [Minister of Social Affairs] held a press conference and announced big changes... I immediately sent emails to my colleagues and others interested abroad and told them of this important news. Then a new

concept was born in the Nordic discourse. I received a notification of changes in the workgroup I am supposed to participate in. Now I am supposed to talk about the 'Icelandic model' of parental leave and I receive a longer period of time than other speakers. And what is of more importance, the other speakers are asked to adjust their speeches so that they can discuss how the other Nordic countries can adapt their schemes to the 'Icelandic model'. The thought behind the Bill that the Ministers presented is therefore becoming a precedent, setting the tone in the Nordic discussion.<sup>3</sup> I think it is very important that this came through today because it is very enjoyable, but unfortunately not every day, that Iceland is in the forefront of the equality debate among the Nordic countries.

And not only in the Nordic context is it unusual for Iceland to be at the forefront, but also in a wider European context. For in the words of the Minister of Social Affairs, "this matter will put us in the forefront among states in the European Economic Area".

## Conclusion

The 'Icelandic model' in parental leave schemes, with a 3-month non-transferable 'father's quota', has gained wide attention. This chapter has attempted to contextualise the parental leave reform of 2000, examining its background, contributing factors, main players and main rationales. It is remarkable in many respects that Iceland has initiated the longest father's quota that now exists. It was introduced as a fast-track social engineering measure by a liberal/right-wing government, and in a country with long-standing liberal traditions, characterised by a deep resentment of central authority and suspicion to governmental intervention. While it was a part of the policy declaration of the liberal/right-wing coalition government that came into power in 1999, it was not a very well-prepared project, based neither on research nor on long-term policy making. In short, the reform and the Bill that brought it about were not well informed.

Several factors were at play in the emergence of the new radical system. First, the existing system was rather parsimonious and hence, when the new system was introduced, very little was taken from anyone; in a manner of speaking 'nobody loses and everyone gains'. Second, court rulings had stated that it was illegal to discriminate between men and women in parental leave, and that the exclusion of men violated the constitution of Iceland. In addition, the reform was a response to external pressure, from the UN and EU, as well as a response to national demands for more actions to be taken in gender equality issues. Third, the new reform sat well with the prevalent emphasis on men in the Nordic gender equality discourse. Fourth, and most importantly, specific features of national politics in Iceland allowed this legislation to develop in an interesting way. The reform was primarily framed as a gender equality issue and the broad political consensus

around it raises questions, since it reflects support for social engineering and state intervention that is exceptional in the liberal Icelandic political context, not least when it comes to gender issues.

Analysing the parliamentary debates reveals that even the most neoliberal factions of the liberal/right-wing Independence Party supported the reform and managed to justify it within the neoliberal ideological framework, primarily as a 'correction of market failures'. Interestingly, tension was found within the Independence Party between neoliberals supporting the reform and more conservative individuals warning about the cost of the reform and supporting economic and gender stability. The analysis shows that the making of policy in this case was more complex, creative and dynamic than a traditional left-right perspective might suggest.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Leave provision described in this box refers to statutory entitlements.

<sup>2</sup> Due to the financial crisis at the time of publication, no euro exchange rate is given for the Icelandic krona.

<sup>3</sup> Complaints Committee on Equal Status Conclusion Nos. 7/1999, 9/1999 and 10/1999, available at [www.rettrathemild.is/Felagsmala/Kaerunefndjafnretismala/1999](http://www.rettrathemild.is/Felagsmala/Kaerunefndjafnretismala/1999) (accessed 21 October 2008).

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