

## **Sharing tales of meltdown: jokers help rescue Iceland**

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By RONAN MCGREEVY

SUCH WAS the sense of profound disgust in Iceland when the country was brought to its knees by a banking crisis that a joke party set up in December 2009 to mock the political establishment ended up being elected to high office.

The Best Party promised not to keep its electoral promises, but found itself the biggest party in local elections held in the capital Reykjavik. Among those elected was Einar Örn Benediktsson, formerly a trumpet player with two of Iceland's greatest musical exports – Bjork and The Sugarcubes, who is now chairman of culture and tourism in Reykjavik's city council.

Mr Benediktsson observed that the Irish general election seemed to be a rather staid affair compared to the convulsions, which happened in Iceland. "Going by the posters, there does not seem to be any innovation going on," he said though he remarked that Ireland did not appear to be a country on its knees.

He is among a group of Icelandic people – led by the mayor of Reykjavik and founder of the Best Party, Jón Gnarr Kristinsson – who are in Dublin this weekend to talk about the mutual experience of economic meltdown and how each country can benefit from the other's experience.

Mr Gnarr, as he is known, was a stand-up comedian in Iceland before getting himself elected last year.

He believes the present left-leaning Icelandic government is not getting sufficient credit for dealing with the country's implosion in 2008 and the country had no choice but to take radical options.

"Many people take it for granted. As I understand, we are the only country in the whole world that has dealt with it in this manner," he said.

Mr Gnarr remarked that not only were Iceland and Ireland both small countries, but the world itself is a small place as Mayor of Dublin Cllr Gerry Breen's brother, Fr Patrick Breen, is the vicar-general to Iceland's tiny Catholic population and lives in Reykjavik.

Gerry Breen, who could be a TD by the end of today, said the tired old joke about the difference between Ireland and Iceland being one letter and six months was wrong because what happened in Iceland took a couple of years to happen in Ireland.

The Northern Lights Observatory, the first event of the "Ireland: Iceland project", is going on all weekend. There will be an event tomorrow in City Hall at 1pm where the public will be invited to talk about the relationship between the two countries.

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