

## TRADITIONAL ICELANDIC FOOD and International Dishes



### Our Weekly Menu:

<b>MONDAYS:</b> Minced steak w. onions Lamb cutlets Fishballs	<b>WEDNESDAYS:</b> Salted lamb & pea soup Lamb cutlets	<b>SATURDAYS:</b> Fried fish fillets Lamb cutlets Roast pork
<b>TUESDAYS:</b> Gratinated fish Lamb cutlets Meatballs	<b>THURSDAYS:</b> Lamb meat & broth Lamb cutlets	<b>SUNDAYS:</b> Roast pork Lamb cutlets
	<b>FRIDAYS:</b> Lamb chops Lamb cutlets	

Homelike food  
International buffet  
Grilled chicken  
Sheep's head and Coke  
Fish dishes  
Hamburgers  
Salad bar  
Sandwich bar  
Coffee and cakes



FLJÓTT OG GOTT



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RESTAURANT OPEN 7-23.30 AND TAKE AWAY  
ROUND THE CLOCK

12\_RVK\_GV\_09\_2007\_ARTICLE/IMMIGRANTS

## Who Knows How the System Works?

Text by Ian Watson

On April 16, 2007, the Icelandic Parliament passed a law granting Icelandic citizenship to eighteen people who presumably did not qualify under the Ministry of Justice's regular application process. Parliament normally passes two such laws per year, and had most recently granted thirteen people citizenship in December 2006, and eighteen people citizenship in June 2006. One of those who received Icelandic citizenship on April 16 was a young Guatemalan woman who is the girlfriend of the son of Jónína Bjartmarz. Jónína Bjartmarz was at the time Iceland's Minister of the Environment, and had from 2000 to 2006 been a member of Parliament's General Committee, which oversees granting citizenship by law.

An act of parliament is one of the two ways in which foreigners may become Icelandic citizens, according to the law on citizenship (#23/1952). More commonly, foreigners apply under Article 5 of the law to the Ministry of Justice, which may then grant them citizenship if they have lived in Iceland for a certain number of years and if they fulfil various other conditions.

The story of Parliament's decision to grant the Guatemalan woman citizenship exploded in the Icelandic media at the end of April 2007. Kastljós, the state television channel's evening magazine program, highlighted it several nights in a row. The young woman had lived in Iceland for only a year and a half (many foreigners wait up to seven years), and compared to other foreigners here, she did not seem to have an unusually strong need for Icelandic citizenship. Most of the media discussion seemed to center around the question of whether Jónína Bjartmarz had exercised some kind of inappropriate influence over the parliamentary committee's decision.

Bjartmarz's party lost several crucial seats in the parliamentary elections on May 12th (hers included), and some bloggers and pundits speculated that Kastljós's coverage of the issue had been politically motivated. Bjartmarz lodged a complaint against Kastljós with the ethics committee of the Icelandic Journalists' Association. On June 19th, the committee ruled that Kastljós's coverage had not been sufficiently well researched, and constituted a "serious violation" of the journalists' association's code of ethics. The same day, Kastljós published a detailed rebuttal of the committee's ruling, and accused the committee itself of sloppy research and reasoning.

### What Happened?

There has been so much smoke from these fires that it has been hard to see the real issues in the affair. The important question is not whether Jónína Bjartmarz improperly influenced the General Committee to approve her daughter-in-law's request. (I haven't seen any evidence that she did.) The issue that needs to be addressed – and could be resolved – is that there is no publicly available information about how the process of requesting citizenship from Parliament works. None. Except Article 6 of the law, which is only three sentences long and not very helpful. This lack of information almost ensures that the law will be applied unfairly.

The Ministry of Justice gives fairly full information on the regular citizenship application process on its website ([www.domsmlaraduneyti.is](http://www.domsmlaraduneyti.is)). In my experience, Iceland's foreign residents are very familiar with its rules and procedures, such as minimum residence requirements and the need for two references. A lot of people receive citizenship this way: over 800 did so during the year 2006.

The Ministry's website gives no information about applying to Parliament, so I looked on the parliamentary website, and particularly on the General Committee's page. I couldn't find any instructions on how to apply. All I managed to turn up was the text of the bi-annual laws granting citizenship. I tried to contact the secretary of the General Committee, but she was away for summer vacation. I tried Googling "ríkisborgararéttur Alþingi" ("citizenship Parliament"), but found nothing relevant.

Until the Jónína Bjartmarz case broke, I think that very few foreign residents of Iceland ever imagined themselves worthy of receiving citizenship by act of Parliament. It was something reserved for very special people, like Bobby Fischer. I have only known one person

who received citizenship this way. This person played for an Icelandic national sports team – the custody of an innocent child was at issue – and they'd been turned down by the Ministry of Justice.

I myself have been patiently waiting for my seven years to be up in 2008, so that I can apply through the regular process. I never dreamed I would have any right to ask Parliament to single me out for special treatment, even though my reasons for needing to be fast-tracked are arguably stronger than Jónína Bjartmarz's daughter-in-law's. And how could I know that I might qualify for special treatment, when the rules aren't posted anywhere?

So the problem is that not everyone has access to the information that applying to Parliament is an option. Jónína Bjartmarz had sat on the General Committee, and surely knew how the system worked. One can easily imagine that her daughter-in-law would not otherwise have known to apply. Similarly, the sports player I mentioned above might not have known about the possibility of applying to Parliament but for a near relative who worked as a parliamentary staff member.

### A Loophole in the System?

I can't fault people who have access to information for using it legally. But I do see injustice in a situation in which only certain people are aware that it is practically possible to apply to Parliament for citizenship. Is it fair that Jónína Bjartmarz's daughter-in-law applied, while many other equally or better qualified potential applicants did not – just because they had no way of knowing that they could?

Not only are there no instructions about how to apply to Parliament, there is no clear information about when one may apply. According to everyone I talked to, the custom has been that (except for cases like Bobby Fischer) you may apply to Parliament for citizenship only after having gone through the normal, months-long application process through the Ministry of Justice and getting denied. (The ministry's standard letter of denial mentions that it is possible to appeal to Parliament.)

But it seems that Jónína Bjartmarz's daughter-in-law applied directly to Parliament, without first receiving a denial from the Ministry of Justice. There is nothing in the law which forbids this. But neither have I found any public information anywhere saying that direct application is permitted or explaining how to go about it. If direct application is really going to be an option, it needs to be equally available to everyone.

In researching this article, the only way I managed to get information about the process of applying to Parliament for citizenship was to call up people who have been personally or professionally involved in such applications. We all know that Iceland is a country where who you know often matters more than what you know. And if it's a matter of finding a good plumber, a used car, or that hidden hot spring that's somewhere in the middle of Eldborgarhraun, this is totally natural and fine. But if it's about citizenship – one of the most important legal rights that we have – we need clear information that is fairly accessible to all.

That means that it needs to be easy for foreigners in Iceland to find out whether, when, and how they may apply to Parliament for citizenship. The newly elected General Committee should lay out the rules and procedures right away. By doing that, our parliamentarians would show that they rank fairness and justice for all the people on this island at least as high as sympathy for a single one.

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