SUBJECT: ICELAND: PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS: 26 JUNE 2004

SUMMARY

1. Grimsson to win easily. Election seen by some as pointless and costly. Will he use the result to justify any future political involvement? Or will the Althing make sure that he cannot interfere again?

DETAIL

2. There is little doubt that Olafur Ragnar Grimsson, the incumbent, will win Saturday's elections: I'll do a headstand on Mount Hekla while whistling "I'm a yankee doodle dandy" if he doesn't. The question is by how much and what the turnout will be (normally 80+%). The latest opinion polls indicate that the other two candiates, Asthor Magnusson and Baldur Agustsson, will attract 0.6% and 7.9% respectively. Grimsson will get 71.4%, while 20% of the electorate say they will spoil their ballot papers. Not only to protest against Grimsson's refusal to sign the media bill two weeks ago (my telno 19) but also because the other candidates are such no-hopers. Many wonder at the sense of holding a costly election (cPdns Sterling 1.15m) to indulge a couple of eccentric Icelanders, one of whom is not a full time resident of Iceland: Agustsson has spent most of the last ten years in the UK. In 2000, no election was held because only Agustsson wanted to stand against Grimsson but could not get the required number of sponsors.

COMMENT

3. The last time I reported on a vote that even the worst imaginable pundit couldn't get wrong was Ceausescu's 1988 referendum on the banning of nuclear weapons. Like that result, Grimsson's certain re-eelction will change little. He could claim the result was evidence of support for his refusal to sign the media bill into law, which itself reflected a belief that the

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constitution intended the president to be a check on the Althing. If it is part of a wish to signal a more politically involved presidency, I am inclined to the view that, notwithstanding a victory, the Althing will see to it that he doesn't interfere in the legislative process again.

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