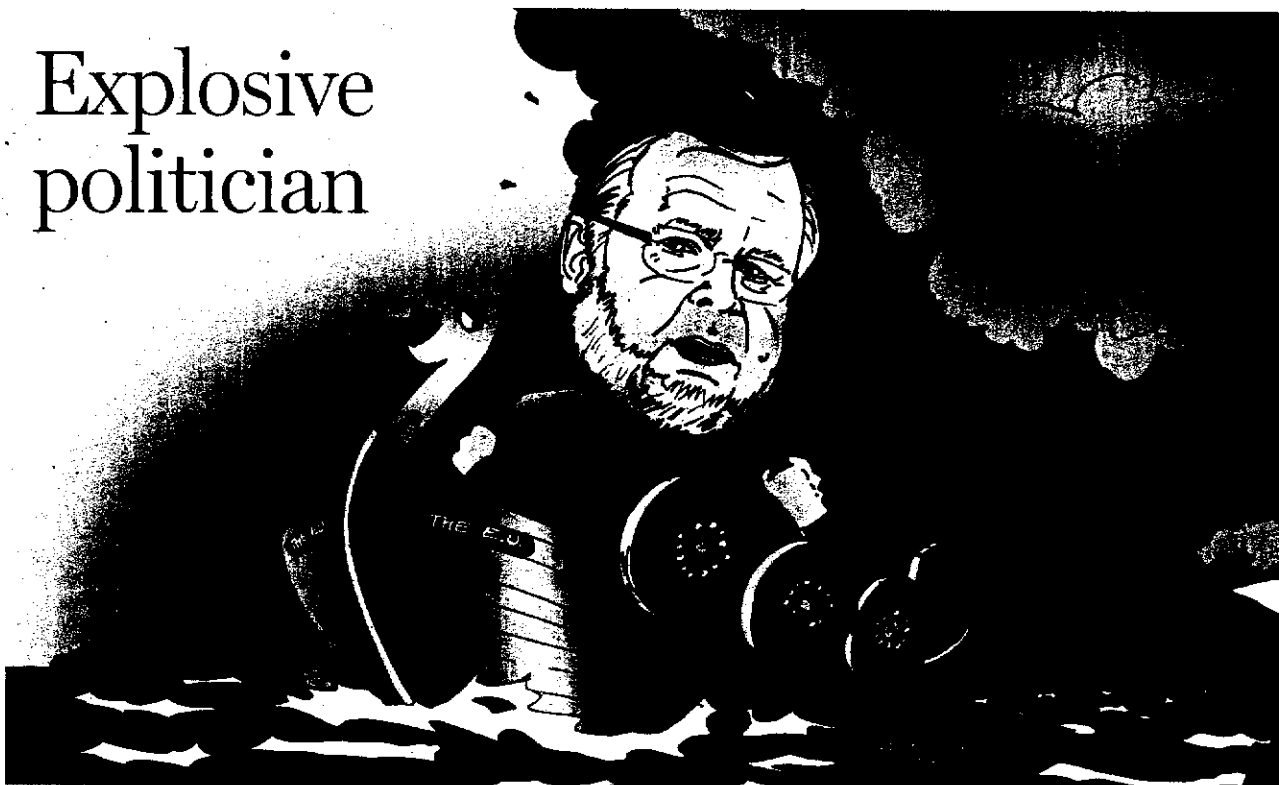


Explosive politician



“People don't give up in the middle of the river, even if there is storm and the water level is rising,” Össur

Skarphéðinsson said two weeks ago. Iceland's foreign minister was responding to a remark by his predecessor, Ingibjörg Sólrún Gísladóttir, who had told *FT Deutschland* that no one seemed to be fighting for Iceland's application to join the EU. Public support for accession was at an all-time low and perhaps it would be wise to withdraw Iceland's application, she suggested.

The interview was widely interpreted as being a direct attack on Skarphéðinsson. If so, then, according to another foreign minister and fellow left-winger, Jón Baldvin Hannibalsson, it will not shake Skarphéðinsson's commitment. “Össur has a strong belief in the EU and has never retreated from that conviction,” he says.

Skarphéðinsson has clashed with Gísladóttir, his sister-in-law, repeatedly since 2005, when she wrested from him the leadership of the Social Democratic Alliance (SDA), a party that Skarphéðinsson had led since 2000, shortly after its formation from the merger of a set of left-wing parties.

Gísladóttir is no longer a political force: her tenure ended in a shambles, when the SDA's governing coalition collapsed in 2008 in the wake of the economic meltdown and she retired from politics a year later, suffering from a brain tumour.

Nor is Skarphéðinsson quite the influence he was in 2005, since Prime Minister Jóhanna Sigurðardóttir, not Skarphéðinsson, took over the party from Gísladóttir. Nonetheless, by dint of history, skill and personality, Skarphéðinsson remains one of the determining forces of Icelandic politics. The 57-year-old is a political veteran, having started out as the editor of the party newspaper of the hard-left People's Alliance. But he is in some ways an unlikely politician.

Skarphéðinsson is a specialist in fish – he has been both a university lecturer and a fish farmer – and early in his political career liked to joke that he was “a doctor in the sea life of salmonids”. A colleague from those days, when Skarphéðinsson was beginning to make his way in politics (a process that involved moving from the People's Alliance and joining the Social

Democrats), says that Skarphéðinsson, the author of a book on trout, was genuinely torn between the scientific and the political. “But his love of being in the public eye won.”

Still, he has science to thank for an early political break, when, as a relatively new member of parliament, he was appointed minister of the environment. “Other people were higher in the pecking order,” says Hannibalsson, “but the fact that he had a PhD in biology gave him an advantage. We could not bypass him.”

Hannibalsson, who was then the Social Democrats' leader, also says Skarphéðinsson's education – he gained his doctorate in the UK – equipped him with better English than most Icelandic lawmakers, a strong tool for the future foreign minister.

Personality traits also suit him well in his current post. “I've no enemies in parliament, but many friends,” Skarphéðinsson said in 1996, and that remark still has the ring of truth.

“Össur is diplomatic, humorous and entertaining,” says Birgitta Jónsdóttir, a new opposition member of the Althingi, Iceland's parliament. Skarphéðinsson is good at nurturing relations with other members of the Althingi and he has friends in all political parties.

“He is very direct and often starts by flattering his opponents, then lets loose his arrows,” says Jónsdóttir.

Those arrows can be sharp. In the Althingi, he often disrupts speakers from his seat, a technique acquired from British politics, once famously remarking that he could “hear one of the opposition's MPs shaking his head”.

Long-standing friends, too, can be targets. When, to the government's dismay, President Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson refused in January to sign a bill to cover the costs incurred by the UK and the Netherlands as a result of the collapse of the Icelandic bank Landsbanki and its online offshoot Icesave, Skarphéðinsson said the president “could carry his own suitcases”, because, in a break with Icelandic convention, he – as the foreign minister – would not accompany the president on his next foreign trip.

Skarphéðinsson can be explosive when he himself is under attack and is renowned for his scorching remarks.

“He is much too fiery, that's his main flaw,” says his brother Magnús, and Skarphéðinsson has likened himself to a wild animal in the political arena.

He is very direct and often starts by flattering his opponents, then lets loose his arrows

“He is unpredictable and a bully at times,” says Þórunn Sveinbjarnardóttir, a SDA colleague. “But he has a warm and sensitive side to him. Össur is very intelligent and his memory is simply astounding.”

He is described as being unusually quick to grasp arguments and assess situations. He also has a voracious appetite for reading – a favourite pastime, along with walking, workouts at the gym and – less so now – fishing for trout and salmon.

That love of reading and the speed at which he reads, comes despite the loss of sight in one eye in a childhood accident. His poor eyesight has had much more of an impact on his driving, which is, apparently, ghastly.

That accident was not the only difficulty of Skarphéðinsson's childhood. Skarphéðinsson, who is married (to the geologist Árný Sveinbjörnsdóttir) and has two young daughters adopted from Colombia, left his childhood home as soon as he could. The oldest of five siblings, he battled repeatedly with a staunchly right-wing and volcanically tempered father and attended a school for difficult children.

That rebellious background appears at odds with the sartorial image he chose early in his political career – he wore bow-ties, a choice since largely abandoned – but his willingness to go into battle with others on political issues is very evident in the unbuttoned, late-night entries on his personal blog.

“He is a blabbermouth who thinks too little before speaking,” says an adversary. “That rules him out as a serious leader.”

That assessment does not do justice to his current position in Icelandic politics. Fellow politicians describe him as the main glue holding the left-wing coalition together. He knows the leaders of the two governing parties inside-out: the SDA's Sigurðardóttir and Steingrímur J. Sigfússon, leader of the Left Green Movement. But he is also a close friend of Ógmundur Jónasson, who left the government over the Icesave issue and who leads a discontented faction in the Left Green Movement.

Sigurðardóttir recently described the fractured Left Green Movement as a group of cats, difficult to herd. Skarphéðinsson may be the man for that job. “Össur is the main fox in the Althingi now,” his brother Magnús says. “And it takes a fox to herd those cats.”

Þjarni Brynjólfsson

CURRICULUM VITAE

1953:	Born, Reykjavík
1979:	Degree in biology, University of Iceland
1983:	Doctorate in biology, University of East Anglia, UK
1983:	Researcher in the British Marine Institute, Lowestoft
1984-87:	Editor of the People's Alliance newspaper <i>Þjóðvæðinginn</i>
1987-91:	Lecturer in biology at the University of Iceland, ran his own fish farm
1991-99:	Member of parliament for the Social Democratic Party
1993-95:	Environment minister
1997:	Editor of <i>Alþýðublaðið</i> , the SDP's party newspaper
1997-98:	Editor of <i>DI</i> , an evening paper
1999-:	Member of parliament for the Social Democratic Alliance
2000-05:	First chairman of the Social Democratic Alliance
2007-08:	Minister for Nordic co-operation
2007-09:	Minister of industry and tourism
2009-:	Minister for foreign affairs