

Icelanders hand in draft of world's first 'web' constitution

July 29 2011, by Agnes Valdimarsdottir



A man signs an official government document. A group of 25 ordinary citizens presented to Iceland's parliamentary speaker a new constitution draft, which they compiled with the help of hundreds of others who chipped in online.

A group of 25 ordinary citizens on Friday presented to Iceland's parliamentary speaker a new constitution draft, which they compiled with the help of hundreds of others who chipped in online.

The group had been working on the draft since April and posted its work on the Internet, allowing hundreds of other citizens to give their feedback on the project via the committee's website and on social networks such as Facebook.

"The reaction from the public was very important. And many of the members were incredibly active in responding to the comment that came through," Salvor Nordal, the head of the elected committee of citizens from all walks of life, told reporters.

Katrin Oddsdottir, a lawyer who had shared her experience on the committee through micro-blogging site Twitter, said she believed the public's input was "what mattered the most" in preparing the draft.

"What I learned is that people can be trusted. We put all our things online and attempted to read, listen and understand and I think that made the biggest difference in our job and made our work so so so much better," she said.

Iceland's constitution was barely adapted from Denmark's when the island nation gained independence from the Scandinavian kingdom in 1944.

"Since then, a holistic re-examination of the constitution has always been on the agenda, but always halted because of political infighting in the parliament," committee member Eirikur Bergmann, a political science professor at Iceland's Bifroest Unioversity who also tweeted his way through the committee's work, told AFP.

But after Iceland's [economic collapse](#) in 2008, which triggered massive [social movements](#), pressure mounted for a revamp of the constitution and for the process to be led by ordinary citizens, he said.

The committee's website (www.stjornlagarad.is, in Icelandic and English) quickly became an incubator for comments, with more than 1,600 propositions and comments on the suggested text.

Moreover, the council was present on Facebook, [Twitter](#), YouTube and Flickr, allowing [Iceland](#) -- and the world -- to follow its progress.

Most of the suggestions had to do with an economic model for the island nation of 320,000, committee member Silja Omarsdottir told AFP.

"The other proposals ... that form a noticeable trend have to do with the Internet, web neutrality, transparency and freedom of access to the Internet," she said.

Some citizens also gave specific suggestions.

"It would be more natural that a parliamentarian would have to resign from parliament should he take on the position of a minister," Bjarni Kristinn Torfason suggested on the council's webpage.

Helgi Johann Hauksson thought the council should be more specific: "who we 'all' are needs to be defined when it is written 'all of us are equal in the eyes of the law,'" he posted.

The comments of international observers ranged from admiration to the occasional bizarre idea.

"Iceland, you are truly a BIG small country! You bring hope to the hearts of people who are gathering on the squares and streets of Europe these days," said Greek university student Charalampos Krekoukiotis, while others from abroad suggested Iceland "kill all capitalists" or "legalise marijuana."

"It is messy. It is completely messy," Bergmann said of ploughing through the public's comments.

"But take your average legislation in your average [parliament](#) in your average country," he said. "That's messy as well."

Parliament's speaker Asta Ragnheidur Johannesdottir said the draft would be examined by a parliamentary committee starting October 1.

"I'm grateful for your work," she told the members. "It is my hope, that in time, Icelanders won't only have a constitution that they accept, but one which they are proud of," she added.

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