

'Nicole Fontaine : President of the European Parliament' from Tribune pour l'Europe


Caption: On 20 July 1999, Nicole Fontaine was elected Président of the European Parliament.

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Nicole Fontaine: President of the European Parliament

Nicole Fontaine (PPE, F) was elected President of the European Parliament on 20 July in the first ballot when she secured 306 votes. Mario Soarès (PSE, E) received 200 votes and Heidi Hautala (Greens/EFA, NL) 49. Since the first election of the European Parliament by direct universal suffrage in 1979, Mrs Fontaine thus becomes the second female President, after Simone Veil. This election therefore has a symbolic value, and the new President welcomed the increase in the number of women in the House (nearly 30 %, as against 27 % in the previous parliamentary term).

Mrs Fontaine was born on 16 January 1942 in Normandy. A graduate of the Paris Research Institute and a barrister with a doctorate in law, for 20 years she was responsible at national level for relations between private education and the State at the General Secretariat of Catholic Schools. She was a member of the National Education Advisory Board between 1975 and 1981 and a member of the Economic and Social Council from 1980 to 1984.

Mrs Fontaine was a member of the President's Council, of the Executive Committee and of the political office of the New UDF. She is President of the Committee of the New UDF responsible for relations with the European institutions.

Since 1984, she has been a Member of the European Parliament. She has been a Vice-President since 1989 and first Vice-President since 1994. She was a permanent member of the Conciliation Committee and Chairman of the EP delegation to the COSAC (Conference of Community and European Affairs Committees of Parliaments of the European Union).

In her inaugural speech, the new President remarked that 'if Europe is to be viewed as anything but a constraint, it must give birth to an enterprise which involves much more than setting up an economic and monetary area, even if the necessary social and environmental dimensions are added.' Accordingly, 'there is an urgent need today to give new meaning to the Union.' This is the only way to resolve the paradox that, in spite of the popularity of the European idea, the rate of abstention at European elections is constantly increasing. Parliament must improve its communication strategy and make it possible for the information it sends out to go far beyond the inner circles and reach out as closely as possible to the citizens. 'It is not enough to do things, they must be seen to have been done.' The President of the European Parliament intends to take up the challenge by demanding 'full recognition of the new responsibilities which the Treaty of Amsterdam has assigned to the European Parliament.' She feels that a better balance still needs to be established between the two forms of democratic legitimacy (the Council and Parliament) on which the adoption of Community legislation is based. The appointment of the new Commissioners will be the first opportunity for the newly elected Parliament to exercise its responsibilities and, 'it would be inconceivable for [Parliament] to appoint the Commission without first having read the second report of the Committee of Independent Experts.'

Mrs Fontaine would like to see a 'strong and creative Commission capable of tackling the great challenges which we have to face together.' The Commission must be transparent, respect the political and democratic equilibrium desired by the electorate and work in close synergy with Parliament. Since the Treaty of Amsterdam has not achieved all the objectives attributed to it at the outset, Parliament will need to enhance the Union's institutional equilibrium, and this in several directions. The scope of codecision must be extended to all items of Union legislation, and Parliament must be involved in the common foreign and security policy. Parliament must also 'be involved at a very early stage' with the preparatory work of the Intergovernmental Conference on the reform of the European Institutions. 'Parliament would not content itself with a minimalist reform.'

The President of the European Parliament also emphasised the role of her institution in the defence of human rights. In every international agreement, the European Parliament has unfailingly insisted that its approval was conditional on respect for a more authentic democracy which respects freedom and human rights. 'For all those peoples who are afflicted by dictatorship, civil war or underdevelopment, Europe represents an immense source of hope for peace, freedom and progress.'

Mrs Fontaine wanted her first action as President in the outside world to be a visit to Kosovo. In this region, we each of us somehow sense that this war was about the future of a democratic model which affords protection to all minorities. 'It was not acceptable, and indeed we refused to accept, that in the very heart of Europe human rights should once more be flouted in such a barbaric manner.' The President of the European Parliament hopes that her visit to Kosovo will allow her 'to go to the two communities, Albanian and Serbian, to the United Nations High Representative, to the political and religious authorities, to the international peace-keeping force, and convey the message of our determination.' The European Parliament will play a full role in the reconstruction of Kosovo and stabilisation of the Balkans.