

Interview with Nicole Fontaine: the major issues during her presidency of the European Parliament (Brussels, 5 February 2008)

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[Étienne Deschamps] Two and a half years is both a short and a long time. When you became President, what were your main priorities, your main concerns, the major challenges that you gave yourself for the two and a half years of your term of office? What were the real priority issues for you?

[Nicole Fontaine] You are right to emphasise this aspect, because I consider that in some ways it is an advantage to know how much time one has at one's disposal. A Minister does not know this; French Ministers do not know these days if there is going to be a reshuffle. It is unlikely before the municipal elections. Afterwards, however, they do not know. Anything is possible. This means that there may be those who have only served one year. It might last longer. It cannot be foreseen. Whereas there, in Parliament, there is much more time, and we can in fact plan our own programmes knowing that we can complement one another according to our personalities, to our backgrounds, to the countries that we represent, of course, and this is quite natural. In my case, what I wanted to do first, what I gave a great deal of attention to — naturally quite apart from the functioning of the European Parliament, and there were many things that had to be done, which led Mário Soares to describe my approach as 'housekeeping'. He had said, 'Mrs Fontaine has adopted a housekeeper's approach', because I had included an important section on the reforms and changes to be made.

[Étienne Deschamps] Items that were, of course, institutional and provided for in the texts.

[Nicole Fontaine] But what concerned me a great deal was the European Parliament's role regarding human rights, and increasing the significance of the European Parliament in the outside world. To the great annoyance, I must say, of the Council and of the Quai d'Orsay in my own country. Then there was the visit made by Commandant Massoud — the invitation that I sent Commandant Massoud — who had not even been received by the European embassies, yet he was received with great pomp by the European Parliament along with the Heads of State. There was the invitation to the Dalai Lama to address the plenary; there was the issue of taking part in ... of co-chairing a conference, the first international conference on the abolition of the death penalty. Now that set some teeth on edge, and I had some colleagues who maintained that it was not the role of the European Parliament to chair a conference on the abolition of the death penalty.

[Étienne Deschamps] Was there gnashing of teeth within Parliament or in the European capitals?

[Nicole Fontaine] Very little. In the European capitals, yes there was. But very little. Very, very little. But to put it another way, if you like, it is true that were straying from our role in a way. But let me remind you, the European Parliament is a sounding-board for the opinions of 500 million citizens. That cannot be ignored. The countries that I visited were ones that I chose. That is true. This was deliberate. My first trip was to ...

[Étienne Deschamps] Do you mean that this was an entirely personal initiative?

[Nicole Fontaine] Oh yes, absolutely so.

[Étienne Deschamps] They were not invitations that were made to you by these countries? I am thinking of the African countries, countries in the Middle and Near East. It is the President of Parliament who deliberately says 'I wish to go to this or that country, to meet this or that type of person or receive this or that ...'

[Nicole Fontaine] Yes, but I should not put it quite like that.

[Étienne Deschamps] How did things take place, practically speaking?

[Nicole Fontaine] I should say that one receives a large number of invitations and hence one is obliged to ... There are those one accepts ...

[Étienne Deschamps] One has to be selective.

[Nicole Fontaine] That's right, exactly. And of those that one can control oneself, when one wants to, the first was to Kosovo. Besides, before I was elected I had made a promise that my first trip would be to Kosovo. It was a strategic period when, you will recall, I met Kouchner, who at the time was ... It was a very, very demanding visit of very, very profound significance because, after all, it is the centre of Europe and it affects the European Union, and we took some important steps. Nothing spectacular but nonetheless all this was very important for the European Parliament. My second concern was, of course, the peace process in the Middle East and I organised a trip, naturally accompanied by my colleagues; a trip to Israel, the Palestinian territories, Jordan and Lebanon. We made the four trips, we were to go to Syria but apparently President Hassan II was ill, so that did not happen. So that was a very, very important trip then. Afterwards, as a consequence of this, there was the invitation that I sent to the speaker of the Knesset and to the speaker of the Palestinian Legislative Council. I do not know whether you recall that they arrived together: both Avraham Burg and Abu Ala. That was an absolutely fantastic moment because, seeing these two speakers, hand in hand, addressing the plenary and proclaiming to the whole world their desire for peace, their determination to achieve peace for their two States, was truly something very ... It was just after Camp David. Camp David had been a failure, but hopes were still quite strong. Nonetheless, it was very brave of both of them to come together. It was that, which ...