

Interview with Nicole Fontaine: her election as President of the European Parliament (Brussels, 5 February 2008)

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[Étienne Deschamps] In 1999, how was your candidature for the Presidency of the European Parliament received, supported and organised within the EPP, in view of the candidature of Mário Soares, former Portuguese Prime Minister Mário Soares?

[Nicole Fontaine] Yes. Yes, that's right. Yes, it took place in rather unusual conditions because up to that time we had had a consensual system under which the Presidency alternated between the two major groups in the European Parliament. Firstly there was a President from the EPP, for two and a half years, never more ... and that had been the case for around ten years, it had never ... we had never departed from this system. And so the EPP, when it was its turn, nominated a candidate, and the Socialists, most of the time they did not even nominate a candidate to stand against the EPP's candidate. There might be an unofficial candidature.

[Étienne Deschamps] A one-off candidature.

[Nicole Fontaine] Yes, exactly, but which was not endorsed.

[Étienne Deschamps] There was a tacit rotation system.

[Nicole Fontaine] Yes, exactly. And the last President before my election was José María Gil-Robles, the Spaniard, who had had the support of everyone: the Socialists ... Right. And so normally it should have been a Socialist candidate who was nominated and elected without any great surprise. But then two very important events occurred. The first was the overwhelming victory of the CDU/CSU group in Germany, and this started to make the Germans think; they said to themselves, 'Our voters are not going to understand. How, given that the EPP has such a large majority and given that have won ... When we're going to have to tell them that we've elected a Socialist President it will be very, very difficult to make them accept it.' And the second element, which was even more important, was that Schröder, Chancellor Schröder, decided, I don't know why, to put an end to the existing 'gentlemen's agreement', according to which, when — at the time the large countries, in inverted commas, the countries ... had two Commissioners, and it was traditional, customary, for one of them to come from the majority and for the other to be offered to the opposition. So, normally Schröder should have offered the second Commissioner's post to the CDU/CSU. Not at all. He appointed a Green. So there was one Socialist Commissioner and one Green Commissioner. The Germans were rightly furious and said: 'Seeing it's like that, it's a *casus belli*, so we will also put forward a candidate.' As a result, the Socialists were very annoyed ... the Socialist group ... Right. Some bargaining went on. On this basis, Mário Soares chose to stand; the Socialists supported Mário Soares, thinking that he would easily get elected, given his reputation.

[Étienne Deschamps] Given his role, who he was and the role that he had played in Portugal's history.

[Nicole Fontaine] Yes, exactly. And forgetting completely, and that was a big mistake from both Mário Soares and his supporters, exactly what I just said earlier, that the European Parliament had recovered its self-confidence. Ten years ago, it would have voted, or seven or eight years before, it would not have hesitated to vote for Mário Soares because it felt much weaker and it thought that being led by a figure as symbolically important as the person who had restored democracy to Portugal would do it good; it would be good for the institution. But now there was no need for it. There was no need for it at all, and my colleagues said to themselves, 'Well, we prefer our colleague whom we know, with whom we have worked, who was Vice-President, who knows the institution well, and we have no reason to ...' You see, so it was quite another period and, incidentally, it was very interesting, I will always remember that in the curriculum vitae of Mário Soares he mentioned 30 foundations or associations of which he was President, without realising that it was completely counter-productive.

[Étienne Deschamps] That it went against him.

[Nicole Fontaine] Well, my colleagues were saying, 'But when is he going to find time for us?' And also he was not familiar with the institution, he had just arrived. He was convinced that he was going to win, absolutely convinced.

[Étienne Deschamps] Did you have the opportunity to speak to him, afterwards, about this, maybe this lack of perceptiveness or this miscalculation ...?

[Nicole Fontaine] No.

[Étienne Deschamps] ... that he or his colleagues in the Socialist group had ...

[Nicole Fontaine] Yes, I think that he had been ill-advised, certainly, because you had to be inside the institution to be familiar with the atmosphere within the institution, and it's true that I received a lot of votes in the secrecy of the ballot, I received a lot of left-wing votes. He did not get all the votes that he should have done, by any means. I also received a good number of female votes, from female colleagues. But he had a knowledge, if you like ... But none of that is particularly relevant; what is relevant, because you mentioned it, I think that the trigger was the refusal to appoint a Commissioner, which ... and there was a hint of revenge there, a ...

[Étienne Deschamps] And from the moment at which the EPP group decided 'No, we are also going to put forward our candidate and we hope that he or she will be elected'. That really demonstrated a discipline within the EPP group ...

[Nicole Fontaine] Yes. Absolutely.

[Étienne Deschamps] ... behind the candidate who was actually chosen.

[Nicole Fontaine] Yes, exactly.

[Étienne Deschamps] And no more disputes, no more tension.

[Nicole Fontaine] And in spite of the pressure that Mário Soares put on the various people, trying to impress upon them that his qualities and his reputation were a credit to the European Parliament, thinking that his colleagues would react to that. That is what made it very interesting. It was very interesting because it was really linked with what had happened a few months earlier, something that had completely altered the state of mind and the mindset of my colleagues.