

*CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY*

28 03 2008 - Seminar on "The role of women in intercultural dialogue"

Draft - Opening speech

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The European Parliament has organised many conferences and seminars around the theme of women and intercultural dialogue - it is good to be able to share this one with you. In his inaugural speech last year, our current president Hans-Gert Pöttering placed particular emphasis on intercultural dialogue and a number of eminent personalities are set to appear before Parliament's plenary this year around this theme. This also coincided with this year's celebrations to mark International Women's Day on 8 March.

I want to present to you some thoughts on my own experiences as a woman parliamentarian and specifically around the EP.

I first arrived in the Parliament in 1999. During our first constitutive session we elected a woman as President: Nicole Fontaine. This was a powerful a powerful signal to me - I was part of an institution where a woman could achieve anything, even be president. Of course, she was only the second one to achieve that in a long line of men. But we need role models and symbols.

The other symbol or picture that stays with me from Nicole Fontaine's presidency was a day in Strasbourg where she invited a leading member of the Israeli parliament and of the Palestinian authority to address

plenary. After the speeches, she stood between them, holding their hands aloft. It was a powerful picture, and somehow perhaps one only a woman could instinctively have achieved; whatever the sad developments in that part of the world subsequently.

My own experience has led me to believe that women have particular talents to bring to both dialogue and tense or conflictual situations. I can recall my own professional life as a young lawyer on the one hand being extremely proud often to be the only woman advocate in a court or tribunal, or more often in business meetings with clients, yet also being aware that by mere presence as a woman could actually alter the nature of the discussion of the conversation. Women must make use of that advantage.

Again, before I was elected to the EP and for a number years, I taught a course in foreign and comparative law at my local university. This was for students doing a joint law and language degree. The first year of the course we had just six students. The most remarkable thing was that they were all young women. Although a generalisation, women often tend to be more attracted to language studies, to be the better linguists; I could also add the better listeners, more sympathetic. All those six students went on to get good jobs at least three of them now have employment in Brussels or the European institutions.

Women perhaps have a different approach. In my political life I have seen that women like to get things done; to see positive achievements. In my country, that means that many more women are attracted to and participate in local government, where they can literally make a huge difference to the life in their localities.

I feel the same about the European Parliament. Every one of us from whatever political party or background has the possibility to be a Rapporteur on a legislative proposal, to take that dossier through the co-decision process. It is almost like being a junior minister in 27 countries. Without any one political group having a majority in our House, people have to work together, you can change minds and majorities; it seems to me that this kind of politics is more feminine in nature.

I often contrast this with my national parliament, euphemistically called by some the "mother" of Parliaments. Nothing could be further from the truth. The number of women there is still appalling low, representing less than 20% of MPs. One analyst (Fawcett Society - a charity) estimated that, at the current rate of change, it would take the conservative party 400 years to achieve parity in Westminster. The nature of the politics remains aggressive and adversarial, it has the quality of a boy's only public school, or of a men's club. You can only achieve something if you are part of the government with its majority, otherwise it seems like a very frustrating experience. One that most women are not attracted to.

On the other hand, the European Parliament seems to have fared much better. Women made up 16% of the first directly elected parliament, and that figure is now up to over 30%. There is no doubt that, apart from the legislative work of our house, many women are attracted and perform well in the international dimension, to mention just a few, in the field of election monitoring, international development etc. For example, 13 out of the 36 chairs of parliamentary delegations dealing with third countries are women (35%). Then of course there is the tireless work of our women's committee in looking at all sorts of gender issues - a committee

originating back to an initiative taken during the Presidency of Simone Veil.

But finally, I wonder if we still have to overcome some fundamental changes in the way we think about women's role, particularly amongst women. I notice that when Simone Veil was president, she referred to a survey where women, when asked, said that they preferred to be represented by men, by male politicians! I wonder if that would be different today.

There is now all sorts of chatter in the corridors of Brussels about who will be the first president of the European Council, the next president of the Commission, the next president of the EP, but all the names being mentioned have one thing in common: they are all male.

Some seem to suggest, women that is, that there are no qualified women candidates, and I take issue with that. I wonder if it is still not a question of perception. We need to get women seen in those roles. I am absolutely sure that women have the ability to fill such posts and succeed in them, because of some of the female qualities I have referred to that make them well qualified to lead in dialogue, and particularly intercultural dialogue.

ENDS