

Nilde Iotti (1920 – 1999)

Advocate of universal suffrage and founding mother of the Italian Republic



Leonilde 'Nilde' Iotti was a resistance fighter during the Second World War, and became one of post-war Italy's most important female politicians. Considered by many as a founding mother of the Italian Republic and perhaps 'the best president Italy never had', Iotti was a member of the committee that drafted the core of the country's new constitution in 1946. Two years later, she joined the Chamber of Deputies, eventually becoming its longest serving president.

A committed European, Iotti became a member of the European Parliament in 1969, serving until 1979, and was elected vice president of the Council of Europe in 1997.

Leonilde 'Nilde' Iotti was born in Reggio Emilia, a small pro-Communist town in Northern Italy, on 10 April 1920. A diligent student, she won a scholarship to study literature and philosophy at Milan's prestigious Catholic university, though she remained a committed atheist all her life.

A resistance fighter during the Second World War, she became a prominent figure in the Communist party (PCI) and a leading organiser of the PCI-dominated Union of Italian Women once the conflict was over. With women gaining full suffrage in 1945, Iotti enjoyed considerable support among the female electorate and was elected in 1946 to the constituent assembly, a parliamentary chamber responsible for drafting a new Republican constitution. Iotti was responsible for drafting the family policy section of the constitution.

She joined the Chamber of Deputies in 1948, one of the two houses (along with the Senate) of the Italian parliament. She was the first woman, and the first Communist, to hold high institutional office in Italy when she became president of the

Chamber in 1979, a post she held until 1992. Known for self-assurance and impartiality in the role, Iotti was often considered the 'best president Italy never had'.

After the death of Palmiro Togliatti, the PCI leader, in 1964, Iotti worked hard to modernise the party. She represented the pro-European face of the party, and supported, throughout her career, European integration as a driver of positive social transformation. "We want a European Union [...] to gain new paths to a greater civil, social and political development, and to open new frontiers of renewal and growth which are no longer allowed by the narrow spaces of the nation-states, nowadays too bounded, and therefore limited in their sovereignty". (Nilde, *Parole e Scritti*, 1955 – 1998, Comitato per la costituzione della Fondazione Nilde Iotti).

During this period, Iotti continued to fight hard for women's rights. She supported and successfully campaigned for the introduction of divorce and abortion laws, which were high priorities for members of the women's movement. She was also a

mediating voice, urging her younger comrades not to ignore the views of Catholic women on such topics.

A champion of universal suffrage

A politician committed to the idea of a fair and equal Europe, lotti was determined to bring her fight for universal suffrage to the European stage. She became a member of the European Parliament as part of the Italian delegation in 1969, the first year that communist candidates were appointed. Throughout her time as an MEP she championed direct elections to the European Parliament, believing that election by the people would give the Parliament an unshakeable mandate and the credibility to act on behalf of citizens.

Her vision for a united Europe also extended to considering the geopolitical implications of an ever closer union. lotti believed

that people of Europe had a duty to provide a positive influence, for example, on the relations between the north and the south of the world, on the peace and development of the Middle East and, more generally, on the regulation of the international system.

lotti saw her and her colleagues' work rewarded in 1979 with the first direct elections to the European Parliament. She ended her ten-year association with the Parliament soon after; a decade in which she also served on the Parliament's Foreign Affairs committee. lotti's connection to Europe did not end there. In 1997 she was elected vice-president of the Council of Europe, the human rights organisation that includes 47 member states.

After 53 years in politics, lotti announced her resignation from the Italian parliament in November 1999. She died two weeks later in Rome on 4 December, aged 79.