

Nicole Fontaine: Politician and educator (1942-2018)



The European Parliament's second female President was a persuasive politician and devoted champion of Europe who oversaw the adoption of the euro. Nicole Fontaine, who was President from 1999-2002, set about reforming the European Parliament's working methods to bring it closer to European citizens.

In her maiden speech to the European Council in Tampere, Finland, in October 1999, she underlined the importance of taking account of people's day-to-day concerns. She argued for an 'ambitious approach aimed at providing the Union with a charter of fundamental rights'. In December 2000 she signed the Charter of Fundamental Rights on behalf of the European Parliament.

Fontaine was an educator as well as a politician. She was a professor at ESCP Europe, the world's oldest business school, and was Jean Monnet Chair at the University of Nice Sophia Antipolis.

Early Years

Born on 16 January 1942 in Grainville-Ymauville, Normandy, Nicole Fontaine was the daughter of a doctor and the granddaughter of primary school teachers. She studied law and became a member of the bar of the department of Hauts-de-Seine, but education was to remain important to her.

Fontaine was living in Paris' Latin Quarter during the 1968 riots by students and workers. She had just finished at the *Institut d'Etudes Politiques de Paris* (Paris Institute of Political Studies) and was expecting her first child. Describing herself more as 'an observer of events rather than a participator', she later reflected that the protests of May 1968 had hastened inevitable change in French society.

Fontaine began her career at the *Secrétariat général de l'Enseignement catholique* (Catholic Education Secretariat), responsible for relations between the private education sector and the public authorities. She subsequently played a major role in the legislative and statutory changes that shaped the legal framework in this area. She was a member of the *Conseil Supérieur de l'Education Nationale* (French National Education Council) from 1975 to 1981 and of the *Conseil économique et social* (Economic and Social Council) from 1980 to 1984. Fontaine rose to greater prominence during national debates on private education and was elected to the European Parliament in June 1984.

Political career

From the very start of her parliamentary career, Nicole Fontaine worked for a citizens' Europe, focusing on projects concerning youth education and the mutual recognition of academic qualifications, as well as women's rights and gender equality.

She served twice as Vice-President, from 1989 to 1994 and from 1994 to 1999. She brokered agreements between the European Parliament and the Member States on key legislation, including two EU youth programmes (Socrates and Youth for Europe). Her diplomatic skills were widely recognised. In 1999, *The Economist* described her as ‘a consensus-seeker, coalition-builder, conciliator... nowhere more at home than in the byzantine corridors of Europe, canvassing cross-party support, flashing her smile, teasing out compromise’.

Nicole Fontaine was elected President of the European Parliament on 20 July 1999. Her first test was the appointment of a new Commission led by Romano Prodi following the collapse of the Santer Commission in March 1999. She enjoyed good relations with both the new Commission and with Member States in the Council of Ministers.

Working tirelessly for dialogue and peace, Fontaine famously brought together the Presidents of the Israeli and Palestinian parliaments for an historic handshake in Strasbourg in 2000. In April 2001 she invited Commander Ahmad Shah Massoud, the Vice-President of Afghanistan, to visit Strasbourg to speak about the situation in his country. She was particularly concerned about the plight of Afghan women. The following month she invited three women who had secretly escaped Kabul to the European Parliament to give their testimony. She described the meeting as among the ‘most moving moments’ of her Presidency.

In 2002, Fontaine left the European Parliament to become France’s Minister for Industry in the government of Jean-Pierre Raffarin. Between 2004 and 2005, she headed the Scelles Foundation, which fights against sexual exploitation. She was re-elected to the

European Parliament in 2004. Nicole Fontaine was also affiliate professor at ESCP Europe, and wrote a number of books on the work of the European Parliament.

Nicole Fontaine was immersed in the debate on how to improve the European Union right up to the last years of her life. Just before the UK referendum on EU membership in June 2016, she published *Brexit, Une Chance? Repenser l'Europe* (Brexit: An Opportunity? Rethinking Europe) with French journalist François Poulet-Mathis. The book is an objective look at the reasons behind public disaffection with the EU. Always a champion of Europe, Nicole Fontaine looked at how to turn it into an opportunity to address the needs of citizens and strengthen the European Union.

Nicole Fontaine died on 17 May 2018 at the age of 76. Her devotion to European ideals was recognised during her lifetime by a number of awards, including the Robert Schuman Medal and the *Commandeur dans l'Ordre National du Mérite* (Commander of the National Order of Merit).



Nicole Fontaine greets Afghan politician and Northern Alliance military leader Ahmad Shah Massoud during his visit to the European Parliament in Strasbourg in 2001.