

"IRISH INDEPENDENT" - 6.8.1979

Independent WOMAN

First feminist premier puts people first

JUST three months after Margaret Thatcher became the first woman in the western world to take power, Europe has its second woman Prime Minister. Last week Portugal's Prime Minister Maria de Lourdes Pintasilgo announced her Cabinet and declared that she would never be the instrument of a military regime. Her rise to power has been even more rapid and remarkable than that of Simone Veil, former French Health Minister and now as president of the EEC Parliament — Europe's most powerful woman.

In July, 1974, nearly three months after the revolution that terminated fifty years of fascism in Portugal, a woman was named to a Cabinet Ministry. This was the highest position in the history of the Portuguese government ever reached by a woman. Maria Pintasilgo, within her brief six months as Minister for Social Welfare, managed to completely reorganise one of the most archaic health and welfare systems in the world.

The revolutionary government of Portugal underwent rapid shifts and changes, however, and by the end of 1975 there had been seven governments sworn into office and the second one, in which Pintasilgo served, was just slightly longer lived than the others.

Maria de Lourdes Pintasilgo returned to her United Nations post and served with the UNESCO division in Paris during the next several tumultuous years of rising and falling governments in Portugal. While elected and appointed governments followed each other in rapid succession, polarisation amongst political parties and trade union strikes paralysed the faltering economy and the social changes of the revolution were repealed and dissembled.

In a climate of discord and impasse, President Ramalho Eanes, called on Maria Pintasilgo to form a new government. She has remained independent of political parties and has been recognised as acceptable as a leader by the trade unions and by political parties on the centre and left. Once again she is faced with an enormous task and a

very brief time in which to conduct minor miracles.

This interview, conducted in January, 1975, synthesizes the background and philosophy of the Feminist to become a Prime Minister.

Maria Pintasilgo is a worker and saw her task as producing a new comprehensive welfare scheme which would overcome in one generation backwardness and medieval thinking.

Engineer

Her background as an educated woman was, she said, a product of her privileged class position. She was raised with little immediate awareness of poverty or exploitation, close affiliation of Catholic feminist philosophical tradition. In her first job as an engineer in a major Portuguese chemical manufacturing firm, she became aware of the problems of the working class, of their exploitation and distress.

That was the beginning of her commitment to social and political change in Portugal. Since that time, Maria Pintasilgo has been learning, doing and fighting. Her appointment was the recognition of her professionalism and commitment, rather than the awarding of a cabinet post to the representative of a political party.

How did Maria Pintasilgo become involved in social questions?

"Well first of all I think it was exactly the fact that I was engineer in a big Chemical Company in Portugal and there I was in the department of industrial research. But I was very much connected with all the social questions and relations and, therefore, I had a growing sensitivity to these kind of problems, and very clearly to the ex-

An exclusive interview with Portugal's new Prime Minister Maria de Lourdes Pintasilgo, by Rona M. Fields, Ph.D.

ploitation of the system as I found it at that time.

"Secondly, after a while I began working internationally with a confessional group, a Catholic group actually, and I was very much alerted to the problem that was no longer a national one but an international one between haves and have nots."

To deal with these problems Ms. Pintasilgo became involved politically seeing politics as a means of forming a web between relations with people and relations with ourselves. Worked as an engineer, she defines herself as having a clear ideology which is clear to those who work with her.

Emigration

Portugal has been beset by political and social trauma. Among the problems are decolonisation with a consequent effect on unemployment figures and emigration on very similar lines to Ireland in the 40s and 50s.

In 1975 there were over a million Portuguese men abroad, most of them from the rural areas. Generally their wives and families remained at home working the small farms, while the families who join their menfolk have language and isolation problems of other countries.

To the challenges facing Portugal Ms. Pintasilgo brings her own belief in the need for social action. Hers is an approach which — unlike the EEC — puts people rather than economic strategy first.

"What we need is not



Maria de Lourdes Pintasilgo

economic targets but rather being the first woman minister social targets towards which helps me break the rules that exist because even within a revolution there are certain rules."

Liberation

"If men are together and men act like the masculine man and have acted in a certain way — they go on acting that way. I think that liberation of a society does not come about without the liberation of women at the same time. Therefore, being a woman I can create my own law, my own rules so therefore, I see a more positive aspect than a problem."

Women account for almost one in three of the work force in Portugal, but generally they are in low status low paid jobs or in traditional all female areas of work. Ms. Pintasilgo felt that she would like to show other women that what she was doing was not so different from what they could do too. And she believes that there may be a certain advantage for women in that they have been socialised into a different way of thinking from the men who hold power.

Even within a revolutionary group woman can bring about a certain freedom. At least I feel that I am not there for a career, I am not there for reaching anything on the top, I am not there for doing that job. I am concerned with the person's whatever their situation, whatever their political party is and that's a tremendous freedom. It's the way I see it."

"Maybe because of my previous experience of having always been the first woman to take on a job, I've had that experience before. I was the first woman to work in industry, the first engineer and so on. I cannot see many problems, I see more of a possibility because of the way I operate, of an opening in terms of being a woman and

