

LETTERS TO MY SISTERS

MARILYN WARING

Woman of the people



FROM ALL OVER the country Portuguese people from all walks of life went to Lisbon on July 27. They went by plane, car, bus and donkey cart. They went to hear a candidate launch a presidential election campaign.

Parliamentary elections were held in Portugal on October 6. Presidential elections will be held in early January. The Portuguese constitution says the president can be a non-party candidate and can appoint the prime minister of his or her choice. Maria de Lourdes Pintasilgo will be the first presidential candidate without party backing, running against candidates from the Social Democrats, the Communist Party, the Christian Democrats, the Socialists and the Democratic-renovator Party.

The Portuguese external debt is currently \$US15,300 million, while the internal budget deficit is \$US2000 million. The unemployment rate is 11%, the inflation rate 29%. The wages of more than 150,000 workers have not been paid for some months. Real wages have fallen by 20% in the past two years.

Recently newspapers have reported the collapse of coalitions in the current government. The party system is increasingly discredited, and instability is such that while the Communist and Socialist parties vociferously oppose the independent candidacy, the army is standing back from the election hoping there will be no victory, no coalition, and a collapse during which it might re-establish supremacy.

Newspapers note the independent candidate has no known power base "only the people". Polls in February recorded Mario Soares at 8%, Freitas do Amaral at

11% and de Lourdes at 27%. She doesn't have extraordinary rhetoric, just honesty, compassion, vision and enormous common sense. On July 27 de Lourdes told those at her campaign launch:

The future president should be independent.

The presidential office cannot be used for special benefits.

I shall never accept the parties' support in exchange for political favours.

Our country doesn't have to spend the rest of its life knocking at others' doors. (Neither the Socialists nor the Christian Democrats have any problem in becoming a US satellite.)

Politics today is an art, science and technique.

Politics cannot be a game of words between parties.

Portuguese politics have too many words and no action.

How can a country progress without a development plan?

There has been a lack of political will on the execution of the government programmes.

The political system hasn't exhausted its possibilities.

The power doesn't exist for itself.

The next revision of the constitution should include the referendum.

To regionalise is to recognise that the reality of a country is multi-centred.

My political attitude springs forth from the fact that I am a Christian.

The dedication to my neighbour

(born from faith) is inseparable from intervention in social life.

You cannot govern if you remain in your office and don't listen to the people concerned.

These are not the empty words of someone who does not know what she is talking about. Born in 1930 Maria de Lourdes Pintasilgo graduated in chemical engineering and became a researcher at the Commission of Nuclear Energy. From 1954 to 1960 she was the project director for the Research and Development Department of the biggest industrial company in Portugal. From 1960 to 1969 she was co-ordinator of training and research programmes, as well as pilot projects, in the fields of development and socio-cultural action, in Portugal and abroad, in the context of the international women's movement "The Grail". She was appointed to the Chair of the Portuguese Interministerial Commission for Social Policy Concerning Women from 1970 to 1974 when she became Secretary of State for Social Welfare.

De Lourdes was recalled from her post as Portuguese ambassador to Unesco, where she served from 1976 to 1979, to become interim Prime Minister of the fifth constitutional government in 1979. She did not run for office in the elections which followed and has since served as adviser to the president.

In 1983 de Lourdes was invited to join the Interaction Council — an organisation of former Western leaders of national states. Most former leaders are asked to join, and her colleagues include Edward Heath, Olaf Palme, Willy Brandt and Malcolm Fraser.

I wanted you to know about Maria de Lourdes and that forthcoming election. I first met her in Oslo in 1980. At that and every subsequent meeting she has added profoundly to my knowledge and understanding of politics. I consider her one of the most extraordinary people I have met and a truly radical feminist. I wanted to tell you I thought her election to office might be one of the most sane, hopeful and celebratory political events this planet could witness. Then I thought "they'll just think she's gone too far again". So I was overjoyed to find a compatriot, Artur Portela, journalist and intellectual, had already done it.

He said: "It is true that there is newness in being a woman candidate in a state which has been for 800 years politically male. . . ."

"But the content of the eventual candidacy of Maria de Lourdes Pintasilgo is something else. As it is her image. As it is her call. Maybe they will be the humanisation of politics, the democratisation of democracy . . . Maybe they will be the rediscovery, in the old social and cultural Portuguese fabrics, of energies which are new or even anonymous in civic life . . . MLP is a political, moral and cultural personality by herself. She has proved it. In what she has done. In what she has attempted. In the way she has exercised political power . . ."

"It may be utopia at the reach of our hands, it may be the breadth not only trans-european, but transcontinental, truly planetary . . ."

"It is very likely that there will be, in this candidacy, a unique meeting of simplicity and grandeur, of Pessoa's village and the whole world . . ."

