

A Portuguese Woman: Revolutionary
Leadership in a New Society

Portugal, after fifty years of dictatorship; thirteen years of engagement in no-win colonial warfare in Africa; massive endemic unemployment; emigration levels so high to have accounted for a drop in population of two million during a period when national population figures throughout the rest of the world have climbed; is undergoing a leftist revolution initiated by the Armed Forces - an institution which, within a fascist society would be expected to be the most right wing.

Portugal is a country long dominated by a conservative social and moral code, typified by the 1972 seizure of a book and the arrest of the three women authors who had challenged the social and political conventions. (New Portuguese Letters, M.I. Barrena, M.T. Horta and M.V. Da Costa, Yet, less than a year after the explosive and inconclusive trial of the Three Marias, as they came to be internationally known, a Portuguese woman occupies the cabinet position of Minister of Social Affairs in the Revolutionary, provisional government of Portugal. Furthermore, this new Minister for Social Affairs is an Engineer by profession and, as a voice of political dissent had still managed to maintain the position of representative to the United Nations under the previous government of Marcello Caetano. Maria de Lourdes Pintassilgo holds her post in the most sensitive ministry of a government committed to social and political change; and holds it as an independent.

Since her appointment to the Ministry in the coalition government which was formed in July, 1974, under the leadership of

Colonel Vasco Gonsalves, the newly appointed Prime Minister, the Portuguese revolution has undergone severe stresses, strains and enormous leaps forward as its sponsors have recognized their own strength.

Shortly after her appointment in July, I interviewed Senora Pintassilgo at her office in the Labour Exchange. The setting itself synthesized the paradoxes of the new Portuguese revolutionary regime. The building, a very modern high rise of stone and glass was the assemblage point for many of the unemployed. They lounged, lingered and picketed on the sidewalk in front of the building. They filled the ground floor reception area and queued up at the information counter. Revolution or no, they needed work or they needed evaluation for work, or they needed some of the rare pension benefits to which few were entitled in Portugal.

The Minister does not give many interviews. She is one of the few office holders in Portugal unobsessed with explaining herself, making promises or broadening her constituency. She is a worker and sees her task as producing a new comprehensive scheme which will overcome in one generation the backwardness and medieval thinking which has petrified the Portuguese class system; exacerbated human misery and provided the human material for sustaining colonial wars and dictatorships at home. 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 to a Catholic Humanist philosophical tradition. In her first job as an engineer in a major Portuguese chemical manufacturing firm,

she became intimately acquainted with the problems of the working class, their exploitation and distress. That was the beginning of her commitment to social and political change in Portugal. Since that time, Maria Pintassilgo 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.

But the Ministry for Social Affairs was, in July of 1974, an amorphous portfolio. Much of the program of the Armed Forces Movement is concerned with change in social affairs, but the interpretation of the program, prior to October called for a care-taker government until the election of representatives to a constitutional assembly. As of July, it was apparent to the Minister that social and health needs, already lagging behind the requirements of a modern society would become geometrically increased by the various displacements attendant upon a new political system. For instance, in a society which provided no unemployment compensation nor general health care insurance, veterans of the brutal and prolonged African wars would be returned without jobs, to inadequate housing, neglected families, and with no veterans pensions. Furthermore, a nation with an illiteracy rate running over ten percent of the adult population will go to the polls to elect a new government without any prospect of knowing for whom or why they are voting unless drastic changes occur in the social affairs of the primarily rural population.

By December, 1974, the indecisiveness of the governing coalition had resolved itself into an attitude of revolutionary

confidence marked by a high degree of consensus without any pretense of uniformity or unanimity. Maria Pintassilgo had gotten the first part of her ministerial assignment completed with a comprehensive planning proposal entitled Ministry of Social Affairs: Current Plans, and the cabinet, in January, 1975, adopted unanimously her ministries' plans for National Health Services, the first of many projects in her program to reorganize the relationship between the government and the governed in Portugal. That same day, January 2, we met together to discuss her experiences as the first woman Cabinet Minister in the history of Portugal.

Fields: You were trained as an engineer and not particularly as a social worker and certainly not as a politician. What was it that led you into social welfare and social concerns?

Pintassilgo: 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 exploitation of the system as I found it at that time and also the class system that we had and still have. 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. And I could see the so called developing

countries were emerging. They were making forceful entry into the international scene and were fearful, and it was in that context of international confrontation that the political dimension became acute for me and became somehow a platform out of which my actions and commitments have evolved.

Fields: So you saw that in order to deal with these problems from your own personal perspective you would have to act politically?

Pintassilgo: Yes, I feel that as soon as you become aware of the political dimension of a problem, you know that all your actions are political and therefore the moment that politics, in a strict sense, as I act now, becomes a possibility one cannot run away from. Because it's in the same line, I see the political sector of a society as the web we can make between relations with people and the relations between structures and I see politics a very particular aspect of both and therefore I think that everybody is involved in the political life in the sense of living that web of relationship. But another thing that is more restrictive in one way, is what we call a political power as in governmental position that I am holding now.

Fields: Is your position going to be subject to the party politics which will evolve out of the March elections?

Pintassilgo: I am convinced that a change will happen. It's still early to foresee what will happen because in the present government it is very much stated a unitarian force for all those that sit around that table. But it may very likely happen that if either of the parties in the coalition parties who are not in the government coalition win more in the assembly, (the constitutional assembly) that they will want somehow a responsibility in the government between say April, and the new one we will have by October or so. In that way, I think that the independent ministers of who I am one, may be replaced by persons representing those political parties. This is a possibility.

Fields: It is very difficult to maintain an office as an independent anyway.

Pintassilgo: Yes, I am not really an independent in the sense that I have my ideology and for those with whom I work the ideology I have is clear. I am independent in the sense that at this moment I am not part of any of the political parties. All of us who sit around the table in the cabinet have, I can say, a socializing tendency (on each other) or a socialistic tendency in the broader sense.

Fields: And this is the key ministry for any one concerned with social change. In looking at the problems that are going to emerge and that are emerging, do you see current social

problems in any way exacerbated by the changes coming about from the de-colonialization of Portuguese Africa? Do you see problems of racial relations in Metropolitan Portugal? Do you see that because of the relationships with the colonies undergoing a drastic change, do you see how Metropolitan Portugal will be immediately effected?

Pintassilgo: I think that Portugal will be affected. First of all in a negative way because I want to stress later on the positive way. The negative way, as you say the unemployment rate which is rather big though we don't have very complete numbers. And in a way although we are in the process of de-colonization which I can see as extremely positive and very quick. I see also that we have to pay the price for that speed and the price is that we must ourselves meet our international commitments in relation to those territories which are in the process of becoming independent. We have a very important responsibility in the sense of working with the people in the new states, as we have the same language and somehow should be real partners. I think that this is a unique opportunity in history because Portugal being a poor country there is no chance that it will be a neo-colonial power. From my point of view, I think that this cooperation is going to cost money to Portugal but at the same time it can be beneficial for Portugal

itself in the sense that these new states have drive and the sense of being born anew which is very good and can influence our politics at home. But we have got to pay the price in terms of budget, in terms of investment of people and money in the new states. These are the negative effects. The positive ones I see in the social situation ...you mentioned the racial question. Though some incidents and localized fights have taken place in Luanda (Angola), I still don't think that Portugal is a racist people. On the contrary, I think that there is possibility for a change and that the new states can be a tremendous force for the widening horizons of the people of Portugal who naturally because of our geographical situation in Europe, are somehow isolated. Therefore, I see a social change coming from the interplay between Portugal and its former colonies.

Fields: Then you see Portugal as a bridge between the third world and Europe?

Pintassilgo: You ask the question, I'm glad you asked it. I really believe that that can be a possibility without being a chauvinist about that matter, I do think that this is a real possibility.

Fields: Have the problems in Metropolitan Portugal of black and white living together not been anywhere like the problems in England or the United States?

Pintassilgo: As far as I know, no. England I must say I know less than the United States. The United States I have stayed only for a couple of months - mostly in New York and it's certainly different maybe because of our mixed bloods anyhow in Portugal. We are made up of very different races and therefore I don't see a real racial question ever arising here.

Fields: One of the phrases that strikes me over and over in your Ministry's program of current plans is a "policy of social action." You see this as a major priority but how in a provisional government, can you take action?

Pintassilgo: We have to, we have no other way out. We have to take action, we must take action. I think when we met the other time (last July) it was already a provisional government but we were less clear about the possibilities we had in front of us. All these months have become clear that the revolution of 25th April was not done once and for all and therefore the revolution is an ongoing process. Therefore, it is already happening and we don't have to wait for the constitutional assembly to start in April to draw up the new constitution. There are some changes that are put upon us, we must get now or we wait for Utopia and simply put history into brackets for some months. That would really be total nonsense. At least the way I see it - that is why action is so important.

Fields: Have you actually been able to begin in some of the programs outlined in these current plans?

Pintassilgo: Oh yes, definitely.

Fields: You mean you have actually begun work on reorganizing medical services?

Pintassilgo: Oh yes, just now that's why I am late for this interview. I have been working with secretaries of state in terms of the reorganization of the basic units of medical care, of diagnosis which were and are still spread throughout the country but are not run in an efficient way. They were under what we call welfare but it's a different meaning than in the United States. It's a related scheme.

Fields: Where do you have to be employed to receive health service?

Pintassilgo: Yes exactly. There is a basic change because everybody is going to get access to this regardless to his or her position in the labor market.

Fields: When will this happen?

Pintassilgo: We have decided now that this will happen within two months. That must happen.

Fields: That's fantastic! Will you have the resources in professional personnel to deal with it?

Pintassilgo: Yes, we have professional personnel to deal with it but our great trouble is to rationalize the services - organize them better because there is a tremendous waste of energy

and of possibilities. That's one point. The other point is the spread - the concentration of the medical corp in Lisbon and Calimbria and Porto. Because we have in Calimbria, because it's a university city, a concentration of medical doctors that is absolutely abnormal. We have more than one medical doctor for every patient. The patients are backed up months for appointments anyway. That's a very bad situation. So what we need now is to encourage and stimulate medical doctors, nurses and other personnel involved in medical care to go more into the country. I hope this can happen.

Fields: I hope so. I hope that included mental health personnel as well.

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Pintassilgo: Yes, very much.

Fields: I gathered that there is a shortage of psychiatrists and psychologists in Portugal?

Pintassilgo: Yes, you know that we are in a very - we have some medical doctors that have been trained afterwards as psychiatrists and neurologists. Those tend to be what I call pill pushers. They give you pills - tranquilizers - and things like that. Then you have the other group that has no medical training at all. They do group analysis and group dynamics and all that stuff. Well, I think that both are exaggerating and I feel a need for merging these

two bodies. Trying to see together where the needs really are and of course, we also have a growing cadre of the anti-psychiatry.

Fields: The Laingian Approach?

Pintassilgo: Yes, you know that better than I do. We have really a shortage of people in this field because in the slums and villages there are many children who would need special care in mental health. We don't have enough personnel for that.

Fields: Has anything been done or planned in rehabilitating the individuals who have been imprisoned and/or tortured during the previous regime?

Pintassilgo: We have proposed a special fund for those who have been severely handicapped by the time of their imprisonment. But I didn't feel much acceptance in the political parties. The political parties think that they are taking care of themselves of their ex-political prisoners and I am still in the process of investigation, like you are. Trying to contact the Commission of Political Prisoners to see if there are people who need some help. It is something that leaves me bewildered. It probably leaves you bewildered too.

Fields: Having yourself served in the UN and being familiar with the services of UNESCO, do you see Portugal as a recipient of some kind of specific aid or being a particular kind

of contributor from the Portuguese Experience to UNESCO particularly?

Pintassilgo: Definitely there is a possibility of aid in different aspects. Mainly in what I call, not so much in the sophisticated professions let me put it that way in which we have a plethora that are identical to the other industrialized countries, but our problem is typical of the underdeveloped countries which is the intermediate layer of professionals which is not the job in the factory but it's not either the high brow job but something in between - the intermediary professions. This will be very important in all fields, culture and industry, in services and in what concerns my ministry here, This is key. Training in the medical profession in the social field but in very concrete ways with very specific purposes, we would need help in that. The other way around, the contribution I can see is indeed I feel at present, that Portugal is a kind of laboratory of many different experiences and if we would have time and somebody like you all the time, raising the right questions, I think it we go rather far and we could bring to the international scene at the level of UNESCO and the other agencies of the United Nations a rather relevant contribution. Just to give you an example. I am meeting within a small committee in the cabinet that is dealing with the

new economic plan. Well, facing in an international crisis it is obvious that the whole economy is cracking up, Not only here, but everywhere. Therefore, what we need is not economic targets but rather social targets toward which economic ones are subordinated and in a way, economic ones are put in their own place. At the service of the society which they should always be. Of course this is easy to say, but United Nations have been working for a couple of years towards a unified concept of social economic development and this has come out of the highly industrialized countries facing problems like pollution, like drug addiction and things like that and seeing that the quality of life is something very important and beyond the economic process. Well, in a country like Portugal, having a revolution in the midst of a world economic crisis which we don't know where it is going, provides us with the immediate imperative demands to work on social targets which means like - food for people. Well, if we are concerned first with providing people a sufficient diet, then what about agricultural production, food prices, food stockage and so on, health, well what works towards health, sanitary engineering, medical care, mental care and so on, so its really the social targets that come prior.

Fields: Just the opposite of the EEC Organization, isn't it?

Pintassilgo: Yes. It doesn't mean that we are good or that they are bad.

Fields: It just means that in organizing priorities you are approaching it from the opposite direction at a time when the EEC having approached it from the economic targets has now messed up not only those but the social targets through them.

Pintassilgo: But we are not yet there. I want to be very honest with you. We are not yet there. The idea of approaching it from that end is a very exciting one.

Fields: Would you call what has transpired here since the 25th of April a revolution or an evolution?

Pintassilgo: A revolution, but not a coup d'etat, not at all but very much a revolution at all levels and very much more since the last time we talked. You can say it is a revolution not only because the repressive system of the previous regime was immediately put down but economically there is a revolution. The school system is in a total upheaval. There is not one director of the schools, medium and the university left in office. Many teachers have been replaced which is also a generation revolution, I think. You see it in many different instances. The young ones are taking over. Sometimes with a lot of impatience and making mistakes on the way. Other times with the real

perseverance that helps the older ones or middle aged ones to keep track of the fundamental goals. I think that there is a very important revolution in terms of participation of the people, of the workers in the direction of the country. This never happened before. You can see - if you ask yourself "where is the power now?" (maybe I should not say that being a member of government). The power is a diffused reality at this moment. If this is not a revolution...the point is to capture power at any moment and to channel that power in the right way.

Fields: The thing that was so remarkable about this was that it was a bloodless revolution. And that it was a revolution in terms of social change. Many people have been saying for a long time that the two can't happen together. You can't have a bloodless revolution and have enormous social change.

Pintassilgo: You know that there is blood and blood. There is blood literally speaking. But the revolution is tearing apart many people...I would be betraying the truth the way I see it if I didn't feel that on the way many people who have lived according to certain rules, certain beliefs, to certain standards and so on. They are torn apart. That is a fact.

Fields: At least lives haven't been lost in the streets which is the most important.

Pintassilgo: Yes that's very important. Lives can always be restored even if it means going in another way, so long as a person is alive to do it.

Fields: Having been in a ministerial post for 6 months, what do you see as being the particular problems of a woman in such a position?

Pintassilgo: It's a point where I am not maybe very realistic. 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 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 being the first woman minister helps me break the rules that exist because even within a revolution there are certain rules. 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. For instance, if I have the problem that I am exhausted because I am a woman, I see that so are my colleagues that are men so I couldn't say that that is a special problem because I am a woman.

Fields: So you see a certain advantage to having been socialized into thinking a different way from the majority - the men?

Pintassilgo: Yes, 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 persons whatever their situation is, whatever their political party is and that's a tremendous freedom. It's the way I see it.

Fields: Not having to play the rooster game where you have to compete with each other rooster in order to be king of the roost.

Pintassilgo: Yes.

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Fields: Do you feel that Portuguese women will increasingly take positions of political social decision making? Following your example?

Pintassilgo: Maybe not following my example. Of course they are interested and intrigued. Of course you are an exception because I am giving you an interview to you, I have tried exactly in order to be different and ^B because I think that ^{NOT} because I have given many interviews in Portugal, I do not want to be a star in the horizon but I have given priority to woman's magazines. Exactly because I feel a companionship with women and I want to show to other women what I am

doing is not basically so different from what they can do. There is a correlation between what I am doing and what they can do if they want so.

Fields: About what percentage of the work force in Portugal is comprised of women? And at what level?

Pintassilgo: Almost 1/3. A great percentage comes from public service. There are many civil servants in public administration which in Portugal is a huge body. The level at which women are working is on the bottom layer. If you take industries, and skilled labor that they are working, they work in every area and in some they comprise the totality of the labor force. It's difficult to know what percentage because many have small farms which are their own.

Fields: Really?

Pintassilgo: Yes, because their husbands are abroad. You cannot forget that we have more than one million three hundred thousand men abroad.

Fields: So the woman have been working farms themselves. I just sort of assumed that the men that went abroad were from the urban population.

Pintassilgo: No, most of the men that went abroad were from the villages. So when you go to the fields you see women, old men and children because the men have deserted the rural area which is not without problems, of course.

Fields: It's an enormous one. In that case then, many of them would be the sole support of their household. They get money back from their men?

Pintassilgo: Immigrants - of course, they get money back from their husbands, most of them, unless there is some rupture in the family life. And this system for economic survival has certainly not contributed to the strength of family life in Portugal. Sometimes the wives have attempted to emigrate with their husbands, but although this may maintain the bond between them (and sometimes this is the only way the marriage can continue as a strength to the children), the wife is isolated wherever they live. The children go to school and learn the language and ways of that country, the men go to work and they too, learn the language. The women stay home and only see other Portuguese people and so they are still left out of their family's experience.

Fields: What about the children of these emigre's, do they remain Portuguese?

Pintassilgo: Now we are making arrangements with the governments of the other countries, mainly France and Germany, so that our children can continue to learn their own language and so that they can relate to both cultures. Too often in the past, we have had Portuguese children become semi-literate in two languages and comfortable in neither.

Fields: Would you try to summarize the major changes in Portuguese society toward which your ministry's current plans are directed?

Pintassilgo: Yes, everything from organization from the village level, parent cooperatives, collective refrigeration, collective washing machines, this is then developed in the program. It is so aimed at improving the quality of life for all sectors of the population and the conscious political cooperation of all for the construction of the collective project of a new society. That is one of the points. Then there is the laying of the foundation of the national health service which will bring about the transition from centralized public system of reduced scope; from a liberalistic system based on economic discrimination to a system based on the institutionalized answer to the right to good health of all citizens. And then there is a gradual establishment of an integrated system of social security which will bring about a transition from a system based on production capacity to a system based on the dignity of the individual and of his inherent, fundamental social rights. Therefore, it would cover everything from old age pensions, family allowances, pensions to those who are not working through accident, etc.

Fields: Does education come under this ministry?

Pintassilgo: No. That comes under the Ministry for Cultural Affairs. What will come under this Ministry...under the social policy measures and measures relating to the integrated system of social security, the plans for the social support for children and young people. To take away from the responsibility of the Ministry of Education, extra curricular activities and not only take them away but very much enlarge the scope because the idea is to provide children and young people with proper conditions for a balance for healthy development. (It is) A system of social action that is turned towards the integration of the child and the young person in the social community. Special services, leisure time services for different age groups, clubs, etc. The question of the relationship between school and social life as a whole must be put. In fact, what goes on indeed, the fact that school social action is integrated in the educational system allows for ideological manipulation as well as giving a school character to activities which should be quite different from those held at school. And this is particularly pressing in the case of children who lack a normal family background. One of the plans in this case is to completely transform orphanages, in fact to close down orphanages and social institutions and to transform them into small units where the children would live in a normal life and go out to school.

Fields: Thank you very much. I shall look forward to reading the plans and to another visit together.

As I left the building to which the Ministry was moved last October, I was again struck by the enormous implications of this new democracy. The Minister, enthusiastic, energetic, and not in the least overwhelmed with the task of converting a nation of eight million people, beset by every kind of social and political trauma into a society in which would promote human dignity, individual worth and the equality of races and sexes; had convinced me that it was not only possible, but probable. The wall slogans attesting the popular support of the revolutionary government reinforced her message, "The People United Cannot Be Overcome".

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