

compliment by
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INSIGHT

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EUROPE'S second woman prime minister, Dr Maria de Lurdes Pintasilgo, was selected by the president as a caretaker premier to keep the administrative machinery ticking over until new elections later this year. But Dr Maria has other ideas. She has asked for the present session of parliament to be prolonged so that she can bring in budget amendments and introduce long-term economic measures.

Portugal's woman premier calls for special powers

Pintasilgo's dream of 'alternative society' prods her to woo parliament

Fundacao Cuidar o Futuro



MARIA PINTASILGO
Portugal's Prime Minister

MRS Margaret Thatcher, very much in the limelight recently, is not the only woman prime minister in Europe today. Britain's oldest ally, Portugal, also has a woman at the head of affairs.

But how different is Dr Maria de Lurdes Pintasilgo from Britain's Tory leader. Last year, when representing Portugal at a Unesco conference, she voted with the Third World against the Western bloc, and she has been decried by a rightwing spokesman in Lisbon as "a Third Worldist with socialist political convictions."

Mrs Thatcher may find it expedient on occasions to flirt with the Third World - witness Lusaka - but socialist convictions, never!

Nor is that the only difference between the two leading ladies. Mrs Thatcher had to fight a hard electoral battle before she won through to the top. Dr Pintasilgo was elevated to the premiership at a stroke of the presidential pen.

If that was a lucky break for her what, if anything, has she done to deserve it?

For the answer we must look back at the political set-up in Portugal as it emerged from the 1974 revolution which ended the Salazar-Caetano

dictatorship. It took the revolutionaries two years to frame a new constitution. In the elections held under it the socialists came out on top, and their leader, Mario Soares, headed the first freely-elected Portuguese government in more than half a century.

from
William Forrest
in Lisbon

Soares had to steer a course between the rightwing parties clamouring for more free enterprise and the communists insisting that the extensive tracts of land seized and collectivised during the revolution should not be returned to their former owners. And he had to do so without an absolute majority in Parliament to back him.

In the end it was the land dispute that brought him down.

He had formed a coalition with the conservative-leaning Christian Democrats, who in Portugal call themselves Centre Democrats.

The centrists draw much of their strength from the farmers of northern

Portugal, anti-collectivist to a man. Yielding to pressure from that quarter the centrists withdrew from the coalition and left Soares to his fate.

The only alternatives that remained for him were: a coalition with the communists, or a "government of national salvation" embracing all the leading parties except the communists.

Soares would have neither and, that being so, the president of the republic, General Antonio Ramalho Eanes, had no choice but to dismiss him.

That was a year ago. For the next ten months the president carried on with two successive non-party governments, the first headed by Nobre da Costa, the second by Carlos Mota Pinto.

The president hoped that Pinto would be able to hold on until the general election scheduled for 1980. An electoral campaign this year the president feared, would be "too costly, politically, socially and economically".

Alas for his hopes. In June the socialists and communists combined to overthrow Pinto and the president resigned himself to an autumn election.

During the run-up to the election Portugal would require a caretaker premier, and for this the president's choice fell on a 49-year-old spinster, with a degree in chemical engineering, minister for social affairs after the 1974

revolution and one-time president of the radical Catholic organisation, Pax Romana - Dr Pintasilgo.

At her first press conference, during which she answered questions in three languages, the new prime minister said her dream was for "an alternative society" in Portugal in which the divisions that followed the revolution would be forgotten.

The rightwing parties, however - Social Democrats as well as Centre Democrats - suspect Dr Pintasilgo of leftward leanings: They point to her past links with the revolutionary "Young Captains" whose coup toppled the dictatorship five years ago.

The constitution requires that even a caretaker government must present its programme to Parliament and win its approval.

Dr Pintasilgo duly formed her cabinet. It includes three soldiers, but, she hastened to assure the nation, she "would never be an instrument of a military regime".

On August 18 she withstood the rightwing's assault in Parliament and won the vote of confidence.

Parliament should then have been dissolved immediately and the new election fixed for November, while the caretaker government confined itself to keeping the administrative machinery ticking over.

But Dr Pintasilgo had other ideas. Still dreaming of her "alternative society" she asked for special powers which would allow her to make amendments to the 1979 budget and introduce long-term measures essential to the nation's economic and social recovery.

Special powers like these cannot be wielded without Parliament's express approval. So the prime minister wants the present session of Parliament to be prolonged and the autumn election postponed.

Whatever the outcome of the affair, we have clearly not heard the last of Dr Maria de Lurdes Pintasilgo. - Gemini