

Introduction

to the interview with Viviane Reding

“If we think small, we stay small”¹

In the early 1950s, the historiography of European integration adopted the phrase “fathers of Europe” – most probably by analogy with the Founding Fathers of the United States, who signed the Declaration of Independence in 1776.² But what role have women played in the European project? In the decades from the 1950s to the 1970s, leadership in Europe was predominantly male, since women were involved only rarely in politics in the six Member States. Even if we can identify some women who contributed to the beginnings of the European project alongside the founders, they did not play a decisive role. The journalist, feminist and Europeanist Louise Weiss (1893-1983) was a leading light in her era, but she was not involved politically in the European integration process.

The situation changed at the dawn of the 1980s, when women began to take on leadership roles in European politics. In 1979, French politician Simone Veil (1927-2017) was elected as President of the first European Parliament formed following direct universal suffrage – many of whose members were also women. That same year, Margaret Thatcher (1925-2013) became Prime Minister of the United Kingdom and played a prominent part in European integration. After Thatcher, Angela Merkel, Chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany since 2005, is only the second woman with sufficient executive power to have a decisive influence in the process of building a united Europe. In 1989, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe appointed the French politician Catherine Lalumière as the organisation’s first female Secretary General. The European Commission, which had long remained a “men’s only club”, opened up to women, with France’s Christiane Scrivener becoming Commissioner for Taxation and Greece’s Vasso Papandreou Commissioner for Social Affairs in 1989.³ From 1993 to 1995, only one of the 17 European Commissioners was female; this progressed to 5 out of a total of 20 Commissioners from 1995 to 2004, and 10 out of 28 in the 2014 Juncker Commission. The election of Germany’s Ursula von der Leyen as the first female President of the European Commission in July 2019 clearly marks a paradigm shift.

In the line of women who have helped build Europe, Luxembourg’s **Viviane Reding** (born on 27 April 1951 in Esch-sur-Alzette) is a key figure. After her studies, including a PhD in Human Science at Paris Sorbonne University, she worked as a journalist at the *Luxemburger Wort* for more than 20 years and chaired the Luxembourg Union of Journalists. She joined the Christian Social People’s Party (CSV) and was elected to the Luxembourg Chamber of Deputies (1979-1989 and since 2018), where she particularly focused on social affairs and international relations, before becoming a Member of the European Parliament for three terms (1981-1999 and 2014-2018) and turning her attention to social affairs, employment and the working

¹ Viviane Reding, *Interview*, 3rd session, Luxembourg, 4 December 2015

² See Gérard Bossuat, *Les fondateurs de l’Europe unie*, Paris: Belin, 2001

³ See Yves Denéchère, *Ces Françaises qui ont fait l’Europe*, Paris: Audibert, 2007 (especially the accounts by Simone Veil, Yvette Roudy and Marie-Claude Vayssade)

environment, as well as civil liberties. In 1999, she became a Member of the European Commission, where she also served three terms. In the Prodi Commission (1999-2004), as Commissioner for Education, Culture, Youth, Media and Sport, she opened up the Erasmus programme to the rest of the world, launched the eLearning programme as a key part of the *eEurope* initiative (highlighting the educational potential of the internet), initiated the reform of the “Television Without Frontiers” Directive (which in 2007 became the Audiovisual Media Services Directive) and introduced a system for funding independent audiovisual production, which boosted the European film industry. In the first Barroso Commission (2004-2009), she was given a pioneering portfolio – Information Society and Media – which encompassed telecommunications, innovation, technological research and the digital economy. Her major achievements include capping mobile phone roaming charges (they were subsequently abolished in 2017), introducing a single emergency number – 112 – in all EU countries, launching the Europeana digital library, and spearheading a programme to use technological innovation for climate and energy solutions. In the second Barroso Commission (2010-2014) she became the First Vice-President of the European Commission, responsible for Justice, Fundamental Rights and Citizenship. She introduced a “Europe of Justice”, based on a package of 50 new laws, and took a stand – threatening sanctions – against Member States that tried to hinder the free movement of citizens (especially France, the United Kingdom and the Netherlands) and against the dismantling of independent judicial systems (in Hungary and Romania). She is committed to promoting the role of women on the boards of directors of listed companies, and she initiated the reform of personal data protection, considered as a fundamental right (adopted in April 2016).

While the famous statement made by Margaret Thatcher at the Dublin Summit in November 1979 concerning the common agricultural policy – “I want my money back” – undoubtedly had a major impact, a declaration by Viviane Reding many years later also marked the minds of all those who heard it. In 2010, referring to the situation of the Roma population in France, the Vice-President of the European Commission responsible for Justice, Fundamental Rights and Citizenship stated “[...] I make it very clear my patience is wearing thin: *enough is enough*”, before adding:

“Let me be very clear: Discrimination on the basis of ethnic origin or race has no place in Europe. It is incompatible with the values on which the European Union is founded. National authorities who discriminate ethnic groups in the application of EU law are also violating the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights, which all Member States, including France, have signed up to.”

At the moment, as we are witnessing the commemorations around the globe for the victims of the Holocaust, these words by Viviane Reding hold a particular significance. By way of conclusion, I will refer to another statement by Viviane Reding – this time from the lengthy interview that she granted me in 2016 – which sums up her view of the world, explains the audacity of her actions and shows why she remains so committed to her work (one might also say that it could serve as Luxembourg’s philosophy!) – “If we think small, we stay small”.

The following pages are taken from a long interview (more than eight hours of footage in total) that Viviane Reding granted us in 2015 in connection with the “Pierre Werner and Europe”

research project. Drawing on more than 40 years' experience in politics, Viviane Reding spoke about her career, the role of Luxembourg and Luxembourgers in the European integration process, various historical events in which she was played a part, and especially her pioneering, decisive action in building an information and knowledge society in Europe – a society that serves citizens and protects their rights and fundamental freedoms.

I would like to thank Viviane Reding for her willingness to read through the interview from today's perspective and update it as necessary. I am also grateful to Sarah Cooper for contributing her linguistic expertise to this chapter.

Elena Danescu, 29 January 2020