

## The campaign for parity in political institutions in France

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21 April 1994 was the 50th anniversary of the acquisition by French women of the right to vote and to stand for political office. However, although women now exercise their right to vote to the same extent as men, there has been no significant increase in their presence in sites of power since 1945. Whilst it is hardly surprising that there were only 33 women *députées* as a result of the first elections by truly universal suffrage, the fact that there are now only 34 is more so. Women make up 53% of the electorate, 54% of university students, and almost half of the working population, and yet only 5.77% of the national legislature, putting France at the bottom of the European table with Greece.<sup>1</sup> This contrasts starkly with the Scandinavian countries, where women's representation in parliament is between 30 and 40%; Germany and the Netherlands, where it is over 20% and even Spain where it is 14.6%.

### Why are women so badly represented in France?

One of the factors specific to France which has produced such an under-representation of women is the legacy of the Revolution and the Napoleonic Code, which was one of the main reasons for the delay in French women's acquisition of social and political rights. The central rôle played by the concept of the universal in French republican values also served to mask the fact that there were differences between *citoyens* and *citoyennes*. The idea of a universal representative of the people meant that it did not matter who that representative was; what mattered was that they represented the people's interests. Therefore, to collect statistics on the composition of institutions according to sex, class or ethnicity would be in contradiction with this principle. Only recently have the demands of international organisations begun to force the collection of

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<sup>1</sup> In Greece, women constitute 5.66% of the legislature.

such statistics, and the analysis of them in France has only just begun. The recent attempts to explain why women are so under-represented in France have suggested the following explanations. The first is the French voting system, which is criticised for disadvantaging women and the minority parties for which they often stand. It tends to personalise the competition, which does not help women, and it polarises the vote in the second ballot, eliminating minority parties. When a system of proportional representation has been used in France, women have done better. Other explanations for the exclusion of women have concentrated on the undemocratic practices of the parties and women's lack of the resources necessary to get involved in politics. Obviously the explanation chosen for the exclusion of women affects the strategies that are going to be employed to resolve the problem, as we will see later.

In order to contribute to an understanding of the mechanisms of women's exclusion, a research team from the *Ecole polytechnique féminine* followed the 1993 general elections, to see whether women were excluded, or whether they excluded themselves. They concluded that it is the political system which excludes women. In the first round of the 1993 elections, there were less than two women in every ten candidates. The researchers reject the traditional explanation that this is because few women chose to stand, pointing out, first, that many obstacles prevent women from entering politics, and second, that a large number of women do, in fact, put themselves forward for selection. The *divers* list, the category created to group together candidates who are difficult to place on the political spectrum, is made up of 46.5% women. However, candidates on this list stand practically no chance of getting through the first ballot. There are far less women on the party lists, and the percentage of women candidates is in inverse proportion to the party's own view of its chances of success. So while the extreme right (excluding the FN), the extreme left and the Communists presented over 25% women candidates, the UDF, RPR and PS presented between 6 and 8%. Thus women are selected as candidates by parties which have no hope of winning. When they are selected by the main

parties, they rarely stand for safe seats.<sup>2</sup>

The little research which had been done before this study, notably by the political scientist, Mariette Sineau, suggests that French political parties are particularly oligarchic. On the right, she claims, selection is done from above and never includes more than a handful of women, who are moved up and down the party hierarchy at the whim of the leaders. The left is not much better. The PS introduced a quota of 10% in 1974. It was gradually raised until it reached 30% in 1990.<sup>3</sup> However, it has never been respected.

Even parties which have made concerted efforts to improve the representation of women have come up against difficulties. The *Verts* have had the principle of parity (the presence in equal numbers of men and women) written into their statutes since 1988. However, although they managed to put it into practice in the 1989 European elections, they were less successful in the 1993 legislative elections when only 13.2% of their candidates were women. The *Verts* claim that the electoral alliance with *Génération Ecologie* made it more difficult for them. However, with GE presenting 19.2% women candidates, this explanation seems to lose a certain amount of credibility.<sup>4</sup> Members of the *Commission Femmes des Verts* attribute the failure to the power struggles between individuals and between the currents in the party, which tend to take priority over the commitment to parity; to party conceptions of 'competence' which tend to favour men; and to a scarcity of women candidates.<sup>5</sup>

The other main explanation for women's exclusion from politics is their lack of the necessary resources, in terms of time and availability to go to meetings, to read, think and construct ideas. It is true that women now make up almost half of the working population, but they tend to have less well-paid jobs than men, are more susceptible to unemployment and are more likely to

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2 Renée Lucie, 'Législatives 93: plus ça change, plus c'est pareil', *Parité-Infos: Lettre d'information sur le mouvement pour la parité hommes/femmes dans la vie publique*, mars 1993, 1-4.

3 Mariette Sineau, 'Pouvoir, modernité et monopole masculin de la politique: le cas français', *Nouvelles questions féministes*, XIII, no.1, 1992, 39-61.

4 Renée Lucie, 'Législatives 93'.

5 Francine Comte & Bernadette Léonard, 'Pratique de la parité: l'analyse des vertes ne fait que commencer', *Parité-Infos: Lettre d'information sur le mouvement pour la parité hommes/femmes dans la vie publique*, II, juin 1993, 6.

have short-term and part-time contracts. Moreover, despite the media hype surrounding the notion of the 'new man' and the 'new father', women still bear the major burden of housework and childcare. It is difficult enough for women to cope with the double shift of work and home, but entering politics demands of them a triple shift, and most women are not in a position to do this.

### European elections

The campaign for the 1994 European elections demonstrated that women's representation can no longer be ignored by the political parties. In October 1993 Michel Rocard, first secretary of the PS, announced unexpectedly that he would be presenting a list on which men and women featured alternately. The Greens did the same thing, with a woman heading the list, as did Jean-Pierre Chevènement, a former leading light on the left of the PS, and founder of the *Mouvement des Citoyens*. Chevènement's list made parity one of its priorities and produced two bills which are currently before the National Assembly. If passed, they would ensure equal access to political office for men and women.<sup>6</sup>

Although none of the right-wing parties have made such practical commitments to parity, they have certainly embraced the rhetoric. On the 50th anniversary of women's political rights, the president of the RPR, Jacques Chirac, wrote a long article which appeared on the front page of *Le Monde* about the under-representation of women in elected bodies, stating that it should be improved.<sup>7</sup> The events to celebrate the 50th anniversary which were reported by *Le Monde* were organised by the right-wing Prime Minister, Edouard Balladur, and the Minister for the Interior and for National and Regional Development, Charles Pasqua, who is hardly renowned for his commitment to feminism. In fact, Christiane Chombeau reports in *Le Monde*

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6 Gisèle Halimi, 'Egalité-Parité', *Le Monde*, 22.4.94, 2. They are *projets de loi* nos. 1048 and 1056, presented to the National Assembly on 23 and 24 March 1994 on the initiative of *Choisir* and by Jean-Pierre Chevènement, Christian Taubira-Delannon, Georges Sarre and Jean-Pierre Michel of the *Mouvement des Citoyens*.

7 Jacques Chirac, 'Le combat des femmes', *Le Monde*, 22.4.94, 1-2.

that when Pasqua praised women's different perspective on world affairs and stated that their absence from politics has impoverished the political system, even women from his own party were visibly amused.<sup>8</sup>

One of the reasons for the increased prominence of the parity issue is an energetic campaign which has been gaining support amongst feminists and women politicians in recent years. The development of this campaign will be traced here, followed by a discussion of the debate surrounding its underlying principles.

### **Demands for parity**

There are clear reasons why demands for an increase in the representation of women in politics did not feature on the feminist agenda either during the first wave of feminism or the early years of the second wave. The suffragists believed that once women had the right to vote and stand for election, women would eventually be elected in equal proportions to men.<sup>9</sup> There was therefore no reason to campaign around this issue. The second wave of feminism in France emerged outside and against left-wing politics and was suspicious of reformism and the law. It feared the 'institutionalisation' of feminism, which it saw in women's entry into party politics, in the adoption by the parties of certain aspects of feminism and in the creation of a Ministry for Women's Rights. Its rejection of party politics and its refusal to engage with the state excluded the issue of women's representation in parliament from its priorities. Changes in feminism during the 1980s, including the inevitable institutionalisation of certain strands of feminism with the creation of the MWR, the need to come to terms with a Socialist government, the recognition of women's studies by the Ministry for Research, and the legal battles over rape and sexual harassment meant that feminists became more willing to seek legislative reform.

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8 Christiane Chombeau, 'Mme. Veil se prononce pour un quota de représentation politique des femmes', *Le Monde*, 23.4.94, 11.

9 Hubertine Auclert, wrote in 1885: 'Il faut que les assemblées soient composées d'autant de femmes que d'hommes'. But she was alone in the belief that parity must be insisted upon.

From the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s, a number of attempts were made to increase the representation of women. One of the first was in 1979, when a group of women in the PS started a petition demanding that 50% of Socialist candidates should be women. They collected thousands of signatures, but the PS just raised its quota, which it has never respected anyway.<sup>10</sup> Three years later a law was passed by the National Assembly and the Senate introducing a quota of 25% for either sex on electoral lists (to be raised later to 50%). But it was annulled by the *Conseil constitutionnel* on the grounds that a quota would make a distinction between categories of citizens, and was therefore contrary to the Constitution (Halimi, *Le Monde*, 22.4.94, 2). The next attempt to introduce more women into politics was made by *Arc-en-ciel*, a movement which, between 1986 and 1988 attempted to unite members of the extreme left and left-wing ecologists. When feminists joined the movement, they instigated parity in its internal organisation. The demand for parity has been carried on by the *Arc-en-ciel*'s successor organisation, *Alternative Rouge et Verte*. In 1988, the *Verts* also included in their statutes the principle of parity in the distribution of responsibilities and the selection of candidates for election. In 1989, they presented a list for the European elections on which every other candidate was a woman.<sup>11</sup>

By this time, parity was on the European agenda. In 1989, the Council of Europe introduced the concept of *démocratie paritaire*. A true democracy, they stated, would ensure the full representation of each sex as a sex.<sup>12</sup> Following the Council of Europe, the EC Commission introduced in April 1992 a network of experts around the subject 'women and decision-making.' At their first meeting, parity was established as the main objective. On 3rd November 1992, a declaration was signed in Athens by women in positions of political responsibility. It included the sentence 'La démocratie impose la parité dans la

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10 *Parité-Infos: Lettre d'information sur le mouvement pour la parité hommes/femmes dans la vie publique*, no. 0, mars 1993, 5.

11 Françoise Gaspard, 'De la parité: genèse d'un concept, naissance d'un mouvement', *Nouvelles questions féministes*, XV, no. 4, 1994, 29-44 (32).

12 Cynthia Cockburn, *In the Way of Women: Men's Resistance to Sex Equality in Organisations*, Basingstoke & London, 1991, 31-2.

représentation et l'administration des nations' (Gaspard, 'De la parité', 35). Simone Veil and Edith Cresson signed for France.

The campaign for parity in France began to gather momentum in 1992. In spring of that year, a book was published which soon became the reference work of the new movement: Françoise Gaspard, Claude Servan-Schreiber and Anne Le Gall's *Au Pouvoir Citoyennes!*. The aim of the book was to plead the case for parity and to gather support for the campaign to introduce a law enforcing it. The aim of the campaign was stated clearly in this book, and has not changed. It is to pass a law to change the constitution to include one article: 'les assemblées élues au niveau territorial comme au niveau national sont composées d'autant de femmes que d'hommes.'<sup>13</sup> The campaign is based on a recognition that the equal representation of men and women in politics is not going to happen as the result of a 'natural' evolution, since male politicians have too much to lose.

At the same time as the publication of *Au pouvoir citoyennes!*, the association *Parité* was formed, by a member of the PS, disillusioned by her party's refusal to institute measures for a better representation of women in the regional elections in 1992, despite its theoretical commitment to a quota of 30% (Gaspard, 'De la Parité', 34). A second organisation, *Parité 2000*, was created by Antoinette Fouque of *des femmes* and now the *Alliance des femmes pour la démocratie*. Since the 1970s, Fouque has been said to have monopolised the public image of feminism, by manipulating the media and by registering the name *Mouvement de Libération des Femmes* as a trademark, whilst at the same time expressing sometimes violently anti-feminist sentiments in her weekly newspaper. The two main areas of feminist activity in France at the moment—the expression of solidarity with the women of the former Yugoslavia and the campaign for parity—have been 'hijacked' by Fouque, who produces pamphlets and press releases in which the *Alliance* claims to have organised every event.

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13 Claire Bataille, 'La parité, oui, mais comment?', *Cahiers du féminisme*, LXVI, automne 1993, 32–4.

By late 1992, parity had become an issue which could mobilise support. In December of that year, there was a meeting on parity in the *Assemblée nationale*, organised by the *Conseil National des Femmes Françaises*. By March 1993, many new groups and organisations were forming with the aim of bringing about a change in the constitutional law which would enforce parity.<sup>14</sup> These included *Elles aussi*, and *L'Assemblée des femmes*, created by women in the PS, including Yvette Roudy. Groups were also forming outside Paris, initially in Toulouse and Marseilles, and later in Strasbourg.<sup>15</sup>

A network was created in an attempt to facilitate the exchange of information between the numerous groups and to coordinate the organisation of demonstrations and meetings. It has since broken down, for a number of practical and organisational reasons. However, during its short existence, the network was responsible for the organisation of a round table in the *Assemblée nationale* on the 8th March 1993, in which several women politicians and ex-politicians took part; the demonstration outside Parliament on the first day of the Balladur government, in April 1993; the launch of the newsletter *Parité-infos*, which publicises the movement's activities; and the *Manifeste des 577*. This was a petition supporting the introduction of parity into political institutions by means of a new law. It was intended to be signed by 289 women and 288 men, the number of male and female *députés* there would be in the *Assemblée nationale*, if it operated according to the principle of parity. Its publication in *Le Monde* just a few days after Rocard's announcement had attracted the attention of television and radio, meant that it received quite a lot of publicity, and the number of signatories quickly exceeded the original target (Gaspard, 'De la parité', 36).

The pressure exerted by the campaign for parity and the efforts of women within their parties seem to have had some effect. The main reason why the parties are either taking positive action to impose women's representation, or feeling compelled to make public statements about the importance of improv-

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14 See Christiane Chambeau, 'La représentation des femmes en politique', *Le Monde*, 8.3.93, 9.

15 Josette Trat & Marie-Annick Vigan, 'Entretien avec Françoise Gaspard et Joëlle Wiels', *Cahiers du féminisme*, hiver 1993/printemps 1994, 9-12.



ing it, is undoubtedly that it is proving to be very popular and seems to be capable of attracting votes. The new political parties throughout Europe, including the German Green Party, have done well electorally from their commitment to the representation of women in their elites.<sup>16</sup> And it seems to be popular with the French public, judging from the results of opinion polls after Rocard's announcement. The polls showed that 89% of women voters questioned (and 84% of men voters) agreed that the parity on the party list announced by Rocard for the European elections was a good thing.<sup>17</sup> When asked if the fact that Rocard's list was the only one with equal numbers of men and women candidates would encourage them to choose it, although 67% replied hardly or not at all, 31% replied a lot, or quite a lot (*Parité-infos*, IV, 2).

In the introduction to an edited volume on gender and parties, political scientist Joni Lovenduski claims that when parties adopt policies favouring women, it is usually as a result of pressure from women within the party or as a response to public opinion (in other words, they do it to win votes). There also seems to be evidence that if parties of the left do it, then parties of the centre and right may follow.<sup>18</sup> The fact that Rocard's announcement so obviously threatened to take votes from the right forced a response. Hence all the interest in the issue by right-wing politicians around the time of the 50th anniversary of women's right to vote. However, adopting parity rhetoric is no guarantee of an active commitment to a growth in representation and the quickest of glances at Chirac's attempt to enter the debate will reveal the vacuousness of his statements. Moreover, for all parties, we will have to see what they do in the next national elections, which are perceived as more important than the European elections.

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16 Mariette Sineau, 'Droit et démocratie' in Duby, Georges & Perrot, Michelle (eds.), *Histoire des femmes en occident: le vingtième siècle*, Paris, 1992, 471-97.

17 Claude Servan-Schreiber, 'Le coup d'éclat paritaire des socialistes', *Parité-Infos: Lettre d'information sur le mouvement pour la parité hommes/femmes dans la vie publique*, IV, décembre 1993, 1-4.

18 Joni Lovenduski & Pippa Norris (eds.), *Gender and Party Politics*, London, 1993.

### **The feminist debate on parity**

Amongst feminists, the case for the principle of parity is clear. What is not so clear is how it should be achieved. So what are the ideas behind the parity campaign? Will it work and what are the criticisms of it?

The demand for parity is based first on the claim that women have the right to equal representation (a democracy which excludes half its population is not a democracy) and, second, that a law is the only way to enforce it. But it is also based, although less explicitly, first, on the belief that the political system is responsible for the exclusion of women and should therefore be the focus of attempts to increase representation and possibly also on the belief that women in politics will make a difference. While the best-developed literature in the parity camp concentrates on the first two claims, critiques of the parity campaign often hinge on these last two assumptions.

The socialist feminists associated with the journal *Cahiers du féminisme* claim that imposing parity by law does not attack the obstacles which prevent women from entering politics. These are, according to the journal, women's unequal resources for participating in politics or their unequal share of power in other areas of public life which could easily be replicated in elected bodies, even if women were equally represented numerically. A law imposing parity would not solve these problems; it simply asks the state to impose a power relation which does not currently exist. Claire Bataille argues that the campaign for parity has emerged amongst those few women who already hold some political power but are frustrated in their attempts to get to the top. It serves only to consolidate the power of a few women in politics, she claims. The minimal demand of a law guaranteeing parity should, argues Bataille, be accompanied by simultaneous demands for proportional representation and the vote for foreign residents, for example. Radical social change, including more childcare, is also necessary ('La parité, oui', 34). The combination of attempts to bring about a transformation of the social and political climate, as well as pressing for constitutional reform and positive action by the political parties seems to be a more practical way of approaching the problem than a narrow focus on the inclusion of a Constitutional law.

A second criticism of the parity campaign in France is that it does not address the question of what difference it would make if there *were* far more

women representatives. The parity campaign supporters do not have a common position on this and seem to find it unnecessary to discuss it. The campaign is presented as one of principle first—women have the *right* to equal representation, whether or not it makes a difference. However, for their critics, the outcome *is* relevant. If it does not change anything for ordinary women, there is no point in directing the campaign at this one goal. Even if parity were introduced into political institutions, politics would still tend to be a luxury reserved for women with no family commitments or those who could afford to pay another woman to look after the children and do the cleaning.<sup>19</sup> Not only will politics not reduce the inequalities between women, assert the critics, but neither will it reduce the inequalities between men and women. In fact, it will give the illusion of a change in the power relations between them, whilst leaving power in men's hands.

This issue is related to the debate about what a representative democracy should be. On the one hand, there is the argument that legislative bodies should be socially representative in their constitution. This means, as far as parity is concerned, that parliament should be made up half of men and half of women. On the other hand, however, there is the argument that as long as elected representatives represent the interests of the electorate, it does not matter who they are. If this is the case, then the demand for parity can only be one of principle, without the belief that it will make any difference in terms of policy-making. Little attention has been paid to this question amongst the supporters of parity. Most of them follow the argument that it is a question of principle, and if it makes a difference as well, so much the better. However, those who have mentioned it claim that it would almost certainly make a difference as far as legislation on abortion and contraception is concerned. Some also suggest that political priorities would change, putting issues such as unemployment and domestic violence higher on the agenda, benefiting not

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19 Josette Trat, 'Parité: de nombreuses ambiguïtés', *Cahiers du féminisme*, LXVII–VIII, hiver 1993/printemps 1994, 12–13.

only women, but society as a whole.<sup>20</sup>

The broader question of whether elected bodies are representative of the people has been largely avoided by those concerned with parity. They state explicitly that it is not a question of the representation of certain social categories, such as blacks, people with disabilities, or the working class. Women do not constitute a social category; they are present in all of them. So while parity is presented as a principle of representative democracy, it is very specific in its understanding of what is meant by this term.

A third criticism of the parity campaign is that it implies alliances with women because they are women, even if they are on the right. This is the first time that there has been any question of alliances with right-wing women. Even when feminist issues were independent of class (for example, the campaign against rape), they never brought together women of the left and the right in a single movement (Viennot, 'De la parité, les féministes', 72). French feminism's close relationship with the left and extreme left has been brought into question by this campaign, and the debate about whether men on the left or *women* make better allies has been rekindled.

The last criticism of the campaign which will be mentioned here is that if both sexes are recognised by law, then this embodies in the law a gender distinction, which feminists have been trying to demonstrate is socially and historically constructed and should be replaced with 'equivalence' or 'interchangeability'. By writing gender into the law, conditions are produced in which it can be claimed that women are less violent, less competitive, and better able to deal with social problems. And indeed, Jacques Chirac cited some of these as reasons for the importance of increasing women's representation. Women would bring their specificity to politics (as Chirac and Pasqua have already claimed). Evidence of other areas in which women's alleged difference has been used to their own disadvantage (for example, part-time and 'flexible' work 'to meet women's needs' or the advocacy of a *salairé maternel*, both

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20 See for example Françoise Gaspard & Claude Servan-Schreiber, 'De la fraternité à la parité', *Le Monde*, 19.2.93, 2 & Eliane Viennot, 'Parité: les féministes entre défis politiques et révolution culturelle', *Nouvelles questions féministes*, XV, no. 4, 1994, 65-89 (67).

enthusiastically endorsed by Chirac) suggests that it could easily be used within a parliament even with numerical parity to keep the real power in the hands of just a few men. A law enforcing parity would not attack the deeper problems of representative democracy, in which, as it stands, citizens have little chance to exercise their rights as citizens.

Against these arguments that parity simply accentuates women's difference, Eliane Viennot and others from the parity campaign argue that, in fact, it is a fight for the elimination of sexual difference as a major factor in the identity of individuals. Even if it necessitates a preliminary stage in which difference is recognised, it is a difference which has been constructed historically and politically, and not biological difference. At the end of the process, women will come to be seen as being equally as capable of running the country as men, and there will be no political, social or symbolic difference between men and women. In order for women to become equal to men, we must first admit that they are not.

### **Conclusion**

So what is the significance of the issue of parity? First, it could have implications for the future of French feminism. When parity emerged as an issue, French feminism was being decried variously as dead, no longer relevant and superseded by post-feminism. The 'movement years' of 1970–83 were well and truly over, and although groups of feminists were involved in isolated projects, whether in women's refuges or in under-funded and barely recognised feminist research, there was no real movement to speak of. It is possible that parity will be capable of remobilising the feminist movement, and this is certainly the prediction of those who support the campaign. However, it would have to be very different to the old MLF. It would involve a final reconciliation of differences over reformism and revolution, which split the movement in the 1970s and early 1980s. It would also involve the foundation of a broader base of support and the acceptance of alliances with right-wing women. In the case of many French feminists, this is unlikely to happen.

As for whether or not it will achieve its goal, it certainly seems to have happened at the right time. The current crisis in representation and the crisis

in the parties, which has led to a general disillusionment with the political system and is forcing a debate on the left about citizenship and the nature of democracy, may in fact be one of the reasons why the parity campaign has emerged now. The absence of women from politics, juxtaposed with their increasing visibility in public life, is just one of the more striking examples of the gulf between the political elite and French citizens (Gaspard, 'De la parité', 40–1). Feminist critics of the parity campaign argue that attempting to integrate women into the existing system will not solve the problems of the lack of democracy in society, the limited nature of citizen's participation in decision-making in all spheres, and the absence of *social* citizenship. Parity supporters insist that the demand for parity will force other questions to be asked about democracy, such as what a democracy is worth if half of its citizens are excluded and what is the point of having rights as a citizen if you cannot exercise them (for example, the right to legislate). Their opponents, however, insist that these questions need to be answered first, to ensure that the demands made are the right ones.

So will the campaign work? It is certainly going to be difficult to institute and enforce, and even then, it might not make any difference to policy outcomes. However, it does seem that the pressure from within France and from Europe, combined with the support of the French public, will force something to happen. Although the network of parity organisations has broken down, the campaign does not seem to have lost its impetus. The debate has broadened to include women and men on the right and in the parties on the left. But the outcome of attempts to introduce legislation remains to be seen. Chirac has already voiced his opposition to a law, although interestingly, Charles Pasqua, who had been opposed to the idea of a legally enforced quota, conceded during the run-up to the 1994 European elections that it was perhaps a 'mal nécessaire' (*Le Monde* 23.4.94, 11).