

THE FEMOCRAT

A feminist and long time supporter of equality and human rights, Joke Swiebel spoke to Brian Johnson about discrimination, women's rights and taking on Parliament's bureaucracy.

She named and shamed, she believed that Europe's criticism of other countries would be more credible if it applied the same standards to itself, she convinced enough of her parliamentary colleagues to ensure a narrow victory, and all for the sake of human rights.

The narrowest of margins, her report scraped through by 5 votes, showed just how politicised the issue of human rights in the EU has become. "It is not easy for any MEP to accept criticism of their own country, but there was nothing in my report that had been invented", reveals Joke Swiebel. "It was all there in the report, but people didn't like me naming and shaming, calling a spade a spade, and of course that is hypocritical".

Swiebel is well aware of the hypocrisy in the Union surrounding human rights. Parliament's annual report on human rights in the world largely goes by unnoticed, but her high profile criticism of human rights abuses within the Union, rapidly became a political issue, with enormous opposition from conservative members. "How can you talk about human rights in the European Union if you're not prepared to name the countries that are abusing those rights. It doesn't make any sense, but of course this was a very sensitive issue for many MEPs."

But through all the trials and tribulations, while some called her report useless and ridiculous, Swiebel doggedly stuck to her beliefs, cajoling and convincing enough of her colleagues to eventually adopt her report. A successful outcome for this self styled 'femocrat' from the Netherlands.

Before becoming an MEP in 1999, Swiebel worked in a number of posts as a senior civil servant and political scientist. She headed the Dutch delegation to the UN Commission on the status of women,

eventually becoming its vice chair, and also led her country's negotiating team at the UN conference on women in Beijing in 1995.

It was while she was working at the UN that she adopted the term femocrat to describe herself. Originally an Australian expression, coined by feminist groups as an insult to women who they believed had crossed over from radical politics to work in the mainstream, to work within the bureaucratic system. "It was used in the United Nations, when I was active in the UN Commission, and I got to know many Australians and New Zealanders who had taken it up as a sort of nickname, so I took it up too, calling myself a femocrat, a feminist bureaucrat."

The term fits Swiebel well, she has the bureaucratic background, the understanding of how large organisations such as the EU function, that many of her colleagues lack. "I know how civil servants function, I know how their minds work, and I know that sometimes it doesn't make sense to phone a Commissioner about an issue or with a question, forget it, you have to go direct to the relevant civil servant."

As a feminist and a bureaucrat, Swiebel worked to transform ideas and issues from the feminist movement into mainstream political life on the one hand, while also trying to ensure that she kept a certain distance, and independence, on the other. "You have to keep your independence from NGOs and other groups, so that you don't become their mouthpiece. Otherwise you will lose your freedom. I think that the role of a femocrat is that of a double agent, but you have to be your own person, and I hope I've been that all my life, and in all the different positions I've worked in."

Born in the Hague in 1941, some would say Swiebel is a product of her generation,

attending university during the height of radical politics in the sixties, becoming involved in many of the major issues of that period, "It was quite natural for me to take part in what was going on, and I became active both in the gay and lesbian movement and in the women's movement. It was there, and it was part of what I thought was important for me to do."

But describing Swiebel as merely a product of those times would be to oversimplify her and all she has accomplished. Even back in the sixties, she was mainstreaming the issues that were important to her. She feels more of a radical here in the European Parliament than she did back then. "In those days I was more moderate, more accommodating. I was a typical social democrat I think. What I did was bring the demands from the street into the mainstream, translating them into eatable chunks, into things that could be accommodated by the local system," she recalls. And she was successful, becoming instrumental in setting the agenda in the Netherlands for women's equality policy, converting radical feminist ideas into political action.

She obviously revels in the femocrat title, and her independence matched with her obvious analytical prowess makes her a force to be reckoned with as a politician. Her strong independent streak has clashed with the roles and positions that she is constantly expected to assume, and she dislikes being forced in a direction that is not her own. She has also learned to question everything. "I don't take things for granted, I can't. But that of course has to do with my background, because if I had, then I wouldn't be here today."

Mainstreaming issues, bridging the gap between movements and politics lies at the heart of Swiebel's work. Against fierce bureaucratic opposition she cajoled and lobbied to restart the Lesbian and Gay intergroup in the Parliament, using her skills defeat Parliament's bureaucracy. "We fought them with their own weapons, and that's a trick I learned from being a civil servant for so many years."

She believes that the intergroup plays an important role in mainstreaming lesbian and gay issues, which she thinks can sometimes

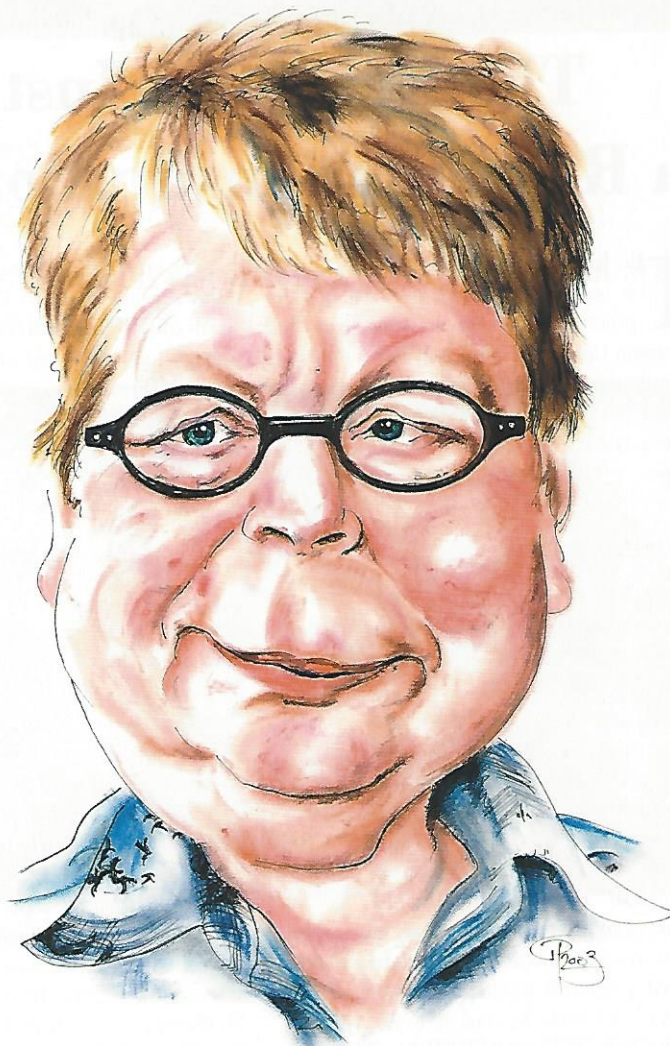
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be lost in the maze of more generalised anti-discrimination policies. "The intergroup is important in having a visible presence in the Parliament, with people who openly sympathise with the cause and work together to keep lesbian and gay issues on the agenda."

Swiebel fights for issues that are important to her, against discrimination in daily life, against sexual violence, issues that she deems are of strategic long term value. The issue of same sex marriages is an item she does not pursue. "From a strategic point of view I'm not sure whether it's the most important issue." Laughing, she adds, "I'm an old fashioned feminist. I was taught that marriage was a way of oppressing women, so you can't expect me to be very much in favour of it."

She does have serious reservations though, wondering if this priority for the gay and lesbian movement is correct. "It's a clash between the old feminists and the gay movement, I still think that fighting discrimination in other areas is more important for real emancipation than same sex marriages. But the issue is there, I cannot circumvent it and it is of course of practical value."

Passionate about women's equality issues Swiebel, through her time as an MEP and with the UN, understands the need to



look at the bigger picture. She deplores the double standards that the Union presents to the outside world on equality issues, but knows there is no quick fix. "I can understand that different steps are taken at different speeds, but there is also an element of hypocrisy within the Union, and that I cannot stand."

She is upbeat about the progress made in tackling equality and discrimination in the accession states, where colleagues from the lesbian and gay movement have been able to utilise new legislation to gain access to ministries and institutions that were previously closed off. "Quite literally in the

accession directives, it was spelled out that governments must consult interested NGOs and interest groups," Swiebel explains. This access has been utilised by both the women's movement and the lesbian and gay movement. "It gives them some legitimacy, it gives them access, it opens doors that otherwise would have been closed and I think that's a very important aspect of enlargement. It has given them a stepping stone and that's an enormous step forward."

Also a member of Parliament's Women's Committee, she believes that to a certain extent, the battle for women's rights has been won, but that society should not become complacent. She is concerned that many of Parliament's top female politicians avoid the women's committee, because they believe it is better for their careers if they are not associated with it. "But that's a contradiction that proves to me that the Women's Committee is still necessary. As a female politician, in order to become accepted as one of the boys, as an equal, you have to stop discussing women's issues. That's the message apparently." ■

Joke Swiebel

Born: 28th November 1941

Education: Political Science and Economics, Amsterdam University

Parliament: Member of the PES group, member of the Committee on Citizen's

Rights, Justice and Home Affairs, member of the Committee on Women's Rights and Equal Opportunities, member of the Delegation for Relations with Australia and New Zealand. Chairperson of the European Parliament Gay and Lesbian Intergroup.