

## French women play politics

PARIS. Three ladies called Simone. Between torrid actress Simone Signoret and icy philosopher Simone de Beauvoir shines a warm but steely other Simone: politician, now top judge, Simone Veil. All three Simones have helped French women advance.

Signoret, in her sparkling memoir *Nostalgia Isn't What It Used To Be*, told how her career soared on raw talent – and how, by shrugging, she commanded lover Yves Montand to crawl back from Marilyn Monroe. De Beauvoir showed women how to split the difference, man-wise: hard-nosed feminist soul-mate to Jean-Paul Sartre while girlish mistress to her “precious, beloved Chicago man,” novelist Nelson Algren. In her male-dismantling *The Second Sex*, she gave all women a bible to thump. And a mantra: “You’re not born a woman, you become one.”

But it’s Madame Veil – a 78-year-old Auschwitz survivor – who most speaks to French women. For 32 years, she has flung herself into the least woman-friendly of all professions in this macho country: politics. Rising to be Minister of Health, then of Social Affairs, then President of the European Parliament, and now member of the Constitutional Court, she has long been the most respected woman in France. The one who led women into politics.

She followed a thorny, sometimes deadly, path. In 1791, Olympe Gouges lost her head to Robespierre by demanding for women the right to climb the speakers’ platform as well as the scaffold. In 1994, killers linked to corrupt male politicians assassinated pushy female MP Yann Piat. Big names surfaced, but police enquiries got nowhere.

In France, politics has always been a macho affair. Even today – in spite of a law saying parties must offer half of candidacies to women -- barely 12 percent of France’s National Assembly members are women. (They sit low on party lists, and in single-member ridings, get to “die” against big names). Percentages of women in parliament elsewhere: Sweden (45), Spain (36), Germany, including Chancellor Angela Merkel (32), Canada (21). French regional and local politics, though electing more women, deny them executive power: only 6.6 percent of mayors of towns 3,500 and over are women.

Political culture here is the flip-side of daily life. Relations between men and women remain more relaxed than in politically correct North America. That tired slogan about times when “men were men, women were women, and everybody knew the difference” makes more or less innocent flirting almost a national duty. But there’s a price for charm: in government and business, women get praise, rarely power.

France’s obsession with its own history entrenches the idea that men should do the dirty work of politics. Women, as men’s muses, inspired, advised, supported, consoled. Oversimplifying: women in post-Renaissance courts became, even more than in troubadour times, the alcove civilizers of men. Female literary salons from 17<sup>th</sup> to 20<sup>th</sup> centuries shaped taste and ideas. Gradually, salons became more political. Napoleon’s female nemeses – Madame Récamier and Madame de Staël – lost salons, won exile.

Lagging behind Anglo-Saxon and Nordic countries, France gave women the right to vote only in 1944. For another 40 years, it stuck female politicians mainly in symbolic or ‘family’ ghettos. Then, over a raging decade, woman seized control of procreation – thus the practical opportunity to enter politics. Legalization of birth control in 1967 led to Health Minister Simone Veil’s all-changing 1975 law allowing abortion. Backed by a

1971 “Manifesto of 343 Sluts” (including Catherine Deneuve) who admitted illegal abortions, Veil became the heroine of women’s access to political power.

The prospect infuriated old-line male politicians of all colours. Female parliamentarians suffered unspeakably obscene catcalls about their bodily shapes and functions. Audible mutterings about “whores” and “dykes” were common – with much worse on the hustings. A disgusted feminist MP, Gisèle Halimi, quit in 1984. Prime Minister Edith Cresson (1991-92) faced misogynist martyrdom. In 1995, “reformer” Prime Minister Alain Juppé (currently being scandal-laundered in Quebec) named 12 female ministers – firing eight six months later.

In 1999, women politicians of all parties joined to launch the *Chiennes de Garde* -- literally bitch-watchdogs. They publicized every sexist insult and managed to cow the yahoos into...not silence, but discretion. Senator and ex-Culture Minister Catherine Tasca told the *Citizen*, “men are more careful now. But condescension is rampant. The other day a male senator ended an attack on a female colleague’s ideas with the putdown: ‘Nevertheless, madame, I still find you charming’.”

Now the “elephants” (male bigwigs) of major parties are apoplectic. Barely getting used to a female minister of defence, Michèle Alliot-Marie, they seethe at two other smart women stepping into the limelight. Françoise de Panafieu is running for mayor of Paris. And Ségolène Royal, a bright (and, I hesitantly report, beautiful) 52-year-old, is a Socialist candidate for the 2007 presidential election.

Neither may win. But thanks to the three Simones, and some other gutsy women, they have a chance.