



Leire

SPANISH GOVERNMENT OFFICIAL
ON A NEW HORIZON, A RISING STAR

Her parents were nervous. They sat down in front of the television, stood up, talked on the phone, sat down again. Leire noticed that something serious was happening, but she didn't understand what. She was four years old and the very young Spanish democracy was in danger: a police officer had seized Parliament and the Army was threatening a coup. Leire's parents were teachers, socialists, Basques. That night no one went to sleep at her house until the rebels finally put down their weapons.

I still remember it very clearly. I could see that everyone was nervous and I was worried...

Leire lived with her parents and older sister in Andoain, a small town near San Sebastián. From the time Leire was very small, her parents took her along to rallies and demonstrations. They were lively, colourful outings and Leire was never bored. But

when she was seven, her parents decided to exchange the grey skies and violence of the Basque country for the sun and peace of the Mediterranean.

In Benidorm, Alicante, Leire was an active, fun-loving child, "A good student but not a grind," as she says. Before she turned eleven, she was "class delegate", the one who represented her classmates before the school authorities. That's why her friends suggested that she run for school board. Leire thought up a campaign slogan, "Hit the target", and designed a poster with a drawing of a dartboard.

That's how I won my first election and became, along with two classmates, a counsellor. And it was really funny because my father was the school principal.

Well, so that was your secret weapon...

No, just the opposite. I had my main adversary at home.

And so Leire first got a taste of what she calls "that drive to have a voice and to represent the voice of others to change things." But she also liked going out with friends, going to the beach, playing sports. And her true vocation, she thought, was writing: she had won a few competitions and she was certain that she would do that when she grew up.

At the age of fifteen, Leire started high school and soon after joined two institutions that would change her life: *Juventudes Socialistas* – Socialist Youth – and her city's Youth Council. On the Council, Leire worked to increase cultural activities, recreational spaces and, mostly, jobs for young people from Benidorm.

Why did you decide to get involved in a political party, an activity that is not particularly popular among young people?

Well, that's something I learned at home; my parents have always been socialists, progressive people.

Children often do the exact opposite of their parents ...

That's true, but not in my case. From the time I was very young, I always knew that I was on the left, ideologically. And the context at that time was not exactly favourable: my generation, the first to be born in democracy, is very different from earlier generations. The only government it knew was the Socialist government, and it had not only distanced itself from politics but from that government, which had really run out of steam. Maybe that's why it was more worthwhile to work with the Socialist Youth.

"...sometimes when I asked a question in the chamber, a member of the conservative government told me that I was not old enough to ask that"

Leire participated in the youth protests that demanded and ultimately obtained an end to mandatory military service. At the same time, she kept doing lots of other things, like running a high school magazine.

Did your friends make fun of you for working with a political party?

No. Maybe they thought I was a little strange, but I never felt attacked. They did seem a bit curious at times, maybe a little sorry that I had so little free time... but there are also friends who admire you for your political commitment.

When Leire left school, she decided to study journalism. But the local university didn't have a journalism programme, and when she tried to register in Madrid she was told that students from other regions needed a better exam score than locals and hers wasn't good enough. Leire still gets angry when she remembers "that injustice," but she laughs and says "Anyway, we have taken care of that."

So she started studying sociology at the University of Alicante. There, she founded a students' association, Campo Jove, of which she was the first president, while continuing to work with the Socialist Youth, now as its treasurer. Leire was pure enthusiasm; she knew how to talk to people and how to organize others as well as herself. She spent hours and hours every day working on her different political activities. When she was twenty-one, she was made a member of the PSOE's – Spanish Socialist Workers Party – regional leadership. It was a very difficult moment: the previous year the Party had lost power and the leader, Felipe González, had resigned.

What was it like to be the youngster in the regional leadership?

At first, it was a challenge: everything seems new and you are not sure they'll pay any attention to you... For my voice to be heard, I had to make it heard.

Why did they take a chance on you?

Because I was well-known in the student movement, among the youth groups. I imagine that is what they saw in me.

And they needed a certain number of young people and women?

I don't have any problem with affirmative action. I have always been a firm defender of that mechanism, without which women would never have been able to show what we are worth or not worth, because the ones to choose were still men and we were always excluded from the realm of power. And I have never had any complex about being or not being a product of affirmative action, because I have always understood that those mechanisms have helped us.

Leire was twenty-two the first time she spoke at a campaign rally. She was very

nervous. She prepared a speech and rehearsed it: she was willing to do anything to make it come out right. She spoke of the problems facing Benidorm, of the importance of participation, of young people coming out to vote. She closed with a poem by Mario Benedetti.

If I love you, it is because you are my love, my accomplice and everything else. And in the street, elbow to elbow, We are many more than two.

When it was over, Leire was very moved, and so was the crowd: she had passed her first major test.

After all the problems we had in the Party during those years, I never thought that politics was a box of chocolates. What's more, right after that rally, I left for Ireland: I made a radical change.

She spent that summer washing dishes in a pub in Dublin, studying English and thinking about her future.

And it never occurred to me that in less than a year I would be a congresswoman.

Leire had decided to pursue a masters degree and was about to join an advertising agency;

but. the night before signing the contract, her Party asked her to be a congressional candidate.

That night, Leire couldn't sleep. The excitement, the honour of the proposal, the possibility that her life might change, kept her awake. But so did the idea that this would be four – if she did well, perhaps eight – years of her life. Then what?

Leire spent that winter visiting towns in the region.

For me, it was an intense, unforgettable experience. It was a rough campaign, and we were received coldly. I remember some rallies where not only didn't people applaud, they didn't even smile.

Leire was elected to the National Congress in her Party's worst election ever. The Party was in crisis. Its leader resigned that very night in front of television cameras.

It was not a happy time; there was a lot of unrest within the party. I had to mature a lot, but it was rough...not always debate on policy, but power struggles.

Did that surprise you?

Well, I already knew that. But it is surprising to see how far, if you are not careful, you can move away from the voters.

Other life changes also started that night. A few days later, the press discovered that there was a new Socialist representative from Alicante who was not only the youngest in Spanish history but a woman. And so the Leire craze began: suddenly, she had become a national figure.

I felt an enormous responsibility: the feeling that if we did things right, we would open the door to a generation.

Doesn't it infuriate you that so many young people from your generation do not participate in politics?

No, because there are many ways to participate. I don't want to judge others: every person decides what he or she does. I have never believed that young people aren't involved with political parties because they don't care: that's a very unfair stereotype. My generation has often shown its commitment to the country through non-partisan political participation: anti-war demonstrations or going to clean up the coast after the Prestige oil spill or voting on a mass scale in 2004... Today, there are many ways of participating that are very different from twenty years ago.

Leire left home and moved to Madrid. In the Congress, she had to get used to many things – three-minute interventions, technical terms, behind-the-scenes discussions and negotiations. And also the cross of being a young woman.

Being a woman and being young meant I had to prove doubly that I deserved to be where I was. A young person is judged more than an adult, and a young woman more than a young man. Some newspapers spoke of my age and physique, and sometimes when I asked a question in the chamber a member of the conservative government told me that I was not old enough to ask that.

When she had got over being angry, she laughed: such crude remarks just proved how disconnected her opponents were from young people.

On her first day in Congress she met a young congressman from León, José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero. He told her with a grin that he had also been the youngest congressman. He also invited her to join a group of representatives to discuss the future of the Party: three months later, they took control and Leire was appointed to the Party's Executive Committee.

In March of 2004, she ran in Alicante again and the Socialist Party won a resounding victory. Leire remembers it as one of the happiest days in her life, “Not only because we won the elections, but also because I had had the privilege of constructing that project from the bottom up.” A few days later, the new president, Rodríguez Zapatero, named her Secretary of International Cooperation. Today, more than four years later, she still holds the post. In those years, the Socialist government doubled international aid; in 2008, Leire managed a budget of around €5 billion, or \$US 8 billion.

What's it like to have power?

I don't feel like someone with power; I feel like someone responsible for making decisions. I really mean that. I don't feel like a powerful woman. I feel like a woman responsible for making decisions and aware that the decisions I make affect people.

And you feel a little pleasure as well?

Yes, I do... When the things you fight for happen: when you see results, see some things change, see your ideas becoming reality.

Very briefly, what are your ideas?

Very briefly: freedom, equality, solidarity, the basic concepts of social democracy. I believe that politics changes the world; if you don't decide they decide for you. I am not satisfied with the world in which we live; it is still unjust in many areas, like gender: I have always been a feminist and equality for men and women is a basic value.

Leire has spent most of her adult life in public view. She says that of course no one has made her do what she does, and that she feels privileged. But there are drawbacks.

You don't have a set schedule; you know what time you start in the morning but not what time you leave in the evening; it's hard to plan a vacation. All of that affects your private life, the people close to you. And for women the problem is even worse because you have the issue of motherhood, which makes it that much harder. I think you have to find time for yourself. It's not only a personal need, but also essential to being able to do your job well: you have to be connected to reality.

At the time of this interview Ms. Leire Pajing was Minister of International Cooperation. In July 2008 she became the Organization Secretary of the Spanish Socialist Workers Party.

FORGING SOCIAL IDENTITIES: CULTURAL BARRIERS AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR YOUTH PARTICIPATION

As young people become adults they take a bigger part in social, civic, and political life. They meet and work with people beyond their immediate families, finding their own identities as they do so.

The Convention of the Rights of the Child (1989)¹ says “All children have a right to express their views and to have them taken into account in matters that affect them”. Ensuring that young people can exercise their rights and encouraging their participation helps both individuals and communities to develop.

Gender and age, as well as income, education and family ties, help decide who can participate. Young people, especially young women, are at a particular disadvantage – many societies bar adolescent girls and young women from taking part in the public life of their community.

When young people become active citizens they help their societies see what is culturally important. They extend the limits of political possibility.² Young people are not part of their elders’ networks of alliances and rivalries, of favours owed and given. They are more receptive to emerging values and worldviews.³ Welcoming young people into public life “teaches them to forget that which is no longer useful and to covet that which has yet to be won”.⁴

Young men and women are making their way in political cultures which have usually valued experience over youth, and men over women. Though few young leaders have reached Ms. Leire Pajin’s level of political power, she shows the extraordinary contributions a young person can make. Growing numbers of young people are joining in civic activities, mainly at community level, but more and more at national and international levels. Young people mentor younger children; educate their peers in development programmes; expand the youth sections of political parties; become activists, entrepreneurs, and leaders of new initiatives. They are assets to their communities and active agents of change.

Governments, civil society and international organizations are coming to know the importance of involving young people in decision-making. Governments now include young people in their delegations to international conferences; international and national conferences create spaces for young people’s forums; international agencies seek their advice. UNFPA, for example, has a global youth panel and national youth advisory panels in more than 30 countries where young people advice on programmes.

At community level this recognition has been slow, in particular for adolescent girls, but this is

changing. Moldova for instance has set up youth councils as forums for youth representation and empowerment in more than a quarter of all localities. Young people in Nicaragua have created spaces to work within their cultures and participate in local councils.

Social institutions should prepare young people for active citizenship and help them make positive contributions to their societies. They should consider the varied ways in which young people engage with their communities and the processes by which young people acquire political and civic values as they begin to participate in public life as adults. They should educate young people to accept diversity, and ensure that they include marginalized young people, especially girls.