

Simone Veil, European political pioneer

Simone Veil, the first President of the directly elected European Parliament in 1979, and the first woman to hold the office, died on 30 June 2017, at the age of 89. A prominent French public figure beyond her years in office, she leaves an important and enduring legacy.

First President of the directly elected European Parliament

On 17 July 1979, Simone Veil was elected President of the European Parliament by her peers. She became the first female President of the Parliament, which had for the first time been elected directly by the citizens. In her first [speech](#) as President, she declared: 'Our Parliament must also be a motive force in European integration. This is particularly true at a time when, as I already have mentioned, Europe's prime need is a further measure of solidarity. This new Parliament will make it possible for the views of all Community citizens to be voiced at European level, and will at the same time more effectively impress upon every sector of society the need for a solidarity transcending immediate concerns, however legitimate, which must never be allowed to mask the fundamental interests of the Community'.



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Indeed, the 1979 election was a turning point in the history of the European Parliament, as the newly directly elected assembly started to discuss possible reform of the European institutions. Altiero Spinelli [launched](#) a productive dialogue with Veil, President of the Parliament, on these issues as early as 1981. After her presidency, Simone Veil remained an active MEP until 1993, and the Parliament later decided to give her name to the [agora](#), located in front of the Spinelli building, at the heart of its Brussels campus, as a symbolic way to encourage the continuation of this dialogue.

Defender of women's rights

In France, Simone Veil is also known as a defender of human rights, in her capacity of judge working in the field of penitentiary policies. Known for her courage, she was nominated minister of health by the then newly elected President, Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, who tasked her with decriminalising abortion in France in 1975. After four years as a minister, she carried on her human rights work in the European Parliament until 1993. After a further brief period as a minister, she continued her respected legal career as a member of the French Constitutional Council from 1998 until 2007.

A tragic family history

During the Second World War, Simone Veil was arrested in the street in Nice, and in 1944 her family was deported to concentration camps because of their Jewish background. After being interned with her mother and sister in Auschwitz and surviving the death march, she was freed from the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp and returned to France in 1945, but neither her parents nor her brother returned. Throughout her life, Simone Veil battled to make sure the Holocaust is never forgotten. In 2018, she was buried in the Panthéon in Paris, where those whom the French state honours have been laid to rest ever since the French Revolution.

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