

Interview

Putting Finland on the Map

An Interview with Her Excellency
Tarja Kaarina Halonen, President, Republic of Finland



Her Excellency Tarja Kaarina Halonen

EDITORS' NOTE *With over 30 years' experience in the public sector, Tarja Halonen has served as the President of Finland since January 2000. The recipient of a master of laws degree from the University of Helsinki, she has served as the Minister for Foreign Affairs (1995-2000), the Minister of Justice (1990-1991), the Minister for Nordic Cooperation (1989-1991), and the Minister of Social Affairs and Health (1987-1990). A member of parliament from 1979 to 2000, Halonen has chaired several parliamentary committees, and was a member of the Helsinki City Council from 1977 to 1996. She has also served as a member of the board of the Oslo Center for Peace and Human Rights, the Panel of Eminent Persons of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), the Cochair of the 2005-2006 World Commission on the Social Dimension of Globalization, a member of the board of directors of the International Solidarity Foundation, and Chairman of the TNL Theatre Organization.*

Do you think the global business community has an effective understanding of the opportunities available for investment in Finland?

Traditionally, companies would look to invest in countries that had low costs. But now, people want to get more and more quality. And if you want to get quality, you have to invest in an educated country and society. I think that Finland has not perhaps advertised

its credentials enough in this regard. It is one of the most competitive economies in the world. We have modern values and we invest in the environment and sustainability. We have a top educational system. We have invested heavily in education, including significant spending on research and development. All of that makes us a very capable partner for foreign companies. Some people think it's very expensive to invest in Finland, but our corporate tax rate is 26 percent, and our GDP growth is forecast to be 2.7 percent in 2007, with 3.8 percent predicted for next year. Of course, these are just forecasts, but they are some of the best forecasts in the whole EU. So, if you want to have a capable partner in different sectors – not only in IT, but in all sectors – Finland could be a good choice. Plus, our system is very transparent. Your money will be in a safe place.

How important has innovation been to Finnish culture?

We think that education is one of the main ways to be innovative. Our people learn to use their brains as children, but creativity is also important. It's not enough to have skills in mathematics, reading, or writing – all necessary skills – you also need to have creative talent. So we train our citizens to be creative. Innovation is important to a variety of industries, such as medicine. It's important to very rapidly incorporate innovation into practices and to be flexible in that way.

Do you believe we're on the right track to address global climate change and other pressing environmental issues?

I'm very optimistic. After the night, it is now the dawn. Not only in Finland and the other Nordic countries, but also all over Europe, there is a growing concern to further our commitment to work together. I think the U.S. will also be an important strategic partner in this campaign. This is an opportunity. At last year's World Economic Forum, there was a clear change in opinion. The atmosphere was about progress – not about “if,” but rather about “when.” The same feeling is all over – in New Zealand, Australia, and China. Finland is considered a gateway to the Eastern European markets. We border Russia and have good relations with that country. Russia has ratified the Kyoto Protocol and is very interested in environmental issues, as are the Chinese. So these are good partnerships – and huge ones.

How has Finland managed to maintain

such good working relationships with so many countries?

I think it's because we have always been willing to share our experiences in order to reach a common target or solve a common problem. Secondly, it's better for everyone to have good neighbors. Europe is like a family of children. We have to work together.

How important is the European Union to Finland's foreign and security policy issues? And how effective do you feel the European Union has been at addressing the continent's key issues?

Finland, Sweden, and Austria joined the EU almost 15 years ago. We were not-so-interesting, well-behaved countries; we were the “good girls,” with a sense of what's right and wrong. We have always been welcomed. And that's important to us, because our history has not always been so nice.

Secondly, to speak in business terms, the European Union is a good brand. Being part of it puts Finland on the map. The European Union operates like one market, which has created a stable economy and a broad and modern sense of security. This is not just about military power; it's about working together with the same purpose. It's a flexible, comprehensive type of security, and I think that has been very valuable.

How about the need for a new treaty for the European Union?

Yes, the family needs a bigger and better house with a more effective structure. We can live with the present situation, but it is like having a house with not enough rooms for all of its family members. That's why it's important to have a new treaty for the future. A new treaty wouldn't change the structure of the union, which is strong. I'm a proponent of a new treaty that will be more modern.

Are you pleased with Finland-U.S. relations at this time, and with how the relationship has progressed?

Every single country in Europe, even the smaller ones, would like to meet with the U.S. President, congressmen, and other members of the administration. I think that we should understand the structure of the modern global world. Meetings between leaders are very important, but it is also important to have cooperation across all sectors. I talk to experts at Harvard University, in the New York business community, people from Florida, and people from Los Angeles, and so on. All leaders should

■

We were among the first countries to give full equal rights to women.

Our history has not been too easy, but I think of men and women as

resources, and why would you only use half of your resources?

■

do that. But we should also be more decisive, on behalf of the state, and acknowledge that we can all do a lot of things – civil society, the business community, and universities – in order to open doors and make positive contact.

What has been Finland's role in addressing foreign policy and other challenges in the Middle East?

Mainly, we have addressed these things within the framework of the European Union. If the EU, the U.S., and Russia can keep the dialogue going, there will be a more positive partnership and the Israelis and the Palestinians can solve their core issues. But I think that we should also be more focused on the whole region. So I'm happy for the rapid reaction we had to the Lebanese crisis last autumn. The European Union responded immediately. And, in the same way, I hope that we can be a helping hand in the future, all the time underlining that the countries in that region have the most responsibility, of course. All over the world, there have been discussions about the Israeli/Palestinian issue, and about Lebanon, Syria, Saudi Arabia, and other countries in the Gulf region. It's important for all nation states to work together. The U.S. is so big, but we welcome it becoming more active, and having a more active role in multilateral organizations, because that is needed. For both the U.S. and the EU, it's very important to see this type of activity growing in intensity. Regional cooperation is essential.

Finland's parliament now has 84 women members – the most in its history. Are Finnish women becoming more involved in politics, in your opinion? And has it had any effect on Finland's government?

We were among the first countries to give full equal rights to women. Our history has not been too easy, but I think of men and women as resources, and why would you use only half of your resources? Why shouldn't you use the

whole of what you have? And we have done that. Now, 42 percent of our members of parliament are women. When we created a new government recently with 20 members, we realized that 12 of them were women. That's a world record, I believe. We didn't plan it; it just happened that way.

You have expressed concern about voter turnout. Some say that there is a general lack of public interest or excitement about politics worldwide. Is enough being done to bring the people back into the process?

This is a really important issue, because throughout the history of the world, people have been prepared to die in order to get the right to vote. But when people have that right, they often don't bother to vote. I think that it's not that they are disengaged; it's more that things are not as good as they could be. People feel like they are more like customers of the government than they are members of it. So the quote, "Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country," applies to this dilemma, which is not new. If you ask people who are active in politics why they are active, they will say, "Somehow I wanted to change things." So we should encourage children to be proud of their opinions, but also to be flexible and ready to make compromises, because that's what democracy means. You don't get your way all the time, but you can be active in the process. I think that everyone – every man and woman – has an idea of how the world could be better, at least one part of it.

You have been in politics for a long time. Did you know very early on in your life that this was something you wanted to do?

No. When I was a child, I wanted to go into painting. Then my parents encouraged me to do something that they thought would be more useful. I didn't agree at first, but after I studied law, I became a lawyer, and I went into

the labor union organization to help the workers. And then, little by little, I realized that I wanted to be in politics. I wanted to do something to change the world. But politics was not the first box I thought to open.

You seem to be very calm, despite your high-pressure job. How do you do it?

Everybody in Finland says that I have a habit of showing my feelings and being very open. Sometimes they say that they would like all politicians to be like that. I'm also a born optimist, and I think I'm the kind of person who is always trying to think of the next step. I like people, and I'm very sociable. Even when I work out, I want to do it in the gym, because it's much nicer to be in a gym with other ladies, making small talk. I love this kind of interactivity with people. Of course, sometimes it's nice to be alone, and I would love to be more with my dearest ones. But they seem to be doing quite well, even though they don't have me all the time.

With so much going on in the world – security issues, the environment, and so on – what's on the forefront of your mind? What are your key issues to address going forward?

I think that we really have to focus on global responsibility. You don't have to travel to do this; it's around you all the time. When we are at home, with our kids and with our neighbors, we can do a lot for the sustainability of the world. That's one of the things that I have tried to champion in Finland. I have asked the public to think about what they can do in their everyday lives. How do they wash their cars? How do they wash their carpets? What kind of cleaning agents do they use? How much energy could they save? These things are very much on the minds of our people and that's important for any global initiative to be successful. Innovation starts with the life around you. ●