President Tarja Halonen answers students' questions

Did you know you wanted to become a president already as a child? What sparked your interest in politics?

Not at all. My mother has told me that when I was very young, I wanted to become a Christmas tree decorator. That aside, visual arts interested me for a long time. During my study years I had many kinds of jobs due to the lack of student financial support, besides some small stipends. Working part-time during studies was very common at the time. After graduating, my first job was at the National Union of University Students in Finland, first as a Social Secretary and then as a Secretary of Organisations. From there I moved on to the Central Organisation of Finnish Trade Unions (SAK). During that time, I also worked for a couple of years as an assistant to the Prime Minister of Finland, Kalevi Sorsa. I returned to the Trade Unions organisations and got elected from there to the Parliament. Therefore, my transfer to politics happened gradually. However, I was interested in political participation and organisational work already as a youngster, and I was active in civic organizations.

How would you describe a day as a President?

The workdays of a President are varied, but often very busy. The President runs the foreign politics of Finland together with the Government. That's why the President makes foreign visits very often to discuss with the leaders of different countries, for example about sustainable development, the economy and security. The President also makes often visits in the homeland and is in contact with the citizens.

You were Finland's first, and thus far, the only female President. How did your gender affect your work?

Quite little to the contents of the work. Already before my election I was the Minister of Foreign Policy to the President Martti Ahtisaari and Prime Minister Paavo Lipponen, and I knew how thigs were quite well. In international meetings there might have been some special arrangements, but the other party always knew I was a woman beforehand. Some small practical things caused difficulties: for example, honorary badges are made for men's suits and are so heavy that they break the fabric of women's formal dresses. Unfortunately, the attire of female public figures often gets a disproportionate amount of attention.

What were the highlights of your political career?

Nationally the highlights were, perhaps, all the posts where I have been the first woman: the first female lawyer in Trade Unions, the first political Minister of Justice, the first Minister of Foreign Policy and then the first President. Internationally, my posts in the UN and especially the Rio Process, where the Principles of Sustainable Development and Agenda 2030 - baselines were conducted. Those will presumably remain in history.

What do you think about the President's political power in Finland?

Here, many complain about the division of highest power between the Prime Minister and the President. It may sometimes cause issues, but centralizing all power to one person would be even more dangerous. The government and especially the Prime Minister has a lot of power in the current era of EU. The original purpose of the new Constitution was to increase the power of the Parliament. In reality, the Parliament cannot direct a majority government very effectively. In addition, decision-making in the EU is not very transparent. Thus, power has shifted more to the government, rather than to the Parliament.

The economy, or in other words the Ministry of Finance, has a lot of power in relation to the whole picture. The division of power is quite difficult to comprehend from the perspective of a citizen – and sometimes, even from the perspective of a politician.

Currently, the state of world politics is stormy. How should Finland steer forward?

Finland needs to know its size and its position and be an advocate of peace, cooperation and sustainable development.

Which human rights questions would you emphazise at this moment?

The minorities of different countries are perhaps the largest group of people in danger of discrimination, especially in conflict situations. And then women, of course.

Why is equality an important value for you, and how could it be improved in Finland?

All people are of equal value. Work on equality can be done in many ways, for example in decision-making, steering the economy and hand-in-hand with service organisation.

New legislations can be enacted, and decisions can be made which ensure that everyone has equal possibilities to access education or receive public services. Achieving equality demands ongoing activity from citizens. It is important to notice one's own prejudices. Even

children can’t have the room bully each other. When you see unequal treatment of children and teens, report it to adults.

How can young people influence the process of building a better future?

In schools, friend- or hobby groups, and on the internet, one can promote equality by treating everyone well and taking action when encountering bullying. I would encourage young people to tell their opinions and ideas to adults, for example to a teacher, principle, coach, or a parent. One can also contact the politicians of your home municipality of Finland. Young people can also discover, who the Ombudsman of Children is in Finland, and ask them about the realization of childrens’ rights. It’s important to remember that one can achieve more together than alone. It is important to take care of oneself and ask help when needed, so one has the energy and ability to build a better world.

Do you have any pets?

We have a cat named Daphne, who moved in with us from the Helsinki Society of Animal Protection HESY.

What do you do in your free time?

I like many types of art, for example theatre, drawing, and literature. I also enjoy going to the gym and cold plunging. During summers I spend time gardening.