

# EDITH CRESSON

## Women Leaders in European Foreign Policy 2019 European Union Studies Association Conference May 9-11, 2019, Denver Colorado

Barbara Morazzani, PhD – De Montfort University

DRAFT/DO NO REPRODUCE

### Introduction

When beginning to research on Édith Cresson (ay-DEET kreh-SOHN), I came across a question I believed to be applicable to this study of *Women Leaders in European Foreign Policy*. The question, “Do Female Presidents or Prime Ministers Make Any Difference? Research finds feminine values make a difference. But do female leaders?” (Mednick & Thomas 2008:644).

Finding this question intriguing, for the simple fact that I believed feminine values and female leaders coincided, I researched a bit more and found that while there is general agreement that women face more barriers to becoming leaders than men do, especially leadership roles that are dominated by men (Eagly and Johannesen-Schmidt 2001, Mednick and Thomas 2008), there is less agreement about how women, in fact, lead.<sup>1</sup>

This query of leadership coincides with my discussion of Édith Cresson. Not because this is a paper on feminism - indeed Cresson often stated she was a female but not a feminist - but because France has still not gone far enough in diversifying its patriarchal composition concerning the abilities of women in positions of leadership.<sup>2</sup>

“The story of Édith Cresson shows how difficult it can be for a woman to really penetrate the corridors of male power” (Skard 2015:382).

### Family background and education

Édith Cresson, a French economist and politician, was France's first, and thus far only, female to hold the office of prime minister from May 15, 1991 to April 2, 1992 (Kavanagh 1998:123, Ramsay 2003:98, Skard 2015:387, Lawrence 2009).<sup>3</sup>

Cresson (nee Champion) was born January 27, 1934 in Boulogne-Billancourt, Paris. Her father, Gabriel Champion (1896-1959), was a senior civil servant (finance inspector) and member of the Socialist Party. Champion would later become the

---

<sup>1</sup> Historically leadership studies have been generally limited to men for the simple reason that men have held most of the leadership roles in society (Mednick and Thomas 2008).

<sup>2</sup> “From 1960-2010, there were 23 women at the top in 15 countries. On the one hand, they were often discriminated against and harassed. For instance, Edith Cresson, the former minister of agriculture in France, was at the time not allowed to participate in breakfast meetings with the PM. On the other hand, some of them became national leaders of great importance and respect, such as Angela Merkel” (Skard 2015:170). See also Ramsay 2003:116-117.

<sup>3</sup> Cresson was the fifth prime minister appointed by President François Mitterrand (Ramsay 2003).

Chief Financial Officer and then President of the France Bank and Deposits Company (Skard 2015:383, Ramsay 2003). During World War II Campion was posted to the French Embassy in Belgrade but returned to Paris once the War ended. Her mother, Françoise Jacqueline Campion (Vignal, 1907-2003) was a strict, conservative Catholic, who hired an English nanny to raise Édith Cresson. Cresson would become fluent in the English language (Ibid.). She adored her father, sharing his passion for politics; she however “rebelled against her mother and the bourgeois milieu she came from” (Skard 2015:383; Cresson 2009).

In 1959 she married Jacques Cresson, the Director of Export for Peugeot (now retired), with whom she shares two daughters: Nathalie and Alexandra (Cresson 2009). Jacques Cresson was always, and to date remains, supportive of his wife’s career in both business and politics. During her political career because Cresson was deemed to be very outspoken, their marriage was often compared to that of the British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and her husband Dennis<sup>4</sup> (Schelma 1993, Skard 2015:386, Cresson 2009).

By all accounts Cresson is considered intelligent, charming and well-educated. Her primary school education included attendance at a convent boarding school in the Swiss Alps. After the end of World War Two, the family returned from Belgrade to Paris, she attended a religious school in Paris while her brothers studied in England.<sup>5</sup> Thereafter she attended the School of Advanced Commercial Studies, earning a degree in business and later a doctorate in demography.

She began her career as an economic engineer and would become a successful businesswoman. Her second career in politics began in 1965 when she met François Mitterrand in 1965. For twenty-six years Mitterrand helped Cresson advance through the ranks of the French Socialist Party. Mitterrand “became her hero and she his protégée, calling her ‘my little soldier’” (Skard 2015:383, du Rocher 2009).<sup>6</sup>

## Political beginnings

Through a colleague from Haut Enseignement Commercial (HEC jeunes filles) Cresson was introduced to the Convention of Republican institutions.<sup>7</sup> In 1965 she participated in the first presidential campaign of François Mitterrand. Following Mitterrand to the Socialist Party (Parti socialiste [PS]) in 1971, where over the next twenty-six years Mitterrand guided Cresson through the ranks of the French Socialist Party.

In 1974, she was appointed to the post of National Secretary of the Socialist Party, which placed her in charge of the youth and student members of the Party. In 1975, she ran a losing campaign for the Châtellerauld constituency, where Cresson was confronted for the first time with issues associated with universal suffrage, receiving few votes during the election due to her gender.<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> The press depicted Cresson as a leftist Margaret Thatcher. Most of the literature describes her as combative and quick-witted. She was further compared to the British prime minister for her bluntness, energy, and stubbornness (Cresson 2009 Library of Congress online, Cresson in “Women in World History” online, Kreisel 2008 online).

<sup>5</sup> I was unable to locate any additional information on her brothers.

<sup>6</sup> See also, Edith Cresson (<https://www.encyclopedia.com/people/history/french-history-biographies/edith-cresson>).

<sup>7</sup> The Convention of Republican Institutions (1963-1971) was founded around François Mitterrand. The Convention was central to the reshaping of French socialism ([https://www.cairn-int.info/article-E\\_VING\\_104\\_0123--the-convention-of-the-republican.htm](https://www.cairn-int.info/article-E_VING_104_0123--the-convention-of-the-republican.htm)).

<sup>8</sup> “The role of women in French politics has grown slowly. In 1993, only 5.7 percent of seats in France’s Parliament were occupied by women – barely more than that after the end of World War II. The lack of women in politics prompted France to pass a law in 2000 requiring political parties to present an equal number of men and women on voting lists, making it the first country to do so. Although things have improved in recent years, men still heavily dominate French politics. Seventy-three percent of the National

After Mitterrand won the 1981 Presidential election, Cresson was appointed Minister of Agriculture. She was the first woman entrusted to head the Ministry, holding the post from 1981-1983. While in the post she encountered the sometimes-violent conservatism of the Federation of nation's farmers. Her appointment was considered a 'provocation' and was poorly received. There were signs in the middle of the streets that read, "We hope you are better in bed than in the Ministry" (Commire 2009 online, du Rocher 2009). Cresson later joked, "I was good at agriculture because I was dealing with pigs" (ibid.)

Cresson then moved into positions as Trade Minister (1983–84 and 1984–86), where she oversaw industrial restructuring and trade. In 1988, she was called to the position of Minister of European Affairs under the Rocard government. Under Cresson, the Ministry was responsible for organizing the French Presidency of the European Economic Community of 1989 and the beginnings of the single market, planned for 1993. The Ministry also participated in the negotiations of the Schengen agreements.<sup>9</sup> She resigned from the Ministry in 1990 to work as a senior consultant on international development with the Schneider engineering group where she was regarded as "a steadfast fighter and a French trade protectionist who was staunchly pro-business" (Ibid. Commire, Kreisel 2008, Lawrence 2009).

## Prime Minister

In May 1991, François Mitterrand appointed Cresson to the position of prime minister.<sup>10</sup> She had the distinction of being the first woman in the country's history to hold this post. Cresson, aware of sexism in French politics and explicit male chauvinism within the 'male elite' of the Socialist Party; as well as growing public discontent with the Socialists Party and Mitterrand himself, initially asked Mitterrand to appoint one of the 'male elites' to the position but he refused (Skard 2015:182, 385, Schemla 1993, du Rocher 2009).

Upon acceptance of the position she began assembling her new cabinet. Cresson chose a few ministers from the government of her predecessor, Michel Rocard. In particular, the Minister of Economy Pierre Bérégovoy was appointed to head a new super-ministry combining industry, finance and foreign trade. Cresson advocated that the creation of the super-ministry would help France compete with other countries. She also appointed five women, three to posts in labor, development, and youth and sports (Ramsey 2003:187, du Rocher 2009).

As she anticipated however, not only did her appointment as prime minister draw misogynist remarks from some politicians within the Socialist Party but from France's center and right parties as well. Overlooking her intelligence, knowledge and experience (Ramsay 2003:108, 179).<sup>11</sup> The media described her as incompetent and Mitterrand's sex slave (Ibid., du Rocher 2009). Subtle and not-so-subtle attacks on her gender continued, including a popular daytime television show featuring two puppet characters, one a sexy and servile female broadly seen as a Cresson parody (Ibid.,

---

Assembly is comprised of men, while the Senate is 78 percent men." *France marks 70 years of women's voting rights* (<https://www.france24.com/en/20140421-france-womens-voting-right-anniversary>).

<sup>9</sup> "The Schengen Agreement signed on June 14, 1985, is a treaty that led most of the European countries towards abolishment of their national borders, to build a Europe without borders known as "Schengen Area". Signed in Luxemburg, initially by only five EU countries, the agreement remains one of the world's biggest areas that have ended border control between member countries" (*The Schengen Agreement, History and Definition*, <https://www.schengenvisainfo.com/schengen-agreement/>).

<sup>10</sup> "Mitterrand was one of the few in French politics who had faith in a women's ability to govern." (Skard 2015:385, Commire 1988). Mitterrand wanted someone in the prime minister position that would rise above the pettiness within the Socialist Party and bring a new dynamic to the policies, someone who would promote his policies, and was competent in trade and business (Schemla 1993:73-93, Skard 2015: 384-386, Commire 1998, Ramsay 2003:181, Kressell 2008).

<sup>11</sup> See also, Browning, E.S. "France's Cresson Faces Criticism After Week in Post". *Wall Street Journal, Eastern edition*; New York, N.Y. [New York, N.Y] 24 May 1991.

Skard 2015, Schemla 1993). "As Cresson noted, if a man was elected to such a position it is because he is competent ... whereas a woman with experience appears to have come out of nowhere" (Skard:2013:385-6).

Despite the misogynist and sexist comments, the Cresson government went on to enact the Urban Framework Act of 1991, which sought to ensure a "right to the city" for all citizens. The Act required "local bodies to provide living and dwelling conditions which will foster social cohesion and enable conditions of segregation to be avoided." The Act would further include: (Commire 1999, Ramsay 2003, Kreisel 2008 du Rocher 2009; Lawrence 2009, "Encyclopedia of World Biography" 2004, et al.)

- July 1991, a law was passed which included several measures aimed at improving access of people with disabilities to housing, work places, and public buildings.
- July 1991, a further act was passed on legal aid which gave the public (foreigners who are lawfully domiciled in France) wider access to the courts.
- January 1992, housing allowances were extended to all low-income households in cities with more than 100 000 inhabitants.
- A water law was passed in January 1992 to ensure the protection of water quality and quantity and aquatic ecosystem.
- February 1992 a law was passed to promote citizens' consultation.

Cresson's Government also placed considerable emphasis on facilitating the international competitiveness of firms with under 500 employees.<sup>12</sup>

Cresson's position as prime minister lasted only ten months. It is widely written that her combative and rough style of governing drew criticism and she became unpopular among the electorate. This was further compounded by her controversial comments on international relations, including harsh characterizations of Japanese business practices that offended French perceptions of statesmanship in diplomatic affairs. A stagnant economy prevented Cresson from implementing many of the reforms that she had hoped would prepare France for expanded competition in Europe. She was forced to resign by Mitterrand after the Socialist Party's defeat in regional elections in April 1992 (Commire 1999: online, Kreisel 2008, Lawrence 2009., du Rocher 2009).<sup>13</sup>

## European Commissioner

In 1994, Mitterrand appointed Cresson to serve on the European Commission<sup>14</sup> as Commissioner for Science, Research and Development. In 1998, she and twenty other members of the Commission resigned amidst allegations of fraud and nepotism. The fraud allegations also led to the demise of the Santer Commission in 1999. The Santer Commission, directed by Jacques Santer, the former Prime Minister of Luxembourg, oversaw the introduction of the euro, the Treaty of Nice, and so on. (Lawrence 2009).<sup>15</sup>

---

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> See, "Cresson's Fall Could Deal Blow to Women in Politics: France: Nation's first female prime minister became its most unpopular after 10 rocky months in office." *Times, Paris*. Rone Tempest, Staff Writer, April 3, 1992 (accessed 22 April 2019).

<sup>14</sup> The executive branch of the European Union.

<sup>15</sup> See also, "The Crisis of the Santer Commission: [https://www.cvce.eu/obj/the\\_crisis\\_of\\_the\\_santer\\_commission-en-7380f95b-1fb2-484d-a262-d870a0d5d74d.html](https://www.cvce.eu/obj/the_crisis_of_the_santer_commission-en-7380f95b-1fb2-484d-a262-d870a0d5d74d.html) (accessed 1 May 2019). And Cresson, Edith (1934-). Women in World History: A Biographical Encyclopedia. Encyclopedia.com. 24 March 2019 <<https://www.encyclopedia.com>>.

The allegation of nepotism against Cresson centered around her appointment of a close friend Rene Berthelot, a dental surgeon, as personal advisor. When advised her cabinet was fully staffed with personal advisors, Cresson had Berthelot employed as a visiting scientist to work in HIV/Aids research from 1995 February 1997. The appointment as visiting scientist implied that he was to work in the European Commission's Joint Research Center or to perform in his capacity as a research scientist. Instead Berthelot worked exclusively as a personal adviser to Cresson.<sup>16</sup> When his contract expired Berthelot was offered another visiting scientist's contract, for a period of one year which would expire at the end of February 1998. His appointment as a visiting scientist lasted for a period of two and one-half years, whereas the rules specify a maximum duration of twenty-four months.

Following a complaint by a member of Parliament from the Belgium Green Party, a criminal investigation concerning Berthelot was opened in Belgium in 1999. Although Berthelot was deemed unqualified to hold the visiting scientist position given that he "produced work of little or no value" during his tenure with the Commission, no criminal charges were brought against him.<sup>17</sup>

Charges were brought against Cresson in 2003 by the Belgian authorities relative to her time on the European Commission from which she resigned in 1999. The allegations consisted of cronyism and misuse of funds.<sup>18</sup> In 2006, in a judgment by the European Court of Justice, the Court declared that Cresson acted in breach of her obligations as a European commissioner. She was found guilty of favoritism and misconduct; however, no penalty or punishment was ordered.<sup>19</sup>

## Current Activities

Currently Cresson is semi-retired, retaining her work as a business consultant. She is also a member of the Council of Women World Leaders (du Rocher 2009, Skard 2015), "an International network of current and former women presidents and prime ministers whose mission is to mobilize the highest-level women leaders globally for collective action on issues of critical importance to woman and equitable development".<sup>20</sup>

## Conclusion

Édith Cresson's legacy remains somewhat controversial depending upon whom the author is. In her interview with Raylene Ramsay (2003:189-194) Cresson dismisses Elisabeth Schemla's opinion of herself as *la femme piégée* (a woman trapped) but she does agree with much of the chauvinism towards during her political career. Duhamel and Jaffre believe, "Cresson was responsible for her own destruction" because she "didn't know the rules of the game" (1993: 109-

---

<sup>16</sup> Judgment of the Court of Justice in Case C-432/04, *Commission of the European Communities v Edith Cresson*. "The Court declares that Mrs. Edith Cresson acted in breach of her obligations as a European commissioner." PRESS RELEASE No 56/06, 11 July 2006, [http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release\\_CJE-06-56\\_en.htm](http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_CJE-06-56_en.htm) (accessed 1 May 2019).

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. See also, The EU Fact Sheet on Recent Scandals: <http://www.eu-facts.org/en/scandals/>.and Rowlatt 1999.

<sup>18</sup> *Former Premier of France Faces Fraud Charges Filed by Belgium*. Associated Press Archives, March 26, 2003.

<sup>19</sup> Judgment of the Court of Justice, *Commission of the European Communities versus Édith Cresson*, Case C-432/04. See also, "Edith Cresson: Willing to extend benefits to personal friends The EU's top court has ruled that Edith Cresson ... violated her official duties" However, the court did not impose a penalty on Ms Cresson, 72" (*Court rules against ex-French PM*, BBC News online 11 July 2006. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/5167940.stm> (accessed 2 May 2019) and "Edith Cresson Charged with Fraud". *The Guardian* 25 March 2003. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2003/mar/26/eu.france>.

<sup>20</sup> Council of Women World Leaders: <http://www.councilwomenworldleaders.org/> (accessed 2 May 2019).

123).<sup>21</sup> Others disagree, writing that Cresson, “was dismissed without ceremony by the same President [who appointed her]. Abused by her party friends, lynched by the press and ruined by the television” (Skard 2015:383). Élisabeth Schemla argues, Cresson’s failure and low approval ratings were largely due to the misogyny of the Socialist elites, the French political class, and the French media (1993). When Cresson discusses her political career in her autobiography, *Histoires françaises*, I think it is safe to assume there’s a touch of bias (as one would expect).

Arguably the fraud allegations lend to remarks about Cresson’s responsibility for her own destruction. Yet despite her unpopularity as Prime Minister and the scandal from corruption charges while she was the European Commissioner for Research, Science and Technology,<sup>22</sup> she had a long and impressive political career, which ran from 1979 to 2001. Within France and the European Community as well. This included positions in the National Assembly of France, both General and Municipal Councils and the European Parliament. To date, she does remain the first, and only woman, in France to serve as Prime Minister.

## REFERENCES:

- Browning, E.S. “France's Cresson Faces Criticism After Week in Post”. *Wall Street Journal, Eastern edition*; New York, N.Y. [New York, N.Y] 24 May 1991, (accessed 22 April 2019).
- Commire, Anne (1999) “Cresson, Edith (1934-)” in *Women in World History: A Biographical Encyclopedia*. *Encyclopedia.com*. (accessed: 24 March 2019) <<https://www.encyclopedia.com>>.
- Council of Women World Leaders: <http://www.councilwomenworldleaders.org/>
- Cresson, Edith (1934-...) 2009 (edited by Ed du Rocher) *Histoires françaises*. Paris, Abes ISBN 2-268-06015-2.
- Duhamel, Oliver and Jérôme Jaffré (1993) *Edith Cresson à Matignon ou la confection d'une impopularité*. SOFRES L'Etat de l'Opinion, Paris: Seuil.
- “Edith Cresson” (2004) *Encyclopedia of World Biography*. *Encyclopedia.com*. The Gale Group (accessed: April 18, 2019). <https://www.encyclopedia.com/history/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/edith-cresson>
- Eagly, A. H., & Johannesen-Schmidt, M. C. (2001). The leadership styles of women and men. *Journal of Social Issues*, 57(4), 781.
- “Edith Cresson Charged with Fraud”. *The Guardian* 25 March 2003. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2003/mar/26/eu.france> (accessed 1 May 2019).
- EU Fact Sheet on Recent Scandals: <http://www.eu-facts.org/en/scandals/> (accessed 2 May 2019).
- Former Premier of France Faces Fraud Charges Filed by Belgium*. Associated Press Archives, March 26, 2003 <https://www.nytimes.com/2003/03/26/world/former-premier-of-france-faces-fraud-charges-filed-by-belgium.html> (Accessed 1 May 2019).

---

<sup>21</sup> See also, Rone Tempest, “Cresson's Fall Could Deal Blow to Women in Politics.” *Times, Paris 1992*, amongst other news articles and encyclopedia inclusions.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. Judgment of the European Council.

France marks 70 years of women's voting rights (<https://www.france24.com/en/20140421-france-womens-voting-right-anniversary>).

Geni.com <https://www.geni.com/people/Edith-Cresson/6000000047327943969>  
Last updated: May 23, 2018.

Hoffman, L. W. (1972). Early childhood experience and women's achievement motives. *Journal of Social Issues*, 28, 129–156.

Judgment of the Court of Justice in Case C-432/04, *Commission of the European Communities v Edith Cresson*. "The Court declares that Mrs. Edith Cresson acted in breach of her obligations as a European commissioner." PRESS RELEASE No 56/06, 11 July 2006, [http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release\\_CJE-06-56\\_en.htm](http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_CJE-06-56_en.htm) (accessed 1 May 2019).

Kavanagh, Dennis and Christopher Riches A Dictionary of Political Biography (editors) (1998) *A Dictionary of Political Biography*. Oxford University Press. Published online January 2009 | e-ISBN: 9780199569137

Kreisel, Cynthia Sharrer (2008) "Edith Cresson" in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Women in World History*. Oxford Publishing Press. ISBN: 9780195148909. Published online January 2008 | e-ISBN: 9780195337860

Lawrence, Veronica (2009) "The Oxford Encyclopedia of Women in World History", Reference Reviews, Vol. 23 Issue: 3, pp.54, <https://doi.org/10.1108/09504120910945443>.

Mednick, Martha and Veronica Thomas (2008) "Women and Achievement" in *Psychology of Women: A Handbook of Issues and Theories* (2<sup>nd</sup> Edition). Edited by Florence L. Denmark and Michele A. Paludi. Prager Publishing. Chapter 19, pp: 625-650.

Palmowski, Jan (2008) *A Dictionary of Contemporary World History, Third edition*. Oxford Press. Published online January 2008 | e-ISBN: 9780191726583 | DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.1093/acref/9780199295678.001.0001>

Ramsay, Raylene L. (2003) *French Women in Politics*. New York, Oxford, Berghahn Books

Rowlatt, Justin (March 19, 1999) "World: Europe Cresson: The 'careless' commissioner" BBC Online Network: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/255053.stm>. (accessed 1 May 2019).

Schemla, Élisabeth (1993) *Édith Cresson, la femme piégée*, Paris: Flammarion, [ISBN 978-2080668400](https://www.isbn-international.org/view/title/978-2-080668400).

Skard, Torild, (2015) "Edith Cresson" in *Women of Power – Half a century of female presidents and prime ministers worldwide*, Bristol: Policy Press, [ISBN 978-1-44731-578-0](https://www.isbn-international.org/view/title/978-1-44731-578-0).

Tempest, Rone, Staff Writer. "Cresson's Fall Could Deal Blow to Women in Politics: France: Nation's first female prime minister became its most unpopular after 10 rocky months in office." *Times, Paris*. April 3, 1992 (accessed 22 April 2019).

The Convention of Republican Institutions (1963-1971) ([https://www.cairn-int.info/article-E\\_VING\\_104\\_0123--the-convention-of-the-republican.htm](https://www.cairn-int.info/article-E_VING_104_0123--the-convention-of-the-republican.htm)).

*The Crisis of the Santer Commission:* [https://www.cvce.eu/obj/the\\_crisis\\_of\\_the\\_santer\\_commission-en-7380f95b-1fb2-484d-a262-d870a0d5d74d.html](https://www.cvce.eu/obj/the_crisis_of_the_santer_commission-en-7380f95b-1fb2-484d-a262-d870a0d5d74d.html) (accessed 1 May 2019).

*The Schengen Agreement, History and Definition,* <https://www.schengenvisainfo.com/schengen-agreement/>.