

Biography of Mr. Harri Holkeri, President of the 55th Session of the General Assembly

Mr. Harri Holkeri, the President of the fifty-fifth session of the United Nations General Assembly—the Millennium Assembly—brings to the post a wealth of political experience, as well as a reputation as a skilled mediator and consensus builder. He was Finland's Prime Minister from 1987 to 1991, and for over four decades has served his country and the international community in several political and economic posts.

The most renowned and prestigious conservative political figure in Finland over the last few decades, he served as Secretary of the National Coalition Party from 1965 to 1971 and as Party Leader from 1971 to 1979. From 1970 to 1978, he was a Member of the Parliament. He also served as a Member of the Board of Governors of the Bank of Finland (central bank) from 1978 to 1997. As Prime Minister, he headed a coalition formed by his party and the Social Democrats. Mr. Holkeri played a key role in developing the social consensus that led to the creation of the coalition government in power from 1987 to 1991, and of which he was Prime Minister. That government was based on cooperation between the Conservative and the Social Democratic parties—a cooperation that extended to international affairs as well. His political philosophy—“You cannot make easy decisions unless you first commit yourself to hard solutions”—has guided his political life.

His skills as a mediator and coalition builder have played an important role in Finland's foreign relations. After the Second World War, Finland, situated on the border between the East and the West, needed a workable and trustful relationship with both the West and its eastern neighbours and the former Soviet Union. The country's decision to pursue a policy of military non-alignment and cooperation needed internal popular support, as well as international acceptance. But the difficulties faced in normalizing relations with the East were compounded by distrust of the Finnish Right, both inside and outside the country. During Mr. Holkeri's term as the Party Leader in the 1970s, Finnish Conservatives explicitly pledged to support the national consensus foreign policy. This contributed to the restoration of national harmony, helped to form broadly based governmental coalitions and led to expanding international cooperation.

Mr. Holkeri has been a friend of three Presidents of Finland—Mr. Urho Kekkonen, Mr. Mauno Koivisto and Mr. Martti Ahtisaari—all of whom used him as their contact person in their relations with the political right. He was a presidential candidate twice, in 1982 and 1988. Both times he ran against Dr. Koivisto, with whom he had worked at the Bank of Finland and with whom he had a close and personal relationship. In 1987, President Koivisto appointed Mr. Holkeri Prime Minister.

Mr. Holkeri has also been active at the international level. He was a member of the Finnish delegation to the United Nations General Assembly from 1963 to 1965. During his career as a Member of Parliament he held various international positions, including as a member of the Nordic Council from 1975 to 1978, Vice-President of the European Free Trade Association (EFTA) Parliamentarians from 1974 to 1975, and their President in 1976.

From 1995 to 1998, Mr. Holkeri was a member of The International Body—a group set up by the Governments of the United Kingdom and Ireland—on the issue of the decommissioning of illegal weapons in Northern Ireland. He was one of the three independent chairmen of the multi-party peace negotiations, where his skills as a consensus builder contributed greatly to furthering the peace process.

In 1999, Mr. Holkeri received an honorary British knighthood, Honorary Knight Commander of the Order of the British Empire, for his achievements in the Northern Ireland peace process. A year earlier, President Ahtisaari had accorded him a Finnish honorary title, *valtioneuvos*, for his national and international merits.

Mr. Holkeri was Chair of the Helsinki City Council from 1981 to 1987. He is currently the Chairman of the Board of Finnair, Finland's national airline, and sits on the boards of various Finnish industries and organizations.

Mr. Holkeri was born on 6 January 1937. His upbringing in the small rural city of Toijala, where his father was a police officer, formed the basis of his personal values, which are centred on the family, love of one's neighbour and love for and loyalty to one's own country. He has a Master of Political Science degree from the University of Helsinki. His military rank is major in the reserve.

He is very interested in sports, particularly long-distance cross-country skiing and running. He has taken part in several marathons, including the New York City Marathon. Golf has lately become one of his favourite sports.

Mr. Holkeri is married, and has two children and six grandchildren.