

Give my friend Cherie a chance

After playing host to Cherie Blair on holiday in Italy, society hostess **Carla Powell** says the most scoffed at spouse in history is nothing like her brittle, silly image

For most of the past three years I have deserted my usual hectic life and gone back to my roots in the Italian countryside, doing up a house and working my own small piece of land. It's been blissfully remote from the political and social bitchery of London. The newspapers don't penetrate here; and even when I can remember how to pick up the BBC or Sky News, it takes only a minute to remind me I don't want to hear them.

I was brought back to earth when Cherie Blair joined me out here recently. She was only a temporary refugee and her stories from the front line of politics were like those of a soldier on leave from the trenches. Alas, she went back all too quickly to the fray. Cherie, despite what you usually read about her, is a wonderfully lively, quick-witted and extremely funny woman. Her visit left me reflecting on how much the role of prime minister's spouse has changed and become infinitely more difficult.



Alan Davidson



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My first memory of the breed was when I was a young foreign wife while my husband Charles Powell was working in the Foreign Office across the street from No 10. Lady Dorothy Macmillan and Lady Douglas-Home were plainly great ladies. But their public life seemed to be restricted to standing beside their husbands in large hats and smiling.

Little interest was taken in them publicly despite some of the gossip which circulated privately. I remember hearing how Elizabeth Douglas-Home used to hiss at her husband Sir Alec as he strode down the steps of an aeroplane in some faraway capital, "Peking, Alec, Peking", to remind him where he was.

The climate changed for spouses for ever when Private Eye began publishing its version of Mary Wilson's diaries. Thus began the process of scrutinising the private life of a prime minister's wife, though luckily the trend didn't take hold then because Ted Heath didn't have a spouse and Audrey Callaghan and Norma Major preferred to maintain the supportive but silent movie role of past spouses (despite Norma's unforgettable outburst on the importance of saving and freezing grotty bits of cheese).

Denis Thatcher stands on his own. He took the strategic decision early on never to speak in public or give an interview; "If I don't open my mouth, I can't put my foot in

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it," as he put it. It served him well. But in private he was gloriously politically incorrect and amusing as well, and much more influential with Margaret Thatcher on policy issues than most people imagine.

He endured the mockery of the "Dear Bill" letters stoically, while she worried that people would think they were real. I like to think I had a small part in his affections as a fellow smoker at formal occasions. His usual genial greeting to me was: "Here comes trouble."

What very different treatment Cherie Blair has received compared with her predecessors. She is subject to constant criticism about everything from her dress sense to her political views to a degree which has no previous equal. What explains it? Well, we all make mistakes and even her friends must admit that she has sometimes offered an irresistible target.

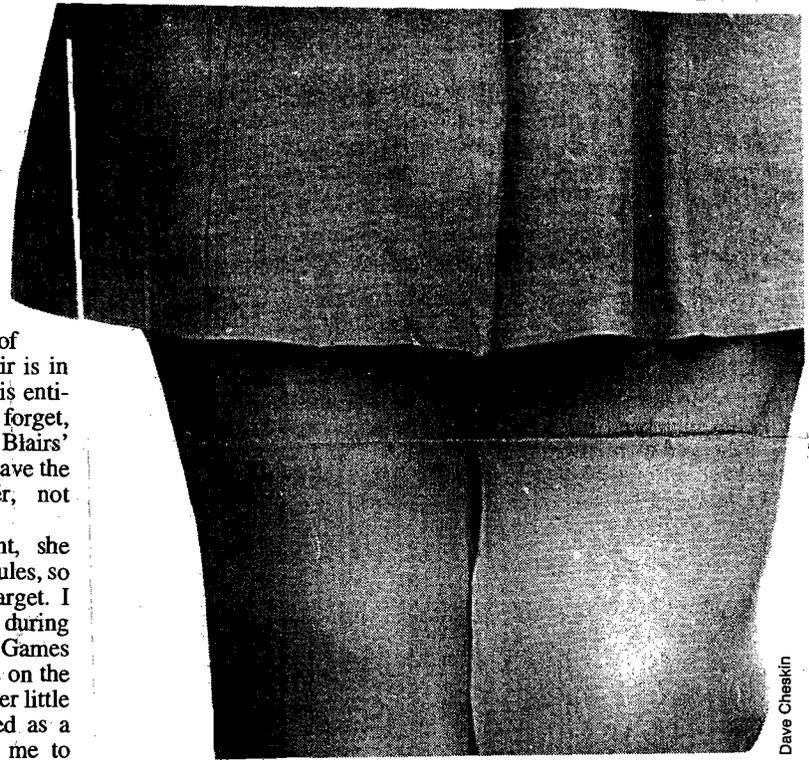
Prime ministers and their spouses live an unreal life in No 10, separated from normality both by the security screen and crammed schedules. It's easy for them to forget how simple actions or comments can be distorted, pilloried and caricatured. But there are other influences at work.

Cherie has "views" — does she just! She can be outspoken, she takes up causes, especially the rights of women in countries where they are still second-class citizens,

she argues for trade union and individual employee rights in the courts. All those are controversial activities in the eyes of some people. But you simply cannot expect a bright and successful career woman in the modern world to accept the role of mute supporter. Cherie Blair is in the middle of a career and is entitled to pursue it. And never forget, originally most of the Blairs' friends expected Cherie to have the successful political career, not Tony.

Cherie Blair is different, she doesn't conform to the old rules, so to some people she is a target. I defy anyone not to yawn during five hours at the Highland Games — yet she does it and she's on the front pages of the papers: Her little visit to see me is described as a "freebie". Do they expect me to charge my guests? Does Charles Moore normally pay when he spends a weekend with friends? This level of abuse is pathetic.

I am not a specially close friend of Cherie, let alone a confidante, but a few days spent with her and her daughter, exploring Rome's antiquities, doing cheap and cheerful shopping and dining out with Italian lawyers, diplomats, historians and journalists whom she delighted with her quick-witted-



Dave Cheekin

ness and sparkling debating style, convinces me that she has had a rough deal.

The public image could not be more wrong. I discovered someone who has very strong and simple values. She cares above all about family and religion. Cherie is an outstanding mother despite the enormous demands on her time, and has a refreshingly open, outspoken

style. As one of my Italian friends remarked: "How on earth can she be so different from what you are led to expect?"

The only answer which I can come up with is: "If you are blessed with brains, four bright and healthy children, a very successful career, and a husband who is a charismatic prime minister, than you don't stand a chance!"

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