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ON No 10

It's all a bit premature to make any plans. We haven't booked a removal van

WHEN Norma Major came face to face with Cherie Blair at the Savoy Hotel a few days ago, neither woman mentioned the election. "We had a very amiable conversation," says Mrs Major. "She asked after my mother [who is recovering from cancer treatment] ... there's no reason to be anything other than amiable."

Yet both women must have been well aware, as they exchanged pleasantries, that they could soon be swapping places at 10 Downing Street. Of course, Mrs Major is not so foolish as to say that she thinks this is probable; but she does venture the view that the mechanics of any possible changeover are somewhat brutal.

"One is hustled out rather ignominiously, which I think is shameful. I don't think that any incoming Prime Minister actually would expect the outgoing Prime Minister to disappear by lunchtime the next day - it's not realistic. I think someone should take a grip of that situation ... I mean no outgoing Prime Minister is going to want to cling on. You want to make a fairly smart move. But one should be able to do it with dignity."

She is speaking hypothetically. She believes that her husband will win; what is more, she "passionately" wants him to win.

Ever since Norma Major stood nervously on the steps of 10 Downing Street six years ago looking less than thrilled with her lot, people have suspected that she is looking forward to the day when her husband is no longer Prime Minister. That is not fair, she says. "I will be 100 per cent delighted [if we win]. Absolutely without reservations."

Does that mean she will not feel an iota of relief if she has to return to normal life? "Ahhh," she says. "Now that's not quite the same thing as not being 100 per cent about wanting to win. I'm sure if we were to lose - and I do not believe we are going to - then there is another life outside politics."

Have they made any contingency plans, booked a removal van? "It's all a bit premature to make any plans. We haven't booked a removal van."

Whatever happens, the Majors will still have Finings, their constituency home in Huntingdon, which Norma has maintained as a sanctuary for her family throughout all the changes in her husband's political life. He joins



Photographs by STEVE PYKE

Face to face with **NORMA**

Exclusive interview by
HELENA de BERTODANO

her there at weekends, although now that the couple's two children, Elizabeth and James, have grown up and moved away, she spends more time in Downing Street.

Will she miss not living here any more? "No," she says, without hesitation. "It would be totally wrong to say that ... It's a lovely, lovely place to be but I won't miss it, we'll just move on. We'll adjust - again."

We meet in the White Drawing Room of 10 Downing Street overlooking Horse Guards Parade. To the left of the fireplace is a Turner painting entitled *Waves Breaking Against the Wind*. As Mrs Major's secretary points out, it is an apt metaphor for the uncertain political climate of the moment.

And yet the mood in Downing Street seems to be one of excitement, rather than any sense of impending doom. On the way up the stairs, I pass her husband. "Hello," he says cheerfully, sounding like a man without a care in the world. His wife radiates the same relaxed air: she explains that they are both delighted now that the campaign is under way. "I think we've been ..."

She starts again, using the singular pronoun this time. "... I personally have been in a kind of

limbo and it's quite nice to get on with it ... I genuinely enjoy campaigning, rather like John does."

Slim and elegant in a fitted navy Windsmoor suit with sparkling diamanté buttons, she does not look anything like the picture of herself in "that blue suit", the shapeless skirt and jacket she wore on the day her husband won - and then again, when she accompanied him to Buckingham Palace.

It is her biggest regret in the past six years: "I do genuinely believe that if I had not appeared

on the doorstep on that first day in that rather - as everybody said - frowsy blue suit, the image I projected would have been slightly different. I think that might have made all the difference to the way people perceived me. I felt as though I'd been misrepresented. I still think I am to some extent."

Nevertheless, she admits that the first few months were difficult. "As marvellous as Denis was, I think that people's perception of a female spouse of a Prime Minister is probably

rather different and possibly the expectations are, too. It's been so long since there was a wife of a Prime Minister that there was just nothing in the way of help.

"It wouldn't surprise me if I had been a bit tense at the beginning. What *did* surprise me was that people didn't seem to understand that this was a huge thing to have happened, and there I was standing on the doorstep looking uncomfortable. Who wouldn't?"

Neither of them had had time, psychologically, to prepare for the role. "He wasn't even Leader of the Opposition so we didn't really have a chance to get used to the possibility ... we weren't aiming at this at all."

Was your husband not even contemplating it? "I don't

ON MARRIAGE

I cannot say 'Look, it's time you went to bed.' No Prime Minister wants a nagging wife

believe he was. His ambition was to be Chancellor of the Exchequer and he enjoyed that so much. I do not believe that this is what he was aiming at."

I ask if she has accepted her role and has learnt to enjoy it. She answers enigmatically: "I do enjoy it. Whether I have learnt to accept it is another thing."

But she agrees that she has become more accustomed to her duties. "It would be crazy to think that you could be doing the job for six years and not actually develop into it. When you've been round the circuit a couple of times, you begin to feel much more at ease and I suppose that shows."

She was particularly rankled by the patronising attitude shown towards them at first - one commentator went so far as to say that in the old days she and her husband would only ever have crossed the threshold of Downing Street as butler and parlour maid. "It was extraordinary. I was the little house mouse [in their eyes], and yet we went to banquets at Buckingham Palace when John was whatever he was and I was just his wife ... But it was almost as though [they thought] I didn't know what to do with a knife and fork."

Initially she was also upset at the image painted of her husband as a boring grey man. "It makes you angry because it wasn't anybody I recognised. But I think you learn to live with that - you have to shrug it off."

She may have become more confident but she is having none of "that secret weapon rubbish". Last year, it was reported that she was her husband's secret weapon for winning the election. She resented the implication that she was suddenly going to be at her husband's side - as if she hadn't been there before: "It did make me a bit angry when people in the constituencies were saying to me: 'Oh, I'm so glad you're going to be with John now', as though I hadn't been for the past six years."

At another point she says: "People believe what they read in the papers, that I don't want anything to do with the job, that I spend all my time in Huntingdon and that I do nothing else - which has never been true. And I never wanted it to be true. That's not what I intended."

Yet because of her domestic independence from her husband, she has often been criticised. Among the letters she received

Continued overleaf

Face to face with NORMA

Continued from previous page at the beginning, one in particular sticks in her mind. "It said: 'A good wife has the ear of her husband'." She looks exasperated, twisting her hands together. "People who are not involved in this frenetic life do not realise how little scope there is for the wife. There is no room for me to look after him, and I cannot say 'Look, it's time you went to bed.' He *knows* what he needs to do. No Prime Minister wants a nagging wife."

Her first priority was to maintain a stable family home. She says that it would be impossible to create any semblance of a domestic life in Downing Street. "We don't get a lot of privacy upstairs. I don't mind because we still have our home, but I think that if this was everything, then you couldn't cope with people buzzing in and out all the time."

If she had stayed full time in Downing Street, it would, she says with a little laugh, have been "a short road to the divorce courts". The uncertainty of her husband's lifestyle would have maddened her. "I would never know when [John] was coming in. How many times can you rehearse a meal — it would drive me crazy, whereas the steward can stand back from it a bit... Even when he was on Lambeth Council, I'd cook a meal and lay the table nicely, then you get the first phone call to say 'Sorry, I've been delayed' and at 11 o'clock you're clearing it all away. That gets a bit tedious after a while."

She says that people believe this means they have "rather a strange marriage".

Yet this could not be further from the truth: "We're happy, we love each other and we're still together."

In return, she accepts that her husband is no longer exclusively her property. He belongs to the civil service and to the country: "Essentially, the job comes first. I accepted that a long time ago."

I ask if she ever cooks for her husband these days. "Oh, yes," she says, enthusiastically. "And we still eat at the kitchen table." Recalling the satirical *Spitting Image* sketch of their Downing Street dinners, I ask her if she cooks him frozen peas.

There is a short silence while she eyes me suspiciously; then she softens. "I never did understand that. The only thing I can suggest is that everybody thought that we were the most boring couple on this earth and maybe they regard peas as the most boring vegetable."

In fact, there is little time to cook her husband peas or anything else at the moment. She racks her brains in an attempt to remember when she last had a meal alone with him. "We didn't have supper together last night; the night before we had a charity dinner; on Sunday night I was at home and he was here; on Saturday night we were out to dinner in the constituency; on Friday night we were in Bath and I did not eat with him; that's five days — and I can't remember as far back as Thursday."

She laughs, realising that it is difficult to prove to me — and even to herself — that she spends enough time with her husband: "I suppose there is



not a lot of time just on our own — breakfast perhaps, but that's not always on our own... the chances are that somebody will come in to discuss something that's more important than whatever it is we might be discussing."

One of the things she most valued were her long chats with him in the car. "One thing I miss, I *do* miss very much is the car, because we used to do a lot of our communicating in the car... Now we've got a driver and a

detective, and discreet as they are, you don't engage in the same kind of conversation. That's valuable time we've lost together."

Nevertheless, she says, they are still "good friends" and she knows how to gauge his moods: "I know when to keep out of the way or keep quiet. You sense that he's sitting there and he's distracted and he doesn't really want to talk to anybody about anything. The trick is to try and pick your moment."

Mistress of No 10
Norma Major's first priority as the Prime Minister's wife was to maintain a stable family home. "We don't get a lot of privacy upstairs at Downing Street. I don't mind because we still have our home... If she had stayed full time at No 10, it would have been 'a short road to the divorce courts'."

She became head girl of her secondary state school in Peckham and went on to become a domestic science teacher and a nanny. But her real passion was opera and she would camp outside Covent Garden for tickets for almost every opera, especially if there was an appearance of her favourite singer, Joan Sutherland, whose biography she later wrote.

Even before meeting her husband, however, she says she was "instinctively" a Conservative. "But I didn't really do anything active in politics until the GLC elections of 1970, when I agreed to give a hand to a friend. That was when I met John."

Instantly attracted to him, she gave him a lift home that night and invited him to a dinner party later that week. He accepted but then rang to cancel at the last minute. She invited him to the opera and he turned her down again. Then he invited her to a dinner at a friend's house and they hit it off; three weeks later they were engaged.

What was her first impression of Major? "I thought he was terrific — yup," she says, smiling at the memory.

Would it be fair to say politics brought you together? "Oh yes, absolutely."

She has never had any career ambitions for herself, although she is a very able writer — apart from her biography of Joan Sutherland, she has written a well-researched book on Chequers. "I don't think it's kept me from doing

school, "not because my mother couldn't stand the sight of me" — as a recent biography stated — but because it was considered best for her. Her mother, who was juggling three jobs to make ends meet, visited her every weekend and she grew up in an extended family of cousins and aunts. "I didn't have a lonely childhood... but I think I grew up very independent."

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things that I wanted to do. I haven't been ambitious for myself and I wasn't really ambitious for John."

What she wanted most of all was to be a good housewife and a mother. "I like domesticity, home life is important to me. It's rather a joke in our family: 'Mum's playing house.' I enjoy housework, but I don't spend all my *life* doing it."

I ask her whether it would be possible to juggle a full-time career with the duties of being wife to the Prime Minister. "I don't see why it should be impossible. The job is what you make of it. There aren't really any rules."

She says that she has never been "a loggerheads" with the political wives of other leaders. "What's the *point* of

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it? We meet very occasionally socially."

Does she think there are any similarities between herself and Cherie? "I don't know, honestly. We had one conversation about the need to keep the children and family life private, but we've never sat and had a meaty conversation about anything."

Norma is fiercely protective of her children. Nothing angers her more than when the press intrudes on their private lives. "They didn't choose this. As far as they're concerned, their father happens to have become Prime Minister... What James has been through could have destroyed him and he's been

absolutely marvellous." She is referring to the media fascination with her son's love life. "I don't think it's in the public interest that anybody needs to know what my children do for a living or where they live or who they're living with."

Family has always come first for Norma and her mother's recent illness has been deeply worrying for her. "She has cancer but we think she's on the mend now. The treatment's working, but it's been very difficult for the past few months."

Does it make politics seem fairly irrelevant in comparison? She nods: "It does a bit, yes. It puts all sorts of things in perspective."

Despite the obvious strains of being in the spotlight, Norma insists that she is happy with her lot and has never been lonely. "I've never known a moment's loneliness in my life. I don't mind being alone sometimes — I need that."

At the moment she is refusing to think too far ahead, although she finds the prospect of the election itself "exciting". "I'm fairly relaxed about it from the personal point of view. I think if we win it will be great. If we lose, there will be other things to do. I don't think it's going to be a personal problem." She adds quietly: "But I do want to win."

She says that she is "laid-back" about the election because they have been to the brink so many times. "I've lost count of how many confidence votes we've had... You get used to it; you know you can cope whatever happens."

I ask her what she will miss most of all when her husband is no longer Prime Minister. She pauses for thought, then smiles: "A parking space in London."

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