

Sunday, 5th April 2009

## Breakfast with Cherie

Ariadne Massa

Cherie Blair admits discretion is never a value she learnt. The mother of four, barrister, Queen's Counsel, and wife of former Prime Minister Tony Blair, spoke to Ariadne Massa.

The world's introduction to Cherie Blair, wife of then newly elected British Prime Minister, were through images beamed via satellite exposing her with tousled hair and in her nightie - a sign of the media circus that would hound her throughout the Blairs' tenure at No. 10 Downing Street.

Tony Blair had just been elected in May 1997. When the doorbell rang at 8.30 a.m. the day after the election, she was the only one awake to answer the door for a flower delivery... and the paparazzi pounced.



"Invading Iraq was the right thing to do. I think we forget too soon Saddam Hussein's threat" - Cherie Blair. Photo: Chris Sant Fournier.

The working-class girl from Liverpool endured a decade-long witch hunt, which dripped with such vitriol that even her political foes were baffled.

She has been described as a "greedy" and "freebie-grabbing", but, for the 54-year-old, it looks like it has been water off a duck's back. The advice American former first lady Hillary Clinton gave her years back has served her in good stead.

"When I first met her (Hillary) she said, 'you have to understand you're not going to please all the people all the time, so it's important to do what seems right for you and to be yourself'. And I think that should be the advice for all political spouses," Ms Blair says.

Walking into a suite at the Phoenicia Hotel, her hair is well groomed and she looks fresh, despite landing in Malta seven hours earlier. She flew in on the invitation of Kate Gonzi to address a business breakfast on 'Balancing Family and Career'. She chose to waive her fee, which says a lot about the perceived greed that has haunted her reputation.

Ms Blair apologises for keeping Ms Gonzi waiting. She has just been on the phone with her nine-year-old son Leo, in London, who is undergoing his violin exam in a few hours and she is fretting because she is not there.

Sipping warm water with lemon and giving the trays of cold cuts and toast a miss, Ms Blair is forthcoming, shedding the vilified image built by the British media, while her infamous lips, which move in strange ways and have inspired many a caricature, turn up in a warm smile.

She tries to understand what could be behind the media's loathing and with a hearty laugh says: "I certainly hope I don't have quite as big a bottom as they sometimes say I do.

"I think it was a time of adjustment really. I was actually the first prime minister's spouse to have a university degree, including Denis Thatcher. That's not because previous spouses were less clever than I am. It was simply a matter that they were creatures of their time and as women of their generation the opportunities to go to university were not usually open to them," she says.

Ms Blair is the one with the superior academic CV; the one who graduated from the London School of Economics with the highest first in her year. Many British snobs wondered how Mr Blair, a proper middle-class boy, ended up with this "Liverpudlian Scouser" (slang for an argumentative person from Liverpool), which made the media feel they had a licence to be toxic.

Ms Blair believes the fact she chose to continue working while her husband was in office could also be to blame, because the "system" found it difficult to adjust to her decision.

"I also think that as a wife of a public figure you can often act as a lightning rod for them, so sometimes, if people felt they couldn't attack my husband directly they could do it indirectly. Once you start understanding that, you stop taking these things personally, it's part of the rough and tumble of politics," she says.

"I'm only human. And some of the things obviously did hurt. But in the end the most important thing was to ensure that what my husband wanted to do for the country and his message came across... If there were times when I actually distracted from that, I was

more annoyed with myself for allowing that to happen, than worried about whether I was hurt personally."

Her book *Speaking for Myself* is an attempt to dispel the perceptions but also to put it in the larger context of women's history; to tell the story of how a young girl, equipped with sheer determination but without much material help, succeeded in going places.

As a young girl she dreamt of becoming the first female Prime Minister, but then Margaret Thatcher beat her to it. When the two young barristers, Cherie Booth and Tony Blair, became an item - he proposed while she was on her knees scrubbing the toilet at the end of a holiday in France - it was actually her who secured the first political candidature.

She smiles as she recounts the "marvellous period" before the 1983 election when "Tony was the candidate's husband, which I think was fine by me, but not so fine for him".

The couple were just returning home from holiday when they decided to take a detour to speak to her parliamentary agent who was running her campaign.

"At the end of lunch, he said to Tony, 'Cherie and I need to talk some politics so would you mind going to help the wife with the washing up'. So poor Tony dutifully went out and started washing up. And at one point, my agent's wife said to Tony, 'Are you interested in politics at all or are you just doing this for Cherie'," she recounts, throwing her head back in laughter.

Eventually, she relinquished her dream, as Mr Blair focused his full energies on politics. The 29-year-old Cherie was suddenly the family's main breadwinner and she was pregnant with her first child. Though initially horrified, she was strengthened by the example her mother and grandmother had set to be financially independent, and set her sights on her career instead.

When her mother was abandoned by her father, she picked herself up, went and took a very lowly paid, unglamorous job to raise her two daughters.

Did she feel women were constantly relinquishing their dreams and maybe taking on more supportive roles as they paved the way for their husband to succeed?

"I think, with Tony and I, it was just the way things happened. Suddenly, we had one child and then two and my life went in a direction that concentrated on the law. In the end, I think it was the right thing to do because I do think he's a better politician and I'm a better lawyer," she says.

Asked how she succeeded in juggling between holding down her different roles as barrister, Queen's Counsel, mother and Prime Minister's wife, she insists it is never as easy as it seems and sometimes one of the balls is dropped.

She believes women should not always think their career path has to be one clear straight road going only in one direction, because life is more complicated: "Life isn't so regimented and you don't make one choice for all time."

Ms Blair recognises that there are several women who are postponing starting a family to focus on their career, but warns there never is a perfect time to choose to have a baby.

"To some extent in my life I was lucky God intervened and made the choice for me. If you try to look logically at things, I think you would spend all the time waiting and never doing it. Sometimes, in life you just have to grasp the moment," she says.

Ms Blair is a firm believer and champion of women's rights. She strongly believes women have a choice whether to bear children or not through contraception.

So she felt "rather sad" when she heard Pope Benedict XVI say that condoms "increase the problem" of AIDS during his recent visit to Africa, as well as with the way it was reported.

"I think we do have to understand that there is concern about promiscuity. But there's also a real concern about saving lives and I absolutely believe, and scientific evidence shows, that condoms do save lives. Therefore, when there's a choice between endangering and not endangering life, we should always choose life," she stresses.

Despite being a practising Catholic, Ms Blair seems to find it easy reconciling her stand on contraception with that of the Vatican, and questions whether the methods the Church recommends are actually the most efficient way of planning the family.

"I think it's a matter of personal conscience in the end. I don't feel bad about making those choices and I don't feel the Catholic Church feels bad about me making those choices," she says.

Ms Blair has never attempted to hide her views on contraception and her reference to "contraceptive equipment" in her book was quickly pounced upon.

She recounts how Leo was conceived because she had decided to leave this 'equipment' behind during the couple's visit to Balmoral, the Queen's residence in Scotland, after a diligent courtier had embarrassingly unpacked her overnight bag during the previous visit.

Ms Blair has never revealed what this equipment could possibly be, and as she sits back into the sofa in the Phoenicia Hotel's lounge, her eyes twinkle teasingly.

"That's a secret. It's probably not too difficult to guess. The word 'equipment' was simply a way of finding a polite word to use without giving too much detail," she says, letting out a merry laugh.

Despite this, there was a lot of hand-wringing in the UK that Ms Blair had shared too much personal information with her readers from "Tony's really strong body", to childbirth, miscarriage, and menstrual periods.

Her book reads in a way that makes readers feel like they are listening in on a conversation between two best friends. For many women this has been a breath of fresh air, and that is what she wanted to achieve, despite being accused of exposing too much.

So did her husband read the book before it went to print? Did he censor anything?

"Tony didn't censor it. He did read through it, but I think as a man he skimmed over the lovey-dovey bits quite quickly. I wanted to tell this story as though I was talking to my girlfriends. And I don't know any women who, when they get together, don't talk about their experiences of childbirth and pregnancy. So I was slightly surprised people found them excessive," she says.

Despite the media's reaction to her book she has no regrets, and believes there must have been a misunderstanding about what sort of book this was going to be. People were under the wrong impression it would be political, but she said she was leaving this to her husband.

"That's his story to tell. Mine was a more personal story of what it was like living in the limelight at the time. But also what it was like to be a woman of my time. I don't think my story is that unique, though I did end up being in some unique circumstances," she says.

Ms Blair is renowned for her impulsiveness to speak her mind - she admits discretion is not a value she learnt and jokes there were so many faux pas moments it is hard to mention just one she regrets.

She is also a woman who found it hard to conform to being a premier's wife and being a human rights' lawyer. In 2004, she had openly attacked the legality of Guantanamo Bay detentions, where the US kept terrorist suspects.

Mr Blair was a staunch ally of former US President George W. Bush, but Ms Blair shrugs off any possibility that this could have caused an embarrassing situation for her husband.

Even with hindsight, she remains loyal to her husband's support for Mr Bush's decision to invade Iraq, a move that was heavily criticised in the UK especially after no weapons of mass destruction were found.

"Invading Iraq was the right thing to do. I think we forget too soon the threat that Saddam Hussein was to the international community and how difficult life was for ordinary Iraqis... This was a man who personally shot members of his own Cabinet. We're not talking of a democratically elected leader here," she stresses.

Despite the mayhem that still reigns in Iraq and the soaring number of casualties, Ms Blair remains optimistic that slowly, Iraqis will one day get a taste of democracy.

"Iraq had a dictatorship for a long time, so it's going to take time before the checks and balances we take for granted come together. But that doesn't mean it's not a fight worth fighting for," she adds.

Whatever criticism the Blairs faced, the couple's relationship has remained strong; theirs has been a marriage built on common values and shared ideals.

Having celebrated their 29th wedding anniversary last Sunday, Ms Blair believes the fact they were both interested in left of centre politics and the whole issue of social justice, as well as religion, kept their relationship interesting.

She admits she is missing him and seeing less of her husband now that he is Middle East envoy working on behalf of the US, Russia, the UN and the EU.

"I do miss him, though it's a really important job he's doing there. If we can solve the question of Israel and Palestine, then we'll be doing a huge amount to bring stability to that region and peace to the rest of the world - I'm so very proud he's involved in it."

With minutes to spare before she is shuttled to her book-signing event at Word for Word Bookshop in Valletta, she stops to think how friends would describe her in three words: "Well I hope they'd say I was funny and feminist... and, maybe, possibly a little impulsive."

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## Comments

**Joe Cassar (20 hours, 43 minutes ago)**

Mr Xuereb, When people like Pinochet, who were as bad as Saddam (if not worse) were "wreaking havoc on his country and people" that is exactly what we did - look the other way. Did you ever wonder why?

And neither George Bush nor Tony Blair "sent their sons to war" - they sent other people's sons. If you were to visit a war cemetery - any war cemetery - you will find that 99% of the crosses are for young men, aged 18 to 20, from working class families.

**Joe Xuereb (1 day, 3 hours ago)**

@ Mr. Cassar. Are you saying that Saddam Hussein should have been allowed to continue, unchallenged, wreaking havoc on his country and people? In effect, saying that confronted with incredible cruelty, we should just look the other way? And even if conceding that the British Forces have no place in Iraq, do you really believe that the withdrawal of these Forces would finally bring peace and calm to this country? For if you do, you can dream on. I do not think that sending your son to war to sort out other people's problems is something one does lightly. Especially when you consider that the son often comes back home in a box.

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**Joe Cassar (1 day, 5 hours ago)**

It seems that the Blairs are still in denial about the totally unnecessary and illegal invasion of Iraq, which cost so many thousands of lives.