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Vicky Pryce: 'I thought we were a unit'

She is high-powered economist and mother of five. She is also the estranged wife of cabinet minister Chris Huhne, who last year left her for his lover. Vicky Pryce speaks for the first time, about the shock, the loyalty of friends and a future in politics

Sabine DurrantThe Guardian, Saturday 1 October 2011



Economist Vicky Pryce for the Saturday Interview. Photo by Linda Ny Lind. 29/9/2011. Photograph: Linda Ny Lind for the Guardian

Vicky Pryce always thought if she and her husband, Chris Huhne, the Secretary of State for Energy, were ever to divorce it would be over the euro. "We used to argue all the time. I was totally anti-euro entry. I thought it was not an optimal currency union, that there would be real problems, a crisis." She smiles wryly. "We had completely opposite views."

She is many things, Pryce: a high-powered economist who inspires intense loyalty among her colleagues; a civil servant whose contribution has been described as "enormous"; a feminist, who continues to campaign for the visibility of women in the private and public sectors; a mother who has brought up five children alongside the demands of the board room; an academic, with visiting fellowships at Nuffield and CASS; a committed Lib Dem; a polyglot; the first woman to be appointed chief economic adviser at the Department Business, Innovation and Skills; the first female Master of the Worshipful Company of Management Consultants; one of the first women to gain membership to the Reform Club. Oh, and a passionate Chelsea fan. It seems a bit rum, then, that she could be best known as the spurned wife of a cabinet minister.

It wasn't the Euro in the end, but an aide: 44-year-old Carina Trimmingham, who had met Huhne when he was fighting the Lib Dem leadership campaign in 2007, and left her female civil partner to be with him. Pryce discovered the affair only hours before it was reported in the News of the World in June last year. It was a "tremendous shock". Since then there have been other allegations – another mistress, and the information that, back in 2003 when he was a MEP, Huhne may have asked Pryce to take speeding points on her licence for him (an issue that remains under police investigation). And last week Huhne felt moved to reveal more personal details at a fringe meeting at the

Liberal Democrat conference. Talking about the "appalling set of circumstances" that surrounded the breakup of his marriage, he described the "stress" his ex-wife must have felt and his attempts to apologise. "I personally feel enormous regret about what I put my family through and what happened with Vicky." Pryce issued a statement on this "serious intrusion. I am surprised that my ex-husband considers it appropriate to talk at a public meeting about the very private aspects of our family life," she said.

Pryce has been bombarded with requests for personal interviews over the last 18 months – we all want the rantings of the scorned wife – but she has said no to everything, until now. The timing of her surrender is interesting; it must be no coincidence that it is only a few days since Huhne's breast-baring. But she doesn't want to get her own back. In fact, the moment she sits down she says: "There are a number of things I am just not going to touch on, all this stuff that is going on right now. I am sure you can imagine, but I just won't." She says it is hard to keep refusing things when you are in the public eye and that anyway, she has ambitions of her own. She is straight about this: she doesn't seem cagey so much as dignified. But, as the interview goes on, avoiding the subject is harder than either of us thinks.

We have met in her offices in Covent Garden – she is a senior managing director at FTI, an American financial consultancy; the only woman at that level in her sector. It is a platonically perfect working environment. All white and marble, polished wood surfaces and red leather sofas, the rooftops of central London – spires and cranes, chimney pots and aerials – stretching out silently beyond acres of clear glass. Pryce is a little late, and arrives flustered. She has had to bag up all the things her youngest son, who has just started at Oxford, had forgotten. She is slight, with narrow-shoulders, heavy bracelets on her slim wrists, black-rimmed glasses cutting across alert, brown eyes. There is an engagingly upbeat air about her; she is 60 next year, but you would never guess. She is dressed smartly but quirkily: opaque tights with high grey court shoes; a jacket with interesting buttons. She stopped wearing black and white for work years ago when she turned up for a directors' lunch and "when I got out of the lift, a client asked if I was looking for the kitchen".

There is much that is unexpected about Pryce. A Chelsea shirt, signed by the squad 2010/11, has pride of place on her wall: "Torres played alright for once on Wednesday." Many of her sentences are surprising. Born Vasiliki Courmouzis in Athens, she grew up the middle of three children: "The ideal position to be in. No one really pays much attention to you so you can get away with murder." She was out on the town at 11, coming home at all hours; later riding a motorbike. It was a huge extended family, in which not much was expected of girls (though her mother "was a great poker player"), something she thinks turned her into "a very early feminist. What is this thing with boys? I didn't understand it. It made me determined to do my own thing."

Her father was in tourism and was keen for his children to learn languages (she speaks four), but it was Pryce who decided London was the place. She arrived at 17, "extraordinary of my parents to let me", and after the Colonels took over Greece and her father's business "went belly-up", worked six days a week in the Mayfair Hotel as a room-service telephonist to pay for her O and A-levels: "It was rather fun," she says. "And improved my English no end." A scholarship from a Greek foundation took her to the LSE, where she studied economics and met her first husband, who was president of the student union and whose name she took.

By 23, she had had her first child, a daughter, followed by another, and was speedily rising up the ranks at Williams & Glyn's bank. They lived in West Dulwich, on a main road: "I love main roads, there is always something interesting going on, people getting knocked down and you rush and help them ... It's quite active." She is funny about her

working life in this period, too: the booze at lunch, the sexism: "The first thing I had to do when I became manager of the economics department was go round and tell everyone, 'You are going to have to throw away the Page 3 pin-ups you have on your screens.'"

Her first marriage ended in 1981, and in 1984, by which time she had become a corporate economist at Exxon, Pryce married Chris Huhne. They moved to a beautiful Georgian square in Clapham and had three further children, two boys and a girl. From this point, it proves impossible to talk about Pryce's life and career without talking about Huhne.

Her City salary – she became a partner at KPMG, travelling to eastern Europe, China, India, Africa – gave Huhne the freedom to experiment professionally in journalism and property. It was when he made the decision to become an MEP, that compromises needed to be made. "I was not fantastically keen on the idea ... I didn't really like the thought of him going off ... I mean it was the way to get into parliament ... it made sense, but it was crazy, we had au pairs but we couldn't both be away. So I completely changed my career."

Pryce left KPMG, set up the GoodCorporation, an organisation promoting ethical business practices, and in 2002 was headhunted as director general and chief economic adviser at the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills. "It wasn't my career path. I had been very well paid, and ... well I am not complaining. I had a special contract which put me above the prime minister, but it was a lot less. But one of us had to be there for the children so I took it. I didn't object to it. When you are a unit and do everything together ..." She breaks off. I am not sure her eyes are not filling. "And I thought we were a unit."

It was a hard period in her life. It is the time of the controversial speeding tickets ("I'm absolutely not talking about that"), when Huhne finally lost his licence for talking on a mobile phone and had to be driven everywhere. She subsequently read in the paper about another affair while he was in Brussels. "The woman said I was going to be left: I have no idea whether any of this is true. I had to handle everything. I had to handle a very difficult child during that period ... He was away all week and, of course, at weekends he had started to nurse the Eastleigh constituency ... It turns out this mistress supposedly helped choose the furniture for our house. I had no clue. I had no idea. I had complete trust at the time."

Her trust continued right until June 2010, when Huhne entered the cabinet. Again, she was the one who compromised, resigning from a post she had come to love (she was then joint head of the Government Economic Service) in order to avoid a conflict of interest. She was offered the job at FTI, but was still working out her notice when Huhne left. "I rang up and tried to offer my resignation. I said, 'With all this stuff, you realise I am going to be a liability.'"

When the news broke, she thought about running away to Greece. "But my friends said I couldn't hide, that it would be the worst thing to do." On the Monday, she went to work. "And all my people, they said: 'Right, we have looked at your diary and you are not going to do this, and you are not going to Brussels and we have taken over that.' It was incredible. You know, the loyalty of your friends and your colleagues, and of course your kids, that's what you live for."

Soon after that there was a Lib Dem party. "I was outside with a very good Lib Dem friend: 'Do I go in? Do I not go in? Do I go in?' I didn't have my prescription sunglasses with me, but she handed me hers and I went. I had to do it. And it was better that I did."

I have stopped asking Pryce questions. She is just talking. "I have friends who say if

they were me they wouldn't get up in the morning. And every morning I think: 'How am I going to get through the day. The shock hasn't gone. But somehow I do. So yesterday, I am feeling ...but I get a call from Sky News, then at 10.30am I went to a client, then I chaired a commission, then I walked to Millbank and did BBC Scotland, then LBC wanted me to do something on the financial transaction tax, and meetings and then dinner with my daughter. Pizza Express." She is talking with forced chirpiness, one hand is clenching her elbow. "So, that's what you do."

All her children live close by and she has two grandchildren whom she adores. There is a future of her own to think about, too. She is still closely involved with Vince Cable's advisory committee and by the next election would like to be playing a more political role: "More women are needed in government, particularly as economists. They view the world differently. They are less single-minded."

Are they better at handling people? She gives me a long, considered look over the top of her glasses. It is as beady as she gets. "I am not a politician," she says. "But I would imagine women are more to be trusted than men."

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