

THE SMILING SENHORA'S PATH TO THE TOP

Portugal's woman Prime Minister, (below) talking about herself for the first time to JACQUELINE REDDITT.

PRIME Ministers are traditionally serious, forbidding and male. Portugal's new premier is jolly, easy to talk to and female. Her constant smile and ready laugh are already becoming legend, but behind the smile is, if not an "Iron Lady" certainly a woman to be reckoned with.

Senhora (Miss) Maria De Lourdes Pintasilgo, considered left-wing though not a member of any political party, was recently appointed by Portugal's President Antonio Ramalho Eanes to run a "caretaker" government for about 100 days, until general elections.

A comparison between Europe's first two women Prime Ministers is inevitable. To begin with, both are from middle-class backgrounds and both are industrial chemists. The two have never met, but Senhora Pintasilgo said of Mrs Thatcher: "She appears to me as a person of tremendous determination and at the same time pragmatism and—something I admire a lot—she doesn't seem to get lost in the midst of many

contradictory events and challenges.

"She seems to know very well what she wants and that, for me, is a very important quality in a leader and very special in a woman leader."

After speaking to Senhora Pintasilgo, I had the impression that these words could equally well apply to her.

From the age of 12, the young Maria De Lourdes showed a defiance and determination, but started her on the path to her present position. A rather sickly child, she had until then concentrated on the piano and literature. She had already read most of the Portuguese novels and classics: "I cannot say I read, I devoured all the books that appeared in front of me," and she developed a lasting love of poetry.

In spite of this natural interest in the arts, she then decided to opt for a course in engineering. The reasons were simple. Other girls she knew had tried the course and failed. It was the most difficult course, with 48 hours of classes per week as well as a lot of practical work. She explained: "All the time, the question was,

can women do the same things as men do? So engineering appeared a challenge to me."

Catholicism was an early and lasting influence on Senhora Pintasilgo, and whilst studying for a degree in chemical engineering, she became president first of the Catholic women students, and then of the International Catholic Students Organisation, known as Pax Romana.

She attributes her later move away from a career in industry to the sphere of social sciences largely to these activities. During this period, she became used to public speaking and, more important, through travel and contact with students of other nationalities became aware of a need for changes and social justice.

With the reputation of being Left-wing, feminist and a militant Catholic, Senhora Pintasilgo is regarded by many as something of a contradiction. She explains that on the contrary, her feminism and Left-wing sympathies sprang naturally from her Catholic belief that: "All humanity, man and woman, are made to be free and equal in dignity."

She thinks of herself primarily as a Christian, believing that "unity among those who believe in Jesus Christ is more important than the cleavages between the different denominations." Of her alleged Leftist leanings, she said: "I see society as a social fabric that needs continuous understanding and change, for people to be able to live in a happier and more just way. Maybe that's what links me to the Left wing. Certainly equality of opportunity is for me a key question."

As Secretary of State for Social Security and Minister of Social Affairs in the first two provisional governments after Portugal's 1974 "Flower Revolution," which ended 50 years of dictatorship, Senhora Pintasilgo set up a committee for the status of women and was largely responsible for changes in women's rights legislation.

Laughingly, she admitted: "You may call me chauvinistic," but she quickly pointed out: "If I'm a champion of anything, I'm a champion of rights for everyone."

I asked Senhora Pintasilgo what her plans were after the autumn elections. Would she return to UNESCO, where she has been Portugal's ambassador since 1975? Frankly, she said, she didn't know.

She had only one definite thought. "First, I need a holiday. I would like to go to Scotland, people say it is so beautiful and so peaceful."

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