

MARIE KNUCKEY reports on a Sydney impression of the woman who, for now, holds the reins of power in Portugal.....



The impassioned prime minister

MARIA de Lourdes Pintassilgo, Portugal's new caretaker Prime Minister, is a great talker, an impassioned speaker, a woman of great warmth, wide cultural interests, great vivacity — and very much her own woman.

"She laughs all the time, and is genuinely interested in people and their problems," said Professor Hugh Philp, Professor of Education at Macquarie University, who got to know her well when they were both on the executive board of UNESCO. He saw her last in December, just before he returned to Australia last January.

A chemical engineer, she worked for CUF, one of the big Portuguese industrial companies, he said.

"She rose pretty rapidly in that to become one of their senior engineers on the research side."

She was born in Albrantes, up river from Lisbon on the Tagus, and her family was fairly wealthy. At university she became deeply involved with student movements, and later with women's groups.

A devout Catholic, she was at one stage head of the Grail organisation in Portugal. This is a lay women's movement, and those who join it for life promise celibacy, poverty and obedience to the movement. Maria da Lourdes Pintassilgo, in her late 40s, has never married.

"Because of the nature of the regime in Portugal, the women's organisations had to work a great deal within the context of the Church," said Professor Philp.

"After the revolution, she became chairman of the Commission on Women's Affairs, and I know she set up a whole series of experimental projects on women in society, a difficult thing to do in a country like Portugal.

"She did a lot in her own industry about women's pay, conditions of work, and equality of opportunity. She had a lot to do with setting up creches, ensuring that women would be free from family responsibilities and could take work. There was one big project on women in rural areas, trying to find ways in which women could contribute more to the community than simply being mothers and slaves.

"I think she drifted into politics because of her work with women. She became Minister for Social Affairs in 1974, but then she dropped out of government when she went to UNESCO."

Professor Philp first met her in Paris. She had been nominated for membership of UNESCO's executive board and was also about to become the Portuguese Ambassador to UNESCO.

"She was elected to the board in 1976 at the UNESCO General Conference in Nairobi. For the next couple of years I worked with her for about three months of the each year. I was vice-chairman of the board and we always met either in Paris or Nairobi, where the UNESCO meetings were held.

"She was a very popular member of the board, which was a pretty tough mob of characters.

"She gets on fabulously with both men and women.

"On the board you are nominated by your government, but elected as yourself and you sit on the board in your own right. In practice, that's sometimes a very difficult line to draw. Some people on the board are simply

the mouthpieces of their foreign offices. Others will try to follow the government line on very sensitive political issues when they come up, but other than that are pretty free to speak their own mind in areas of their own expertise, and Maria was very much her own woman. You had to convince her on intellectual grounds and human grounds and not on political grounds.

"She is very highly intelligent and an extraordinarily cultured woman. She reads a great deal in anthropological and philosophical literature and it's not a superficial interest.

"She is marvellous value at a dinner party because of her conversation and her whole total bubbling attitude to living. She has a marvellous fund of stories and proverbs to illustrate what she is saying.

"She doesn't like poverty or oppression and she is a very impassioned speaker. More than anybody I know she can become

ing parties and I found her not only a congenial colleague but a very effective one. Nothing was too much trouble. She didn't mind working till two or three in the morning on drafts of reports and could jolly other people along to make sure they did too — including the chairman!

"She is inclined to take on far too much and as a result she jumps from one thing to another. I've heard her accused of lacking depth in her approach to some issues, mainly because she has had so many things on her plate that she didn't have time to become as involved as she might be. I'm not sure how fair this criticism is. Sometimes on an emotive issue she would be inclined to go off half-cocked, without doing her homework, but this didn't often happen."

How good a Prime Minister will she make until the next elections in October end her caretakership?

"She's very good at seeking



Maria de Lourdes Pintassilgo, Portugal's caretaker Prime Minister.

totally impassioned about a topic in whatever language is handiest. She is just as likely to make a major speech in French as in English. She has good Spanish but seldom uses it, some Italian and some Dutch. She writes beautifully in French and not badly in English."

(She has done post-graduate work at universities in Great Britain, France, the United States and the Netherlands).

She has been accused of talking too much, and for this reason Professor Philp thought she would make a bad chairman, and hold the floor too much. But he admits he was proved wrong.

He saw her chair important meetings with great efficiency, and give those present a feeling that here was a chairman who really did care about them. She is also good at getting work out of people.

"I had to chair a lot of work-

advice. She doesn't think she knows it all — far from it. She's also a tremendously honest person.

"She's very tough, but not in the Margaret Thatcher mould of toughness. It's not an abrasive toughness, but a resilient toughness, because there's sympathy and warmth with it. I'd sooner be in a country run by her than in a country run by Mrs Thatcher.

"I'm told she lives very simply at home. I haven't been to her home in Portugal but I have been to her flat in Paris. She had certainly stamped her individuality on it. I got the impression of lots of paintings — tending to be classical Italian and classical Dutch — lots of flowers and many, many books. The sort of books I'd want to pick off the shelves on subjects like anthropology and social affairs. It was a comfortable place, a nice place to go and sit down."