

'I see very little of Nick ... I have my own life, I have my own job, my own family'

Miriam González sets out a clear dividing line between her political and professional roles, Hilary Rose reports

In a general election that was all about the unexpected, one of the highlights was a feisty, attractive Spanish woman who didn't even have a vote.

Whereas Sarah Brown abandoned her high-powered job in PR to focus on her family, and Samantha Cameron downgraded her job at Smythson to a consultative capacity, Miriam González Durántez, citizen of Spain, aka Mrs Nick Clegg, announced in her heavily accented English that she had no intention of giving up her job as a partner in a City law firm to tag along as eye candy after her husband. Hooray for Miriam Clegg.

She is polite but wary, her nails are manicured and her movements precise. You can imagine her in a mantilla with castanets. Or killing a bull.

She doesn't usually give interviews, but today she is at a smart London hotel to tell us about a sustainable fashion venture called **EcoLuxe**.

EcoLuxe is a group of ethical designers who have banded together for London Fashion Week to promote environmentally friendly fashion design. To grab women's attention, the **EcoLuxe** people have stated clearly that González Durántez is the Deputy Prime Minister's wife. So why does she think they asked her to promote this?

"At some point during the general election," she says, "people pointed to the sustainable fashion items that I was wearing, and I think that is probably why I was asked to do this. It seems to me it's a very good initiative — giving consumers a choice to have sustainable fashion if they wish to."

Her penchant for sustainable fashion was noted during the election. One red-top newspaper said that her dress looked like a grey bin-liner, and that a handbag produced from bottle tops in

Brazil looked like something made by the Wombles. It went on to pillory her for not supporting British manufacturing. There is more than an element of her being damned if she does and damned if she doesn't. She couldn't care less: it's a beautiful bag, she says defiantly. She has a couple of clutches as well. "I wear them even to royal banquets. Do negative comments hurt? Of course not! You can't please everybody, especially in what you wear."

It's a lesson Samantha Cameron and Sarah Brown have long since learnt.

And now there's Miriam Clegg, in her smart Zara suits for work and casual clothes for when she's with her three children, Antonio, 8, Alberto, 5, and Miguel, 1. She grew up around politics — her father was mayor of the local town and later a senator. She studied in Valladolid and Bruges — where she met Mr Clegg — before becoming an international trade lawyer. Now 42, she lives in Putney, and is a supporter of environmental issues, women's rights and ethical fashion.

The **EcoLuxe** collection includes organic clothes from Portugal, luxury accessories made by a co-operative in the Himalayas, ethical shrugs and fish-skin shoes. It all sounds laudable, but fish-skin shoes? It doesn't really make the heart sing, does it? "Have you seen the shoes?" she asks, not unreasonably. "They are fabulous. I think sustainable fashion is in the process of going mainstream. I think it is important that it is not seen as hippy fashion, but as fashion for everybody."

Some of her own wardrobe is sustainably sourced, but not all. "I never pretend to be something that I am not," she says. She tries to buy sustainably

when she can, and is frustrated that it can be hard to work out where to shop. She's encouraged that big designers such as Stella McCartney are banging the sustainable drum, and that celebrities — including her friends Colin and Livia Firth — are vocal supporters. Handily, the Firths are enthusiastic Lib

Dem supporters as well as fans of eco fashion. (Livia Firth has a shop, Eco, in southwest London which sells sustainable goods.) "Livia is very vocal and she is the person who introduced me to sustainable fashion," Mrs Clegg says.

Is it important to her to look good? "I think it's important to look correct. What you wear is a mark of respect, so yeah, your appearance is important, but I'm not obsessive with fashion. You just have to look at me to realise that."

Today, she looks stunning in a Zadig & Voltaire white jacket and an emerald green silk dress. And for every bin-liner gibe, there have been others making more favourable fashion comparisons, including with Michelle Obama ("She's in a league of her own, so I can't stand any comparisons," she responds).

Under close questioning, she admits to liking the SamCam-favourite Zara. ("I buy in Zara. I buy in many shops.") She travels frequently, so buys a lot abroad, and she also has an internet habit.

"I buy on eBay," she says. "I highly recommend it. The eveningwear is quite good for me. If you only wear something a few times, it's a good thing that people pass it on to each other."

When does she do her eBay-ing? In her lunchhour? "It's none of your business. I go on the internet whenever I wish."

You get the distinct sense that she



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finds all this talk of clothes frivolous; she would rather be talking about bio-fuels and bamboo fibre. Is this what our Deputy Prime Minister talks about over the dinner table? "I see very little of my husband," she says. "I talk about our children, mostly."

What about work, then? One of her business associations, with a Spanish company, recently caused shouts of "conflict of interest" and comparisons

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”

with Cherie Blair. "With . . . ?" she says, pretending not to have heard.

"Cherie Blair."

"I don't know who Cherie Blair is. She is a woman who had children and worked and I take my hat off to her."

So, is her current position something of a double-edged sword?

"You're asking is it a nice position to be married to my husband? It's a ridiculous question. Of course it's nice to be married to my husband. I chose him as a husband."

Meeting her does nothing to dispel the rumours that it is she who wears the trousers: Cabinet meetings are rumoured to be scheduled around his doing the school run.

"I said in the election that I will help whenever I can, but I will not make my whole life conditional to supporting the campaign," she says. "Right now, I have my own life, I have my own job, I have my own family."

Is it not ironic that her first big solo outing as Deputy Prime Minister's wife is to do with clothes? "I am not doing this as the wife of Nick Clegg. I am doing this as Miriam González." But it's surely her profile as his wife that is important to the promoters. "They may be interested by the trade initiatives that I've done on the environment. I'm married to Nick. Everybody knows that I'm married to Nick. I don't understand why that could be an issue."

Who wouldn't applaud her desire not to be subsumed by his job, and her commitment to ethical issues?

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