

A BROKEN WOMAN; Vicky Pryce 's drive to destroy her ex-husband Chris Huhne has led to the prospect of jail for both. For the first time Isab... .. 2

SE News; Front Page
HD **A BROKEN WOMAN; Vicky Pryce's drive to destroy her ex-husband Chris Huhne has led to the prospect of jail for both. For the first time Isabel Oakeshott reveals her own pivotal role in the affair A tragedy without winners**
BY Isabel Oakeshott
WC 5,321 words
PD 10 March 2013
SN The Sunday Times
SC ST
ED 1; National
PG 1,2,3
LA English
CY © 2013 Times Newspapers Ltd. All rights reserved

LP

The night Vicky Pryce thought she had finally "nailed" her exhusband she appeared, out of the blue, on my doorstep. It was already late, perhaps 9.45pm on an April evening in 2011, and she was slightly out of breath. She had driven straight to my flat in Barnes following an event in central London after work and she had not eaten. She was clutching a digital tape recorder.

"I think I've got him," she said. She was hungry and there wasn't much in the fridge. My husband and I cobbled together a plate of cold prawns and some cheese and poured her a large glass of pinot grigio.

TD

She sat at the end of the kitchen table, slightly on the edge of the seat. She was wearing her signature navy skirt suit and high heels. As she ate she fiddled with the tape recorder, trying to switch it on. She was clearly very tired and hated technology.

Finally, she found the right button and suddenly we could hear her voice — brisk and businesslike at first, quickly growing shrill. The other voice was Chris Huhne, secretary of state for energy, Liberal Democrat MP and her estranged husband. He was cold and emotionless.

I was shocked. You would never have guessed they had been married for 26 years and that she was the mother of his three children. There was a complete absence of affection or concern in his voice. Vicky's language also jarred: expletives spat out in increasingly hysterical tones in her distinctive Greek accent.

This was the private side of two very public figures. He was one of the most important men in British politics. She was a distinguished former joint head of the government economic service and chief economic adviser at Vince Cable's Department for Business.

Now we sat in silence over the prawns and cheese, listening to them arguing. She was telling him The Sunday Times was investigating a tip that he had dodged a driving ban for speeding by pretending she had been at the wheel. He was telling her to keep her mouth shut.

The recording finished and she switched off the machine, looking up expectantly.

"It's not enough," my husband said flatly. This was not his story, but after 15 years on Fleet Street as an investigative reporter he knows the standard of proof required to publish explosive allegations about someone with money and power.

Vicky looked crestfallen. It was the fourth attempt she had made to catch her estranged husband on tape confessing to a crime. I could see why she was excited — it was by far the closest she had got.

Last month Huhne finally confessed publicly and pleaded guilty to a charge of perverting the course of justice. But on Thursday her quest for vengeance backfired when she was convicted of the same crime. The judge indicated that they both face jail.

How did this catastrophe for the two of them come about? I have had a ringside seat on the unfolding story.

I FIRST met Vicky in the security tent at the Liberal Democrat party conference in Liverpool in September 2010. I was standing in the queue, waiting to go through the x-ray machines, when she arrived with a mutual friend who introduced us. I smiled and said hello.

"You know who I am, don't you?" she asked anxiously.

I did, of course. The collapse of her marriage to Huhne that summer had featured prominently in the media. Tittle-tattle about the dreadful way he had treated her over his affair with his aide, Carina Tringham, still appeared regularly in the press.

"How are you managing?" I asked.

"Not too good," she answered.

She was brave to be at that party conference with so many eyes on her. Huhne was there with his lover and it must have been difficult facing all the party activists and colleagues they had known for years. Everyone felt sorry for her.

She was holding her head high, however, determined to be there as a member of the party in her own right. She wanted to support Cable, a friend, as he made his first speech to a Lib Dem party conference as a member of the cabinet.

For a brief period after the coalition was formed in May 2010, Pryce had been chief economic adviser in his department, a job she had felt compelled to give up to avoid any perception of a conflict of interest when her husband also joined the cabinet. "It must be hard being here," I said.

Instantly she was confiding in me: Carina was somewhere in the conference centre, she said, and she was terrified of bumping into her and Chris. Photographers had been stalking her. She felt watched.

Her fear of crossing paths with her husband may have sounded melodramatic, but it was real. (Several months later she told me of her panicked reaction when she thought she spotted the back of his neck in a taxi. She was practically hyperventilating as she recalled it.) We passed through security and headed into the conference centre. I told Vicky that The Sunday Times would love to interview her some time. She was noncommittal but seemed open to the idea and we agreed to meet for a coffee back in London after the conference season.

We both went to freshen up in the ladies before braving the throng. She peered at herself very critically in the mirror, trying to smooth her unruly hair. I thought how desperately thin she looked.

The following weeks were busy and I didn't think about Vicky until November, when she agreed to an interview. It was the first she had given since the collapse of her marriage. The focus was to be on her career.

I went to the offices of FTI Consulting in Holborn, where she was a senior managing director. She greeted me rather warily. Sitting behind her desk, she fielded questions about her work and ambitions quite coolly, looking at me intently through heavy rimmed glasses. On the wall were framed certificates from guilds and universities. She was playing the tough businesswoman but it was a thin veneer.

The mask slipped the moment I tentatively asked about her private life. Her eyes welled up. She took off her glasses, angrily rubbing away tears. "Sorry," she whispered.

I was embarrassed — her pain was so raw. I switched off my tape recorder and tried to offer some words of comfort. We called it a day. She was pleased with the piece The Sunday Times ran that weekend and told me she wanted to talk more — off the record. We met a couple of weeks later in a coffee place near her office.

It was a freezing December day and I was eight months pregnant, an excuse for hot chocolate with cream and marshmallows. Vicky looked as if she could have done with the calories, but she opted for her usual caffeine fix.

By this time she was in the middle of divorce proceedings and clearly under even more strain. She told me Huhne was doing his best to hold on to as much money as he could. She thought he was deliberately undervaluing some of the properties held in his name.

She also suspected he was lying about his domestic arrangements, pretending he was not cohabiting with Carina so the divorce courts would not take his lover's income into account.

Vicky had just received his official financial disclosure, a long statement detailing his assets and liabilities. She had also been through some of his bank statements.

"He spends £75 getting his hair cut!" she exclaimed indignantly. She complained about his vanity, describing how he had once visited a stylist to have his "colours" done. Apparently, after the consultation he threw away all his shirts and ties that were not the recommended tones.

She had a copy of his financial declaration with her and produced it rather furtively. She wondered if there was anything of journalistic interest. I skimmed the various investments. Nothing jumped out.

I have it all somewhere in an old notebook: details of multiple houses, Isas, pension funds and bank accounts, as well as lump sums he received from his elderly father. It added up to about £5m. There was no public interest that would justify publishing details of it.

It was now clear to me that Vicky had an agenda: she was out to get Chris Huhne. She didn't need to spell it out: her willingness to show me confidential documents that might have revealed something compromising showed she wanted to do him damage. The more he compounded her misery by trying to pare down her divorce settlement, the more dangerous to him she was becoming.

What particularly riled her was that she had almost always been the higher earner during their marriage, an achievement she felt should be recognised.

"Basically the reason he was able to build a property portfolio and fund his political ambitions has very little to do with him 'making millions in the City' — which he didn't — and a lot to do with me ... I was earning consistently considerably more and spending it all on the family," she would later write to me.

BY NOW it was nearly Christmas and I went on maternity leave. For a couple of months I was completely absorbed in looking after my newborn and forgot about Vicky.

When my daughter was about two months old I began to emerge from the fog. I had promised the editor I would not go completely off radar and so I began putting in the odd telephone call to contacts, including Vicky.

I was keen to get to know her better. As well as having economic expertise, she was very well connected with many friends in interesting and powerful positions. We arranged to catch up over lunch at Christopher's American Bar and Grill in Covent Garden.

A year or so later, after Huhne had been charged with perverting the course of justice, the Crown Prosecution Service would demand details of the expenses claim that I submitted to The Sunday Times for lunch with Vicky that day.

It would have been nice for Huhne's defence team if it had found some financial irregularity to discredit me. More likely, it hoped I'd taken her to fancy places and plied her with champagne. They must have been disappointed when they saw the receipt: just sparkling mineral water and a pleasant meal costing £73.74.

Over chicken caesar salad and sea bass, we discussed the recession, the forthcoming budget and the state of the coalition. We also talked about Huhne.

It was nine months since they had split but she was as angry and heartbroken as ever. She claimed Huhne no longer had any relationship to speak of with their children. She didn't believe he deserved to be a cabinet minister.

Furthermore, she feared he was once again positioning himself for the Lib Dem party leadership. This was not an entirely outlandish suggestion. At the time Nick Clegg's stock was at an all-time low after the tuition fees debacle and he was about to lose his campaign to change the voting system. Huhne's ambition burnt brighter than ever.

The spectre of her husband prospering after smashing up the family was more than Vicky could bear.

"He can't be leader," she said. "He shouldn't even be in the cabinet. People should know what he's really like." So there it was: she wanted to bring him down. I made sure I had understood her correctly.

"You want to stop him?" I asked.

"Yes," she said. I didn't see how. His finances were squeaky clean. She didn't seem to have anything else up her sleeve.

"Yes I do," she said. She leaned across the table. "I took his points."

I didn't know what she was talking about. She had almost whispered it in her strange accent and I asked her to say it again. She told me Huhne was a "crazy" driver, always speeding. Apparently he had clocked up nine points and would have been banned if he'd been caught again.

Battling for selection as the Lib Dem parliamentary candidate in the Hampshire constituency of Eastleigh, he couldn't afford to lose his licence. So when he was caught again, he had pressurised her to pretend she had been at the wheel.

Not long after our lunch I was caught speeding, for the first time in my life. It was annoying — 34mph in a 30mph zone seemed a pathetic way to acquire three penalty points — but I was able to see for myself how it was possible to nominate someone else for a speeding offence.

Our battered old VW Passat is registered in my husband's name so he received a letter from the police. We both knew I had been the one driving, so he filled out my name on the form. I paid my fine, accepting the points.

In Vicky's case there had been a bitter dispute. Huhne had falsely entered her name on the form and sent it off to the police, putting her in a nightmare position.

It had all happened long ago — 2003 — and Vicky was frustratingly short on detail. She told me that another newspaper was already looking into it. Apparently it knew "someone close to Huhne" had taken his points, but not who.

I couldn't help thinking it was a rather minor offence. Nobody had been hurt. But cabinet ministers can't be law-breakers. I knew Huhne would be in serious trouble if it got out.

I watched Vicky walk away after our lunch, clipping down the street in her high heels, fragile as tissue paper. For all her anger and desire for revenge, I was sure she still loved her husband and wanted him back. Secretly she hoped his affair with Carina would not last.

In the following days I pondered how The Sunday Times could run the penalty points story. While Vicky clearly had an agenda, I never doubted she was telling the truth. It was just too strange a thing to make up. I felt that if she was going to fabricate a tale to bring Huhne down, she would have come up with something better that did not risk undoing them both.

In taking penalty points on Huhne's behalf, although under immense pressure, Vicky had committed a criminal offence. Given how committed she was, I hoped she could be persuaded to go public with her account — and take the consequences.

At least she would be playing it straight. If she went on the record about what had happened it would certainly be harder for Huhne to deny.

That night I emailed her: "I've spent most of the afternoon thinking about your situation from every angle and have come to some conclusions."

In the long message that followed I urged her to tell her story openly. I felt this would achieve her objective — bringing Huhne down — with the minimum damage to her own reputation. She would simply tell the truth and see what happened. I also suggested ghostwriting a long article for her. We could go away for a couple of days so that we could work undisturbed. She liked the idea, suggesting Greece.

She replied: "Timewise I need to think about whether we publish after my [divorce] settlement or before. Also emphasis will need to be on political wife, glass ceiling etc as we said, with the revelations coming out as snippets rather than main focus if you see what I mean. Also I would need some reassurance that it would indeed bring CH down... Let's talk a bit more but generally like it."

A few evenings later she sent me a message from her Black-Berry saying she "definitely" wanted to "nail him... More than ever actually".

At that moment she was sitting at a trade and industry dinner at the Mansion House in the City with Cable and his wife, Rachel. She said she was "particularly pissed off" because she'd had to pull out of a dinner at Nuffield University, where she and Huhne were both visiting fellows. "Despite attempts by the warden to put him off, he insists on going," she complained.

She was angry with him, but she was also having doubts about going on the record and was giving a great deal of thought to potential alternatives. Among her ideas was getting a reporter to ambush Huhne about the penalty points at a press conference, or tipping off the party leadership, even Clegg's wife, Miriam.

"Other possibility would be to tell NC or his close associates (having coffee with Miriam this pm) that papers are on to him ... that might have the benefit of NC not wanting any more scandals and ease him out. Don't know, do you think that is too dangerous?" I advised her against both.

The emails whizzed back and forth, often going round in circles. I was finding the whole process exhausting. Up half the night with my newborn, I was also fielding endless missives from Vicky, who would change her mind about what she wanted to do from one day to the next. Late at night she would become emotional and even more confused.

"Sorry Isabel, bad night last night and I was a bit incoherent," she wrote after one rant, admitting she'd "sort of lost it". Once, emailing me in the early hours, she fell asleep at the keyboard, firing off an email full of jumbled letters. But while she wavered over methodology, her commitment to the overall objective was not in doubt.

"As I said before I am completely determined (and not only because of the BAD economics he used yesterday to scare people re the oil price and to put pressure on Osborne to give him what he wants in the budget and beyond. Really shocked by that crap)," she emailed me. The only stumbling block, she wrote a few days later, was "repercussions" for herself.

I was still on maternity leave but totally immersed in the story. There were meetings with my bosses about how to proceed. While there was a clear public interest in publishing the story — a cabinet minister had apparently broken the law — we were all troubled by the potential implications for Vicky.

On March 9 I emailed her with a blunt warning: "We have asked our lawyers and the bottom line is that, however the story is done, there is some risk to you. It would be dishonest of me to pretend otherwise. If we wrote it as you suggest, quoting you as saying you know at least one person who took points for him, without saying who it was, there would almost certainly be pressure on you (from other media and maybe even the police) to reveal who it was — and you'd end up having to reveal it anyway. At the end of the day, it's a question of whether you're prepared to take the risk or not, but one thing you can be sure of is that once the story is out, CH would be forced to resign and his career would be in tatters."

She was undeterred. "A solution must be possible with no damage to me ie me still being seen as the victim rather than the horrible avenger?" she wrote. I wasn't optimistic. It was a very difficult story to run.

"Can't see a way of doing it really ... no responsible paper will run it without you either going on the record or signing an affidavit, or some independent evidence (taped admission or whatever) or a confession, which isn't going to happen unless he knows the game is up," I wrote later.

She said she hoped I hadn't given up. I hadn't: the story was too big for that. I had always felt it was worth attempting to get Huhne on tape. It was an idea Vicky had come up with herself. If she succeeded he would certainly have to quit as a cabinet minister and there was a possibility she could avoid being dragged down.

By April she was ready. I met her outside Sloane Square Tube station and gave her a simple digital recorder with an earpiece, showing her how to use it. She was extremely nervous and I thought it quite likely she'd mess it up by becoming too emotional. I offered to be with her while she made the call, for moral support.

She lived in a grand crescent in Clapham, south London, and I met her there one Friday evening. Her son Peter was hanging around the kitchen and her daughter Lydia was watching a DVD with her boyfriend in her bedroom. Vicky showed me round the house, clopping up several flights of stairs in her high heels.

"Don't you ever take them off?" I asked. (I couldn't imagine her in slippers and a tracksuit.) She shook her head.

The marital bedroom was untouched since the day Huhne left, his books still stacked on the bedside table. We went back downstairs to the drawing room and Vicky checked that Peter was out of earshot. Then she put on the earpiece, switched on the tape recorder and dialled.

It was an anticlimax. At the time the hacking scandal was gathering pace and Huhne, always wily, wasn't taking chances.

"I absolutely deny you took my points," he boomed, very obviously speaking for an audience. Vicky was not surprised. She had never been optimistic that it would work.

I went home feeling deflated. I was fed up with the whole saga which — through my own fault — was completely dominating my maternity leave. I was losing faith that the story would ever see the light of day.

Vicky was unbowed. Over the next couple of weeks she made a number of other attempts to get Huhne on tape. She was getting closer. On one occasion he warned her not to "let the genie out of the bottle" but he still covered his back, insisting, for the record, that it was all nonsense.

Finally, when he thought the story had gone away, his guard slipped a little, resulting in the recording she brought round to our house that evening in late April.

Although he hadn't confessed and there was nothing we could publish, what I heard wasn't the sort of discussion they would have had if it was all nonsense. He had spent a long time trying to dissuade her from talking to me and they had engaged in a long debate about whether anyone had enough evidence to run the story. I felt sure that if a jury heard it they would be inclined to interpret it against him.

Vicky remained frustratingly vague about the exact date and location of the speeding offence — information we really needed. I had to press her to dig out her old driving licence, which she did eventually produce.

With a bit of detective work we were able to pinpoint a location: Chelmsford in Essex. Vicky had never heard of it. I encouraged her to find out what she had been doing on the day in question — an old diary or email might have helped — but she didn't turn up anything.

We were running out of options. She was now utterly against going on the record with a full account of what had happened. She was still determined to get the story out, however, and still clung to the belief that she could confirm that "someone close to" Huhne had taken penalty points for him, without identifying the individual concerned.

This was far from ideal. As I'd warned her before, once we published she was bound to come under pressure to reveal more. She was so volatile that I was also worried she might suddenly claim we'd made the whole thing up. It was high stakes stuff and The Sunday Times needed to protect itself.

Vicky would not agree to an affidavit. However, she was willing to sign a confidential statement backing up her version of events before publication.

On Friday, May 6, I emailed her a draft agreement drawn up by our lawyers. It emphasised that we would protect her anonymity. She wrote back that it would need only "a little tweaking ... to protect me from prosecution if it goes to court".

Eventually both sides were content. I wrote the piece and read it line by line to Vicky over the phone. She was excited.

We rang Huhne's special adviser and put the allegation to him. His response was a categorical denial. He wanted to know what evidence we had. It was exactly how we had expected him to react.

At The Sunday Times the editor was still cautious. What if Huhne sued? We had no proof. I told Vicky the boss was not yet prepared to publish. She exploded.

"If he's not prepared to run it, I'll give it to The Mail on Sunday," she yelled. She was in a complete lather.

On May 8, two months after my lunch with Vicky at Christopher's, The Sunday Times published the story.

She had approved every line, but when she saw it in print she panicked. I have occasionally seen this happen with other people. You go to great lengths to ensure they are happy with every word of a story, yet when they see it in black and white they freak.

After almost 10 weeks of daily emails and text messages, I didn't hear from Vivky again. She didn't answer text messages. She wouldn't pick up the phone. I was bewildered and strangely bereft.

Although our relationship was primarily professional, we had grown close. I had honoured every word of our agreement. I couldn't understand why she had cut me off.

Over the next few days I came under intense pressure from media colleagues to reveal the identity of the individual who had taken the penalty points. I was not remotely tempted. I felt highly protective of Vicky. Yet I was becoming suspicious. Why was she behaving so strangely? On the Thursday after we broke the story, I tried emailing her again. "What can we write this weekend" I asked, adding that I had to run a follow-up story.

"I want you to be happy with whatever we write." I reassured her we would not break our agreement with her. She didn't reply.

That weekend I found out why: she had double-crossed me. While I was busy protecting her identity, she had been busy revealing all to a rival newspaper, The Mail on Sunday.

Even worse, she had handed it a copy of the tapes. This was an extraordinary betrayal and deeply underhand after everything we had been through together. Our relationship had been based on trust. I had kept my side of the bargain; she had broken hers.

Worse, although I still felt a responsibility towards her, she had compromised herself. That weekend the MoS published practically the entire transcript of the longest recording. It was now obvious who had taken the points. Very quickly, people figured it out.

I believe Vicky did what she did because she was frightened. The MoS had been pursuing the points story for months and had been scooped. She had long been worried that it would seek revenge. "If their story is hijacked ... they will turn against me which will be a disaster," she had once emailed me.

She had been trying to ride two horses: broadsheet and tabloid. It was a dangerous game and it was no surprise that she fell off.

I was on holiday in the South of France when the police called. I suppose it was inevitable. Politics is a cut-throat business and it has become standard procedure for MPs to call for criminal investigations when rivals get into bother.

Reporters were able to prove that Vicky had been in central London on the day Huhne's BMW was clocked speeding in Essex. He had been in Strasbourg that day. His routine was to fly back to Stansted, where he left his car, and drive home, placing him squarely at the scene of the offence.

The circumstantial evidence was damning. Yet nobody at Westminster really thought there would be charges. There was no CCTV and most of the original documents relating to the speeding incident had been destroyed.

When questioned by police, Vicky simply refused to comment and Huhne continued to deny everything. During breaks in questioning by police, he calmly got on with his departmental paperwork. Officers were shocked by his casual disdain.

After careful consideration I agreed to give a statement to police. I no longer had any contact with Vicky. My focus was on Huhne, who I knew was lying. I was not sure what I could add — I knew only what Vicky had told me — but there was no reason to be obstructive.

Handing over lengthy private email correspondence between myself and Vicky was an entirely different matter, however. I was horrified when it was requested by the police. While I do not believe those messages contained anything unprofessional, I would have chosen every word carefully if I'd known it would be for public consumption.

The Sunday Times put up a vigorous fight in court. But eventually we were forced by a judge to give up the correspondence, along with copies of our written agreement with Vicky.

Still, nobody thought the police would get anywhere. There was widespread shock when, after lengthy deliberation, Keir Starmer, the director of public prosecutions, announced to a packed press conference in February 2012 that both Vicky and Huhne would be charged. Huhne had been brazening it out for nine months. Finally he had to resign.

Vicky had got what she wanted: she had brought him down. Her own difficulties notwithstanding, I am sure part of her was very pleased.

A YEAR later I made my way into Southwark crown court, a lumpy modern building by the Thames near London Bridge.

Huhne's trial was due to begin. After failing in multiple attempts to have the case thrown out, he stunned everyone by pleading guilty.

Vicky continued to plead innocence, putting forward an archaic defence of "marital coercion". I continued to feel there was little I could contribute to the court case.

As I sat in the corridor of the court, waiting to be summoned, who should appear but Vicky herself. It was the first time I had seen her since we published the story. She was rushing, as usual. I looked at her. She looked at me. She half smiled and I tried to convey in the briefest of gestures that I wished her only well.

As I stood before the judge and jury I told the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth: for all her career success and steely public face, Vicky Pryce is a surprisingly fragile soul. She loved her husband

and worked every hour God sent to provide for their children. When he walked out of their marriage, sauntering off to the gym as if 26 years together didn't matter a fig, her judgment was completely clouded by grief.

By the time I met her, she was already **a broken woman**.

" I want to be seen as a victim, not a horrible avenger

NS gpol : Domestic Politics | npag : Page-One Story | gcat : Political/General News | gpir : Politics/International Relations | ncat : Content Types

RE uk : United Kingdom | eecz : European Union Countries | eurz : Europe | weurz : Western Europe

PUB News International Associated Services Limited

AN Document ST00000020130310e93a000oa

Search Summary

Text	"A broken woman"
Date	In the last year
Source	All Sources
Author	All Authors
Company	All Companies
Subject	All Subjects
Industry	All Industries
Region	All Regions
Language	All Languages