

'My life as Mrs Dr he's really

Trips to the supermarket, treacle tarts and soppy films, Sandra Howard reveals the softer side of her Tory leader husband

SANDRA HOWARD SMILES AS SHE greets us mid-afternoon in the lounge of her immaculate London home. "First things first," she says. "What would you like – tea, coffee, wine?" When she's back from the kitchen, armed with tea and chocolate biscuits, she settles down on the plump cushions adorning her sofa.

The four-storey, two-bedroom Victorian terrace she shares with politician husband Michael in the heart of Westminster is awash with rich colours and luxurious fabrics, while a cosy fire burns in the hearth.

Bookshelves line the walls, with reading matter ranging from Margaret Atwood's *The Blind Assassin* to a book about American president JFK – who Sandra, as a supermodel in the '60s, had the pleasure of meeting.

Even the toilet's tastefully furnished, with a magazine award Howard, 63, won for Politician Of The Year in 2004 on the windowsill and a caricature of Michael with former Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher on the wall.

It's a home to be proud of, but Sandra, 64, isn't convinced.

"I visit friends who live in modern, minimalist houses with white walls and

stripped floorboards and I love that look," she says. "It makes me want to take everything down and start again."

She's equally apologetic about the clothes she's planning to wear for our exclusive photo shoot.

"I bought this suit to campaign in with Michael," she explains. "It's only from Next – I hope that's OK?"

Despite being married to the leader of the opposition party and having been blessed with stunning looks, Sandra's surprisingly shy. She speaks with a slight stammer, blushes frequently and avoids eye contact.

"I'm terrified of social situations," she admits. "If anyone has any confidence-boosting tips, I'd love to hear them."

By her own admission, she's had a "purple past", having been married three times before Michael – to pianist Robin Douglas-Home in 1959, with whom she had a son, Sholto, now 42; PR director David Wynne-Morgan in 1966; and ad executive Nigel Grandfield in 1972.

She was still married to Grandfield when she met Michael at a ball in 1975. They married later that year. "I fell for Michael and felt I had to be selfish," she says. They now have two children, Nick, 28, and Larissa, 27.

Now, in the run-up to the anticipated May general election, she's keen to reveal the family man behind Michael's public image.

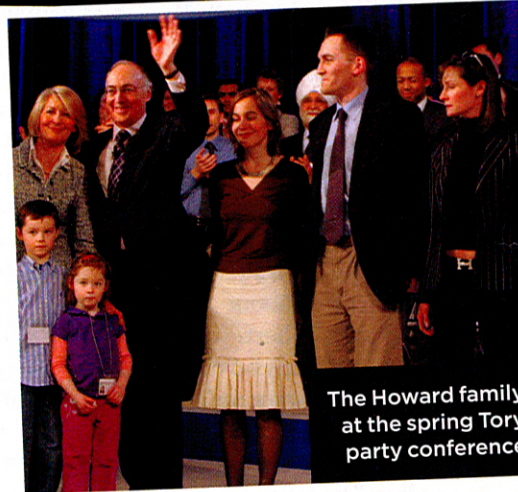
Michael has long been criticised for being stuffy and out of touch with popular opinion. He was hit hard in 1997 when, after a dispute over the sacking of a prison service director, his fellow Tory Ann Widdecombe, who was then a Home Office minister, famously said there was, "something of the night" about him.



Michael and Sandra holidaying in the south of France



The couple relax on the beach in 1975



The Howard family at the spring Tory party conference



As the election nears, Sandra's schedule is "relentless"

She has nothing but praise for his skills as a dad, however. "He's very loving," she says. "And our kids respect him an awful lot."

She doesn't think she's being used, despite suggestions that she gives the Conservatives some desperately needed glamour and, some say, provides them with their best chance of winning the election. She's actively campaigning for the party, touring constituencies on her own to raise the profile of female Tory MPs and appearing on the podium with Michael and their family recently.

"I'm a free agent," she says, her quiet voice raised for the first time. "I do what I want to. I'm campaigning because I genuinely believe he's right for the Prime Minister's job – and I'd be annoyed if I hadn't done everything possible to help him get there."

She feels strongly about a programme that's dominated the news recently – *Jamie's School Dinners*. Under pressure from the TV chef, Education Minister Ruth Kelly last week pledged £280million to improve the quality of kids' food.

"Jamie's fantastic," she says. "Even the Labour party would admit they wouldn't have got where they have without him. He should take full credit for the extra money schools are getting – but then I would say that, wouldn't I?"

She adds: "When our children were little, I made them healthy packed lunches, with sandwiches, fruit and half a carrot. I rarely fed them chips."

Another issue close to her heart is that of the controversial 24-week limit on abortion, which Howard recently said should be lowered by at least two weeks.

"Every woman has a right to choose," she says carefully. "But aborting a foetus when

Four times married

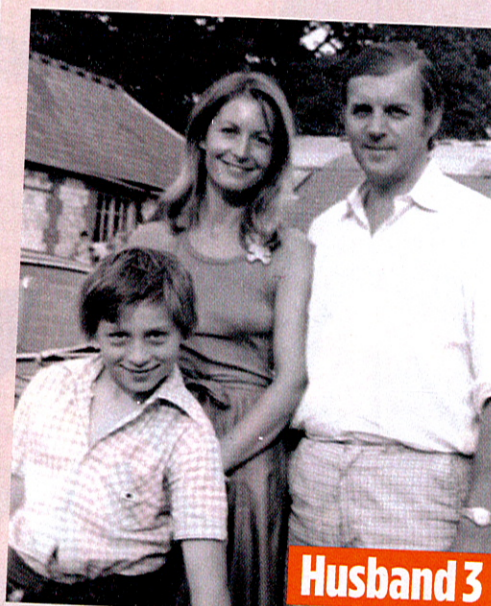
Sandra had been married three times before she wed Michael. In 1959, she married pianist Robin Douglas-Home. They have a son, Sholto. In 1966, she wed PR director David Wynne-Morgan. In 1972, she married ad executive Nigel Grandfield (pictured with Sholto)



Husband 1



Husband 2



Husband 3

it has a chance of living is frightening. I'd never have terminated my pregnancies at that stage."

She admits that, as the election campaign draws to a close, life is increasingly stressful.

"The pace is relentless," she says. "Michael's rarely in bed before midnight and gets up at six. Normally, we relax by watching Woody Allen films and playing table tennis at our constituency home in Lympne in Kent, where we spend our weekends, but there's hardly been a second off recently."

Her husband's recent sacking of the party's deputy chairman, Howard Flight, after he implied the Conservatives would cut public spending more than they'd publicly admitted, only added to the stress.

"It was a horrible decision for Michael, but he did what he felt he had to," says Sandra.

Although she's met her opposite number Cherie on several occasions, she is guarded about the PM's wife. "I've got a lot of respect for her holding down a career," she says. "But I don't think it's appropriate for me to comment on her personality."

"Of course, Michael talks about Tony, and

there are inevitably things that wind me up about him, but it's too personal to discuss," she says.

Recent opinion polls indicate that Labour's lead is growing, and it seems Sandra's unlikely to be packing her plush furnishings for a new home at 10 Downing Street any time soon. But if she's worried, she's not showing it.

"We've got a mountain to climb, but there's real movement out there," she says. "And I get a great reception when I campaign around the country."

With her self-deprecating manner, graceful good looks and adoration for Michael, it's hard not to warm to her. But why should we trust her husband?

"He's not just all talk," she says, with an intended dig at his rival. "He's honest and keeps his promises. And in politics, as in marriage, that's what's important." ■

By Antonia Hoyle

Dracula!

big softie

Unfortunately for Howard, then Home Secretary, the saying stuck, even entering *The Oxford Dictionary of Political Quotations*. Comparisons to Dracula soon followed, seemingly summing up Howard's appearance – his pinstriped suit, five o'clock shadow and forced, toothy grin.

Sandra admits that the bad press was hurtful to their family.

"Michael handles criticism well, but it upset me. It seemed so unfair," she says. "I wrote to newspaper editors explaining that there was nothing shady about him – I needed to get my feelings off my chest."

But she insists she's no longer bothered by the Dracula analogy.

"It was a long time ago and we can laugh about it now," she says, although she believes it's high time we saw her husband's softer side.

"He's romantic and sensitive," she claims. "He always cries at the end of *Sleepless In Seattle*, and buys me lots of presents – jewellery and flowers mostly. He never forgets to give me a Valentine's card and insists I treat myself to nice clothes."

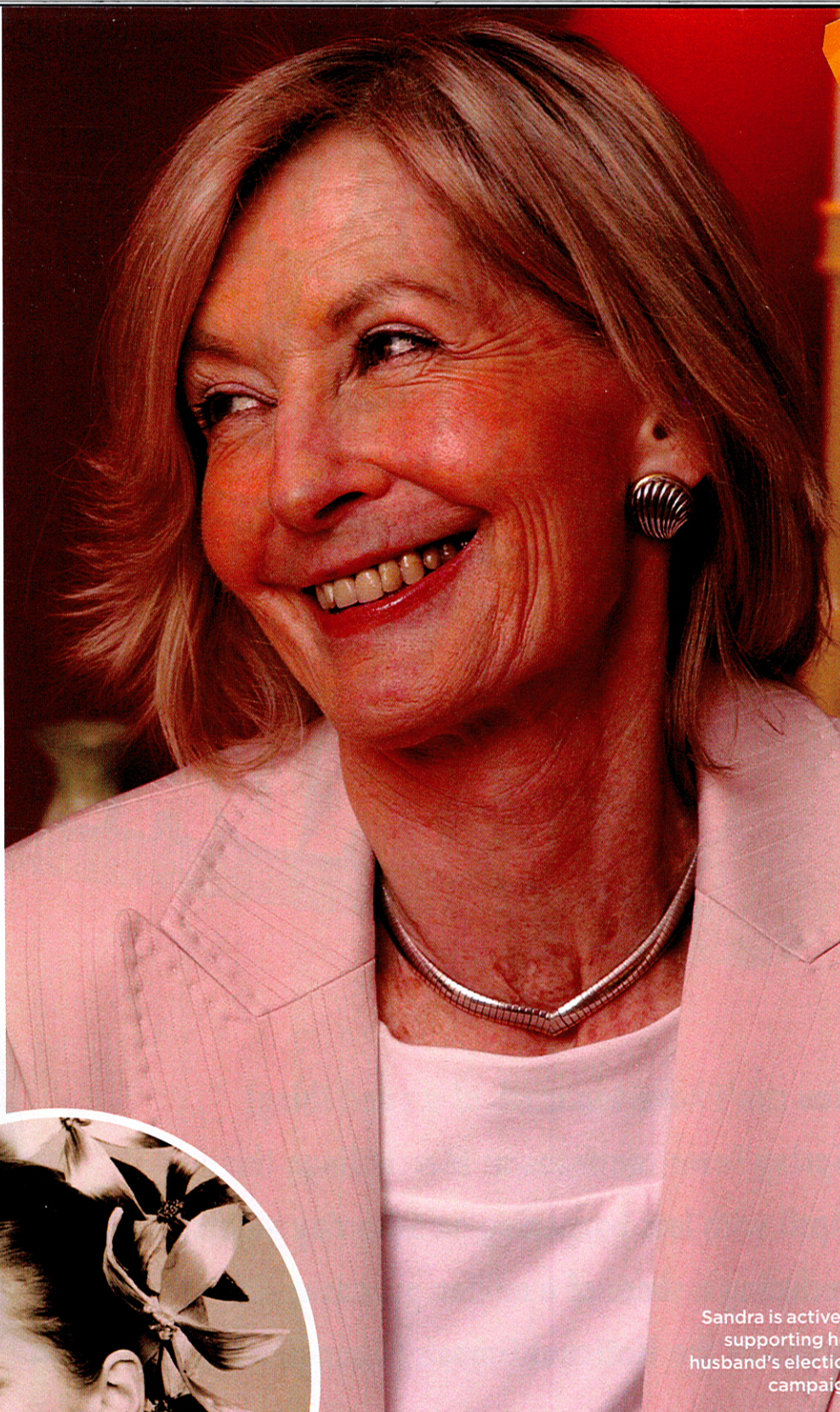
Michael relies on her for fashion advice.

"He won't go shopping without me!" she laughs. "He buys designer stuff in the sales, but otherwise it's high street stores like Marks & Spencer. I desperately try to pull his ties off him – he looks better in open-necked shirts."

As a former model – she graced the cover of *Vogue* two months running in the '60s – she gives him tips on posing for pictures.

"I tell him to imagine there's a string holding him up so he'll stand straight," she says. "It has mixed results. Sometimes I'll see him in the papers and ask: 'Where was the string, Michael?'"

It's clear though that Howard is the



Sandra is active supporting her husband's election campaign



Sandra was a model in the '60s

leader in his marriage too – and Sandra's happy that way. "I'm more

adaptable than him, and don't mind backing down over decisions," she says. "In every marriage it's important that someone gives a little."

She admits they argue and, tellingly, takes the blame for confrontations. "It's normally because I'm late – I have a terrible problem with time-keeping," she confesses.

"But in terms of household chores,

we've organised a division of labour. Michael gets the logs for the fire, and I sweep the hearth. He makes the tea in the morning and does the supermarket shopping. He's got a sweet tooth – he loves treacle tarts and chocolate mousse, anything unhealthy! He worries about his weight, but doesn't do anything about it."

It seems culinary skills aren't part of Michael's repertoire.

"He's pathetic in the kitchen," she laughs. "He can boil an egg, but that's about it. When I was in hospital after Nick was born I had to leave him step-by-step instructions on how to cook for himself and Sholto. He was thrown in at the deep end." >