

POLITICS

Spain will soon match Sweden as one of the global leaders in governments with gender parity. Eight women will form part of the incoming government of Prime Minister-elect José María Rodríguez Zapatero, an unprecedented situation in Spain since the return of democracy. The Socialist leader underscored his commitment to parity by naming a woman as Deputy Premier

Zapatero's cabinet of equality

The incoming premier's commitment to gender parity in his government has surprised many

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Socialist Party leader and Prime Minister-elect José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero made it one of his key electoral promises, but at the time few really believed him. Who could have thought two months ago that there would be as many women as men in Spain's next ministerial cabinet?

The situation is certainly unprecedented in Spanish history, but ever since the unexpected Socialist victory in the March 14 general elections, gender parity at senior government level is more than just a dream.

Perhaps the only ones who truly grasped the reach of Zapatero's words were the women who are now set to form part of the new Socialist government, and most particularly two members of Andalusia's regional government: Carmen Calvo, Culture Minister to be, and Magdalena Álvarez, the future Public Works Minister.

Calvo and Álvarez were both part of the so-called "Notables Council" formed by Zapatero to prepare his governing program. Prior to the elections the two women acted as if the Popular Party's electoral upset were a given, ignoring polls' gloomy predictions for the Socialists.

In mid-February, José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero asked Carmen Calvo to gather a group of intellectuals in Madrid's Convention Center to declare Don Quixote, Spain's new cultural banner. Few paid much attention to the event, which was organized by the cultural minister in the regional Andalusian government. One of those who did attend the event was historian and expert in Spanish affairs Ian Gibson, who after listening to the Socialist's candidate speech on Don Quixote simply re-

Incoming Culture Minister Carmen Calvo has a reputation for being tough

marked: "All that's fine, but you must name Carmen Calvo Culture Minister."

Neither Calvo nor Zapatero budged at the unusual suggestion, and most of those present could not help but smile to themselves. It was February 23 and nobody at the time gave a dime for a Socialist victory in the March general elections.

Carmen Calvo, however, says she did expect an electoral upset. "People were very angry. You could hear it out on the streets, and I've been out and about on the street a lot these past eight years. They were going to vote against Aznar, it was predictable."

This country, explains the future Culture Minister, "has its



María Teresa Fernández de la Vega (left) with Magdalena Álvarez. / GORKA LEJARCEGI

karma, its spirit, which is now blooming. I wasn't sure whether we'd win by 300,000 votes or by the margin we actually attained, but what was certain is that the people weren't going to put up with it anymore."

She has not yet celebrated the electoral victory. She still feels within her the "sadness and shame" of the March 11 terrorist attacks, to which the Spanish people "responded with democratic serenity."

Before her is an arduous task; something which she describes as slaving away for this country, "mobilizing resources" that were previously scattered among the hands of many. She has a reputation for being tough. "No, I'm not that tough, I'm determined, and when I believe firmly in something I get down to it." Do not expect to see her flitting about at the country's cocktail parties. She is an early riser and goes to bed equally early. Her achievements in her native Andalusia have been plentiful and she is particularly proud of having brought Picasso back to Malaga. But what she is happiest about in life is being the mother of a 24-year-old woman, "a beautiful little person."

When Zapatero decided to follow Gibson's advice and name Carmen Calvo Culture Minister, she was engrossed in the reading of various books. Among them were Wittgenstein's *El movimiento del pensar*, Stefan Zweig's *The eyes of the eternal brother* and Juan José Millás' account of the



María Jesús San Segundo (l) and Carmen Calvo.

story of Nevenka Fernández — a Popular Party municipal councillor who was the victim of her boss' sexual harassment — entitled *Caso Nevenka*. Calvo had also seen two films recently: *Nicotine* and *Cleopatra*.

Magdalena Álvarez will be the second Andalusian minister in Zapatero's cabinet. Álvarez, the finance minister in the Andalusian regional government, is reputed for being an iron-handed boss. She was so certain she would be named minister in the case of a Socialist victory that during the party's last federal meeting all she asked was: "So, what ministry will it be?" And she was right to be so sure of herself,



tanding debt with Andalusia, insisted on smoking his cigar. Thisirked Álvarez, who immediately filed a complaint with the committee's president. EL PAÍS managed to grab a few minutes of her time as she stood in the waiting room of a hospital, where she was going to visit a friend of hers. "Nobody will dare smoke a cigar in front of you anymore," she was asked. "Well, as long as it's to celebrate something," she fired back.

For Magdalena Álvarez, Spain is breathing "some fresh air" again. She perceives a change in atmosphere: "People are happy. We've taken off our corset." Like Carmen Calvo, she is also familiar with the trappings of power. Her only fear now is making a mistake. Her professional responsibilities have not drawn her away from studying and reading. But when we ask her about the book she is currently reading she replies: "A huge volume on the railway. And documents, documents I need to know what's awaiting me." After some thought she adds: "Now I remember, the last thing I've read was Antonio Benítez's *Mujeres en traje de batalla*."

Like the future Deputy Prime Minister Teresa Fernández de la Vega, Cristina Narbona needed to put in a great deal of thought before accepting Zapatero's proposal. She would lose the bet she had with her friends that she would never become a minister. But in the end, she simply could not say no. Zapatero told her in

because she will soon become Public Works Minister. Magdalena Álvarez is also certain that the task ahead will not change her, not only because she is used to being in command, but because she has a well-defined priority for the job ahead: "To modernize the railway system, to continue that wonderful story of the AVE [high-speed train] to Seville, which we were so criticized for."

She is not exactly a soft-spoken woman, and she likes to make her opinions heard. Her clash with Popular Party leader Mariano Rajoy when he still was Public Works Minister is popular knowledge. Rajoy, during the talks on the government's long-