

A camera in the corridors of power

(Used in The Times Newspaper)

The Houses of Parliament could only have been photographed in detail in one way – by insiders. Terry Hope looks at how a rare political alliance was formed to present a unique view of the inner workings of the country's grandest place of work

It's not difficult to spot Labour MP Austin Mitchell around the House of Commons. He's invariably the one with the selection of cameras draped around his neck, with his sagging suit pockets straining under the weight of a few more. He's managed to turn photography, he states with some pride, from a hobby into a disease, and few places have proved immune to the attentions of his probing lens. Perhaps then it was inevitable that Mitchell should find himself at the centre of a plan to produce a book of pictures whose aim it was to explore life behind the scenes of parliament, and to throw some light onto the mysterious workings of the seat of government.

Faced with tight security considerations, however, and a protocol that denied him access to most parts of the House of Lords as well as the more intimate meetings held by the Conservative opposition, he had little option but to bring in others to help him with the project. He turned to fellow members of the All Party Photographic Group, cross-bencher Baroness Wharton and Conservative Peer Lord Crathorne. Between them the oddly-matched trio set about the delicate task of obtaining the permissions that were necessary to allow cameras, in many cases for the first time, to be used in some of the most sensitive areas of the Palace of Westminster.

"No-one else could have produced a book like this," declares Mitchell, "because they would never have been allowed into the places we were as Members. It wasn't easy even for us: the place is plastered with 'No Photography' signs, which to my mind is barmy. The National Trust bans photography because it maintains that flash might fade the fabric inside their houses, but it's hardly likely that flash is going to fade the Members is it?"

Baroness Wharton, known to close colleagues simply as Ziki, shudders slightly as she recalls the stresses and strains that accompanied her liaison with the plain-speaking Mitchell. Delicate permissions, once obtained, could have been withdrawn at any time – effectively sinking the whole project - had other Members complained. This didn't sit easily with the tried and tested Mitchell formula of blazing away with whichever camera came to hand at everything that moved, and it led to several tense moments. Ultimately, however, he received nothing more serious than the odd stiff letter tersely re-stating the principle that no one in either House could be photographed in a candid fashion.

"He told me he didn't believe in deadlines either," Ziki recalls. "The whole project just kept being pushed back and back, and then weeks after it was all supposed to have been finished Austin came up with a picture of Alistair Campbell giving a press briefing, and insisted that it had to be included. Now Austin can be charming, loveable and irresistible, but it was around this time that he tried to telephone, and I said no, it wasn't safe to talk to me..."

If the pictures that resulted from the collaboration have the capacity to intrigue and surprise those who have only ever seen the grand public face of the Houses of Parliament, taking them also revealed to the photographers hidden and hitherto unsuspected aspects of the place. Lord Crathorne, for example, discovered that, lurking behind the splendidly ornate Royal Throne in the Lords' Chamber is a cupboard that contains the vacuum cleaner and brushes used by the cleaning contractors. "I can't even look at the Throne without wondering how that cupboard opens now," says Ziki.

Austin Mitchell, meanwhile, was tipped off by ITN's Political Editor Michael Brunson regarding the best place to photograph The Speaker's Procession crossing the Members' Lobby on its way to the House of Commons Chamber at the start of the day's business. This turned out to be a private gallery, attached to the office of the Leader of the Liberal Party, which looked directly down on to the scene. Delicate negotiations with Paddy Ashdown were required to enable Mitchell to access this

particular vantage point, and eventually security clearance was given to record a scene that few members of the public have ever seen.

The pictures in the book reveal time and again the incongruous nature of working in a palace. Members of both Houses are shown carrying out their daily routines against a backdrop that often appears remarkably ordinary until the eye takes in the unnatural degree of gilt and pomp that pervades their surroundings. Not many of us carry out our daily routine flanked by spectacular wall coverings, old masters and ornate stonework, and for some it's less than conducive to good working practices.

"The House is useless as a place to work," says Mitchell. "People think it must be fantastic, but it's like trying to run an office in a cathedral. Although it has a wonderful décor and you do feel the history of the place hanging on your shoulders at every turn, it's dark and gloomy and a very inconvenient place to do business."

The Parliament Tea Room, which features in one of Mitchell's most telling pictures, is dismissed for being decorated in a fashion that makes it look "like the waiting room in *Brief Encounter*." "Actually that's a little unfair," Mitchell concedes after a moment's thought, "though it does have the kind of old fashioned look that wouldn't be out of place in the inner sanctum of a gentleman's club."

The picture, taken at 3am while MPs waited for a call to vote, sums up the overpowering sense of tedium that can envelop the House during long nights such as this, and not surprisingly perhaps some Members appear to have been caught dozing quietly. "This picture came close to infringing the rules we'd been given," Mitchell admits, "because I was supposed to get permission from the people I photographed, but I don't think anyone would have appreciated me going around and shaking them to say 'Do you mind..'"

"So I just took it. This particular vote didn't take place for another five hours, so it was one of those occasions when huge numbers of people are kept at the House of Commons for divisions that never take place, because the whips are nervous that they might face a sudden vote."

The project presents a side of the Houses of Parliament that's never been caught on film before and very possibly never will be again. Both Lord Crathorne and Baroness Wharton are hereditary peers and, as such, are facing the distinct possibility that they will lose their seats in the Lords when the numbers of hereditaries are cut from 640 to 92 under the government's reform proposals.

"The rather draconian point is," says Lord Crathorne, "that this book is due out in mid October, and by the start of November, if the government has its way, both myself and Ziki could be barred from many of the places we photographed for this book. So for us it looks like being a swansong: even so, if that's the way it turns out it's still one that we're both delighted to have had the opportunity to participate in."

Parliament in Pictures by Austin Mitchell MP, featuring photographs by Lord Crathorne, Baroness Wharton and Austin Mitchell MP, published by Thames & Hudson, £19.95