

The Man with his finger on the button

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Defence Secretary George Robertson invariably reaches for his camera in his rare spare moments. He tells Terry Hope about the hobby that's become an obsession

George Robertson stands by the octagonal table that once formed part of Winston Churchill's war office and which now sits in his own office at the MOD and gazes lovingly at the pictures spread casually out across it. A look of almost paternal pride fills his eyes, his mouth creases upwards in a tiny smile.

One senses that we're looking here at the more vulnerable side of the nation's Defence Secretary. Like most politicians you can bet he's got a hide that's armour plated where all the personal abuse and general mudslinging is concerned. That's par for the course in this profession, and if the little things - say having to sit and watch as a grossly caricatured latex dummy cavorts as your spitting image on TV - are going to upset you, then you're in the wrong game.

But criticise a man's photographs and, well that's different. You're dealing with a whole set of heightened sensitivities here because, however casually the invitation for the viewer to pass an opinion might be thrown out, it can't disguise the fact that a man's art - aside from family perhaps - is his most sensitive spot. What Robertson is showing us here is, in essence a glimpse at his very soul, and it would be a cruel man indeed who took a look, shrugged his shoulders in a so-what sort of way and then pronounced himself unimpressed.

There is, of course, a small part of everyone who's ever created anything that demands an audience and some reaction, however great the risks of rejection might be. Which is how we now all know that George Robertson, Minister of the Realm, takes photographs for a hobby and why, as we speak, he's preparing to let his precious images be taken away to that black hole known as a newspaper picture desk. He's astute enough to know that, but for his position, his photographs would probably never make it beyond the confines of his local camera club, and he's brave or foolhardy, enough to take the chance that not everyone will hate them for precisely the same reason.

He first picked up a camera as a boy at school in Dunoon. 'I was a member of a camera club there,' he recalls, 'and won my first minor prize in a general competition it held, with a photograph of the Firth of Clyde taken through a car window. With friends I also learned how to develop and print my own black and white photographs, but the chemicals and papers I used were so cheap that everything I did then is now fading.'

A burning passion for politics then intervened - Robertson at 15 was to be found on the pier at Holy Loch, the Polaris missile base, shouting CND slogans - and photography disappeared off into the background for a period. He rediscovered it when his first son was born 26 years ago. 'When you've got children,' he says, 'to start off with it's a great novelty to record their progress on film.'

Photography became a key hobby for me, a release from politics and an escape route from the pressures of one occupation which threatened to take over your life. And it was something you could share with people; it's not like deep-sea diving or even golf,' (the other hobby listed in Robertson's Who's Who entry).

Eighteen long years in opposition allowed Robertson time to pursue his personal interests, and the anonymity to ensure that he was rarely bothered if he took to the streets to look for pictures. He travelled extensively on official trips abroad and his camera always made the journey too. On one occasion in 1985 he accompanied legendary photo buff Denis Healey on a visit to Moscow at the height of the Cold War to commemorate the 40th anniversary of VE Day. 'Mrs Thatcher had decided that no-one was going to go from this country, so Denis was the most distinguished person on this visit. Because of this nobody really questioned the fact that he had a camera with him - he was even taking flash pictures at the Bolshoi Ballet - and I just went around after him as he poked his camera into the faces of ordinary Muscovites.'

Three years later, travelling to the borders of southern Turkey in his capacity as Deputy Shadow Foreign Secretary, he had his first close encounter with the effects of Saddam Hussein . Accompanying a German member of the European Parliament on a fact-finding visit to the refugee camp in Halaga where Kurds who had been gassed by Saddam had been taken, he had an opportunity to photograph the sobering scenes he found there. The experience, he says, stays with him to this day. Perhaps the biggest chunk of his time that photography took up was the co-founding with fellow Labour MP Roland Boyes of The All Party Photography Group in the mid 1980s. The Group is one of those parliamentary rarities, a non-political gathering of like-minded enthusiasts, who laugh, chat and swap photographic anecdotes like old friends rather than the sworn adversaries one fondly imagines them to be.

‘There was always an annual MP’s works of art exhibition,’ he says, ‘and Roland said that the photographers should really have an exhibition as well. So we went to Kodak to see if they would back us and, although I think they were a bit dubious that a bunch of MPs could actually take any decent pictures, they decided to get involved. And I think they were pleasantly surprised by us.’ The association continues to this day, and Robertson reports with some pride that he’s got the maximum six pictures in this year’s show.

When Labour swept to power nearly two years ago Robertson became Defence Secretary and spare time and any lingering anonymity disappeared overnight. Even so, as a kind of signing off, he found a way to squeeze photography into the election campaign: ‘It lasted a full six weeks of course,’ he says, ‘and the people fighting the election, and those watching it, grew very tired of it all. So in Dumfries, which was one of the seats we were targeting, we took some of my exhibition prints along and put on a public show.’ One trembles to ask, but fortunately the outcome was a happy one: a Labour MP was duly returned.

Now the rigours of office ensure that hobbies of any kind are on Robertson’s back burner. His golf playing days are over for the moment – ‘if you’ve been away all week, going away for four hours to play golf at the weekend is difficult’ – and his camera is no longer packed for official trips. ‘I do see incredible photographic opportunities everywhere,’ he says, ‘but because you’re the VIP there’s no way you can suddenly whip out a camera and take a picture of the guard of honour. It’s just not done.’

His cites his family as his chief form of relaxation at the moment – he has a four-year-old grandson he adores – and he does find time to squeeze in an annual family holiday, visiting America for a couple of weeks last summer and Canada the year before. He also tries to make an annual pilgrimage back to the remote Hebridean island of Islay where he was born, and on such expeditions his camera is still sure to get an airing. ‘It has the most beautiful light in the world,’ he coos wistfully, producing a bundle of prints to reinforce his point. ‘I shot seven rolls of film last time I was there.’

Cannily he’s found a way to marry his photographic interests with his exhaustive public duties. Last year, for example, he took a zoom compact camera along to the Brit Awards, chaperoning Cherie Blair on the night John Prescott was famously soaked by a publicity-seeking pop star. Robertson, sitting on another table, missed the picture of the dousing, but was thrilled with a photograph he achieved of The Spice Girls in mid performance, a picture he describes ‘as an astonishing piece of luck’. He attended this year’s presentation, but reluctantly left the camera behind this time. ‘It actually said this year that cameras were forbidden, which strikes me as a particularly pointless rule. Plus I got a lot of criticism for being there in the first place and if I’d been going around with a camera...’

Robertson has also instigated the production of prints from his favourite negatives by the MOD photography department as gifts for visiting VIPs. ‘A lot of people come here and the traditional exchange of gifts is a part and parcel of any visit,’ he explains. ‘There is a tendency for people to give very large books which have got brilliant pictures in them, but coffee table books end up just sitting on coffee tables. Giving someone a signed photograph is much more personal, and I think it’s quite special. When I met the American Defence Secretary for the first time he gave me a copy of a

novel he'd written about political life in Washington. Although it was out of print, he was very proud of it. Other visitors have given me paintings they've produced.

'Well, I don't write books, and I don't paint. Photography is the thing I do, and it seemed to me to be a good idea to make something out of this. The private office here felt so too, and helped me with the choice of picture'.

There is a downside to all the kudos of being a celebrity photographer and getting the chance to show your pictures everywhere as Robertson discovered when the hobbyist magazine *Amateur Photographer* decided to ask its star columnist, a photographer from a national daily, to cast a critical eye over some of the pictures selected for last year's parliamentary exhibition. Lord Crathorne was overjoyed to be picked as 'Picture of the Week.' Meanwhile the man running the biggest government department in Europe was singled out for the booby prize, a tin badge declaring that he'd been 'Mauled by Maloney.' Robertson declares ruefully that he never even received the badge, and mutters something about it being a dangerous thing to meddle with the Defence Secretary of the UK. What was that about baring one's soul?