

Interview with Paul Curtis, Australian Hi-Fi Photographics MagazineQuestion:

...more or less how did it start, how did you get involved with photography?

Prime Minister:

I think probably travelling and just taking pictures of different places that were interesting that I mightn't ever go to again. Then when you start to get a family you take pictures of the kids, and so it goes on.

Question:

Roughly, how many years have you been involved with it?

Prime Minister:

About 20 years, or a little more. More than 20 years.

Question:

Do you shoot mainly black and white, or colour print or colour slides.

Prime Minister:

Well I'm a bit lazy about that now, and so it's mostly colour negatives. It used to be colour slides. Some movie photography, but having not so much time as I used to, you want something that you can put in a book that you can look at without having to get out complex projectors and screens, and that's really the reason for colour negatives.

Question:

Is there any subject you most enjoy taking?

Prime Minister:

Well something interesting, something different. Wildlife, if you can get close enough to it. For a while - I grow great camelias, we've got 70 or 80 camelias at home - I thought of collecting a series of different camelias and maybe one day publishing that. But as a politician I never have enough time to take it far enough. A very great part of it is plainly activity (inaudible) whatever is interesting at the moment. It gives you a record, reminds you just as well as a diary and probably more effectively, and I think in a more attractive way.

Question:

Do you find that you are taking all your pictures when you are overseas and when you are at home?

Prime Minister:

Well when you go to different places. When I went to Birdsville I had a camera with me, camping out in the desert. If I go to different places in Australia I take a camera. Often when you are going overseas its just business and meetings, one hotel to another, and hotels are very much the same, and so there isn't a great deal of opportunity for photographs. Going to China and going to Japan, when you had several days looking at the country after initial discussions was obviously quite a different matter, providing very interesting and fascinating opportunities for photography.

Question:

Tell me, when you are taking pictures overseas do you get any comments from other Heads of State about your photo interests?

Prime Minister:

I don't think so. President Scheel who was here wave goodbye from his plane and then he came out again to take some photographs of the latest model Viscount. He arrived this morning at the airport with a camera in his hand. Quite often you go to a meeting and find other people who are interested in photography, or they will give their camera to one of their staff to blast away with.

Question:

Are there any other physical figures, political figures, who share your interest, apart from President Scheel?

Prime Minister:

Well I haven't discussed it to any lengths with any of them. I just noticed that President Scheel was carrying a camera and using it.

Question:

It doesn't crop up in the course of conversation?

Prime Minister:

Well it has. I have no doubt a number do. I think some members of the Royal Family use one of those tiny little Minoxes. Others use a small Rolex (inaudible). But all sorts of people take photographs from time to time of a great variety of things.

Question:

What about your family. Do any other members of your family take pictures too?

Prime Minister:

At different stages I think the kids have all had Instamatics. They have gone through phases of taking photographs. I don't know that any of them are developing into a fanatic and ardent

photographer at the moment. My wife Tamie in recent times has struggled to become a bit more interested in the use of a full 35mm lens Minox. She won't use a big camera because its too bulky, too heavy and too ostentatious probably. She uses one of those small ones about the size of a pack of cards. In the last few months she has been taking quite an interest and trying to do something more than just point a camera and snap - paying attention to the composition of the photograph. Whether it's an interest that will last or not I don't know yet.

Question:

I get quite heavily involved via industry association (inaudible). Do you feel that you are self-conscious when you are carrying a camera?

Prime Minister:

It depends what it is. In many cases I don't - if you are looking at things. But if you are getting out of a car and you officially have to greet somebody or you are waiting for somebody officially on the steps of Parliament House or reviewing a guard of honour, in those circumstances it would look very odd if you went around with a camera dangling in your hand or around your neck. That was one of the reasons why I first got interested in small-sized electric cameras. But I've basically given the very small cameras away. The Minox, or whatever, the smaller one is too hard to get good quality out of, it was too hard to get good processing, and too slow anyway.

Question:

Have any cartoonists picked up your camera carrying habits?

Prime Minister:

One of them ought to have. Pickering should have, because I launched a book of his sometime last year I think, and he always a pipe in my mouth, and I haven't smoked a pipe for four years, so I thought I'd buy a pipe to make him honest and he thought he would buy me a pipe to make **me** honest, and that's the pipe he bought me - that long-stemmed Dunhill, which must have cost him a fortune. And launching the book he wanted me to draw him or draw a line on a cartoon. I said no I wouldn't, I'd take a photograph of him instead, but I didn't tell him I was going to take a photograph with a fish-eye lens. That reminds me, somebody wanted me to do a cartoon of something and I said get one of those fish-eye photographs.

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Question:

That's quite interesting. It would be new.

Prime Minister:

Somebody is having an exhibition or something at present on them.

Question:

How many pictures on average a month would you take, or is that a difficult question.

Prime Minister:

Well there is no average. It might be none, if I'm going somewhere it could be several rolls. I operate on the hope that if you take a lot of photographs, one or two of them will be worth keeping. I take a lot more than I ever put in a book.

Question:

And do you look back on those books fairly often, or do they just get put in a book and forgotten.

Prime Minister:

The family look back on them occasionally. I look back on them occasionally. I can't say I go to a photo album every night, but they are there, and they are a reminder, a record.

Question:

Do you think of your photography as a private thing or do you enjoy showing your work to others and do you send people prints?

Prime Minister:

It is a private family thing more. But if I've been on a trip or been somewhere and taken some photographs of other people I might send them copies of them, but more generally it's a family affair.

Question:

I would like to ask you some questions about your favourite piece of equipment, but I understand you mightn't want to mention brand names and stuff like that.

Prime Minister:

Why not do it on what sort of cameras, what sort of lens length. I don't have to mention names. I think it's fairly clear.

Question:

What sort of equipment do you use in a kit form?

Prime Minister:

A standard 35 mm camera. I don't think I've used the standard 50 mm or 55 mm lens for a very long while. (inaudible)... wide - angle 24 mm lens, which is the one that a very large number of press photographers use I think on a continuous basis. Its a versatile lens and for any filming that is around it's a very good lens. And it's a good lens inside. I have a fish-eye lens, which I use for odd occasions, but it's more a fun lens I think than one for serious photography, and I don't really like zoom lenses, although I have got one. I think they are a bit slow to use, a bit cumbersome, and I'm not sure that they are quite as sharp as a fixed focal length lens. And I have one telephoto lens and a 500 mm lens, which is good for wildlife or whatever, although when I really wanted it I didn't have it, which was an opportunity missed. Next time I hope it will be with me. The other lens which is interesting is the close-up lens, which gives a very great degree of magnification, and that is the lens I usually use for flower photography - photographing camelias. I sometimes think it would be interesting to experiment with close-up photography of all sorts of different kinds. It really takes you into quite a different world and a fascinating one. But that will have to wait a little while

Question:

Do you want to give any criticisms or philosophies or likes or dislikes about camera design?

Prime Minister:

Well it has advanced enormously, is much more versatile and is also easier to use than used to be the case. I think it will get very dull when there is automatic focusing and automatic everything, although I've got no doubt that automatic cameras sell in great quantities but they don't always assist the photographer's own creativity unless you can override the automatic elements and make the camera do exactly what you want. I think it's something that a lot of people get a great deal of pleasure out of - families in particular can get a great deal of pleasure because it does provide a visual record, and I think that's the best record of different things that you do with your kids, your family, the good times you've had together. I don't think I've got anything in particular to say about equipment other than that. There is an enormous range. It must obviously be very hard for people to make up their minds what they want to buy if they don't have firm ideas of what make they want to go to, or what sort of camera they want to get. The opportunities are great, and generally the instruments are fairly easy to use these days. I can remember the first camera I had was, I suppose it would be by today's standards about 50 or 60 years old, it would take six or eight films on a role. It was quarter plate size. Was that a regular size, quarter plate? And that used to take good, reliable black and white on old-fashioned slow film. But photography is a lot more

exciting today. It's one area where technology has opened up many new possibilities and I think greatly expanded the market because it has opened up more opportunities. The only camera you could get was the old quarter plate design or its equivalent, and I don't know that there would have been as many people interested as there are now.

Question:

How about flash? Do you like to use flash, or do you prefer to get along without it?

Prime Minister:

I like to carry a flash with me. I have one of those bounce flash things which reads it out automatically. It doesn't have to bounce flash, but it can bounce and read automatically and make it very easy to use. Again if you are going to some places it enables you to take photographs that otherwise you wouldn't - we saw midnight corroborees in Central Australia. That would have been missed completely if I didn't have a flash. In those circumstances I think it's well worth using.

Question:

Is there any particular photographer whose work you most admire?

Prime Minister:

I think there are a number of good photographers. I don't suppose you'd mind me saying it, but Bruce Postle of The Age I think is a creative photographer and a good one. A particular photograph of his helped me out of a political problem on one occasion. Some of my political foes were trying to create, as I believe, a rather unfavourable image of Fraser as being archaic and unreasonable, and so they printed T-shirts deriding the English pound, to put value back into the pound and all sorts of other antiquated statements of that kind, and the press were starting to make something of this. So we worked out what we should do about it and got two attractive girls from the rag trade, and they donned these T-shirts, and they laid down on their backs and stuck their legs in the air, and they had a photograph of Fraser which they held between them. And I think Bruce Postle got up onto the ceiling and took a photograph looking down on them. This photograph appeared on the front page of The Age and I had a mini-press conference at the same time and said that I greatly valued my friends putting out these T-shirts because (inaudible) Frank Crean and the one about putting value back into the pound, and that I thought Jim Cairns had relieved matters. I picked out various political figures around, the ones who I thought were appropriate for a particular T-shirt, and that was the end of that spoof. The photograph spoofed the spoof very effectively and very well.

Question:

Any particular favourite type of picture? I was just thinking

you could be a very good candid photographer.

Prime Minister:

No, I don't think so. It depends upon circumstances. Some of the most interesting photographs are of people or incidents having people in them, incidents involving people have got more interest than just places. You can go to different parts of the world and photograph different places which are interesting and which you haven't seen before, and these provide a good record, and more than a record they provide a photographic opportunity.

Question:

Have you got any comments you'd like to make about the approach of Australian press photographers as against those that you meet overseas?

Prime Minister:

No, I think Australian press photographers basically do a fair enough job. They have got to take film, they do it. If given a reasonable opportunity they let it go at that. I don't think I'm usually pressured in trying to get photographs, they have got a job to do, to take photographs which are meant to be newsworthy. I think it's an easier question to ask and answer than one about Australian journalists.

Question:

Have you done any of your ^{own} black and white film?

Prime Minister:

No, never. I thought if I got involved I just wouldn't have time.

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