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David Partner

By Louisa J. Curtis



David Milliband © David Partner

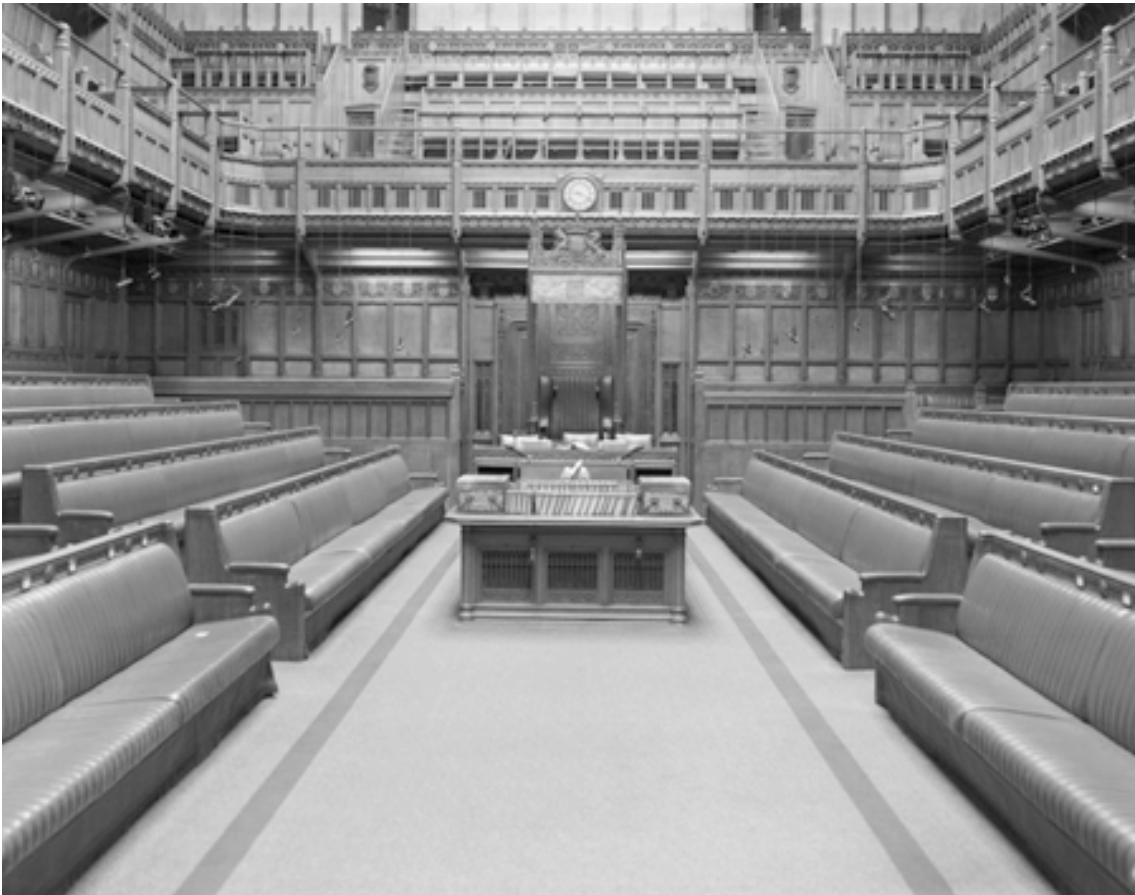
<http://www.davidpartner.co.uk>

This month my conversation is with a very old friend of mine whom I have known for 40+ years now - UK-based portrait photographer [David Partner](#). We were teenagers when we first met, and at one point we both ended up living in Paris at the same time, he to take photographs, and myself to study corporeal mime. Over the years we have stayed in touch even though he lives in the UK and I am in New York. That's the beauty of the Internet - you're only an email or Skype away, and over the years I have watched his career blossom into something quite special.



© David Partner/Valerie Amos from Heads of Government series

When you visit David's website, you will see that he also shoots architecture and interiors, cars and landscapes, but it is the portraiture that defines and dominates his career. Sandy Naime, Director of the National Portrait Gallery in London said of his work: "We at the National Portrait Gallery know about portraits – it's what we are about – and David's are some of the best we have seen." This high compliment was also David's response when I asked him to give me a defining moment in his career, so let's begin by talking about some of those portraits, or more specifically the "Heads of Government" series. I asked him how this particular project had come about exactly? *A few years ago I was a commercial photographer shooting a wide variety of assignments, mostly on large and medium format film, but with the advent of digital technology I realized that I was in danger of becoming a jack of all trades, soon to be superseded by man/woman with a DSLR... I started shooting Heads of Government on Polaroid 55 (RIP!) pos/neg film, partly as a response to this, and out of a chance meeting with somebody who at the time was the Minister for the Arts in Tony Blair's Labour administration. This became a project to photograph individually all Ministers in the Administration, highlighting their personality and experience through the subtle medium of this film. The whole project took about one year to photograph.*



© David Partner / The Chamber

After shooting over 100 portraits I wanted to exhibit the collection before the upcoming general election in the UK, which eventually took place at the Association of Photographers Gallery in East London. Two things resulted from this; firstly the Photography Curator of the National Portrait Gallery in London bought some of the images from the collection, which later that year formed the Exhibition at the NPG, which was on display for 6 months, and was viewed by many thousands of visitors to the Gallery. Secondly, which segways us nicely into the second series I wanted to reference: I had met the Curator of Works of Art and some of the senior officials from the Palace of Westminster, home to The House of Commons, “the cockpit of Democracy” in Churchill's words. As a result I was commissioned by the House of Commons to photograph 100 members of the staff of the House, the people who make sure the place functions smoothly, and for the business of Parliament to proceed without let or hindrance, as it has done for hundreds of years. This took about 9 months, during which time I had free access to the Place, which is virtually unprecedented!



© David Partner/ Arthur Chamberlain, Lift Attendant (left) and Peter Grant Peterkin, Sergeant at Arms (right) from Working for Parliament series

So we have one series of the “employers” – the ones who are running the show, and in the other series we now see the “employees” and the staff who work behind the scenes in the British Parliament, (shooting on both sides of the playing field, as it were). I asked David if the two series were totally different experiences for him, or was there a ‘common’ thread (no pun intended) between the two? *The contrast between photographing the principals in Government and the employees of the House could not have been greater. On the one hand I photographed the Ministers close-up, and the staff were placed firmly in the context of the place in which they worked, however the thread was the sense of common purpose and loyalty to the institution and office, which they all served.* I asked David how does shooting the architectural and cars/exterior work differ from his portraiture? Is he more drawn to one or the other, or does he shoot different genres by necessity, and he replied: *My commercial work always relates to people, whether photographing portraits, cars, architecture or other exterior work, in that to achieve the common purpose of the assignment, a co-operation is always required and desirable. For example, my work with Land Rover fostered a sense of mutual respect between the Company and photographer. I enjoy the challenge of photographing different subjects, this is what drew and draws me still to my chosen career.*



© David Partner/ Land Rover Freelander

Do you have anything you would have changed when it comes to your career? *I would have had more confidence in my ability to undertake artistic projects and to be taken seriously as a photographer earlier in my career, there were always people ready to undermine, on go sees the flick through the portfolio, and casual derogatory comments...* When you're not shooting something for a client, how important is it for you (or any photographer) to be shooting personal work, and how do yours come about? Where do you get your inspiration and ideas? Do you keep a journal? *Personal work is artistic expression for me, the style and content of my commercial work comes out of my artistic background. I am inspired by the world around me, whether it be books, paintings or people and what I see every day. Unfortunately I do not record everything in a journal but I am starting a new blog!*

Give me some of your favorite photographers and those who have influenced you: *The obvious ones, Avedon, Penn, Eggleston, Steven Shore, Sally Mann, and the Victorian Pre Raphaelite Julia Margaret Cameron, from France, Guy Bourdin and Sarah Moon.*

I'm always interested to find out what the photographer's must-have piece of gear is, and what is their most essential non-photographic item they always carry with them and he said: *A Manfrotto tripod, and a multi purpose spirit level! These two items pretty much underline my photographic philosophy.*



© David Partner/ Bryan (left) and Becky (right) from Crane Academy Kenya series.

I also like to ask each person I interview when their birthday is, and in David's case he responded, "28th June – a typical Cancer." I already knew this, but it is interesting to share with the readers what a "typical Cancer" is, and how that relates to and comes out in his work. Cancer is the 1st Water sign of the zodiac, introducing us to our imagination, emotions and the past. And it is for this reason that the sign of Cancer loves History, and things of the past. David grew up in an extremely "historical" environment since his father was housemaster at Winchester College, an elite, private, all-boys school that dates back for literally more than 600 years – in fact it claims the longest unbroken history of any school in England! And David already quoted Winston Churchill - need I say more? David is also heavily involved in the wider photographic community as a director of the AOP, the premier photographer organization in the UK, where he has been a member for many years, and is a trustee of the Rook Lane Arts trust, where a program of photographic events, including the latest Royal Photographic Society Print exhibition, are shown at the historic Rook Lane Chapel, one of England's original Wesleyan (1707) Chapels. You'll also notice that when I asked David what is his favorite food was in my "quick" questions below, he mentions Moroccan cooking, and his mother's family was originally from Lebanon thus influencing what might otherwise have been a typically very boring English palate! You know what they say about the British food!

But back to the sign of Cancer, which anatomically rules over the stomach in the human body, so they are generally great cooks and love to entertain at home – they’re homebodies – and David’s home in Somerset [along with his wife and three children] is a very beautiful, historical and welcoming home. Home is quite evidently very important for him, and so is his craft. And since Cancer is the sign that represents the archetypical mother, it’s no big surprise really that the first person David said he would thank in his Oscar speech would be his mother! Also notice in David’s “About” page on his [Web site](#), and I quote, “Equally at home [notice he uses the word ‘home’] answering questions in front of parliamentary committees, photographing some of the UK’s best-loved and most respected institutions, or working with business leaders worldwide, David’s body of work is unique in modern photography. Referencing the art-form’s Victorian trailblazers [notice the ‘historical’ reference] as much as the 20th century’s masters of portraiture, David has established a reputation for showing people as they are – allowing his subjects to ‘speak’ candidly to the camera for themselves.” In short, David has an innate ability to make his subjects feel completely comfortable and ‘at home’ with him, so that they are uninhibited, and the result is unashamedly real.

And last but not least we have the **ChatterDozen** quick questions:

- 1) What is your favorite day of the week, and why? *Wednesday, because it is a “glass half full/empty” day.*
- 2) What is your favorite TV show? *“Homeland.”*
- 3) What was the last movie you saw? *“Skyfall.”*
- 4) Give me three words that best describe your creative style? *Precise, Artistic, Vision.*
- 5) If you could be born in another period of history, when would that be and why? *The 1850's - so much of the world as we know it today began then...*
- 6) What is your favorite music, song, or band? *“Hollow Talk” by The Choir of Young Believers, and anything by Puccini!*
- 7) How about your favorite animal? *Cats, they calm you down and restore a sense of balance to life.*
- 8) If you could get on a plane tomorrow, and go anywhere you wanted to and perhaps somewhere you’ve never been before, where would you fly to and why? *India, the whole of another life is there, I would love to go and start again there.*
- 9) What is your favorite food? *Moroccan, Couscous, Tagine's etc.*
- 10) And your favorite color? *Blue, sky, sea...*
- 11) If I handed you an Oscar for photography, whom would you be thanking in your acceptance speech? *My mother, wife and, maybe children, as they have all been my inspiration and rock.*
- 12) And besides these key people for your acceptance speech, who else (dead or alive) do you admire? *Winston Churchill, for being in his lifetime a national disgrace/treasure/hero.*

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