



DN photo Dec 5 2019 - Getty Images

What lies behind our public face

Unofficial moments are the ones that tell us most about important people, the split-second grabs by alert camera-people who have been hired on state occasions to capture gravitas but sometimes chance on reality.

They know the public doesn't trust official portraits. We hunger for accidental exposure that comes from the subtle manoeuvring that precedes every formal photo session.

The Nato Alliance 70th anniversary portrait was a wonderful example. Not the official one, which was a perfect study of rictus smiles. I'm referring to the moment snapped seconds before, the one in the paper.

It showed Queen Elizabeth, heaven help her, being squashed by two men sitting with their legs apart, as men are wont, partly to stop their privates getting squashed but also to assert a presence.

By far the worst squasher is ad hoc (now confirmed) British prime minister Boris Johnson, who has his hands on his knees and his elbows splayed to a degree that has forced the Queen to lean slightly towards a man who looks like French leader Emmanuel Macron but isn't.

He's got his elbows in, mainly to accommodate the monarch but also her heir apparent on his other side.

Prince Charles is another outee, although only on one side, because on his right is the champion of them all, Donald Trump, for whom body language is as nuclear a political weapon as his runaway mouth and Twitter finger. He's all elbows...and hair and teeth and splayed fingers on widely separated knees. He, Boris and Charles are all splendid splayers.

Beside boorish Boris sits Justin Trudeau, who is decidedly innee, suggesting that while those of French extraction can be treacherous, a la Rainbow Warrior, they at least have impeccable manners.

My brother, he of the big lenses, tells a story of the best photo he never took, at a similar occasion, the official photo session for the Commonwealth Heads of Government conference in Auckland in 1990.

He had all the leaders set up but they were waiting for the Duke of Edinburgh. When he finally arrived, the duke moved quickly in front of the leaders, slid to the floor, lay on his side, propped his head up with one hand and posed.

Rob was so taken aback he forgot his trigger finger and the duke was back on his feet so quickly the photo op was lost. “Aha, you missed a good one there, young man,” crowed the duke.

Unofficial behaviour, then, is far more interesting than the image our higher-ups are desperate to project. No surprise there. But let’s examine the impact that has on perceived reality.

It can get you the presidency of the globe’s most powerful nation, as Jack Kennedy proved when his animal appeal easily trumped Richard Nixon’s oiliness.

Despite teeth that are the joy of cartoonists, who make a living by exaggerating physical traits, our prime minister projects a warmth that leaps from all her media images, still or moving. She’s proved the power of eyes surpasses that of bulk and elbows any day.

John Key, despite having eyes that betrayed nothing, used studied casualness to portray himself as non-threatening, as if being prime minister was a breeze and we shouldn’t worry because if he could do it with such apparent ease there really wasn’t anything to be concerned about.

The biggest problem with reality is coming to terms with our own. Most of us don’t have the confidence of politicians, nor the self-belief that enables them to fool themselves into thinking they ought to be irresistible to any discerning voter.

I’ve had that problem since the day I realised as a teenager that I was a hopelessly skinny, spotted, awkward boy with a nose too big and calves too small. It wasn’t entirely imagined, because there were teenage acquaintances, mostly girls, who were eager to ensure I knew about this multiplicity of defects.

I took to wearing padded jackets to enlarge my upper body profile, which was a problem in the heat of summer. At the beach, I was a body surfer (ironical) rather than the board version because I shied from public exposure of puniness and lack of co-ordination.

I’m no better now. I abhor the photo of myself that goes with the *Stuff* version of these ramblings because my only asset, once-luxuriant hair, has become the curse of the wisp. Instead of getting a buzz cut like sensible men, I wear caps a lot. My odd reality.