

MY IMAGE AND I

How public figures see themselves

Sailing past the cynics

EDWARD Heath is known for being pompous and aloof, a bad loser, having an under-active thyroid, sailing, and conducting boats and orchestras respectively.

Could he, in fact, be sensitive, gentle, reflective and shy; a man who uses his intellect as an armour against public expression of feeling?

"People used to say 'We must do something about your image'. They never got to that point," he says, in the voice of a tape recorder whose batteries are running low, "because I said, 'I don't believe in images—you should be yourself.' And to the best of his ability, he is.

He is gentle, sits very still and has a penchant for the long pause. He is also corpulent—his blue shirt gapes slightly and his tummy sticks out—and he displays a rather charming scattiness about his appearance.

"I think I wear perfectly straightforward clothes—suits that tend to be darker in the winter and lighter in the summer. I don't think of my clothes from the point of view of making an impact." He smiles. "I think of them as being serviceable."

What would he say about his physical appearance? "There's not much you can say or do about it. I think of myself as just normal-looking." Meaning? He laughs. "Well, I get my hair out when it gets long. And I'm always told I look very healthy." His face, however, could do with a pot of moisturiser.

How would he describe

himself? Long pause. He looks severe. "There are so many different aspects of oneself, aren't there?" he says, characteristically taking a metaphysical excursion round the different facets. His is a cerebral, airy, intellectual nature: he doesn't like to give himself away and is loth to open up.

Finally, he answers the question by summarising his interests and his values: family life, long-term friendships and helping those in need. Very much later, he says: "I am very hard working, a perfectionist [this is reflected in his surroundings], forthcoming, I don't try to hide things, and I can't stand humbug." Would he call himself petulant, resentful and bitter, especially towards Mrs Thatcher?

"This idea that politics is just a game of football and doesn't matter, is just not true," he says. "It's about one's principles in life, and particularly about one's political principles and putting these into practice."

Aloof, autocratic, celebrated for his chilly remarks, arrogant, with an impenetrable crust of impersonal formality: how does he feel about these accusations?

"Where," he asks, clearing his throat and slightly choking, "do they come from? Not from the world of music, sailing, pictures or

from people who are interested in orchids, not from Europe or America or India, let alone China... no, they come from a small group of ill-informed journalists who, unfortunately, regard it as their task to criticise people and run them down."

Rather than a cold fish, he suggests a man who is relaxed in his own environment. He also exhibits a keen pride in what he regards as his achievements.

He refers to his "extraordinarily happy Cabinet"; and talks about how much he enjoys friendships and entertaining. "No one has emulated the triple position of President of the Oxford Conservatives, the

Union and Balliol Junior Common room since me: so I can't have been all that arrogant, remote or unsociable. And I've had the same seat for 39 years, so they can't regard me in that sort of light."

Is he, then, a Ted? "That says it all," says the man whom the taxi-driver described as Everyone's Favourite Former Prime Minister. "The fact that everyone uses 'Ted' answers a lot of the criticisms that are made. People can't go around calling me Edward, which has a much more formal connotation to it."

"But I am bored, I admit that freely, with ordinary social chatter. Chat about people's private lives



Ted Heath: charmingly scatty about his appearance

doesn't interest or amuse me. I like to talk seriously. That's why it is sometimes said that I am unsociable. But I'm not in the least. I just don't have time for frivolity.

His father, who died at 88, just after Heath had served as Prime Minister, always wanted him to be an accountant. "I still wish," he said to his son just before he died, "you had taken up a respectable profession."

Heath's image is that of a man who has been unable to form a close personal relationship. "I have carried on a perfectly busy life without one. I have a lot of good friends."

"Why did I never marry?" He pauses to eat a chocolate bourbon, having kindly offered me a mid-morning vodka. "Because the right occasion never arose."

Is he shy? "Yes, particularly when I know that people dislike me intensely—which a large number do for some reason or other. I see no reason why I

should invite myself to their parties," he says with a wry smile and naughty glimmer.

He considers himself idealistic in public and private. Upright, perhaps? "I have no back problems," he says with the characteristic straight-faced delivery (never once do I see the famous shoulder-shaking laugh). "I think I have got a very good sense of humour," he later says. "But I never want to damage people."

Change

Is he a happy person? "Call no man happy... I have a bit of happiness and unhappiness." He looks sad; is he? "Oh, you don't make me sad."

Is there anything he would change about himself?

"There are a lot of people I've encouraged and helped to get into the House of Commons. Looking at them now, I'm not at all sure it was a wise thing to do."

Caroline Phillips