

## Feature



**Up close and personal:** since last October Hannah Rothschild has been filming, then editing, her documentary on Mandelson

**A**S THE dust settles on the covers of a slew of New Labour diaries and memoirs, as Ed Miliband promises to lead a “new generation”, many might wonder if there is any appetite left for profiles of the last government. Before seeing Hannah Rothschild’s new film *Mandelson* I might have agreed. Her documentary feature doesn’t offer a point of view or political stance; it simply observes the former First Secretary of State in his fight to help his party win a fourth term. It’s a view of politics the public rarely sees, a fly-on-the-wall portrait of a man set in a world alternately anodyne and terrifying.

The film’s strength is that it’s a gripping study in character. As Stephen Frears succinctly puts it: “We all know the facts of Mandelson’s life and what happened to New Labour. The genius of this film is that it captures the bits in between to create an unforgettable portrait.”

At the centre is Mandelson gliding from meeting to meeting, slipping in and out of cars and trains, calm, charming and calculating one minute, vicious and vociferous the next. When, for brief moments, Mandelson is off screen, it’s as though a light has gone out. Watching it I found myself switching back and forth – I like him, I hate him, I like him.

“He is full of contradictions and is highly fallible, as his political career has shown,” Rothschild says. “But that’s why I wanted to make a film about him.”

When I suggest that she only got the job as she was sister and daughter respectively of Nat’s and Jacob Rothschild, two of Peter’s great friends, she replies: “You’d have to ask Peter that question but he said he wanted a record of what politics is really like. And that’s what I’ve done – warts and all.” Extraordinarily, Mandelson didn’t get or even ask for a veto or any editorial control.

On camera Mandelson makes no secret of revelling in the power of his position: he loves that he can bully Times editor James Harding over a leader, saying sarcastically “it would be brilliant if you heard my views and ideas before sticking me with motives I don’t have. If you or any of your staff bothered to come and see me you could have attacked me better ...”

He loves that it falls to him to steady the ship after the Hewitt/Hoon coup; he relishes intervening in the Mrs Duffy disaster, manipulating the press to try to curb the hostility. The true extent of the problem is irrelevant, his power and indispensability is all.

Even the leaks about Brown’s bullying become an opportunity for the Business Secretary to shine. In a wonderful scene, he’s fiercely wagging his finger at the assembled hacks, shouting: “No one tolerates bullying in this government.”

Rothschild and Mandelson first met at a dinner “given by my father Jacob. He claims to remember the dress I was wearing. That gives you an idea of his attention to detail and memory.”

Rothschild’s relations have never put money into her films but she admits “being born into this family creates significant advantages but it’s what

one does with those privileges that matters. The same goes with this film – having landed the big fish I felt a tremendous sense of responsibility to get the story right.” To get the story right by Mandelson? “No, for the viewer.”

Many senior civil servants and party members were horrified – few wanted a camera recording sensitive conversations and meetings. On more than one occasion a junior apparatchik had her summarily removed.

But surely Mandelson protected you, I ask – after all, he agreed to do this and you were his friend? “Peter made it very clear, rightly, that having let me in, it was entirely up to me to stay there and to win the trust and respect of his colleagues. On our first day out, we met at Paddington station. He didn’t say hello or even look at me but unbuttoned his jacket to reveal an inbuilt pocket for my radio microphone. I slipped the gadget inside, he did up his jacket and turned away, making it very clear that I was just another satellite around planet Peter.”

**B**EING a one-woman film unit isn’t easy either. Rothschild does the filming, the sound, and the lighting. The equipment weighs 25kg and she often had to decide between taking a coat and carrying an extra battery.

“There was one particularly bleak Friday evening when we were in the belly of a Trident submarine in Cumbria. My professional brain was saying, ‘hang on in there, this could get interesting’ but my heart was shouting, ‘get home to the children’.”

Educated at St Paul’s and Oxford University, Rothschild joined the BBC as a junior researcher in the 1980s and worked her way up to directing documentaries for the Music and Arts department. Two years ago, she made the *The Jazz Baroness*, a biopic of her great aunt, muse of Thelonious Monk. Last year, she released *Hi Society*, a film about the interior designer, Nicky Haslam.

Rothschild’s films are quirky, powerful and engaging, full of humour and insight into the human condition. She is brilliant at getting her subjects to talk and to behave as though the camera isn’t there. Frears, who like me loved the *Jazz Baroness*, feels that *The Real PM* is far cleverer and more sophisticated. “With the *Baroness*, she had an extraordinary story. With this, it’s a question of weaving together scraps and moments to make a whole.”

Those “scraps and moments” added up to more than 200 hours of footage of Mandelson, now reduced to a gripping 75 minutes. Even though you hear her ask the occasional question, she is a strictly behind-

### Capturing Mandelson:

“Having landed the big fish I felt a tremendous sense of responsibility to get the story right,” says Hannah Rothschild, left





# My year with the real PM

As her film charting Peter Mandelson's last months in office is released, Hannah Rothschild tells **Rosie Boycott** what it was like to be 'another satellite of planet Peter'



the-scenes filmmaker. Her subjects sink or swim of their own volition. Though she's full of enthusiasm now, there were many times over the six months when she'd been exhausted and downhearted.

"Covering the election was a dispiriting experience. Huge issues were rocking the world – a recession, climate change, terrorism – and here was an opportunity to put principles and passion back at the heart of politics. Instead we had an election fought on tittle-tattle and issues as asinine as airbrushing and anti-depressants!"

**S**URELY, as the man running Labour's campaign, much of the blame for this lies at Mandelson's door? "It was a cross-party malaise," she says. "One of my favourite moments in the film is when John Bercow, the Speaker, reprimands Parliament for their boorish behaviour. 'What will the electorate think of us,' he asks – too flipping right."

The film follows Mandelson from last October to the night of the general election, when he disappeared at 6am into coalition negotiations before leaving the country to complete his book. I asked if she still liked him after so much time in his close company. Her answer is evasive. "It's vitally important while making a documentary film to leave personal feelings out of it and to look at the subject forensically with a cool detached eye."

When they met again in June, Mandelson was dismissive and curt. Although Rothschild charitably says, "It was as though he'd lost his sparkle," I thought he just wasn't bothering to put on a good face any more.

"If you don't want me to carry on, I won't," he snaps at her, before taking off his microphone and striding to the door. For the consummate politician who has kept up a perfect front for months, it's a strange lapse. Perhaps he genuinely doesn't care what people think of him and was content that, however he appears, this gripping, brilliant docu-

**'Peter said he wanted a record of what politics is really like. And that's what I've done – warts and all'**

mentary, which exposes a man in pursuit of power at all odds, will only enhance his status in the history books.

This spring Mandelson was running a department with a budget of £21 billion. His immediate staff included two special advisers, two drivers, five private secretaries, one PA, one diary secretary, one principal private secretary, one spokesman and more than 50 press secretaries at his disposal, courtesy of the taxpayer. He sat on 35 of the 43 government committees and each morning conversed with the Prime Minister, shaping his government's day ahead, his finger in every pie. Today, he's looking for a job.

And what of Rothschild's future? She's writing a biography of the Jazz Baroness for Virago but doubts if she'll resist the call of another documentary for long. "It's like running away to join the circus. You find a fascinating subject and immerse yourself in another world."

■ *Mandelson – The Real PM?* premieres at the London Film Festival on October 24 at 7pm and October 27 at 1.30pm at NFTI. It will air on BBC4 in November. Hannah Rothschild will be speaking and showing clips of *The Real PM?* at 5x15 at the Union Chapel, Islington on October 28, 7pm. Tickets and more info at 5x15stories.com