

Britain: Labour's arts policy is a disaster in the making

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27 August 1998

The Labour government has introduced the most far-reaching changes in arts funding in Britain in the last fifty years. Its supposed reform of the Arts Council will have a profoundly negative impact on cultural life.

The Arts Council was established in 1946 as part of the post war reconstruction of Britain. Just as the National Health Service was to guard and nurture the nation's health, the Arts Council's remit was to preserve high art and create the conditions for the development of new art through education and grants.

Prior to the Second World War, one had to have independent income, be apprenticed to an artist or gain a place in one of the few exclusive academies to participate in the arts. The existence of the Arts Council changed the cultural landscape. Culture and creativity were to be inclusive. Art, drama and music were taught in schools, art colleges sprang up all over the country. As a result, the sons and daughters of white and blue-collar workers were able to play a significant role in the cultural explosion of the 1960s.

The Arts Council's main areas of concern included the support of major national venues, regional theatres, schools etc. Its structures reflected this to some extent and were designed to prevent direct political control over its agenda. It was made up from the elected chairs of autonomous regional committees, drawn from the artistic community.

During the 1980s under the Conservative government, the very concept of state funding for the arts came under attack. Thatcher and then Major cut social spending across the board. Within this framework, arts were targeted. Newspapers were filled with government denunciations of 'frivolous' art. Everything from abstract sculpture to socially critical plays like 'The Romans in Britain' was condemned both for its content and for being a 'drain on the public purse'.

As a result arts funding has declined by £34 million in real terms since 1993. The Arts Council was no longer able to support the arts in the way it previously had.

When Labour came to power last May they promised to address the crisis in the arts. Chris Smith was given the job of Culture Secretary. Many well-publicised parties were thrown at Number 10. Everyone from Dames of the theatre, to rock stars, writers and artists of all description were wined and dined by

New Labour, then wooed with promises of increased funding for British cinema and support for the arts as a whole.

Far from honouring its pledge to rescue the arts, in May this year, Smith announced a complete overhaul of the Arts Council, building on the drive by the Conservative government to make the arts dependent on commercial sponsorship.

Smith replaced the council of 23 elected by the artistic community itself with 11 handpicked members. In a public statement of opposition, the Council's Drama Advisory Panel resigned en-masse. Amongst those who left were the playwright Sir Allan Ayckbourn and Thelma Holt, the renowned West End producer. A protest letter was sent to Chris Smith with 60 signatories, including the noted theatre director Sir Peter Hall and producer Sir Cameron Mackintosh.

Many who work in the arts fear that dependence on commercial backing will stifle creativity and innovation, and lead to the closure of many small theatres and dance groups. Such fears are entirely legitimate. Even establishments considered the 'crown jewels' of the British arts establishment, such as the Royal Opera House (ROH) are under threat.

Labour's changes in the Arts Council were in fact prepared for and justified by commissioning a review of the Royal Opera House by Sir Richard Eyre, the noted stage director.

In many ways, the fate of the ROH, home of the Royal Opera and the Royal Ballet, epitomises the fate of the arts in the 1980s and the crisis this created. The Royal Opera House was established in the 1940's and was taken under the Arts Council's wing. The ROH was financed through direct subsidy from the Council and its board was given leave to raise additional monies by giving it charitable status.

During the 1980s everything became unstuck. The ROH compensated for the cuts in funding by Thatcher's government by steadily increasing its seat prices and making economies. The speculative boom in the City provided the ROH with a growing audience who commanded an ample disposable income. When the bubble burst in the early 90s, audience numbers began to fall and large private donations began to dry up. Only then did the dire state of the ROH's finances become apparent.

When the ROH was awarded £78.5m by the National Lottery Fund for the Arts, it caused a public outcry. The ROH was

regarded by many as the sharpest expression of the social polarisation that had taken place and was associated with the pleasures of a wealthy social elite. In one notorious incident, Tory Housing Minister Sir George Young said that the homeless were 'the sort of people you step on when you come out of the opera'.

In January of this year Sir Colin Southgate, head of the record company London EMI, was brought in by Labour to put the House in order. The ROH currently is in receipt of a £14m subsidy for both the Royal Ballet and the Royal Opera companies, much less than half the state subsidy of any comparable opera house in Europe. At the end of the financial year 1996/7 the deficit stood at £1.5m, by the end of March it was £3m and rising. In a letter from Sir Colin to Chris Smith, he stated that the ROH could not survive without a doubling of its subsidy.

Instead of responding to this appeal by its own 'trouble-shooter', Labour utilised opera's reputation as an elitist art form, which the experiences of the 1980s reinforced, to justify its plans for a complete overhaul of arts funding.

Sir Richard Eyre's review made specific calls for economies at the ROH's Covent Garden site, including the 'flexible use of labour', 'contracting out design', casual employment for the choir and sharing its orchestra with other London venues. Any savings made by the implementation of such measures, even if they prove to be practicable, would liberate only a few thousand pounds and would not begin to make a dent in the ROH deficit.

But more importantly, the deficiencies of the ROH, real or imagined, were defined by him as 'a barometer of the health of the world of performing arts'. Sir Richard told the Culture Select Committee: 'Unless the ROH regards itself as an organisation that exists for the public good and if they wont change... there is no justification for them to receive public support.'

Whatever Eyre's intention, Labour used his report to declare that the 'arts establishment' must be made more accountable to the 'people'. As is often the case this invocation of accountability is nothing but a euphemism for enabling big business to determine all aspects of public life and a justification for government cuts.

Having shown that they are prepared to tackle the ROH head on, there is no doubt that less prestigious arts organisations will fare no better in New Labour's hands.

Several self-appointed guardians of culture have put forward the opinion that releasing the arts from state sponsorship will lead to a creative renaissance. Typical of such philistine views are the comment by journalist Jonathan Glancy in the *Guardian* newspaper. Glancy claims that it would be far better for artists, 'to be funded or commissioned by a maverick private patron, perhaps, than by committees. Great art is not the product of consensus, but of confidence, risk taking and even recklessness.'

It may be true that great art is not the product of consensus, but its funding is not the same as its execution. The question that must be posed is where are these wild maverick patrons queuing up to sponsor art? The myth that we can somehow return to the 18th and 19th century when the capitalist class sponsored the performances of many artistic works, is patently ridiculous. The reality is that, at the end of the 20th century, expenditure has to be justified to boards of directors and shareholders. Bert Antonious Kaufmanns, a member of Sponsor Partners had this to say: 'In the last analysis, sponsoring--unlike altruistically motivated patronage--is a strategic instrument of communication that serves clearly-defined business aims.'

And business, of course, always has to make a profit. Making the arts dependent on private sponsorship militates against the development of challenging and creative work that may not immediately find a mass audience. It will produce more Andrew Lloyd Webbers and 'Cats', than Mozarts and 'The Magic Flute'.

The arts have been presented as the black sheep of social spending, but even if arts funding ceased tomorrow this would not translate into increased money for health or education. The Arts Council was part of the social gains won by the British working class after the Second World War, all of which are being dismantled by New Labour. We now have an Arts Council with no real independence, whose budget is under the iron grip of government with the directive to make the arts deliver financially.

In the recent past, if a class were reading a play they would be taken to see it. No longer. Many schools had an orchestra or brass band. No longer. The changes to the Arts Council recommended by Sir Richard Eyre's review will result in organisations like the Royal Opera House becoming expensive musical museums, excluding many more people than today. Worse is yet to come. The implications of Labour's overhaul of the arts have not yet been fully appreciated, but they will be.

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[17 July 1998]



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