

# Britain: Labour government outlines the next stage in its assault on the arts

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The British parliament is currently debating the Labour government's Culture and Recreation Bill. It is seeking parliamentary approval for the reorganisation of existing institutions such as the Arts Council and the creation of new ones such as a Film Council, Culture On Line and Resource—a national strategic body for museums and libraries.

The government is set on promoting the “creative industries”—media, design and fashion—whilst making the arts institutions support government policy in return for grants and forcing greater reliance on private sponsorship.

New Labour's proposals are a complete refutation of the policy implemented by the Labour government after the Second World War.

Fearing social and political unrest after the war, the government brought in a number of welfare reforms. Amongst these was the establishment of the Arts Council of Great Britain, which was meant to operate at “arms length” from government control. As the architect of these reforms, John Maynard-Keynes said, “I don't believe it's yet realised what an important thing has happened. State patronage of the Arts has crept in. It's happened in a very English, informal, unostentatious way. Half-baked if you like. At last the public exchequer has recognised the need for support and encouragement of the civilising Arts of life as a part of their duty. But we don't intend to socialise this side of social endeavour. Everyone I fancy recognises that the work of the artist in all aspects is of nature individual and free. The artists walks where the breath of the spirit blows him.”

Behind the formation of the welfare state, lay the deprivations during the war when, according to Keynes, “all sources of comforts to our spirits were at a low ebb”, and a fear of revolutionary movements developing after it.

The post-war period saw a considerable widening of the audience for the arts. Many institutions, such as the South Bank arts complex, were constructed. There was an enormous growth in opera companies, orchestras and public art collections. The 1960 in particular saw the emergence of a new generation of professional and working class artists, actors and playwrights, but this was both partly as a result of the institutions set up after 1945 and partly in a rebellion against them, at a time of mass political radicalisation.

The Arts Council existed as an unaccountable body, exercising control over grants and appointments. Official censorship continued until 1968, when the office of the Queen's Lord Chamberlain was abolished. The Lord Chamberlain had the power to demand changes to plays and books and also to ban them. Whilst the most celebrated case concerned D.H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, many leading playwrights such as Harold Pinter and Joe Orton were also censored.

Despite the welfare reforms, Britain remained a class-ridden society where “high” art—theatre, opera, modern art—remained the province of a social elite comprising the upper classes and educated middle class. Compared with what was to follow, however, the situation facing artists, actors and their audience at that time seems positively idyllic.

With the economic crises in the 1970s, Labour governments began curbs

on public spending that gathered pace after the election of Margaret Thatcher's Conservative government in 1979. Dedicated to free market policies, and employing as her battle cry “rolling back the welfare state”, Thatcher mounted a populist attack on the arts establishment. It was accused of elitism and frivolity in order to justify spending cuts and make arts institutions rely on rich patrons like advertising tycoon Charles Saatchi, who was the architect of Thatcher's election campaign.

Most radical theatre groups such as Joint Stock and 7:84 (referring to the statistic at the time that the top seven percent of the British population owned 84 percent of the nation's wealth) lost their Art Council grants and were shut down. Many colleges closed their drama courses and theatres cancelled their Theatre in Education initiatives because they, like schools, could not afford them.

The Tories also encouraged attacks on artistic freedom. In 1980, Howard Brenton's play *The Romans in Britain*—a critique of Britain's military involvement in Ireland that depicted homosexual rape—was forced to close by “family values” campaigner Mary Whitehouse.

The Thatcher government's worship of free market capitalism found its echo within the old workers' organisations, as they ditched their old reformist policies. The first to do so was the Euro-Stalinist faction of the Communist Party of Great Britain, whose leading personnel went on to play a crucial ideological role in the formation of New Labour. The magazine *Marxism Today* and its editor Martin Jacques became the most vocal admirers of Thatcherite policies and what they saw as private sector dynamism.

One contributor to the magazine, Geoff Mulgan, wrote in 1989, the year the Berlin Wall fell, “Who is doing most to shape British culture in the late 1980's? Next, Virgin, WH Smith, News International, Benetton, Channel 4, Saatchi and Saatchi, the Notting Hill Carnival and Virago or the Wigmore Hall, the Arts Council, National Theatre, Tate Gallery and Royal Opera House? Most people know the answer, and live it every day in the clothes they wear, the newspapers they read, the music they listen to and the television they watch.” (*Saturday Night or Sunday Morning? From Arts to Industry—New Forms of Cultural Policy*, Comedia (London), 1989). Great Britain, he said, was going through changes that “bear little relation to traditional notions of art and culture and the subsidised institutions that embody them.”

Socialism was discredited and there were only “radical liberation struggles around gender, race, sexuality, disability and imperialism,” according to Mulgan. He complained that the Labour Party had never challenged the “power of the tiny metropolitan elite that views the world of the arts as its own private playground” and used taxes from the poor to pay for it.

While there may have been a kernel of truth to this charge, his answer was to make art the plaything of big business—an industrial and financial elite whose privileges far outstripped the social layer he regaled against in an essentially right-wing populist-style. He called for “a shift towards understanding how the modern popular arts as commodities are produced,

marketed and distributed by industries dependent on skills, investment and training, and a development away from pre-industrial ideologies of art that emphasised personal development and the sacrosanct value of individual self-expression (for a few)".

Dressed up as a radical attack on an old parasitic elite, Mulgan's call has simply replaced one elite with a new elite enriched by the 1980s stock market boom—particularly in the creative industries—and for art to be judged by the yardstick of how readily it could be brought into the service of the major corporations and marketed to the masses.

In 1992, *Marxism Today* folded and many of its contributors took up well paying jobs in the creative industries, in journalism or as special advisors to Tony Blair and other leading Labour politicians. Mulgan co-founded one of Blair's favourite think tanks, Demos, together with Jacques in 1993 and is now Director of the Performance and Innovation Unit in Blair's Cabinet Office.

One of the first acts of Blair's government after its election in 1996, as part of this policy of dumbing down, was to change the Department of National Heritage to the Department of Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS). The new government held parties for celebrities involved in the creative industries to get them to endorse the Blair project to "rebrand Britain". Blair himself said, "For too long, arts and culture have stood outside the mainstream, their potential unrecognised in government. That has to change, and under Labour it will ... in the 21st century, we are going to see the world increasingly influenced by innovation and creative minds. Our future depends on our creativity." Art, he continued, had the task of recreating a sense of community, identity and civic pride.

Blair's newly appointed Secretary of State at the DCMS, Chris Smith repeated Blair's views. Art had to "play an important role in helping deliver ministers' policies", which he listed as social regeneration, social cohesion and combating social exclusion—Labour-speak for the impoverished working class (Mulgan was once Tony Blair's special advisor on social exclusion).

Smith wanted to place the creative industries promoted by DCMS at the heart of the Government's social and economic agenda. Arts organisations were subject to a plethora of performance measures, the most important of which related to efficiency and popularity. Talking to a group of arts administrators, a senior official at the DCMS explained, "You had better realise this. If your audiences don't go up, then the Treasury won't fund you, It's as simple as that."

Reading through the corporate-style policy documents published by Smith's Department, one is hard pressed to find anything remotely approaching Keynes's "breath of spirit" in art. The stench of commerce, however, is there aplenty.

According to another DCMS official "Look, neither [Gordon] Brown nor his Treasury team are remotely interested in the arts and Tony isn't wildly interested himself."

The government's identification of art with the creative industries is exemplified by Smith's appointment of Gerry Robinson, chairman of the multinational Granada media, hotel and restaurant group, as chairman of the Arts Council. He has since made book company Faber and Faber chairman, Matthew Evans, chairman of Resource.

Within a few months of his appointment to the Arts Council, Robinson forced the resignation of the 23-strong council—made up mainly of arts administrators but including the playwright Alan Ayckbourn. According to one of the new appointments, the Royal Ballet dancer Deborah Bull, "Serving on the council has been done by old men in suits. It's been decided that we want fresh blood and young people in the arts."

Robinson saw his role not as funding "wish-lists", but a "limited number of deliverable priorities".

As part of move away from state funding, the Arts have increasingly had to rely on money from the National Lottery set up by the previous Tory government. It has funded many prestige projects, especially those

associated with the Millennium celebrations like the Dome. Some commentators incredibly described this as a new renaissance in the arts, but according to a report by Adrian Babbidge in *Cultural Trends*, the journal of the Policy Studies Institute, in the race to build new attractions many new or extended museums have been given insufficient operating funds.

By early 1998, the honeymoon with what were called "Labour's luvvies" in the creative industries started to disintegrate. The veteran theatre director and New Labour supporter Sir Peter Hall received a standing ovation at an award ceremony, when he said Labour's lack of support for the arts was as bad as the Conservatives. The government had cut funding, such that the deficit in the arts sector at the end of 1998/99 was £35 million, about 14 percent of total income.

Faced with a revolt by its supporter, Smith produced proposals under the slogan "investment for reform". He promised the top museums and galleries increased funding amounting to £290 million worth of grants over three years, whilst they carried out his reforms. He set up a new watchdog, the Quality, Efficiency and Standards Team (QUEST) to oversee the funding and advise on efficiency, income generation, private sector partnership and devolution to the regions.

In the Culture and Recreation Bill, he has the right to vary the trustees of the new arts organisations and intends that they start financing themselves "largely from commercial revenue and becoming less reliant on grants."

Besides the promotion of the creative industries and making arts institutions more reliant on business, New Labour wants art to serve its social policies. In May 2000 the DCMS produced a consultation document, *Centre for Social Change: Policy Guidance on Social Inclusion for DCMS funded and local authority museums and galleries*. It lays out a six point plan for museums and galleries to link up with organisations working with the socially excluded, whom Smith encourages to be used as volunteers. As an example it quotes the Walsall Museum and Art Gallery exhibition in 1996 called *Brenda and Other Stories: Art, HIV and You*. The consultation document says, "its primary aims were to raise awareness of HIV and broader issues surrounding sexual health, to display high quality works of art and to promote the use of arts exhibitions as an arena for generating consciousness of social issues." It claims the number of HIV tests in Walsall increased by 30 per cent as a result.

In its response to the consultation document, the Museums Association points out that most museums are already involved in community projects but are having their funds cut. It says there is "no reference to literature on social issues such as unemployment, poor skills, low incomes, poor housing, high crime environments, bad health, poverty and family breakdown" - the real cause of social exclusion.

In its dealings abroad, the government relies mainly on the British Council. Its brochures describe art as a vehicle for promoting nationalism—"a way to understanding and reinforcing shared identity". "Every nation" it continues "has a rich and diverse past reflecting the cultures and people that settled or passed through. This is a key resource that gives each nation and region its identity and makes it different from its neighbours."

For India's 50-year independence celebrations, Standard Chartered Bank sponsored a British Council tour of the Royal Shakespeare Company. For the bank, it was an opportunity to demonstrate its commitment to its market in India and to entertain 3,000 key clients and customers.

Within Britain, one of the main organisations that promotes the value of art for big business is the Association for Business Sponsorship of the Arts, ABSA. Colin Tweedy, its CEO, recently pointed out, "The arts provide a medium for businesses to reach out and touch their audience ... the ability to associate their brand with the creativity and excellence of the arts provides a point of difference in a crowded market."

Robin Wright, ABSA's chairman, says the organisation's "new mission

[is] to embed art much more deeply into business so it becomes a tool to unlock the creativity of an entire company.” He has praised Chris Smith for cementing a more strategic relationship with ABSA, which will undertake specific projects for the DCMS. Wright hopes this will overcome the unstable nature of business sponsorship and the tendency of companies to cut it in hard times. “We have learnt too often that arts sponsorship is seen to be just a ‘Chairman’s whim’ and is vulnerable to changes at the top of a business” he says.

This can be seen when the Midland Bank ended its 26-year sponsorship of the Royal Opera House. It stopped cheap opera tickets for young people and set up its own “sexier” rock festival to attract a younger market. According to Belinda Furneaux-Harris, Midland Bank’s advertising executive, “The opera has always been elitist. The ballet is less so but it’s still a bit niche. We want to interact more with consumers.” The opportunity for Midland to drop its sponsorship coincided with a continuous media campaign encouraged by Conservative and Labour politicians against the ROH’s elitism and mismanagement. The entire governing body resigned in 1997, after it disclosed debts of £17 million mainly due to the escalating costs of redevelopment.

Within the arts establishment, others beside Peter Hall have complained about government policy. Writing in his book *Art Matters*, John Tusa, a former TV presenter and managing director of the Barbican Arts Centre, complains that for arts administrators the ultimate question of existence seems now to be how cheaply a service can be provided. Whilst insisting that “most cherishable human transactions in a good society are precisely those that are not costed”, he concludes “Let us do a deal. We in the arts will not resist the business jargon that has been forced upon us ... We will learn their tricks and not shy away from some of their vocabulary: but they must in return understand what distinguishes and separates us.”

The questions of what makes art distinguishable and separate, i.e. good art, is an important question. When asked his views by John Tusa, Chris Smith refused, saying it was a “value judgement”. Lois Keidan, Director of Live Art Development Agency says, “How do you know good art, how do you recognise good art, how do we evaluate and access good art and particularly innovative art? If it’s something that hasn’t been done before, if it’s breaking the rules and challenging precedents how do you know if it’s good or not? And this for me is an absolute fundamental worry because if that’s one of the criteria that’s being used to validate art, then I’m very worried about who’s making those decisions and what is informing those decisions.”

Andrew Brighton, Curator of Public Events at Tate Modern says that good art is “atheistic, sceptical, critical and disruptive”—the complete opposite of New Labour’s conceptions. The remoteness of large sections of the population from art is not an argument for debasing art or making art conditional on a mass audience. That is simply an argument for conformity. Art must rather be liberated from commercial constraints, whilst enjoying complete freedom from censorship or control over its production.



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