

# At least one major UK museum faces closure

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15 June 2013

Massive spending cuts by the Conservative/Liberal government are set to be announced in this month's Comprehensive Spending Review. They are expected to further devastate many cultural institutions, and result in the closure of one of the museums of the flagship Science Museum Group (SMG).

This month SMG director Ian Blatchford announced that a further 10 percent cut in its budget would likely lead to the closure of the Museum of Science and Industry in Manchester (MOSI), the National Railway Museum in York or the National Media Museum in Bradford. Blatchford also stressed that "big cuts" may also be required at SMG's London base, the Science Museum founded in 1857.

The SMG is a non-departmental public body of the government Department for Culture, Media and Sport. In 2011-12 about 62 percent of the SMG's income was provided by Grant in Aid from the Department and 21 percent from commercial activities. The SMG has already taken a 25 percent budget cut in real terms since 2010, resulting in the loss of 89 jobs.

Blatchford commented that an additional 10 percent cut would leave it "little choice other than to close one of our museums, since our structural (year on year) deficit would rise from £2 million to £6 million."

A 2011 report by the Museums Association found that a fifth of museums surveyed nationwide responded that their funding had been cut by at least 25 percent. Eighty-two organisations, 58 percent of respondents, had experienced a cut to their overall budget in the past year. Twenty-eight museums (20 percent) experienced a cut of more than a quarter. Half of the respondents reported that they have had to reduce opening hours and 86 percent have had to make cuts in staffing. Twenty-nine percent have had to decrease the number of events, activities and outreach services they provide.

Latest figures from the Department for Communities and Local Government revealed that net current

expenditure on culture by local authorities dropped £256 million (7.8 percent) in the 2011/12 financial year.

The museums comprising the SMG employ hundreds of workers and are vital cultural assets of national and international importance, visited by more than five million people last year.

The Museum of Science and Industry is located in the historic Castlefield area of Manchester, in the north-west of England and is the largest science museum in Europe. The city's most popular tourist attraction, it includes five listed buildings and the world's first passenger railway station which opened in 1830 for the Liverpool to Manchester line. MOSI has many exhibits detailing the origins of the industrial revolution, fuelled by the development of the cotton industry's factory system which originated in the city. Also on display is an identical replica of the world's first stored programme computer, the Small Scale Experimental Machine, more popularly known as the Baby, which was built at Manchester University in 1948.

MOSI only became part of the Science Museum's Group in 2012 after the Department of Culture, Media and Sport decided to end its funding—along with seven other so-called "non-national" museums, from 2015.

The National Railway Museum, visited by 727,000 visitors in 2012/13, was the first national museum outside London when it opened in York, England in 1975. It traces the history of rail transport in Britain and its impact on society. Among its collection of 280 vehicles is a working replica of Stephenson's Rocket, the early locomotive that became the template for most steam engines in the following 150 years.

The National Media Museum in Bradford, West Yorkshire, has seven floors of galleries with permanent exhibitions on photography, television, animation, the internet and the scientific principles behind light and colour. Among the museum's vast collection of 3.5

million items of historical, cultural and social value are the first photographic negative, the earliest television footage and the world's first moving pictures (the *Roundhay Garden Scene*).

Bradford is the world's first UNESCO City of Film and the museum received 493,000 visitors in 2012/13.

The museum also organises the annual Bradford International Film Festival. Earlier this month it screened one of the 20th century's unique documentaries, *Tsar to Lenin*.

The threats to the SMG museums have prompted large scale opposition, including from prominent scientific and cultural figures. Tens of thousands signed online petitions demanding the closure plans be halted, with several hundred attending a protest in Bradford on Saturday.

Opposed to mounting any struggle against cuts, a joint statement by Bradford, Manchester and York's Labour Party-run council leaders merely stated that "Government science policy needs to be more joined up".

Complaining the governments' Department of Business, Innovation and Skills' was spending its "science and society" programme" funds of £13 million on a "plethora of initiatives" but not on the Science Museum Group, it never questioned why just £13 million was available for such a vital cultural, educational programme.

Labour is seeking to depict the proposed cuts as indicative of a bias towards London institutions. The joint statement declared that closing one of the three museums was "something we, and the North as a whole, could not accept". It added, "The economic and cultural impact of closing a national science museum in Bradford, York or Manchester would be much more devastating in any of these cities than closing a London museum would be on the capital's or indeed the nation's economy."

Bradford council leader David Green said it revealed "a north-south divide in terms of resources and decision-making".

Such a divisive, reactionary campaign, which promotes the agenda that cuts have to be made somewhere, on the basis of ever dwindling resources, must be rejected.

In reality, according to a November 2012 article in the *Museums Journal*, 42 museums, galleries and

heritage sites have shut over the past decade, with 30 closing in just the previous two years. Eight of the closures were in the Greater London area. As with every other town and city in UK, massive austerity cuts have been imposed in the capital, including in many Labour-led boroughs.

Since the crisis erupted local authorities in the UK have been forced to sell off priceless works by artists including Picasso, Auguste Rodin, Anthony Van Dyck, Ford Madox Brown and John Everett Millais. Last year Liberal Democrat Member of Parliament John Leech proposed that the city council-owned Manchester Art Gallery investigate selling off some of its most valuable assets as a means to make up spending cuts being implemented of nearly £200 million.

The ruling elite will stop at nothing in order to force the population to pay for a crisis not of their making. Cultural assets, built up over decades, are being systematically stolen and sold off to the rich. The social right of all to the fullest access to culture, as an essential necessity for a fulfilling life, is being sacrificed at the altar of profit.



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