

PUTTING THE POPULAR BACK INTO CULTURE

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The South Bank of the River Thames between Westminster Bridge and Waterloo Bridge is an area stalked by the ghosts of curtailed dreams. In 1951 the bulldozers moved in to smash down the site of the Festival of Britain. So ended a promise that was symbolised by a commitment to involve ordinary people in their own future. In the Festival popular cultural forms such as television and the cinema were not only taken seriously but were often the vehicles used to display Britain's postwar technological advances. All that now remains isolated in a sea of concrete and car parks, is the Royal Festival Hall, which if the festival organisers had listened to King George VI would now be called 'The Peoples' Palace'.

A palace it may have been but certainly not for the people, until 1981 when Tony Banks, then chair of the GLC's arts and recreation committee, decided to open up its vast under-used foyer area. The result of which being that the building is used all day and the attendance at concerts there rose by 50% in the first year of the new policy.

This month may see another ghost walking not only along the South Bank but wandering all over the capital. The hammer of abolition has been swung at a new vision of popular culture, one that has been given life over the past five years by the biggest single grant aid budget within the GLC. The successes and failures of the GLC's arts and recreation committee's policies must provide an object lesson for the Left in this country. Over the last five years prevailing ideas about popular cultural forms have been changed and a whole new political constituency addressed, and within limits, its support maintained.

There is seemingly a close link between forms of popular culture ascribed to the population of an area and the identity given to that area. So until recently the image of a stereotypical Londoner was made up of essentially white male working class pastimes: beer, dogs and football. The broader political aims that entered County Hall with the new Labour administration, strove to address a new sort of Londoner. With over 140 mother tongues



spoken in an area where the average length of stay was only five years and where women were organising themselves on their own terms, the old images of the working classes had to be adjusted.

As both Lord Birkett, director of arts and recreation at the GLC, and Alan Tomkins, policy adviser to the arts and recreation committee, admit, up until 1981 there was little to choose between the leisure policies of either Tory or Labour administrations in London. Both seemed to subscribe to the prevailing notions that had been handed down unchanged from the paternalism of the 19th century.

On taking office in 1981, the new administration found the old committee structures of the GLC for making policy in the fields of arts and recreation still working within these outdated notions. The pressure from the grassroots was already building up. Grant applications were flooding in, there was no staff to deal with them, little or no policy was in place and with arts grants finding their way on occasion to the in-trays of the housing department, it

seemed as if the promises were not to be fulfilled. Indeed, when Alan Tomkins arrived in late 1981 he found that arts grants were being given out by the GLC's finance committee!

There were several choices facing Tomkins; devolve the arts and recreation policy to the boroughs, hand them over to a body outside of the GLC's committee structure such as the Greater London Arts Association, or take a more radical path to make the policy the result of grassroots involvement within the GLC itself. Taking the success of the women's committee co-option of grassroots activists, Tomkins invited individuals on to the newly formed sub-committees that were to deal with community arts, ethnic arts, sports and the South Bank complex. He consciously tried to reverse the normal criteria for selection on to such bodies, that is artistic abilities first and political criteria second. So by choosing from socially excluded groups, the community arts committee never had less than 70% women on it and the ethnic arts committee was 100% black and Asian.

The full force of politics and arts mixing together did not make it all plain sailing, committees would meet for up to six hours without giving a single grant. Unlike the Arts Council the GLC found that they were limited by the law in what they could and could not support. Indeed it came as a surprise when they were told that under the Local Government Act of 1972 photography was not an art form.

One of the most fundamental shifts over the last five years has been not to provide large facilities, but instead give aid to help groups facilitate their arts or sporting activities. It was a conscious attempt to shift the relationship between the individual and the local state from one of centralised direction to one of mutual support. One of the clearest examples of the effect of this was in the variety of festivals and events sponsored by the GLC whose spirit united politics and fun.

During the 'Jobs for a Change' festival over 15,000 people went and sat and listened to a series of debates in the council chamber in County Hall. Ken Livingstone invited people into his office offering hospitality in the form of a mountain of Pepsi tins on his desk. Small things in themselves but powerful object lessons in humanity and the nature of politics in the late 80s.

Now the plugs have been pulled on the GLC what will be the fate of their policies on popular culture? For Alan Tomkins the longest-lasting effect will be on the language of culture. No longer will community art consist of mounting an opera in the Ford works at Dagenham (a suggestion made in the dying days of the Tory regime at County Hall), no longer will definitions of culture be limited to an essentially bourgeois list. Community newspapers, video, photography, theatre for the deaf and blind; are now to be recognised as valid art forms. Their power rests in their ability to carry ideas to a wider audience. They reflect the ways the powerless can bring some control back into their own lives. A control that is achieved by speaking not just to the heads but to the hearts of their audience.

With new levels of arts funding being announced by central government and with the begging bowl being passed around the London boroughs it looks as if there will be many a broken heart among community and ethnic arts groups.

The response of the local authorities is as yet largely unknown. Predictably Westminster City Council have opted for the prestige of supporting the English National Opera to the tune of £2m. Yet what is to be the fate of a community theatre such as Jackson's Lane? Their funding will have to be provided by no less than four separate boroughs. Despite the lessons of what support for arts and sport can achieve, how far will rate-capped London boroughs be able to fund the huge shortfall between central government grants and those provided in the past by the GLC?

The South Bank will soon be quiet, no festivals, no marches. The lights will be going out in community theatres and video workshops all over London Asian and Irish sports just starting to develop with the aid of GLC grants, will now have to start a possibly vain search for commercial sponsorship. But no amount of abolition will be able to take away the pride and sense of involvement that has been opened up by the GLC's policy on popular culture.

