Barnett Stross: Parliament and Patronage

When Sir Stafford Cripps was Chancellor of the Exchequer he held very clear views on the participation of the State in fostering the Arts. On the last day I saw him in the House of Commons, he addressed the Arts and Amenities Group of the Parliamentary Labour Party. It was a few days before the summer recess, and he was anxious to enlist the support of interested back-benchers for a proposed bill to preserve Britain's Historic Buildings. During the discussion he declared that in supporting the Arts, any Government must be prepared to increase its grants as the National income increased. Early in 1947 we had formally asked him to intervene on another matter. We feared that London, as a result of post-war financial regulations would lose its place as a world centre in the purchase and sale of works of art. We asked him to help, and proposed a plan which entailed appreciable dollar expenditure. After a fortnight he sent for us and presented us with a much better and more comprehensive scheme, which he at once put into force.

The previous Chancellor, Mr. Dalton, had no inhibitions on the need for State assistance. Himself a lover of Opera, ballet, the theatre, painting, and sculpture, he believed and still does, that everything beautiful and significant in our common heritage should be made as widely available as possible. I was particularly impressed by the attitude of the late George Tomlinson when he was Minister of Education. We pressed upon him the need to assist the provincial museums of this country, pointing out the desperate plight of many of these which were privately endowed. Endowments which sufficed 80 years ago had lost much of their value. The Bowes-Lyon Museum was likely to close and a similar fate faced many others. He responded by drafting a Museums and Libaries Bill, which would have allowed for substantial grants to both libraries and museums. Unfortunately he failed. The Association of Municipal Corporations made it clear that their members would not accept financial help from the Ministry. They feared that the Libraries and Museums Committees would be overshadowed by the Education Committees and that in each case the Director of Education would have control.

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When George Tomlinson found he would not succeed with his bill he framed another and smaller one. Leaving out any provision for Libraries he drafted a Museums Bill. This would have offered £250,000 annually to the provincial museums. The result would have been to improve the service greatly. The labelling and preservation of material which sheds light upon the past history of our people would have been vastly bettered. Areas now devoid of any museum would no longer have been denied. Curatorship would have been placed upon a true professional level. Of the 700 provincial museums some of the worthless ones would have been allowed to close down. New ones would have been built where needed, and a regional organisation instituted. Again, however, a small section of the Association of Municipal Corporations was adamant and again the Minister failed.

Since then the situation facing many of the provincial institutions has become desperate. The Bowes-Lyon Museum has, fortunately, been saved by the Durham County Council, or as I have heard it said, by the pitmen of Durham who marched to the rescue.

It is not sufficiently well known that by virtue of the Education Act of 1944 any local authority will be reimbursed to the extent of 60 per cent., any expenditure made by way of grant to a local museum. There is a condition attached however. There must be an undertaking that the museum is used without charge for some educational purpose. In fact many progressive Local Education Authorities have long made full use of this provision. Others show little or no interest, and allow both buildings and collections to deteriorate.

It must be remembered that until 1914 local societies were able to maintain their collections and the buildings housing them in good order. Since then the value of the funds at their disposal has drastically fallen, and in addition, the reservoir of private wealth from which they used to draw has practically evaporated.

Costs have risen and still continue to rise. The national institutions supported by direct State grants have received increases. The larger Local Authorities have their rates to draw upon, but museums depending upon endowments and private subscriptions are finding their problems well nigh impossible to solve. Roofs leak and fabric decays. Internal fittings and furnishings have deteriorated and there are no means for replacement. Curators, always ill paid now often receive a derisory salary. Many museums have no hope of employing skilled staff and the collections suffer accordingly.

Since 1926 the Carnegie United Kingdom Trust has assisted in this field of work. The Trustees have made funds available in order to strengthen the Museums Association, and grants have been given to help in the reorganisation of museums and to institute training.
schemes. In all, more than £100,000 has been provided by the Trustees, but they have always rightly insisted that the scope of their help is limited and that the provincial museums can only be saved by substantial help from the Government or the Local Authorities. Recently the Trust declared that its support cannot continue indefinitely. It offered £25,000 if the Treasury would add £50,000 in order that the Museums in the provinces should receive at least some essential support whilst a Royal Commission reported upon the general position. This offer was under consideration for 12 months before an answer was received. In effect it was a blank refusal. The Treasury did not accept the need for a Royal Commission to investigate and report. All the facts were known. In view of the general financial difficulties, the Government did not see its way to giving any assistance by direct grant to the provincial museums. Any assistance should come from the Local Authorities, who could not, however, be expected or advised to come to the rescue under the conditions now prevailing.

The National Institutions

I have written at some length on the difficulties facing many of the 700 provincial museums, for it is in the provinces that the service is so greatly in need of help. The National Institutions, such as the British Museum, the National and Tate Galleries, together received a direct grant of £4 million in the last financial year. Directly after the war the annual figure was £1 million. It would seem that these 17 Institutions are well cared for inasmuch the assistance given has quadrupled since 1945. Moreover, since 1956-7 the National Land Fund Scheme allows the Treasury to accept great houses and their contents in satisfaction of estate duty. If desired an individual painting may be extracted from such a house and bought for the Nation. In this way Lord Powis's Pieta by Van de Weyden was added to the National collection at a cost of £80,000.

In fact, however, any comparison with 1945-6 is misleading. Expenditure in that year was low because the great collections had not been fully re-assembled. The increase by means of the direct Parliamentary vote is probably twice, not four times what would have been offered had the collections been fully housed and on view. It is more important to remember that of the £4 million made available, almost every pound is earmarked for upkeep and payment of staff. The grants for purchase of works of art are pitifully low. The National Gallery receives annually £12,500 and the Tate £10,000. It is true that machinery exists whereby some outstanding painting may be acquired to prevent its export abroad. The outcome usually involves payment of a grossly inflated price. Instead of the owner being able to approach the Trustees and offering to sell, or

the Trustees seeking out the owner and offering to buy, there is an application to export and only then do discussions arise for the retention of the work.

The Trustees of the National Gallery have pleaded again and again for an increase of a substantial nature in the purchase grant. Parts of the collection are weak and unrepresentative. Prices are higher than ever and there are no longer any reserves left. The small funds accumulated in the past have been used to buy the Delacroix, the Guido-Reni and a few other paintings. In the modern international art market competition is more severe than ever. The stream of sales from local sources is still large but will not last for much longer. The opportunity to buy at comparatively low prices paintings not so eagerly sought by fashionable taste, will before long have vanished for ever.

The Tate Gallery is faced with a similar problem. The Trustees are charged with a duty to collect British painting, modern foreign painting, and modern sculpture both British and foreign. The second and third of these three objectives present difficulty, not only are prices high but there are serious and immediate gaps to be filled and heavy arrears to be made good. The London County Council earmarks £20,000 a year for the commissioning and purchase of works of art for its schools, housing estates and public buildings. This is twice as much as the Tate receives to carry out its obligations to the Nation.

The Theatre

In Europe many new theatres are being built. In Britain, not a single new theatre has risen in London in the past 25 years. In the provinces more than 100 have closed their doors. One exception is in Coventry where the municipality is building a theatre. The abolition of entertainment tax a year ago is most welcome but has come very late. The Bristol theatre is threatened, and there is no guarantee that even Covent Garden is safe when the present lease comes to an end in some 12 years time. When the controversy arose over the fate of the St. James Theatre, the Minister of Housing and Local Government described his power to prevent any change of use in other theatres. This protective power is not such as to prevent an owner closing a theatre, leaving it derelict, or pulling it down.

In March, 1949, a sum of £1 million was voted by Parliament in order to erect a National Theatre on the South Bank. The foundation stone was laid, but the Treasury has not released the money. As the years have gone by one thing is certain. It would now need Nearer £2 million to build what it was thought half that sum could Achieve nine years ago.
The Arts Council

During the debate in the House of Lords on July 11th, 1957, Lord Mancroft answering pleas for greater assistance to the Arts by the State was able to say that the Arts Council receives £1 million a year, and that this is four times as much as they received in 1945-46. Before the recent budget was framed the Council in its annual report pointed out that £250,000 has to be allocated to the Royal Opera House and £100,000 to Sadlers Wells. It should be remembered that Covent Garden is used by the Government for prestige purposes. Foreign visitors and delegations are taken there, and its importance to the nation is great. Several scrutinies have been made of its administration by the Treasury’s accounts department in order to help in preventing wastefulness. The truth is that Covent Garden needs an extra £100,000 a year if it is to hold its own with La Scala, Milan, the Opera House in Paris, or with opera in New York. It should be remembered that Italy spends more on Opera alone than the Arts Council’s total grant.

Every year the Arts Council presents a carefully considered budget, and each year its estimate is cut. General costs and salaries and wages have steadily risen. Economies and cuts have been made. The Regional Offices have been closed, and serious attempts at diffusion of the Arts abandoned. With the meagre grant available, half of it earmarked in supporting Covent Garden, Sadlers Wells, and the Symphony Orchestras, the Arts Council can establish itself only in a few strong points, and the provinces are inevitably complaining of neglect. The Carl Rosa Company was only able to tour 30 weeks in the past year. The Welsh Operatic Company can play for eight weeks only. It is true that its magnificent chorus is drawn from men and women who are not professional singers, but further financial help could extend the time they can offer.

To assist the theatre in Britain all that the Arts Council can spare is £55,000.

Of the symphony orchestras, it is sufficient to say that the British orchestras give on average twice as many concerts a year as do Continental orchestras. They have not enough time for rehearsing new work. They travel too much, and are not enabled to train adequately those who should play for us in the future.

The Industrial Disputes Tribunal in a recent award, recognised that musicians are underpaid. The award puts a further strain on managements. Each of the six permanent orchestras must raise about £10,000 a year more from some source.

An additional grant has just been given by the Chancellor for this year and next. The Arts Council had hoped for an increase of £250,000 but received about half this amount. Without this increase either Sadlers Wells would have closed or the subsidy withdrawn from the symphony orchestras. As it transpired Sadlers Wells must face a complete reorganisation and combine its administration with the Carl Rosa Company. It will not close down but faces serious difficulties, and may not be able to offer new productions.

A Blight on the Arts?

Is it true that a blight has fallen on the arts in this country? The answer is that never has there been such a demand for higher standards and greater diffusion. In 1956 twice as many people went to the National Gallery as in 1938. Similar figures apply to the Tate Gallery, and to the good provincial galleries. Since the war there has been a greatly increased popularity of concerts, opera and ballet and all forms of Art. In giving consideration to this desirable change, Lord Mancroft, speaking for the Government argued that such increased appreciation was preferable to further financial assistance from the Treasury. It is very difficult to follow the logic of such an argument.

Private patronage has not been fully replaced either by the taxpayer, ratepayer, industry or by charitable bodies. Under Section 132 of the Local Government Act of 1948, wide powers were given to County Boroughs and District Councils. They are allowed to spend the income of a sixpenny rate, plus the receipts from charges to the public from entertainment which is offered. The powers given are very wide, and many Local Authorities make some use of them. The Standing Committee on the Arts of the London Council of Social Service published three years ago a Survey of Civic Entertainment in Greater London and its Cost. Only seven Local Authorities spend a 1d. rate or more, Tottenham spending the most with 2d. Ten Local Authorities spent between 1/2d. and 1d. rate. Some authorities aim at the provision of entertainment for as many people as possible. Others think more widely in terms of recreation. Activity in Willesden offers a remarkable range, from Opera and Pigeon-Racing to a Regatta and a Carnival Week. St. Pancras emphasises art and culture as its aim. Beyond any doubt over the country as a whole Local Authorities are willing, in increasing numbers, to spend money in order to enrich the life of their citizens. The former frigid concept that the rates should be used only on public utilities is disappearing. Councillors and officials alike seem convinced that man cannot live by ‘drains’ alone.

With few exceptions industry has not as yet entered the field of patronage. This may well be because approaches have not been made persuasively. Rolls Royce assists the Derby Repertory Company. Imperial Chemical Industries and Dorman Long help the Little Theatre in Middlesbrough. There are prizes for poetry by Guinness, and literary prizes are offered by the Sunday Times, the
Evening Standard and the Observer. The Church is becoming once again a true patron. Three Cathedrals have commissioned Epstein, and tens of thousands of people have already made pilgrimage to Llandaff to see his 'Christ in Joy'. The recent unveiling of the massive carved group at the T.U.C.'s new headquarters gave pleasure and reassurance to all those who look to the organised workers' movement for a lead.

The firm of Courtauld set a good example a long time ago. Apart from specific gifts to the Nation the Institute has played a progressive role in raising the standards of museum curatorship. A few months ago a number of Industrial concerns found a substantial sum of money to support the Civic Trust whose president is Mr. Duncan Sandys. The Trust, which is a voluntary organisation has been formed to assist in the struggle to preserve what beauty still remains in our towns, villages and countryside, and to inspire every form of attack on ugliness, squalor, litter and clutter. It has already at its disposal £40,000 a year for the next seven years, and will be of help in many ways. The John Lewis Partnership has assisted opera, drama and chamber music. It also provides exhibitions in its stores of paintings and sculpture.

A Policy for the Labour Party

The reply of Lord Mancroft in the debate in July, 1957, in the Lords did not please his colleagues very much, wherever they sat. He defended what is already done by the State, but pleaded that the time had come for new patrons to offer their help. He said, among other things: 'After all, it is the public's behest that has ousted the old patron, and I think it is the public's job to find someone to put in his place.' The Government were providing a direct grant of £5 million a year, and more by indirect means. He suggested the ratepayer could do more and so could the public in its private capacity.

Would a Labour Government show itself sympathetic towards the Arts, and be more liberal in its financial assistance? There are many who believe that on past performance it would be, although there are some critics including Mr. Priestley and others who were bitterly disappointed. They expected much more. Perhaps they were not sufficiently aware of the economic problems that beset us in the years from 1945 to 1950.

I consider that this whole problem is one for the Labour movement as a whole. It should be studied and discussed frequently and fully. No one can promise what a future government will do, in any detail, but policy can be formulated now which should be strenuously pressed upon a Labour administration.

No one would accuse the Arts Council of exaggeration or irresponsibility. It is, however, from the Arts Council, from the Trustees of the National and Tate Galleries, and from the Museums Association that stringent criticism of our national policy is heard.

In the United States the private Art Patron is encouraged to give financial assistance to specified institutions of an educational nature, or to present works of Art to museums, either in his own lifetime or at death. The value of his contribution or gift reduces the tax upon his income or estate. If the Treasury accepted such a procedure, both the National and Provincial Museums would benefit greatly and continuously.

The Arts Council should receive its grants on a quinquennial basis. These grants should be substantially increased. At the moment the annual sum allocated is about £1,100,000, and it should be doubled. This would allow the regional offices to be opened again, Covent Garden, Sadlers Wells and the National Orchestras would be adequately supported, and the provinces would benefit at long last. A capital sum must be made available so that a group of theatres in the provinces can be bought and modernised. These theatres, centred in the larger provincial towns and cities would be linked with the Old Vic, forming a National Theatre. The new building proposed for the South Bank should be erected as soon as this plan has been determined. This new National Theatre, linked with those purchased in the provinces and in Scotland and Wales would offer a guarantee that the Art of Drama would flourish and not decay. The capital required would be less than £10 million.

The Government should accept its full responsibilities for its National institutions, and the purchasing funds made to the Trustees be realistically increased. Both the National and Tate Galleries should for some years have at their disposal £150,000 a year for this purpose.

It is not correct that we are fully aware of the situation of the Arts in Britain. It is desirable that a Royal Commission be appointed to report upon the position and to make recommendations. Until this is done we are to some extent in ignorance of all the facts. The one certainty is that whilst we spend £500 millions a year on education out of an annual budget of £5,000 millions, we offer our citizens only £5 millions for the most inspiring and consoling fragment of their experience. Is it really impossible to contemplate finding about £30 millions of additional money, spread over ten years for both capital outlay and current need?

A Labour government will have to face this problem at once after Section. Whatever other difficulties it will be presented with, this cannot be neglected or postponed.