

# Liberalism and Power - The Arts - the Human Response

by **Michael Meadowcroft**

"There has always been a connection between the word 'Liberal' and the arts. Any political creed ... should be sensitive to its effects on civilisation."

**Jo Grimond** [1]

The social high spot of every Liberal Assembly since 1965 has been Friday night's "Glee Club". The biggest room in the headquarters hotel is packed to the skylights with delegates singing political parodies and enjoying a succession of party turns. In 1981, in Blackpool, there was the special treat of a Welsh Choir. The friendly noise of the huge audience in the Imperial Hotel ballroom died away as the choir prepared to sing. Their tenor soloist stepped forward, hands clasped together in time honoured fashion, and sang like an angel. In the momentary magical silence that followed such an exquisite shared experience, Trevor Jones, chair of the Association of Liberal Councillors, turned to me with tears in his eyes and whispered, "Michael, that's what it's all about, isn't it?"

Cold print is quite inadequate to convey to those dedicated to remaining unmoved by "the arts" how music, drama, sculpture, dance, writing or painting can stir the emotions in such a direct way. And yet I doubt whether anyone is wholly invulnerable to all aspects of the arts. My case is that art is unique to the human experience and that we neglect it at our peril. Moreover, only Liberals, with their instinctive emphasis on the primacy of human values rather than economic values, understand the crucial place of the arts in political philosophy and have always sought to encourage artistic expression alongside the need for better physical conditions [2].

## **Philistinism inherent in economic determinism**

Paradoxically it is as difficult to argue the case for assisting the arts when there is high economic growth as when there is economic recession. The rise of the Labour party and the subsequent dominance of collectivism on the progressive side of politics led to almost a century of belief in the benefits and merits of materialism. It was, and is, alien to "scientific socialism" to stress as its prime aim equality of distribution and then to risk being seduced by less tangible aims, particularly so long as apparently limitless planned growth could deliver material goods.

No sooner had the same politicians, ably assisted by those on the neo-Conservative right, begun to realise that growth could not be assured than the anti-culture argument changed to the assertion that the arts were an indulgence that could not be afforded in such straitened circumstances. Was it not much more important to

improve houses, build motor cars, and pay for heart transplants than to assist elitist eccentricities - particularly when "art" could be caricatured as a block of bricks at the Tate Gallery? Fortunately the human instinct is strong enough to ignore such received truth and, despite or because of recession, there is more involvement in the arts in Leeds, and elsewhere, than at any previous time in my thirty years in politics.

The lack of interest in modernising our economy, and the post-colonial bewilderment at the need to make fundamental changes in the structure of British industry, led to the crisis of the late 1970s and the resurgence of a Conservative party dominated by those with a narrow "monetarist" creed. As in physics so in politics Newton's Third Law operates and "for every action there is an opposite reaction." Economic reforms were required and measures of unpleasant austerity were inevitable but the political pendulum swung too far. Not only are the new Conservatives apparently callous towards those less able to defend themselves economically but they are also dismissive of initiatives that are not productive within their narrow economic criteria. We currently have what is arguably the most philistine government ever, judging individuals by what they have, or can grasp, rather than what they are.

### **Liberalism and its holistic view of the individual**

Liberal writers have always maintained their awareness of the different facets of the individual. Men and women are spirit, soul and body, and woe betide any political movement that fails to recognise it. John Stuart Mill wrote about the benefits of "a stationary condition of capital and population" which would assist in "improving the art of living" [3]. T. H. Green's "positive freedom" was as much to enable individuals to enhance their cultural identity as to develop their economic independence [4]. Even the famous Liberal Yellow Book of 1928, which was a formidable programme of economic policy, stressed that "we believe with a passionate faith that the end of all political and economic action is not the perfecting or perpetuation of this is that piece of mechanism or organisation but that individual men and women may have life and that they may have it more abundantly."

In our own time the development of an emphasis on ecology has been wholly beneficial but the green movement has been strangely neglectful of the "natural" role of the arts. Liberals understand the need for policy and practice to be in tune with nature, and that we confront natural forces at our peril, but Liberals also recognise the need to foster those aspects of human nature that enhance life chances for individuals and their communities.

The ability to create artistic beauty and to respond to it is uniquely human and is no less "natural" than the beauty of nature itself. Attempts to analyse objectively what constitutes artistic excellence have never been entirely convincing, precisely because it depends so much on the innate link between the artist and the "client" mediated through the artist's work. Indeed artists have themselves often argued that

the continued recognition of a work of art as a masterpiece lies in its power to evoke a widespread instinctive response. Leonard Bernstein devoted a whole series of lectures to the "Unanswered Question" of what are the limits of artistic quality:

One thing I know instinctively to be true, and I will put my hand in the fire for it: that whatever that creative mystery is, those mystical matchings and mismatchings in that upper circle, it cannot exist or come to be, unless it is inextricably rooted in the rich earth of our innate response, in those deep unconscious regions where the universals of tonality and language reside. The Poetry of Earth is ceasing never." [5]

The politics of yesterday, entrenched in the economic determinism of Left and Right, have been obsessed with the price of things rather than their value. They ignore the truth of Thomas Jefferson's phrase, enshrined in the American Declaration of Independence, that a crucial aim of government is the pursuit of happiness. Max Hastings illustrated a stark contrast:

£105 million buys a mere 21 miles of motorway, a single squadron fighter aircraft, about half a frigate .... this is the total sum to be provided this year for the Arts Council [6].

### **Life Chances - a Liberal concept**

There is some evidence from recent general elections and opinion polls that there is a growing rejection of capitalism's and socialism's clamorous emphasis on materialism. The opposite ends of the spectrum draw close in their misunderstanding of the human condition and the consequent poverty of their electoral appeal. In one respect the decline of two party politics and the continued resilience of the third party vote, despite all provocations, is surprising in that there is real poverty and financial worry in many parts of Britain. But it is also unsurprising in that there is a growing awareness that for many people there are no transforming answers to the economic crisis, allied to a remarkable determination to survive and to maintain their pride and dignity. More than any other writer it is the Liberal politician and academic Ralf Dahrendorf who has consistently stressed that developing an individual's "life chances" does not depend on economic growth and that Liberalism's task is improvement rather than expansion, quality rather than quantity [7].

The arts reflect society, often uncomfortably, and those concerned about youth politics would do well to study trends in pop music which, in George Melly's words, "present, with an honesty based on indifference to any standards or earlier terms of reference, an exact image of our changing society, particularly in relation to its youth, in a compact and easily accessible form" [8]. Melly traces the way the Rolling Stones reflected the male teenage revolt against adult mores, and the brilliance of the Beatles' touch in articulating the ambivalent attitudes of the later 1960s. More recently, Iain Chambers has suggested [9] that attempts to read the political signals of 1980s pop music simplistically can be dangerous and that efforts to exploit current pop music politically take great risks when it appears to pull in different directions, including populism, rejection and ethnicity. Liberals

will, I hope, recognise these as powerful factors in the current urban tension and will be aware of the importance of developing strong and secure neighbourhoods as a pre-requisite to using freedom in more extrovert and yet less anti-social ways.

Current theatre has responded by depicting its message through its heroes and heroines. Alan Bleasdale and Willy Russell evoke a remarkable response with "Yosser" Hughes and with Rita. In neither case is there any pity or resignation in that response. Instead there is a recognition of, and solidarity with, an independent spirit determined to survive and to surmount adversity. In both cases, but particularly with Rita [10], there is an awareness that the adversity to some extent includes the working class pressures to conform. It is highly significant for Liberals that the impact of such plays lies in their emphasis on individuality and the stifling of life chances of men and women by economic and social pressures. For Liberals liberation is not the acquisition of economic resources themselves but rather what those resources can unlock.

### **The dead hand of elitism**

My own experience of the arts exemplifies the barriers that culture and background impose. At various times I have withstood concerts, opera, ballet, Shakespeare, poetry and other literature, believing that they "were not for me." Some of the subtle distinctions now seem bizarre. Gilbert and Sullivan were in, but Verdi was out; jazz was fine, but Mozart was not. In each case as I have sampled the unknown I have cursed the wasted years. Some things, of course, appeal more than others - for instance, I find that I am rather more an "aural" than a "visual" person - but there is no intrinsic barrier of class, of geography, or of gender. No art form is of itself elitist. Indeed elitism is a result of attitudes and a belief that the elite wish to maintain their monopoly. Such foolishness is matched only by the non-elite who unwittingly connive at their own artistic impoverishment by branding aspects of the arts as unsound and not for them.

Owen Kelly points to an establishment acceptance of "court arts" which were the prerogative of royalty and nobility. He states that:

The claim these "arts" make to moral or intellectual superiority comes from their lineage, and from the powerful positions of those advancing these claims on their behalf, and not from any inherent qualities that they possess [11]. It is as crucial to widen out community arts as it is to make opera and ballet accessible to all. Essentially the arts must belong to everyone or in time they will belong to no-one.

It is no chance coincidence that it was a Liberal, Maynard Keynes, who was the first Chair of the Arts Council in 1945, and that he saw his job in distinctively Liberal terms. Liberal social policy is invariably based on three key principles: first, it should enable rather than provide; second, it should be community based; and, third, it must be pluralistic rather than restricted to a single dominant view. The promotion of these principles is as crucial to the health of our artistic culture as it is in education, housing and social services.

### **The arts in the community**

Keynes saw that "the task of an official body is not to teach or to censor, but to give courage, confidence and opportunity" [12]. Liberals in office must make sure that individuals have the opportunity to sample different aspects of the arts and to develop interests and talents. It is particularly important to develop links with schools so that the excellent work so often done within the education system is not allowed to disappear because of a lack of opportunities after school. For example, the availability of musical instruments on loan, perhaps through continuing education or the network of unemployment centres, plus a range of playing opportunities, would match breadth of access to the possibility of progression towards excellence.

Liberals believe that the local community must be the focal point of its culture and that far more effort needs to be made to develop community arts and to bring the arts to the community. Keynes saw this clearly:

We want to collaborate with local authorities and to encourage local institutions and societies and local enterprise to take the lead .... We look forward to the time when the theatre and concert hall and the gallery will be a living element in everyone's upbringing.

The importance of having Opera North based in Leeds was not as a means of securing, say, thirteen weeks of opera, which could simply have been "bought in" from another company, but in order to have the inestimable benefit of designers, producers, musicians and singers living and working in the city and enhancing the whole musical life of our communities. To be sure there is still a long way still to go but, for instance, the policy of taking extracts from the current repertoire to schools and to Yorkshire clubs and canteens does much to break down barriers. The partnership of professionals and amateurs in Leeds Youth Opera and in the Opera Group at the local College of Music has assisted their development considerably. The community production earlier this year by Opera North of "West Side Story" in a former Bradford mill was another master stroke in the campaign to persuade the tentative to experiment artistically.

It would help considerably if seats at expensive facilities were subsidised less and the individuals who needs such help subsidised more. We currently have the situation that seats are subsidised for those who do not necessarily need the subsidy but are still too expensive for many of those who do. To have vouchers available through the community and exchangeable at the box office would be more appropriate, and is Liberal policy.

### **Pluralism and the arts**

Above all, and in clear distinction to the other parties, Liberals know that a diverse and plural society is essential to the social and political health of the community. In the arts, as in other grant aided projects, it is not for a government, a controlling party in a local council or, worse still, a single powerful individual to enforce

narrow prejudices through the manipulation of the purse strings. To deny an experiment, particularly a creative experiment, support solely on the ground that it does not conform with one's prejudices is not only illiberal but may also deny the possibility of the experiment proving itself to the benefit of the general public. There cannot be, nor ought there to be, a consensus on values in the arts, or in politics generally, but it is crucial that there is a consensus on procedures if democracy is to survive. Access to the processes of government, and an acceptance that they operate fairly, is essential to the health of a democratic system. The present attack on pluralism, both by the Conservative government and by Labour controlled local authorities, with the appointment of politically "safe" staff in key positions, the financial encouragement of "front" organisations and the starving of voluntary bodies that are embarrassing is deeply disturbing. Society more than ever needs to experiment and to innovate; historically the arts have been in the vanguard of ideas and it will have a serious knock on effect if nonconformity is ever stifled.

The arts are no optional extra, to be acknowledged if and when a minute or a pound can be spared, but are crucial to the awareness of our social crisis and to the possibility of surmounting it. The modern heresy of believing that concentration on scientific specialisms is necessary within our academic institutions is contrary to the Liberal perception of the wholeness of the human personality and of the needs of the community. Just as a holistic approach to health care is distinctively Liberal so it is essential in education and leisure.

Christopher Small, in a remarkable book which challenges the traditional views of western values, wrote:

The spectacular changes which western art has undergone in our century are metaphors for changes that are still only latent in our culture. They show, however, that there are in fact forces within the matrix of society that are favourable to these changes, which could bring about our liberation from the scientific and technocratic domination of our lives, from the pointless and repetitious labour that passes for work for most people and, for our children, from the scars inflicted by our present schools, well intentioned though they may be, on all those, successful and unsuccessful alike, who pass through them [13].

Liberal policy must continue to emphasise the importance of decentralisation and devolution in arts funding and support. This is important for its own sake in putting the administration nearer to the artistic workplace but it is also a way of guaranteeing independence for the arts. "Arms length" funding is a key way of minimising illegitimate political interference. The creation of a separate unified Ministry for the Arts, headed by a Cabinet Minister, will ensure that activities at present scattered amongst Ministries within which they are of minor importance will be enhanced rather than diminished. In recent years arts funding has fallen behind in real terms and there needs to be an increase in total funding - not necessarily simply by direct grant, but also through fiscal encouragement of private patronage and sponsorship.

Acceptance of increased public support requires the winning of individual hearts and minds. It is a strange society in which more people are employed in the arts than in the motor industry, and yet in which there is a more general acceptance for support for the manufacture of motor cars than for the making of music. For sure we still face acute economic problems but we also face an even more devastating social crisis. The resolution of our social crisis will facilitate the solution of economic problems but an obsession with economics alone will exacerbate the instability and insecurity of our neighbourhoods.

### **The arts and personal liberation**

We need courage to believe and to argue that the transformation of the individual's horizons is vital to the community's vision. In Leeds, the council estate pupils at Intake High School and their by now natural affinity to Shakespeare, or the black youths in the remarkable Phoenix Dance Company, originating in Harehills school, have transcended the received view of their environment. Not only have they increasingly fulfilled themselves and enhanced the cultural life of their immediate contacts, but they have also pointed to a positive purpose to life in a tough environment, very different to the negative feelings that all too often undermine the stability and integrity of the community. Albert Camus put it thus:

By itself art could probably not produce the renaissance which implies justice and liberty. But without it the renaissance would be without form and, consequently, would be nothing. Without culture, and the relative freedom it implies, society, even when perfect, is but a jungle. that is why any authentic creation is a gift to the future [14].

### **References**

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6. *The Standard*, 14 March 1985.
7. see for instance his *After Social Democracy*, London, 1980; *The New Liberty*, London, 1975; and *Life Chances*, London, 1979.
8. George Melly, *Revolt into Style*, London, 1970.
9. Iain Chambers, *Urban Rhythms*, London, 1985.
10. see for instance Willy Russell, *Educating Rita*, 1981, Act 1, Scene 4, and the passage on working class culture and politics which, alas, was omitted from the film version.
11. Owen Kelly, *Community, Art and the State*, London, 1984.
12. this and other Keynes quotations are from a BBC talk in July 1945, referred to in *The Glory of the Garden*, The Arts Council, 1984.

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