

## The Art Of Decline

The Labour Party's policy for the arts contained in its *Charter for the Arts* and launched by Norman Buchan this month, is bitterly disappointing both as regards its ideological approach and its proposals for institutional reform. Further, it is not even clear if the charter will become part of Labour's election manifesto or simply remain a discussion document.

In producing the document Labour's leadership refuses to recognise the notion of cultural politics and the idea that art is a necessary instrument of social change. That's alarming since the British establishment has always realised and acted on the principle that culture both determines and reinforces ideology. Neil Kinnock's fabian approach which says that art is good for us contrasts sharply with Stuart Hall's argument: 'It's perfectly clear that if you can get hold of culture you can do what you like with the politics. The idea that we could have a radical movement of any kind in this society while the dominant cultural attitudes remain unmodified, is ridiculous. Politics is held in place, underpinned by certain cultural attitudes, which if they are left untransformed, will undermine every radical initiative.'<sup>1</sup>

Culture has to be the battleground of, and for, socialism. It affects all aspects of life - from what to wear, to how, and under what conditions, products are made and who makes them. It provides us with the very language we use and the images through and with which we represent ourselves. Culture is therefore education, architecture, town planning, ecology, etc.

The Labour Party - as Arts for Labour has found to its cost - sees the arts mainly as tools for campaigning. Red Wedge, a broad left coalition, is welcomed for that reason. The more seriously Red Wedge disturbs young people in its criticisms of society the more likely it is that Labour will distance itself from them.

Similar confusions abound in debates on style inside the Labour Party. Style in the way we live and the way in which we present politics is clearly important. But the quest for style can be conformist, reactionary even, and divert attention from more fundamental issues. Someone should tell the Labour Party that in the great cities of art, Venice and Florence, it's not style but conflicts of interest which matter most. There they realise that politics always has been and always will be about conflict. Conflict will not go away simply because one feels comfortable in designer-jeans and has no shame in watching *Dallas*.

Three other cultural battles look like being lost. Neil Kinnock is resisting the idea which has been agreed by Labour's policy-makers that our arts spokesperson should have cabinet rank. Since both the SDP and the Liberal Party have agreed to put this important no-cost proposal into their manifesto it would be monstrous if Labour were to join the Tories in seeing the arts as a fringe activity.

Secondly, Gerald Kaufman is resisting the idea of a unified and enlarged Ministry for the Arts which would have responsibility for the arts, art education, film, video and broadcasting. As shadow minister for the Home Office, Gerald Kaufman wants broadcasting to remain as part of, and be regulated by, our Ministry of the Interior.

The main and possibly the only argument - apart from the fact that the BBC would be an attractive part of anyone's empire - is that the Home Office is seen in Whitehall as the proper 'regulating' body. Policy on broadcasting is not apparently about art, entertainment and communication but is to be treated on a par with regulations on the opening hours of pubs, parking restrictions and fines for dog shit. Even Norman Tebbit, who has realised the political importance and effect of drama, is

not as naive as Labour's leaders in this instance.

Embarrassed by the absurdity of their position on this issue Labour's leaders have called in Messrs Mudge and Fudge who propose that whilst Labour's arts minister should be allowed to advise on policy, matters such as setting the licence fee, the appointment of people to positions of power and all those executive functions which give a minister political clout should remain with the Home Office. In other words Labour intends to maintain the status quo while, once again, the Alliance parties look like adopting the sensible and radical idea of a unified arts ministry.

And finally, Roy Hattersley, Labour's shadow chancellor, is resisting Norman Buchan's commitment made in good faith on the floor of the House of Commons to double the miserable amount of money spent by the government on the arts. One could understand Roy being a bit worried about letting Michael Meacher make policy on the hoof and commit Labour to adding endless noughts to the totals of monies that can be spent. But if Labour cannot commit itself to an extra £150-£200m a year for the budget for the arts then we should cease to claim that we are a civilised party. Surely we have a right to expect support from Roy Hattersley.

If these three battles are lost then Labour's policy for the arts will be in ruins and we will have proved ourselves to be doughty realists and good philistines.

For the rest, Labour's policy - spiced with buzzy phrases like 'ethnic arts' and 'women's art' to make it sound radical - is very much a depressing 'steady as she goes' one. Whilst Margaret Thatcher can change the world, Labour can't quite bring itself to abolish the Arts Council though it is prepared, thank God, to end the charade of the 'arms-length principle'.

Labour's emphasis on giving more money and power to Regional Arts Associations

(RAAs) is surely right. But instead of allowing local authorities to nominate people to the RAAs (who will then nominate themselves on to the advisory Arts Council which Labour intends to keep), why not breathe some life and possibly more practitioners into the system by having separate elections for the RAAs?

Labour's proposals for local authorities also miss the point. We have too many Conservative, Alliance and Labour local authorities who just don't see the arts as important for Labour to be complacent. But that's precisely what its proposals in this area are. Specifically, Labour has rejected the notion that a statutory duty should be placed on local authorities to make provision for the arts. It has also rejected the accompanying notion that local authorities should be compelled to spend a minimum proportion of

their income on the arts.

The first argument against these proposals is that they would represent an interference by central government in local government activity. However, all local authority statutory functions are by definition granted by central government. The second argument says that if a minimum proportion of income to be spent by a local authority on the arts were set, then those authorities who now exceed the minimum (like my own borough of Hackney) might be pressurised to cut back on expenditure. The validity of this argument depends on the acceptance of an insulting view of the courage of local politicians.

In all honesty the Labour Party has failed to grapple with a lot of the problems - probably because they have no real theory to guide them. There's been no attempt to integrate cultural policy into economic and social policy,

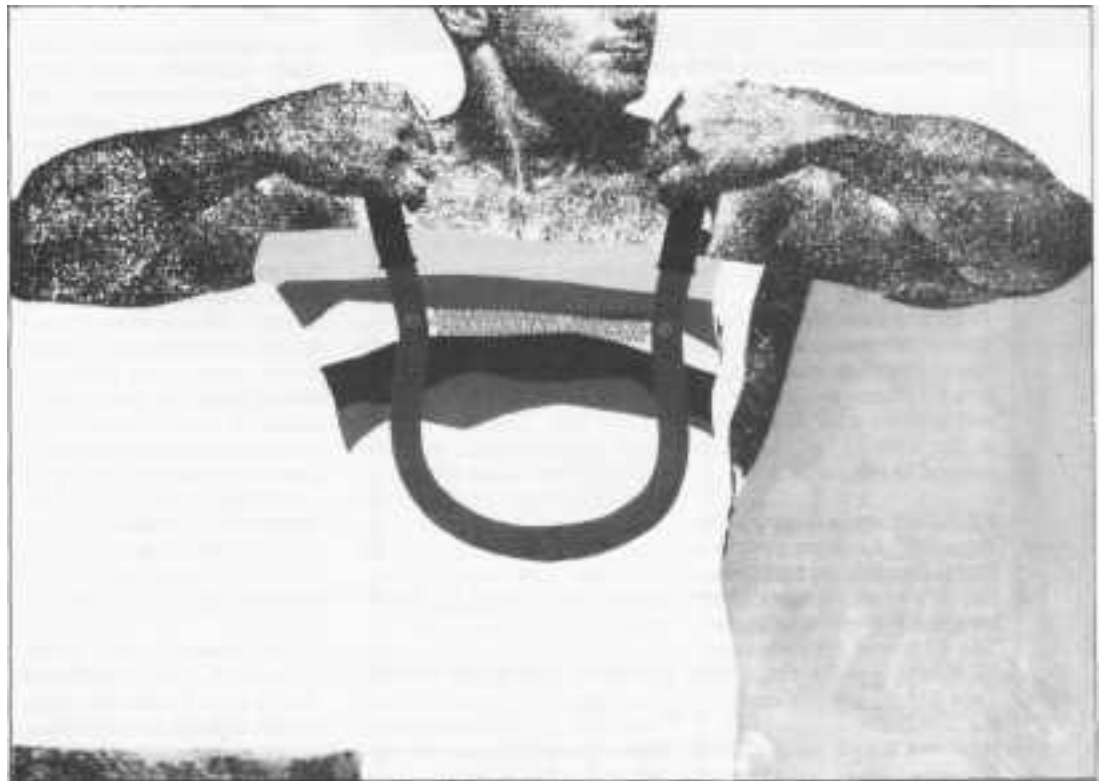
no attempt to deal with awkward issues such as radical practice versus populism, no attempt to bring together community arts, ethnic arts and high art, and no attempt to make art part of the core curriculum in schools.

The GLC, along with the metropolitan counties had some good ideas which were difficult to execute because of a hostile government. They were on the way forward but it's far from clear if and how Labour will re-establish them.

Neil Kinnock needs to stir into life some of the 'callow nonentities' (Hugo Young *The Guardian* Oct 10) if Labour is to win the next election. Cultural politics is one area where that can be done. Culture could be a vital weapon in bringing about social change. •

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\*At *Marxism Today's* Common Pursuits Conference, quoted in *Art Monthly*, November 1986.



**Adonis in Y-Fronts** is the catchy title of this picture by Richard Hamilton showing as part of the 'British and American Pop Art' exhibition at the Tate Gallery, Millbank, London

SWI. Pop Art was the 'enfant terrible' of the late 50s, which used all the ephemeral clutter of the consumer society to provide a critique of its values.

It attempted to explore some

of the tensions between the unbridled optimism of the Macmillan school of 'you've-never-had-it-so-good' and the unease which a more mechanised society was producing.