



Self-portrait, 1954



Self-portrait with guitar, 1977

On Sunday March 6, *The Sunday Times* published extracts from a lengthy five-page letter which they had received from David Hockney, long resident in California. Hockney is threatening to withdraw his forthcoming major retrospective from the Tate Gallery this autumn, in protest against the passing of clause 29 of the Local Government Act. In the letter Hockney castigates the hypocrisy, double-standards and 'meanness of spirit' of English society. He describes Thatcherism as 'crude and philistine', responsible 'for an incredible ugliness of environment'. Hockney's criticisms of modern Britain are not, however, simply aesthetic but are founded on a keen sense of social inequality he identifies in British culture.

Hockney's image of a myopic, philistine England is hard to dispute, though he is naive if he seriously imagines that 'this clause 29 wouldn't be tolerated by Americans'. The American constitution does not automatically guarantee greater freedoms, as we know from the case of Michael Hardwick's 1986 appeal against the anti-sodomy statutes in

Art Of The Political

The arts lobby has come out firmly against Clause 29. Simon Watney looks at the recent threat by David Hockney to withdraw from his forthcoming exhibition at the Tate Gallery

the state of Georgia. In this instance the Supreme Court decided that the constitution does *not* protect gay relationships, even in the privacy of the home. Nonetheless it would be difficult to imagine a starker conflict of cultures and temperaments than between the ebullient warmth and generosity of individual Americans, and the unrelenting 'narrowness of vision and apathy in the people' that he finds here.

As a gay socialist I certainly sympathise with Hockney, though I should add that being a socialist makes the public face of America seem like hell, while as a gay man the private life of Britain feels like hell! Hockney describes how, 24 years ago, he used his 'Englishman's inalienable right to live wherever he chooses, and pissed off. Reading that only served to remind me ironically of the deafening ovation which followed the

prime minister's statement at last year's Conservative Party conference in Blackpool, that: 'Children who need to be taught traditional moral values are being taught that they have an inalienable right to be gay...'. Many of us who feel increasingly exiled in our own country cannot criticise David Hockney and others for leaving, even if we recognise only too clearly that that option is simply not open to most (especially with mandatory HIV antibody tests for all would-be US immigrants).

The oddest reaction to Hockney's letter came in *The Guardian's* leading comment piece the following day. This pointed out that Britain is not so much presided over by the nanny figure he described, as by a bellowing sergeant-major. Hockney is archly informed that if it takes clause 29 to make him realise what's

been done to personal freedoms in Britain, 'communications with California must be more difficult than we had hitherto thought'. This attitude seems to exemplify the blindness and insensitivity (and despair?) of current political commentary on the liberal Left. We all tend to muddle along when times are bad, but we only feel the gut-wrenching sense of *crisis* when something very, very dear to us is directly threatened by the state.

Two heterosexual feminist friends of mine have independently told me in recent weeks that they simply hadn't realised quite *how* bad things had got, until clause 29. At first I tended to pooh-pooh the 'cultural' implications of clause 29, being more concerned with the insulting distinction it draws between supposedly real and 'pretend' families. But our culture *does* matter. And the really sad thing is that if David Hockney does withdraw his exhibition from the Tate, neither the sergeant-majors nor the 'dreary, unimaginative people running almost everything' will even notice. Or care less. •