

David Edgar resigns from the 80s

# Farewell Clubland



**E**ach era throws up social institutions which encapsulate the times. In the 20s, it seems, all social collectivities aspired to the condition of an Oxford College; in the 30s to a Grand Hotel. In the 40s people felt at home in camps - first of a military character, then on their holidays. And if (as has been said) the 60s were a party to which one was not invited, then the 80s are a club to which one is denied admittance. For the first time since the 50s, 'join the club' is not the rueful acknowledgment of a shared misfortune, but an invitation quite devoutly to be wished.

In the beginning was the rehabilitation of the word. In the late 70s, commercial airlines realised their full-fare 'business' customers were growing increasingly resentful at having to rub shoulders with the cut-rate hoi polloi. So they invented a special, intermediate class, 'positioned' both literally and financially between 'economy' and 'first', to put these people into. And while Pan Am called this new class 'Clipper', and TWA 'Ambassador', British Airways decided (on the basis of sound polling evidence no doubt) that the word that best communicated comfort and exclusivity was 'Club'.

It was not ever thus. In the 60s and 70s, the word felt faintly down-at-heel. People in clubs were secret drinkers if not actually voyeurs; 'in the club' meant accidental pregnancy. And the gentleman's club itself, the Athenaeum, Garrick or Reform - with its arcane procedures, pompous dress-codes and nursery puddings - was clearly destined for the same historical dustbin as domestic services, field sports and the public schools.

So why has it not happened? Why, after two decades of retrenchment and decline, is clubland booming? Why has the effort to invent a club to appeal to people under 50 finally succeeded? (albeit tongue-in-cheek - the joint's called Groucho's). Why are pubs and cafes now installing

Chesterfields and engaging liveried commissionaires? Why have the t-shirt wearing classes of all Europe for three summers now affected membership of All-Star Teams, this Yacht Crew and that Country Club? Why does a certain leading charge-card speak not the language of availability and acceptance, but that of 'membership' and 'privilege'? (and with a growing sense of status desperation - now 'gold' and 'platinum' have come, can 'plutonium' be far behind?) In short, why has Clubland joined the theme park, brand essence and recladding among the buzz-concepts of the times?

Clearly, Clubland is itself an exercise in branding, the recladding of a social site, the re-theming of a segment of leisure business in the 1890s. But Clubland is more than just another heritage environment. As British Airways tells New Yorkers on the radio: the very point of Super-Club Class (the status banding tightens once again) is that by flying it you can 'separate yourself from the rest of humanity'. For, as Groucho Marx reminds us in his Joke, Clubland is not about belonging but exclusion; its rules define not the permissible but the forbidden; not who is, but who is not, admitted. Clubland is where the top third is, and where the middle third would like to be, because they know the bottom third will always be excluded.

As ever, our new times throw up many and contrasting possibilities. One prospect is of a Britain still locked into (or locked out of) Clubland, the few cocooned in a fantasy of ersatz Edwardiana, the many growling at the gates. Another sees us marching back to join the massed ranks of a reconscripted army of the proletariat (the masses being, as Raymond Williams perspicaciously reminded us, the people we don't know). Or else, perhaps, the 90s will see new forms of alignment and affinity, based on open membership, and open doors. •

David Edgar