

# Sentinel Interview

The GLC's cheap "Fares Fare Policy" for London Transport was very popular, and so is its Art Policy, a policy which has taken art out of elitist institutions and centres of excellence and back into the communities where it can be a meaningful and dynamic part of people's lives.

One of the prime movers in this popularisation was Tony Banks, ex-chairman of the GLC's Arts Administration Committee and now Labour MP for Newham North West. Tony resigned from the chairmanship in order to co-ordinate collaboration between the GLC and Parliamentary opposition to the Government's anti-democratic stance on the survival of the Greater London Council. Much of the Government's embarrassment and unease on this issue is due to Tony's efforts.

When the new Labour District Council invited Tony to Edinburgh to speak at a Conference on the future of the arts in Edinburgh he found time, before catching a train back to London, to give the Sentinel readers the benefit of his experience, in the GLC, of launching a popular arts movement.

## POLICY

"When we won the election in London in 1981 we didn't have an arts policy. Let's be quite clear about that. There were a few lines in the manifesto, but it wasn't considered to be 'macho' in political terms to have an arts policy."

This Tony considers to have been shortsighted, and he gives the example of the way the Italians, and other Europeans use folk festivals and rallies in order to put over their social message. Thus important messages are communicated to people in an entertaining way, and they are not bored to tears by turgid political speeches. Indeed, Neil Kinnock made this same point when he gave his interview to the Sentinel.

# POPULAR ARTS MOVEMENT



Before the summer recess of parliament, one of the prime concerns of Mrs Thatcher's government was to abolish democratically elected councils, the best known being the Greater London Council. One of the reasons the GLC is to be given the chop is that it is a powerful and popular voice of protest - a major spokesman of this project is Tony Banks.

But if the arts are going to be used in this way they must be clearly relevant to people's ordinary lives. "We rejected at the outset the concept of 'art for art's sake'. We didn't see how such a policy could have any relevance when faced with widespread social problems.

"We felt, and we still do, that we need to relate arts and leisure policies to the problems of unemployment, homelessness, poverty and urban decay. To stand the arts apart from those wider considerations means condemning them to a position of irrelevancy; icing on the cake to be enjoyed by the wealthy and privileged."

## PRIORITIES

With this in mind the GLC identified four priority areas for an arts policy. They wanted a policy that recognised the unemployment crisis, the need for closer links with the education authority and the education communities, an arts policy which recognised the multi-ethnic nature of our society, and one that recognised the need for community involvement.

"Community resources are absolutely vital in working class areas where there is a whole range of deprivation. There is economic deprivation, there is social deprivation, there is cultural deprivation, you know all deprivations are linked together. They require positive discrimination on the part of this council (the Edinburgh District Council). They will have to look at those geographical areas of their city where there is a great concentration of deprivation and then start allocating resources into those areas. That's one form of community arts."

## POWERFUL

Tony believes that popular art is a way of expressing very important, very potent social messages. He cited the example of "The Boys From The Black Stuff" as an example of how popular art can be used to convey a message and change people's lives. After watching "The Black Stuff" a lot of people who thought they were alone and to blame for their position of being unemployed suddenly got the message that there were

millions in the same position as them, going through the same problems and emotions. What's more they could see that they were the victims and not the culprits.

## POLITICAL

But isn't that introducing politics to the arts? "The GLC has not politicised the arts. I mean, that's nonsense. How can a local authority politicise the arts? Arts and politics have always been inextricably linked, all we have done and all the Edinburgh District Council is doing is to be honest enough to recognise that close linkage. When I hear people say 'keep politics out of the arts' I usually reinterpret that as meaning 'keep your politics out of what we (the establishment) have decided is going to be called art'."

"People understand more about unemployment from these programmes than from all the parliamentary bloody speeches by all the ministers and political pundits."

"That's how powerful the arts are in terms of a medium for expressing a social message. A message of enormous social power. That is why artists have been imprisoned and put to death throughout the ages, because repressive regimes are frightened by the power the arts actually have in communicating ideas to people.

## POPULAR

"And that's why people in the Labour Party are realising that the popular arts aren't just a piece of candy floss, they are actually a very potent and powerful social vehicle for getting across social and political messages."

But can the arts save the GLC?

"I don't think the arts will save the GLC. Indeed, this government will stop at nothing to abolish the GLC. But, so what? Institutions can be dismantled; ideas can't be destroyed. What we've done in London is sowing the seeds of a popular movement that can't be expunged by this philistine Tory Government. The seeds will flourish even in the absence of the GLC because they are the seeds of a popular arts movement."

Colin Bartie.

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