
Chris Smith

Beyond Cool Britannia



The decision to launch a bid for London to host the Olympics in 2012 has been a long time coming, but it is the right one for the Government to make. The economic impact – in visitor numbers, tourism growth, and enhancement of British identity around the world; the regeneration of some of the most derelict areas of East London; and the sporting legacy, stimulating enthusiasm, especially amongst young people: all of these are major potential benefits. We'll be up against stiff competition, particularly I suspect from New York, but we must give it our very best shot.

One of the advantages of hosting an Olympic Games is that it presents an unrivalled opportunity to showcase our nation as we really are. I remember visiting Sydney three years ago, when the Games were on, and the chance it gave to put Australia on the world map brought untold benefits to the whole country. Visitors came, money was spent, and economic success followed. But more than that. The sense of identity of Australians, the way they felt



Julian Opie's Britart cover for Blur's Greatest Hits album



Britain was full of cutting-edge art, dance, music, and theatre. People could go clubbing through the night. Artists were setting out to shock.



Damien Hirst's exhibit, 'With The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living' (1991), at The Saatchi Gallery

about their country, and the view the world had of them, were all transformed.

Can we achieve the same for Britain? And would we want to? All the polling that has been done around the world, and all the surveys of visitors who do come to visit us here, show that the predominant global image we have is of a country rich in heritage, pageantry, and quaint traditions. A Royal Family riding around in gilded coaches; rolling pastoral countryside; red buses and black cabs rattling past Big Ben; grand ladies in crinolines and gentlemen with swords seen against the backdrop of stately homes: these are the pictures that the idea of Britain seems to conjure up in people's minds.

There is nothing wrong in playing strongly to this particular brand identity that we seem effortlessly to have



as a country. Part of it is of course a true reflection of important elements of our society and way of life. But it is at best an incomplete picture, and we need to acknowledge that.

Seven years ago a ham-fisted attempt was made to put the other side of the case. Britain was no longer the preserve of history and heritage. Britain was full of cutting-edge art, dance, music, and theatre. People could go clubbing through the night. Artists were setting out to shock. A new spirit was abroad in the land. And press release after press release tumbled out from the then Secretary of State proclaiming the advent of "Cool Britannia".

It's a phrase I hated then, and still do. And it's a concept that really only had validity in reminding us of some aspects of our contemporary culture. Yes, our music could stand



Above: Blair meets Gallagher - "Cool Britannia" at its peak
 Right: Buckingham Palace
 Below: Naomi Campbell famously falls wearing shoes by British designer, Vivienne Westwood



comparison with the best of anywhere, especially where it gloriously brought different musical traditions together in a new and richer fusion. Yes, our visual artists – despite the hype – were finding genuinely new ways of expressing themselves. Yes, our fashion designers were taking Paris and Milan by storm. But this was down to individual talent expressing itself, not down to some socio-political arranging of the temper of the times. And whilst it revealed exciting cultural success it did not represent a wholesale overthrow of the old order. The "Cool Britannia" label was never more than a rather crude attempt to convey a sense of cultural innovation; and because it laid itself open so readily to parody, it failed.

It did however leave those charged with marketing Britain abroad as a visitor destination with an acute dilemma. Given that both images – of heritage and of newness – had



elements of truth about them, what sort of pitch should be made to the world? The recently retired couple in Kansas would almost certainly be attracted by different aspects of Britain from those that would tempt a German teenager. You can partly solve the problem by making the appeal in different ways in different markets, if you can define them sensibly. But you're always going to run the risk of sending out confused messages, trying to be ancient and hip in succession, with inevitably diminished effectiveness as a result.

The solution must surely be to glory in the fact that Britain is both of these things, and much more besides.

Celebrating the diversity of our appeal is both truer to the reality of what we are as a nation and a better way of burnishing the image we have abroad. When Ken Livingstone helped to launch the London Olympic bid he



Above: Images from the Notting Hill Carnival, London - 'the most diverse multicultural city in the world'
Left: Ben Okri

spoke of the multitude of nations and traditions represented in the city. London is indeed the most diverse multicultural city in the world; other towns and cities around the country have richly mixed ethnic identities. And we should see this as a real strength in setting out our stall to the rest of the globe.

Take a look at some of the most powerful voices writing today in Britain: Ben Okri, Salman Rushdie, Kazuo Ishiguro, Jack Mapanje; and consider where the streams of influence and tradition come from. Look at the work of Chris Ofili in the visual arts. Think of how the themes, sounds and instruments of Eastern and World music are joining together with a European inheritance to create some of the most captivating modern work. And you'll immediately see how tawdry and out-of-date any concept of "Cool Britannia" must be.



The image of Britain as a country full of "old maids" bicycling through the early morning mists to Sunday communion was never ever more than a partial reflection of reality. The image of a country full of Britart and Britpop ready to storm the world with modernity wasn't much better. Let's settle for something rather more complex, rather more difficult, but infinitely more exciting: a country of astonishing diversity and creativity, putting many parts together and coming up with something greater. It's happened more by accident than design. But it's a rich mix, and we should embrace it with pride.