

'I have tried too in my time to be a philosopher; but, I don't know how, cheerfulness was always breaking in.'

A view from the gates

This modest dose of eighteenth-century wit is dedicated to Jonathan Griffin and his partners in the Britain Abroad Task Force. Judged by his thoughtful piece in these pages, Mr Griffin could do with some good cheer.

His task has not been made easier by the spread of Foot and Mouth disease (that is, Hoof and Mouth for our American readers), and this is certainly no laughing matter for all those affected throughout the country. Yet, beyond this emergency, methinks he might protest too much.

Does Mr Griffin really believe that 'at the time of writing things have rarely looked so bleak nor branding so necessary for Britain'? A quick scan of history might cheer him up. Managing Britain's reputation would have looked quite tricky in times of Union, Civil War, Revolution and German-speaking monarchy, particularly when it was tossing away a dominion called America. As for bleakness, Churchill, Eden and Major might demur; Hitler, Suez and Black Wednesday could put the Dome in perspective.

Come, Mr Griffin, and stroll with me down the sunny side for a few moments. Britain's reputation abroad needs to be improved, of course, and we hope your Task Force can generate positive action towards that goal. But the situation is not as dire as is painted. The assets are there to be exploited. The talent is there. The precedents are there. All we need is some leadership, and another quick scan of history is modestly encouraging there too.

Consider the picture painted in different tones. The Dome had minimal impact on Britain's brand image abroad. Our German cousins suffered an even greater embarrassment. Yesterday's fish and chip wrappings, Mr Griffin. Floods? Rail crashes? Fuel protests? These are problems and tragedies common to all overheated industrial societies; not to be minimised but there to be dealt with. These issues are not unique to Britain, though they may feel unique to the British themselves and they rightly concern those close to government. May I offer you Californian earthquakes, Russian submarines and French truck drivers for solace. 'Events, dear boy, events' have a habit of happening, all over the world, and being forgotten when the next event shows up.

Let me repeat that the Foot and Mouth emergency is an event which should properly preoccupy us today, but even this tragedy will one day, God willing, be history. It is even conceivable that out of this emergency a more dynamic approach to marketing Britain may be born. Perhaps Mr Blair and Teresa Wickham will learn useful lessons from their sales canvasses in America.

Back to the colour palette, and what signs of light do we see in the research? The British Council research is well worth reading, and its prime result – the Brand for UK Education – well worth the MORI fees on its own. Yet its broad conclusions are not all 'unsurprising but depressing'. Britain's business reputation amongst the young research sample happily outstrips most expectations (and certainly those of international executives). Britain's creative reputation is clearly higher amongst prime purchasers and suffers unnecessarily by dint of these respondents' frame of reference. Britain's great opportunity is emphatically in the Far East where, rather than being seen as 'worthy but dull', Britain is a blank sheet.

Of course, if you still believe in Empire, you might be taken aback by the fact that Britain misses out on perfect tens all round and is somehow regarded as a junior partner of the US. But in the real world, there are strengths to market and a distinct identity to build. Look ahead and see the opportunity which the inevitable decline in America's cultural hegemony will create. The end of the gross brand, a new beginning for the tailored. Goodbye new flavour, hello innovation.

Take heart from Chris Powell's cautious optimism elsewhere in these pages. Focus on Britain's innovative streak. Ensure it is seen as a business strength as well as a cultural claim. Above all, uncover the leadership – particularly *outside* government and civil service – that will make things happen.

Leadership from within government is capable of dramatically affecting Britain's reputation abroad. Margaret Thatcher, for all her faults and domestic critics, had a massive effect on Britain's international standing. It is entirely feasible that Tony Blair, in his probable second term, will spread his wings on the world stage. The Epitaph Motive virtually dictates that he will, and Gordon Brown is perfectly capable of looking after most

domestic issues as he prepares for succession. Yet this leadership role is much more a matter of spokesman than action man. For action, we must look to the private sector.

Quite simply, politicians and civil servants are not very good at marketing. Some still see it as beneath them, no matter how hard they now have to work at it. How else do we explain why the real achievements of the Millennium Commission (properly detailed by Mike O'Connor elsewhere in these pages) have been obscured by media fixation with the Dome?

The Commission can rightly claim 'mission accomplished'. That is, in all respects except marketing. The politicians' remit to the Millennium Commission implicitly restricted its ability to help its projects go to market effectively. Just as politicians' muddling guaranteed the New Millennium Experience Company would never enjoy a market-responsive culture. Why else have the Millennium Commission's triumphs not already been trumpeted abroad, not just as reasons to visit Britain but as prime examples of British ingenuity? There are great stories to be told here, in glorious technicolour. Hire Sir Michael Caine to give us a tour of his South Bank; Catherine Zeta Jones for a cycle trip along the Millennium Coastal Park or a stroll round Foster's extraordinary National Botanic Garden in Carmarthenshire; Billy Connolly for a tale or two of Scotland's revolution, from Glasgow across to Dundee; Julie Walters on Birmingham, Sir Paul McCartney up north, Prince Charles on the gardens of England, David Frost revisiting Cambridge. And do let us have John Cleese return to the West Country, ending a day at the Eden Project with a session on the couch for Mr Smit. (Over a turbot at Rick Stein's place?)

By all means, put Tony Blair on stage, but first find a business leader to make things happen. Listen to Sir John Egan, also in these pages, on how London's reputation was turned around. Then ask someone like him to bang heads together – and drums – beyond London.

Now, we can see that Mr Griffin enjoys a good read, if only from his reference to Julian Barnes' *England, England*. (This is prescribed reading for anyone involved in Destination UK and particularly the Isle of Wight.) Here is a recommendation that he dips into something a little more serious, albeit with tongue sliding cheekwards.

When Chris Powell quoted the inspired (and typically British) idea of establishing a Finishing School for Young Entrepreneurs, someone quipped that it should be called The Josiah Wedgwood Academy. This caused your correspondent to revisit his favourite essay on this hero. (If you are interested, it is 'JOSIAH WEDGWOOD: An Eighteenth-Century Entrepreneur in Salesmanship and Marketing Techniques' by N. McKendrick, published by Arnold in *Essays in Economic History*, Volume Three, edited by E.M. Carus-Wilson. This is prescribed reading for anyone involved in marketing.) To quote McKendrick: 'Born the thirteenth son of a mediocre porter with only the promise – and a promise never fulfilled – of a £20 inheritance, he died in 1795 worth £500,000 and the owner of one of the finest industrial concerns in England. His name was known all over the world. It had become a force in industry, commerce, science and politics.'

Contrary to received wisdom, Wedgwood did not prosper beyond all his contemporaries on his technical supremacy and industrial organisation alone. Rather, he wrote the book on marketing. Topical designs, fashion leadership, warehouses, showrooms, exhibitions, trademarks, new display stands, puffing articles, straightforward advertising, free carriage, travelling salesmen, McKendrick shows how Wedgwood used the lot. Above all, he mastered the art of celebrity endorsement and captured the world of fashion. He wrote: 'Fashion is infinitely superior to merit in many respects, and it is plain from a thousand instances that if you have a favourite child you wish the public to fondle and take notice of, you have only to make choice of proper sponcers.' The sponsors Wedgwood recruited were the monarchy, nobility and connoisseurs – the leaders of fashion. In these ways, he opened up the national market and then the world market. All this at a time when the King was going mad, the French were revolting and America was seceding. (Surely there is a movie here.)

Wedgwood's techniques might remind us of how British Airways sold itself to America, how the *Sunday Times* came back from the dead, and how London re-established itself as a worldwide hub – not just for fashion, culture and tourism, but also for finance, trade and inward investment.

Take heart, Mr Griffin. Take the longer view. And take note of an eighteenth-century entrepreneur and his contemporary, the wit quoted at the beginning of this piece. Arm yourself with the cheerful smile of confidence and find yourself a twenty-first century Josiah Wedgwood. There is many a foreign field to conquer once our own fields recover their health. It just takes leadership.

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Editor's note

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