

A supplicant at the gates

Gerald: 'Is she not connected with trade?'

Lady D: 'Trade? Nonsense. Her father made a fortune by introducing the corset to the Eskimos. That is not trade. It is philanthropy.'

Alan Bennett, *Forty Years On*

It is not essential to be sceptical about philanthropy but it helps. Particularly now, when there seems to be so much philanthropy in the air.

Our thrice welcome visitor from The Thunderer, Mr Simon Jenkins, has been admonishing museum managements and, more accurately, their political masters for allowing the national museum to become 'a politician's plaything'. By demanding free entry as one of '25 steps to a better Britain', and promising compensation, the New Labour government of 1997 turned 17 national museums into 'the walking wounded of culture politics. Choking on five years of lottery money, they stumble blindly to the nearest minister and plead for more'. Through philanthropy, and 'the archaic whim of Chris Smith', the national museums were privatised by the back door. Mr Jenkins argues that 'not charging strips them of more than revenue. It deprives them of independence, incentive and discretion'. He wickedly suggests that in their search for a new director, the trustees of the British Museum will only be looking for an expert in persuading ministers to part with funds; 'they might as well ask Ms Jowell to make the appointment'.

In this issue's Brandwatch, Gordon Brown is described as that 'benevolent person in the soup kitchen of Number 11, Downing Street'. Imagining the Chancellor as a benevolent soul shows remarkable creativity but you take the point. Through an apparently philanthropic gesture, museum spending is controlled, pseudo-socialist ideals are waved in the air, and Downing Street spin is spun in a way that even Shane Warne would envy.

Life in museumland is different across the Atlantic. (As is life in general, particularly today.) Over here, observing deficits at the British Museum, *The Art Newspaper* cries: '*Bust to follow museum boom!*' In the States, Locum's correspondent Robert Herber reports headlines - in the wake of shrinking state support - which scream: '*It's the age of museums!*' Divided by a common language we may be, but this is more than linguistic difference. This is cultural difference, on every level imaginable.

In America, museums are healthier. They are responding positively to less state involvement. Their budgets are enhanced not drained by increasing accessibility. They take their collections, their wisdom and their brands to the people, for money, not for the sake of socialist ideals. Above all, in America they give good philanthropy.

There is no shame in being seen to give generously in America. 'Good citizen' policies are part and parcel of successful capitalist endeavour across the USA. There is nothing vulgar in paying thousands of dollars a plate to attend a charity dinner. Or in bidding thousands of dollars a bottle for a case of Screaming Eagle Cabernet. Or in having your family name inscribed on the list of trustees for the local museum. No shame? Of course not. How could there be shame in supporting a good cause? Nothing vulgar? Of course not. How could it be vulgar to be seen setting a good example?

God bless America and its commitment to tax-free donation. As P.J. O'Rourke once wrote, 'A charity ball is like a dance except it's tax deductible.' (Sceptics amongst the readers of this journal will doubtless be asking why such 'good citizen' behaviour does not always stretch over the oceans. To embrace fellow citizens of the world still in under-age employment across the Far East. Or in below-threshold pay behind the world's fast food counters. As they say, abroad is another place. Or as James Cameron said of a Texan president whose policies bespoke difficult foreign relations: 'Alas for Lyndon Johnson, the world was full of foreigners'.)

Back home, Americans look after their own and are proud to be seen to do so. In Britain, there is as much modesty today in admitting sufficient wealth to make bequests, as yesterday prevented those 'in trade' from looking over the social parapet.

One of the greatest benefactors in British society is a family that chooses to make most of its bequests under an entirely different name. This family is not alone. The late Paul Hamlyn was a rare, visible benefactor, but then, of course, he made his own fortune.

Is this the key to the philanthropist's vault? To reducing dependence on government? Perhaps new money is less squeamish about being seen in circulation.

'A charity ball is like a dance except it's tax deductible.'

P.J. O'Rourke

Certainly, New Labour money likes to be seen moving around on the side of the cultural angels. There are few American benefactors ashamed of their trade or their gifts.

Earlier this autumn, the Royal Institute of British Architects moved in on the philanthropy pitch and awarded its £20,000 Stirling Prize to Magna, voted this year's best building. (Congratulations are in order. Particularly since these vast steelworks have been asking to be properly regarded since 1916.) Magna is but one of 500 new British museums to have opened in the past 20 years. How many will still be open when the lottery tide has ebbed? Those, like Magna, that have aimed high and enchanted their visitors. And those, even fewer, that have attracted sponsors and benefactors less capricious than politicians.

There is a flaw at the heart of the greatest wheeze in modern philanthropy - the National Lottery - that should act as a warning to any destination dependent upon government support. It is this: that the government not only sponsors the lottery, it regulates it (and of course then goes on to award the contract for running it). This is not a good idea. It is rather like confusing the executive and the judiciary. It can lead to abuse of the original concept, for instance in the way that Lottery funds can be committed to the likes of cancer treatment; a worthy recipient, but of tax-sourced revenue, not of Lottery funds. If the principle of 'additionality' was so easily breached, should we not be wary of governmental philanthropy?

The Lottery has turned the majority of British citizens into philanthropists, if unwitting or passive philanthropists. Fine though its ambitions were and many its splendid applications, its effects have not all been positive. Our cultural institutions need more willing and active philanthropists than the public at large can ever be. They need patrons more interested in posterity than most politicians can afford to be. And they need philanthropy with less strings than the control freaks of government could ever conceive.

Elsewhere in this issue, the respected economist Sir Alan Budd tells of how the trustees of clubby Britain, the great and good of public life, are asked to give their time and talents to bodies on which they serve, be they Royal Commissions or Review Bodies. (Though not Judicial Enquiries. Judges do not forego their fees. Of course not.) This is a form of quiet philanthropy that is so charmingly British you would, illogically, not wish to see it disappear in a brave new world of professional experts. We should prefer our Budds to those McKinseys over there.

There are, indeed, many exports of American practice that we understandably view askance. Branding practice that has overrun individuality and 'taught the world to sing', but one American song. Political practice that has elevated the focus group to the point where our voting booths are empty and our politics 'Americanised'.

That said, our cultural institutions could learn some useful lessons from their American counterparts. About endowments and bonds and independence and philanthropy beyond scepticism. Can you imagine the British Museum's cultural collections paired with the Smithsonian's balance sheet? That would be a result for posterity. And a goal for philanthropy.

Footnote

In the last issue of *Locum Destination Review*, this column wagered, in relation to the world of Disney and with more prescience than its author would have wished, that Visigoths were on the horizon.

What has happened since then in New York and Washington reminds us all of the risks faced by destinations everywhere and by the people who make those destinations what they are. The greater the destination, the greater the risk, as the citizens of Bethlehem have shown us over the decades. Destinations are now magnets for terror as well as pleasure.

Whilst all destination makers will be wariest than ever and properly so, they will also need to limit the damage done, by fear and loathing, to their livelihoods. The examples of leadership, provided by the mayor of New York, and of sheer initiative from the marketeers of Las Vegas (reported in this issue) are beacons to everyone in the industry.

Visigoths come in many different forms. They must not be allowed to prevail.

Editor's note

CUSTOS is an independent observer of the destination industry. His views are not necessarily those of *Locum Destination Review's* editorial board or of Locum Destination Consulting.