

## British Council under Review, 1960s – 1970s

As outlined in the introduction, the British Council's activities targeted both political and cultural priorities. This analysis will look at the changing value ascribed to two varieties of activity (commercial and cultural exhibitions overseas, and ELT) that exemplified these priorities and changed in response to the post-war reviews.

The audiences to which the British Council addressed itself were innately linked to the notion of their value to funders. The Executive Committee of the Council acknowledged that its areas of operation had been shaped by "historical developments" and agreed with the Beeley Report's recommendations that these should "be kept under constant review as circumstances changed."<sup>1</sup> An example of this was the declining focus on Western Europe between 1954-1967, which was readjusted to recognise Britain's reengagement with European integration as it sought membership ("in light of the French veto"). Likewise, the Council diverted resources towards newly independent African countries after 1960. At the same time as involvement with Western Europe and Sub-Saharan Africa increased, the British Council increasingly reduced its involvement in South-East Asia and The Gulf.<sup>2</sup> These outcomes showed a tension between the political and cultural priorities of the British Council. When its activities were concentrated on allies and promoting trade, it served its political priorities, whereas when it sponsored development and an engagement with 'British thinking' it very much moved to satisfy cultural priorities. Within the British Council Executive Committee, it was felt that representations should be made to the FCO to stress

"the contribution the Council can make to direct British interests and influence. In particular [...] its main purpose in developed and developing countries is to be a long-term means to dispose politicians, consumers, etc., etc., to think and buy British, and to resist the blandishments of our competitors - the United States, France, Germany, and Japan, as well as the countries of the Communist Bloc."<sup>3</sup>

This consideration of 'thinking British' is interesting, as this period witnessed a profound shift in Britain's image overseas as defined by its cultural outputs. This is at the heart of how government reviews conceived of cultural value, and helps to explain why the debate remained so abstract during this period.

The Beeley report of 1967 coincided with a period in which The Who and Mary Quant supplanted Morris Dancing and Thomas Hardy as accessible icons of British identity. In the mid-1950s to early

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<sup>1</sup> Cosmo Stewart, 'Notes for British Council Executive Committee' 23 January, 1968. FCO 13/134.

<sup>2</sup> Cosmo Stewart, 'Notes for British Council Executive Committee' 23 January, 1968. FCO 13/134.

<sup>3</sup> C H D Everett, 'Memo on Executive Committee Minutes', 10 June 1968. FCO 13/135.

1960s, the focus of British exports overseas had shifted away from heavy industrial and consumer goods, toward luxury products that traded on a perception of British 'tradition'.<sup>4</sup> "It was in this context that the images, and realities, of British industry could increasingly be viewed as a weakness and not as a strength, however mythical that strength might have been."<sup>5</sup> As the 1960s progressed, there was a desire to alter this trend and create a more sustainable future for British overseas exports, as outlined by A. R. Glen, the Chairman of the Export Council for Europe in 1965, who took important lessons from recent exhibitions in Copenhagen, Amsterdam and Milan:

"One is to temper the British image still required by local shopkeepers (made up of Guards, London buses, royalty and pageantry of all kinds) by a growing emphasis on Britain's fashion and technological development."<sup>6</sup>

**The British Council reflected the changing realities of British culture in a changing world**, which meant that its value was often difficult to define. In the words of Art Historian, Lisa Tickner:

"The formation of the British Council and the Arts Council as institutions encouraging and promoting British art meant that for the first time the establishment and the avant-garde drew closer together in the post-war period."<sup>7</sup>

As such, it was rather embattled when faced with government reviews, and with the incomprehension of Whitehall departments.

A collection of 'British Week' events sponsored by the British Council (in Brussels, Dallas and Montreal in 1967)<sup>8</sup>, marked a turning point in which the identity of Britain began to be presented differently:

"As the more coercive, military or colonial aspects of British identity faded, so national status was increasingly defined in cultural terms. The 'projection of Britain' required an identity forged or confirmed in displays of cultural heritage, scientific achievement, manufactured goods and contemporary art, architecture and design. Britain had long been associated with tradition and heritage values in overseas markets, but it was a new creativity 'manifested by the modernity of contemporary art forms', that emerged as a 'crucial indicator of national survival and continuing vitality' in the post-war period."<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> This can be seen in the changing priorities of Exhibitions organised by the Board of Trade overseas, and also the funding provided for export promotion. This increased by a factor of 20 between 1952/53 to 1960/61.

<sup>5</sup> Paddy Maguire, 'Craft Capitalism and the Projection of British Industry in the 1950s and 1960s', *Journal of Design History* (1993) 6 (2): 97-113 (113).

<sup>6</sup> 'British Week In Milan Brings Big Buying Boost. From Our Special Correspondent.', *The Times (London)*, 18 Oct, 1965. p. 17.

<sup>7</sup> Lisa Tickner, 'Export Britain': Pop Art, Mass Culture and the Export Drive' *Art History*, 35/2 (April 2012), pp.394-419. (p.418 n.124.)

<sup>8</sup> Tickner summarises: "A British Week was a trade promotion, addressed to the host country but also targeting British manufacturers by urging them into overseas markets." For further information, her note points towards BT 279/228, Mrs Ruth Wright, Finance Division, Board of Trade, 'Note of a Meeting at the Treasury on 16 July 1963'; and BT 333/172, 'British Weeks', unsigned, 14 October 1969. Tickner 'Export Britain', p.415. n.53.

<sup>9</sup> Lisa Tickner, 'Export Britain': Pop Art, Mass Culture and the Export Drive' *Art History*, 35/2 (April 2012), pp.394-419. (pp.400-401.)

This effectively positions the notion of cultural value at the forefront of national policy in a period which witnessed a profound revision of Britain's role in the world. In this context, the cultural value of the British Council was achieved in partnership with other British organisations as well as partners overseas. The cumulative value of the British Council during this period was realised as part of the "package" of Britain's overseas representation.

Between the Drogheda Report and the Beeley Report, the financial resources of the British Council had risen by an annual average of 8%, from c. £3m p/a to c. £11m p/a.<sup>10</sup> This owed something to the increase in the cost of existing activities (estimated at around 4% p/a), and therefore represented a maintenance of activities rather than an expansion. Yet, from this point, the Council faced increasing pressure to rationalise, for which read reduce, its expenditure. One of the most expeditious means of achieving this was to reduce the extent to which the British Council was "spread thinly". Six countries were agreed for withdrawal in 1967/68, and the Council proposed complete withdrawal from a further fifteen in order to realise the mandated cuts. In total, this meant withdrawal from a quarter of the countries in which the British Council was operating in 1966/67.<sup>11</sup> The changing nature of the Council's audiences reflected the value that its work had for Britain, as recognised explicitly in 1970, during a funding review initiated by the incoming Prime Minister Edward Heath and designed to achieve savings. The Council was lauded as an essential asset, giving good insight into how its activities were valued:

"The British Council provides a form of British presence which the Duncan Committee for instance regarded as being "an increasingly important medium through which Britain will project her interests and her new approach to international relations", and as enabling Britain to present herself as a trading and cultural partner of major importance. Cultural exchanges deriving from Council work provide links with this country which have far-reaching commercial implications. Teaching of English provides an indispensable reservoir and basis for an appreciation and desire in foreign countries for things British."<sup>12</sup>

Throughout the 1960s the British Council's "intense cultivation of ELT" was tied to the training of teaching staff overseas rather than sending staff from London (as recommended in the Hill Report).<sup>13</sup> Likewise this favoured the development of curricula that focussed on the Council's role in Commonwealth countries.<sup>14</sup> This programme was championed by the Council's Controller of the Education Division, Arthur King, and represented an emphasis on the developmental value of ELT, and its ability to cultivate partnerships with developing nations. This was identified as part of the self-reinforcing mission of the Council by the Executive Committee, who stated the key priorities to be: "(a) education; (b) the image of Britain, e.g. the arts and (c) laying foundations."<sup>15</sup> The CPRS review questioned the importance of overseas representation after the question of British entry to the European Community had been resolved. In the midst of a broad economic downturn, trimmed

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<sup>10</sup> 'Review of Overseas Information Activities: Memorandum by British Council', January 1967. FCO 13/280

<sup>11</sup> 'Review of Overseas Information Activities: Memorandum by British Council', January 1967. FCO 13/280

<sup>12</sup> R Fyvis-Walker, 'Reductions in Public Expenditure – Overseas Information Services'. FCO 26/591

<sup>13</sup> R. Smith, 'ELT and The British Council, 1934-2014: Research notes' retrieved from '[http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/al/research/collect/elt\\_archive/](http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/al/research/collect/elt_archive/)', (Accessed: 27/04/14).

<sup>14</sup> R. Phillipson, *Linguistic Imperialism*. (Oxford: OUP, 1992), pp.145-52.

<sup>15</sup> 'Minutes of the Meeting of the British Council Executive Committee', 18 June 1968. FCO 13/136.

budgets were no surprise, although there is a clash between the shrinking of international visibility and the increasing importance of Britain's role as an international hub for the services industry. This, in part, was the central concern of the CPRS review: how can we understand the clashing priorities of cultural value and commercial necessity?

In a passionate speech to the House of Lords, the former head of the British Council, Lord Ballantrae, laid out how he felt the CPRS review had failed to capture the vital role that the Council played to British interests. Naming the report a "hideous progeny" permeated by a "defeatist motif", his defence cited numerous assessments of its value, the first:

"a letter which appeared in The Times on 4th November, three weeks ago, signed by five distinguished Germans, one of them the son of Chancellor Adenauer: We, as friends of your country, would find it deplorable if the long-term benefits flowing from lively cultural and educational relations were to be sacrificed for the sake of short-term political assessments, arrived at from a standpoint of current self-belittlement".<sup>16</sup>

The opinion of other Europeans was crucial to the activities of overseas representation, and the British Council represented an important means of delivering diplomatic value. The developmental value of ELT, alongside the political and commercial value of trade exhibitions and science teaching ensured that whilst Britain sought to compete with its neighbours, it also sought to court them. The CPRS review had failed to balance commercial necessity and cultural value. Next, Lord Ballantrae turned to a personal contact, a Frenchman and:

"a former ambassador in Addis Ababa, Brazil and Greece, who wrote: As an alien I cannot take part in a debate on the Foreign Office, but as a member of the European Community I sincerely hope that the BBC will still rule the wave-lengths, and that the British Council will, like the Greek Phoenix, acquire a new life thanks to a report advocating its sudden death". Then I suppose such was his emotion that he broke into French and finished by saying: J'espère que les Communes réagiront, et que les Lords rugiront! which translated means: I hope that the Commons will react, and that the Lords will roar!"<sup>17</sup>

The ultimate rejection of the CPRS review hinged upon support for these assessments, and the belief that British ambition to present itself overseas need not be compromised by a gloomy forecast. Rather, the enduring belief in the value of the activities of the British Council rendered it an important and enduring means by which to maintain Britain's role in the world and to define that role.

During this period, government reviews of the British Council and its activities reinforced the continuing value of the organisation, even when this was in direct response to attacks. The changing audiences and activities of the Council recognised how its cultural and political priorities corresponded to those of the national interest. Yet they also showed an increasing focus on

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<sup>16</sup> Hansard, House of Lords Debates, fifth series, vol. 387, cols. 860-861.

<sup>17</sup> Hansard, House of Lords Debates, fifth series, vol. 387, cols. 860-861.

'developmental aid' and the ways in which Britain might raise the value of its culture by engaging with young nations. This period of change for Britain's role in the world reflected a changing sense of how it might value its culture, balancing commerce alongside the more nuanced appeal of its unique identity.

Andrew W M Smith

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