

The Watts Gallery and The Artists Village

Remarks by John Nickson on the publication of the report Art For All by Dr. Helen Bowcock at a reception held at the House of St Barnabus, Soho, London, 26th April, 2017.

Thank you for inviting me to say a few words on the publication of this inspiring report from which we may learn much that is needed at a time of profound change and much that should inspire us as we face an uncertain future.

This evening, here in this historic house, we are standing firmly on foundations laid long ago by those who were devoted to improving the quality of life of the most disadvantaged and to giving them hope. That the House of St Barnabus continues its role and looks as glorious as it does now in 2017 is due to the vision, energy and generosity of people who share that mission today.

As we have heard, the spirit of GF and Mary Watts that inspired our Victorian and Edwardian predecessors, remains vivid today but that is no accident. Indeed, if it were not for the determination and drive of Perdita Hunt, supported by her trustees and her colleagues, and for the foresight and generosity of the gallery's benefactors and for the hundreds of volunteers who have given and who continue to give so much of themselves, the Watts Gallery may not have survived and this report by Helen Bowcock would not have been written.

Moreover, I believe that what we are celebrating in Surrey has significance for the whole of our country.

When I started thinking about writing OUR COMMON GOOD, I asked a simple question: if the state provides less, who will provide more?

When I talked to the philosopher AC Grayling, he told me: “It is always difficult when one is in the middle of social change to understand trends and what the ultimate destination is likely to be. We know what we are changing from, but it is not entirely clear what we are changing to. Our move away from state provision has not been accompanied by a return to the kind of philanthropy we had in the nineteenth century. We are in a very different position from the US where the wealthy see it as a kind of duty to give”.

Britain has changed and is changing. Whilst we are a very much more prosperous country than we were fifty years ago, we are more divided and more unequal. Although Britain has never been so wealthy, charitable giving has not grown in real terms for thirty years. Moreover, we now know that younger generations are and will be poorer than their parents and grandchildren. There is less trust in authority, less social cohesion and an alarming rise in hard line populist politics in a world where liberal democracy may not predominate as wealth and power move east to a more autocratic and plutocratic Asia.

I seem to have travelled a long way from Surrey but as we prepare to vote in June, the question about what kind of society we want to be seems to be more pertinent than ever. And it seems to be that my question about who will provide more if the state provides less is one that ought to be on the lips of every voter.

I am, however, a realist but the one thing that we can do is to spread the word about what is being achieved and what is possible and to encourage those in government who talk about a shared society to observe what is happening in Surrey and other parts of the country and to learn from it.

Anyone looking for a message of hope, for a moral response to the challenges we face and for practical solutions should look to the voluntary and the beyond profit sector.

In order to find answers to my question about who will provide more, I talked to more than a hundred people all over the country, from Belfast to Bromley-by-Bow, via Blackpool. It was if I had lit a fuse. People almost ignited in their enthusiasm to address and to demonstrate how to overcome the problems facing our country.

I spoke to philanthropists and social entrepreneurs, to local authority, business and community leaders, to charities, to those they support and to those who volunteer.

Surrey represents a microcosm of our country: poverty, despair and people who are forgotten and left behind amidst prosperity and great wealth. I was delighted to be invited by Helen Bowcock to visit the Opportunities project that she and Matthew are supporting, helping to change the lives and transform prospects for single parent mothers living in an isolated estate on the fringes of wealthy Farnham.

It was a privilege for me to meet and to talk to those who lead and benefit from the project and to write about them in my book. Whilst the primary purpose of the project is to develop employment skills, Opportunities is also transforming lives by leading them into a new world of inspiration and fulfilment, as represented by the Watts gallery and the Artists Village.

I do find it odd that such a culturally distinguished country as ours finds it so hard to talk about culture, to acknowledge why the arts are so important and worthy of support by the state, the private sector and individual citizens. We seem to be even more unwilling to acknowledge the link between the arts and education when we are told that we live in a knowledge economy and that the creative industries are the fast growing part of the economy.

If the state is to provide less, who will provide the cultural and intellectual as well as the social capital that is required to sustain society and the economy?

In Surrey, the answer seems to be an alliance between people of good will who are devoted to a concept of the

common good; schools, charities, the more enlightened local politicians, prisons, individual men and women giving their time and where possible their money. I would say that a prototype shared society can be found in Surrey and specifically in the work of the Watts Gallery and Artists Village.

The truth is this. A state that provides less means that more of us are going have to give very much more, both in terms of money and time.

And just because we will be providing more and the state is providing less does not mean government can abdicate from its responsibilities. The state must become an enabler and it must work in partnership with other sectors of society.

The challenge for both national and local politicians is to understand the nature of the partnerships which are beginning to the flourish in other parts of the country. The most effective partnerships are local and rooted in communities. To put it crudely, success is based on bottom up rather than top down. And where public money is being invested most successfully, by which I mean a social return in terms of reduced crime and unemployment, then that is on terms agreed with partners and fellow investors rather than those dictated by the treasury.

The message for politicians is that a shared society requires government to devolve responsibility and to share power. We have some way to go to before that will happen.

In conclusion, let us celebrate what has been achieved in Surrey, congratulate and thank Perdita for her dynamic leadership and her staff for all that they have achieved, congratulate Helen on her report, thank both Helen and Matthew and all the Watts gallery and Arts Village benefactors and all the volunteers without whom there would be nothing to share with the people of Surrey and beyond.

And let us remind ourselves why the arts and culture matter so much more than their contribution to the economy. At the end of an interview for my book with Chris Smith, former Secretary of State and current chair of the Art Fund, he said this:

“Art and society should be inextricably linked in liberal democracies as art is the ultimate expression of freedom. We must feed the hungry, give shelter to the homeless and care for the sick but if we fail to nourish the soul and feed the intellect, we are lost”.

Thank you.

Ends.

John Nickson is the author of *Giving is Good For You* and *Our Common Good: if the state provides less, who will provide more?*