
THE AUTHOR

Kingsley Amis is a 57-year-old Londoner. He used to teach at universities and write when he could. For the last 15-20 years he has been a full-time writer. Among his novels are 'Lucky Jim' and 'Jake's Tally'. He has written and lectured on many subjects, including politics - 'very unprofessionally', he says. In his earlier days he called himself a socialist, but since then he has found out what socialism is and he now supports the Conservative Party. He is a member of the Writers' Guild.

AN ARTS POLICY?

Kingsley Amis

Foreword by Hugh Thomas

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Foreword

by Hugh Thomas

Mr Kingsley Amis has been delighting readers with his wit and style for twenty-five years. O Lucky Jim! How we remember him!

However, Mr Amis's long string of accomplished novels is only one side, if the most important part, of his literary achievement. There is his poetry. There is his criticism. Now here are his political recommendations. These are, to be sure, recommendations for a policy towards the arts. But, nevertheless, they are political if only because they deal firmly and squarely with the argument that the arts should be "politicised". A horrible word, it is true, but an appropriate one for a rotten idea. Mr Amis, too, shows that he could be an inspiring politician. What is his policy? A heavy investment in poets? Subsidy for exporting novelists? Tax-free dachas for needy critics? Compulsory attendance at courses on cinema and TV drama for those writers who have neglected these important new forms? Not a bit of it. But Mr Amis's plan is for us to have no arts policy. This is a very skilful plan though he would be the first to agree that it is a difficult one to introduce and carry through in a nation much used to busy bodies. At the end of his pamphlet — aversion of a speech delivered at the Centre's fringe meeting at the 1979 Conservative Conference at Blackpool — Mr Amis allows his attention to wander — or at least so I believe — and suggests a little community assistance to bookshops. Tut, tut, Mr Amis, we shall not allow you to get away with that for long! But his ideas are, in general, compelling — I believe they will lead to much good debate and, I hope, saving of money.

Hugh Thomas

An Arts Policy?

As you'll see soon enough, what I have to say carries no special authority. I've been selling my work for nearly thirty years and living off it for over fifteen. I have some experience of other arts as what's now called a consumer. I'm a member of the Writers' Guild, but not a very active one, I'm afraid, and I've never sat on any panel or board or committee concerned with administering the arts. So at any rate I have no vested interest in the matter. I've a vested interest in surviving, like everybody else, and also like everybody else another one in not being told what to do. More of that in a minute.

You may not think so, but I chose my title with some care. *An arts* policy? Only one single policy for all those different arts? An *arts* policy? What a horrible bureaucrat's phrase, with 'arts' used as an adjective. An *arts policy*? As Mr St John-Stevan asked, 'Why should a political party have an arts policy at all?'¹ and I think any Conservative approaches the subject not with the eagerness of the planner but with the feelings of someone reluctantly settling down to a not-very-exciting duty. I hope so, anyway. The question-mark in my title is meant to show that reluctance. It also shows indecision: I'm not sure what policy is best. And that's rare; my friends will tell you that for Amis not to be absolutely certain what he thinks on any topic from Aberystwyth to Zoroastrianism is almost unknown. The question-mark stands for another kind of uncertainty too: I had to give the organisers the title before I wrote the talk, and as usual didn't know a lot about what I was going to say until I was down to the job.

One thing I'm absolutely sure about is that any kind of socialist policy for the arts must be sternly resisted at every point. When the State takes a really passionate interest in the work and other activities of its artists, creative and executive alike, the artists had better start running. Many a writer in the Soviet Union, for example, must feel he could well have done without the kind of official recognition he's attained. It would be foolish to pretend that there are not plenty of people in the Labour Party and elsewhere who would like to see a British

government concern itself with culture to the **same** sort of degree. Any kind of totalitarian hates all artists, not only writers, because he can never own, or direct, their talent, what makes them artists.

What is the official arts policy of the Labour Party? I strongly recommend *The Arts and the People*;² notice it's not *The Artists or Artists and the People*; it's *The Arts*, the commodity, and *the People*, the consumers. I thought I was going to be bored, but I wasn't; I was fascinated, and horrified. If I spend a few minutes on it, that's not only because it pays to know your enemy, though it does. Preliminary thanks are **offered** to the people who made their experience and expertise available to Labour's N.E.C.: Government ministers, MPs, trade unionists and individual Party members — I suppose some of them might have been artists. First sentence of text: 'The arts are politically important.' Footnote: 'In this statement we use the term arts to include all cultural activities — including those activities often termed as entertainment.' Next page: 'Politics are inextricably sewn into the fabric of the arts;' quite a vivid image. There, of course, the authors are telling us something about their brand of politics, not about the arts. You won't find much political content in a given string quartet. I suppose they might tell you that that content **is** in string quartets as a whole, something to do with a leisured, affluent class, perhaps. That would be a pity, because what is interesting about any string quartet **is** how it differs from all the others written up to that time. After studying Shakespeare politically, which I did once, you can be pretty sure he wasn't a republican and he wasn't anti-English, and that's about it. Enough; we know where we are there.

What the authors call in so many words a socialist policy for the arts, has six clauses. **(A)** goes: "To make the art available and relevant to all people in this country". To call something 'relevant' like that, as a synonym for 'meaningful' or 'interesting', is a very unpopular use in some quarters. I'm all for it; it's a useful or **even** infallible sign that the writer is a victim of appalling herd-instinct, getting his ideas from some fashionable source and passing them on without taking them in or thinking for himself. **Also**, you can't do that, make the **arts** relevant to all people in this or any other country, nor even to most people, who are not interested in them. Before sitting down to frame an arts policy, it's essential to understand that.

It's a traditional Lefty view, the belief that anybody can enjoy art, real art, **in** the same way that everybody is creative. In the words of that old idiot and very bad artist Eric Gill, 'The artist is not a special kind of man; every man is a special kind of **artist**.'³ That's only possible if making mud pies counts as art, which admittedly is beginning to happen. Can you imagine a novel, say, that was relevant to everybody in the United Kingdom, including the ones with an IQ of 50? But I think that's what these chaps are getting at. You notice they say 'available' as well as 'relevant'. Obviously a novel is physically *available* if it's in print; they must mean 'accessible', another fashionable **use**, 'understandable' by an **SO** IQ. So the novelist is to write clown to his readers and thereby cease to produce art. The trouble with bringing art to the people is that it tends to get fatally damaged in transit.

I may have come a bit too far too fast. Anyway, clause (B) of the socialist arts policy goes: 'To increase the quality and diversity of the arts with greater emphasis on those based in communities'. So my duty **is** clear. I must write better, which had never occurred to me before, and I must write more sorts of things, epic poems and introductions to catalogues of exhibitions of experimental paintings and gags for TV shows — remember they're art too, even though they are often termed **as** entertainment. Actually, more than this is required. '**A** socialist policy', they say further on, 'requires more books, and a wider range and higher quality of books to be published, written by **authors** of every sort of social background'. Naturally. But why aren't people writing these high-quality books already? Our friends seem to think quality is a sort of optional ingredient or extra like HP sauce on sausages: 'Don't forget the quality, mum!' Years ago, when the universities were beginning to expand their intake, I wrote of university students, 'You cannot decide to have more good ones. **All** you can decide to have is more. And more **will** mean worse.'⁴ So with books, so with paintings, so with everything. An artist is a special kind of man, or woman, there are never many around at one time and there's no way of making new **ones**, even by spending money. Authors are certainly going to have some money spent on them, though, because literature is, 'an underfinanced artistic area'. Would you let someone who talked about 'underfinanced literature areas' recommend you a book?

What about those arts based in communities? What are they? There's community singing, of course, but I'm sure they don't mean that: much too spontaneous and uninstrucive. It's hard to make out what they do mean. Community arts are a 'process of art activity' rather than a product. They include drama, but it's community drama; music and dance, also community; silk-screen painting, video, murals and neighbourhood newspapers — 'all aimed at involving the community', they tell us, and — they don't tell us, but I know — all left-wing. Community theatre would be **very, very** poor man's Brecht, Arnold Wesker, etc. There's a good give-away passage about encouraging, 'fringe experimental and community theatre which most regional and national theatres have neglected from lack of finance and lack of interest'. In other words, we'll supply the finance and you'd better supply the interest, a very clear example of the Socialists' habit of giving the public not what it wants but what they think it ought to want. And it's the Tories who get called paternalistic! Happily, the public won't take what it doesn't want. It goes somewhere else. It changes the channel.

The last point I want to make about this vile document, which manages to disgrace the Labour Party, concerns its answer to the question, 'Who will run the arts?' Well, 'a policy-making National Conference for the Arts and Entertainment will be set up, comprising of' — this is really elegant stuff — 'elected representatives from local authorities, Regional Arts Associations, arts and entertainment trade unions, individual artists, subsidised management, and other relevant bodies' — got it right for once — 'such as those directly representing the consumers of the arts.' So this lot decides what the public ought to want and a reformed Arts Council doles out the cash. It, the reformed Arts Council, will comprise of, one-third, Ministerial appointees suggested by what they call 'interest groups in the arts', hold on a minute, and two-thirds, 'representatives of most of those interest groups represented at the National Conference', and a list follows. Since it's only 'most of', who's missing? Local authorities? No, they'll be there. Trade unionists? No. It's individual artists. We're not having any of *them* on our new Arts Council; who do they think they are?

So under a Labour government we'd have the TUC controlling the arts in this country. And it's well enough known that he **who** pays the piper calls the tune, except that

these days it wouldn't be a tune but a succession of meaningless noises that nobody asked for. The principle doesn't change when a Conservative government comes to power, though I obviously wouldn't be here if I didn't think that such a government would exert its influence more wisely and far more gently than the contenders on the other side. And yet . . . The whole question of paying for the arts is a very difficult one, not only at the doling-out end but also at the receiving end, the end which isn't so often considered from this point of view. The truth is that the way an artist is paid profoundly affects his product, whether he's an opera producer, what used to be called a lyric poet or anything in between. Most artists are subject to two quite different pressures, one to do with their material, the other to do with their public. In the twentieth century a lot of artists have got heavily involved with their material at the expense of their public. In other words, they tend to produce something very technical, complex, unfamiliar, in some way unexpected, and the public doesn't understand it, is bored, baffled or outraged. And the public — I belong to it myself most of the time — is usually right. This was happening long before there was any government support for the arts, but that support encourages the tendency. In explaining his resignation from the Arts Council in 1977, the distinguished poet and novelist, Roy Fuller wrote: 'The bestowal of money for the arts inevitably attracts the idle, the dotty, the minimally talented, the self-promoters.'⁵ He might have added that their typical product is plays without plots, a canvas entirely covered with black paint offered as a picture, poems that are meaningless patterns of letters — I needn't go on. If you're paid in advance or have your losses underwritten, the temptation to self-indulgence is extreme. If you have to please to live, you'll do your best to please.

The standard answer to that, of course, is that I'm suggesting that artists should pander to the public's whim and that new work, innovative work, should not be encouraged. The public's whim is better than the critics' whim or the experts' whim or the bureaucrats' whim and what we should encourage is good work, not new work. Actually the public's whim can be pretty constant, a whim of iron. Take one field, music. A new work, called say 'Distortions', is commissioned. It's to be played at a concert. **You** have to put in other works as well, by Beethoven, Schubert, Brahms, and other composers who pandered to the

public's whim. When you work out the order of performance, 'Distortions' has to be played second. If you put it first, nobody comes in until it's over, except the composer's party and the critics. If you put it third, before the interval, everybody goes out before it starts. If it's after the interval, they all have a drink and go home. And it's been like that for fifty years — some whim. A cynical friend of mine, a very able keyboard player and conductor, said that the really rare event in musical life is the **second** performance of a modern work; no subsidy for that. Well, I could go on about this for hours, as you may well imagine, so I'll round off this bit just by stating flatly that if you really are interested in quality, one way of allowing it to improve would be to withdraw public money from the arts.

As well as being tempted to be self-indulgent, the State-supported artist is likely to be wasteful. We all spend other people's money more freely than our own, with less regard for value. It doesn't really matter if a chap overspends an individual grant, which is likely to be pretty small anyway. It matters rather more if he's in charge of a new production of *Carmen*. Let's call him Entwistle. He'll be very lavish on the production itself, because that's what gets talked and written about. It's Entwistle's *Carmen* you go to see, and when you've finished discussing that you go on to the singers' *Carmen* and after that you might get on to the conductor's *Carmen*, and possibly you might have a word or two to say about Bizet's *Carmen* if there's time, or room. I was told on excellent authority a terrifying story about a recent production of *Rosenkavalier*. There's a drunken-brawl scene in which, at every performance, half a dozen glasses were smashed on the stage. One of the singers noticed that they seemed posh affairs, and asked how much they'd cost. Seven or eight pounds, he was told. 'What!' he said, 'Why aren't you using tooth-glasses?' 'Oh, the audience would see, and it would seem wrong to have rich characters drinking out of cheap glasses.' I'm glad I'm not playing the Bleeding Sergeant in that fellow's *Macbeth*; presumably he'd stab me every evening before I made my entrance so the audience wouldn't be put off by seeing artificial blood. I don't think he'd be spending fifty quid a week on glasses if the money came out of the takings, do you? As a footnote, I similarly doubt whether you'd give \$2,865 you'd earned and paid tax on to something called Harry's Big

Balloonz, with a Z. Well, the Arts Council gave that sum to a body so named in 1975—6. Actually it's a performance art group, whatever that is, but I wouldn't give a cent of your money to anything called that, even if it were a charitable home for distressed old ladies. That strikes me as quite a good wheeze for go-ahead charitable homes. I offer it free.

So taxpayers' money paid to the arts encourages waste and irresponsibility in those who do the spending as well as self-intelligence in the artist. On the second point, I might have said further about 'Distortions' that as well as not writing for the public the composer *is* writing for the critics, which means hell inevitably strive after originality. It's annoying, but originality will come of its own accord or not at all, and striving for it must have a harmful effect. Anyway, am I arguing for the abolition of subsidies? For the moment I am. A third argument on this side concerns the supposed experts who sit on the central panels, the awful Regional Arts Associations and so on. A full study of the rise of the expert in this century, especially its second half, would make enthralling and very depressing reading. It's all part of the great loss of confidence that has shaken our society, beginning at the time of the First World War. In the past, you didn't know anything about art, but you knew what you liked. Of course you did, and what was even more important, you weren't afraid to say what you liked, and didn't like. You were a Victorian businessman and you came down to London from Birmingham and you bought a Pre-Raphaelite picture because you liked it, not because some interfering git called Ruskin said you should. Now you ask an expert because you don't trust your own judgment. It's comically appropriate that one of the most totally committed expert-worshippers of our time should be Sir Roy Shaw, the amiable head of the Arts Council, or its Secretary-General as he's forbiddingly known. Roy Fuller, in his why-I-resigned article in *Encounter* magazine,⁶ gave as one minor reason what he called 'the hideous contemporary paintings' bought by the Council and hung in its Piccadilly offices. In his reply the following month, Sir Roy Shaw said that Roy Fuller was an excellent poet, but, 'he is not an authority on contemporary painting and neither am I; the paintings were bought on the advice of people who are.' We learn from that that Sir Roy must himself be an authority (up-market term for an expert) on contemporary poetry, or he'd have had to ask one to find

out whether Roy Fuller was an excellent poet or not. Imagine telling Lorenzo the Magnificent that that painting he thought he liked had been pronounced bad by an expert.' Imagine telling our Victorian businessman. Their descendants are afraid of being thought unprogressive.

The present system exalts the expert and institutionalises him. The panels and study-groups and regional boards he sits on officialise and bureaucratise and politicise art. They might have been designed for the needs of the Left and probably were: new and expanding bodies with ill-defined powers and fields of operation and endless public money, money the public won't pay. For the moment I'm objecting not to Leftist politics as such but to the consequences of those politics on the various bits of art that get publicly promoted and financed. It's strange that some of the members or supporters of what rather sadly still likes to think of itself as a mass party should have such elitist tastes, that left-wing views should go with an apparent liking for avant-garde, experimental, nonsensical and certainly minority art. The explanation must be that the Lefty's settled hostility to tradition, to things as they are, overrides his feelings of class solidarity, perhaps not very strong in the first place.

So do we phase out the Arts Council and all the other bodies, withdraw in the end every shilling of public support? It's tempting. Think of a Minister for the Arts with no functions at all, his title a pure honorific like Warden of the Cinque Ports, a symbolic figure to be seen only at first nights or private views. Certainly some parts of the system could be closed down: grants to individual writers and other artists whose materials aren't expensive could well go, and there seems an unanswerable case for closing down the National Film Finance Corporation and the other bodies it has spawned, what with their classic demonstration that investment in failure ends in failure. But things like that wouldn't save very much, any more than closing down arts centres, however desirable that would be on every ground you can think of. The really big spenders are the national opera and theatre companies. What the question boils down to is whether we seriously think the day will come when Covent Garden or the National Theatre can get along without any taxpayers' money and **also** without lowering the quality of their productions, though putting a 50p ceiling on any glasses they may break. If we do think that, then the argument is **over**.⁹

Where's the money to come from? David Alexander, of the Selsdon Group," thinks it could come from where it most certainly should come from: the individual as consumer, not as taxpayer. Enough private money would be set free by radical cuts in taxes on capital and on incomes to cover the gap left by the withdrawal of subsidies. Dismissing as a red herring the idea of business patronage, David Alexander sees what he calls mass patronage as the answer. Colin Brough, of the Bow Group," sees things differently. He doesn't think the arts can ever be free of State support, but a large injection from business could be gained by changes in the laws affecting capital gains, covenants and such matters. I don't know what I think. I am very conscious of the idea that any transition involving a large increase in the price at the box-office would have to be managed with almost superhuman care, and I hate the thought of any of these important institutions being endangered. If they had to shut for a month or two, they'd probably shut for ever. But what I do think is both important and practicable is the lifting of VAT on the arts, if not on all of them then on theatre, opera and concert seats. Even the authors of the Labour Party pamphlet agree with me here. To take this action would be to give a huge invisible subsidy of the best kind, one that doesn't benefit individuals or individual groups. I urge the government to consider this seriously and soon.

I've said nothing so far about the Conservative document about arts policy," because it's very disappointing, to put it as mildly as possible. The sub-title, *The Way Forward*, bodes ill. The first sentence goes, 'Any government, whatever its political hue, should take some active steps to encourage the arts.' No. The arts aren't like housing or public health; they have their own momentum and rate of development, and must be allowed to pursue it unmolested by encouragement as much as by censorship. The extra reason why I said so much earlier about the Labour pamphlet is that long stretches of the Tory one read just like it, though they're rather better written. The arts are *menaced by public indifference*. No: public interference. *The bureaucrats who dole out the money lean towards the conventional and established*. No: they lean towards experimentalism and non-art, because they're afraid of being thought unprogressive. *Fringe activities should be encouraged*. No, no, no. I won't go on. Apart from suggestions that VAT should be reduced, State subsidies limited to 50% of revenue

and business support actively encouraged, the authors have *nothing* useful to say and a good deal that's pernicious. Their statement is a sad example of Tory me-tooism.

I'd like to say thank you to the government **for** establishing the principle of the Public Lending Right for authors, and to explain to the doubtful that payments under PLR would not be grants to individuals but returns for services already rendered to borrowers of library books, the money coming not out of those borrowers' pockets but out of taxation. Perhaps I might also point out that so far no money has even started to come. Action, please.

You'll understand if my final point is also about books. One of the simplest ways, not of bringing art to the people, but of letting the people get at art, is by way of bookshops. In this country there are about 500 chartered bookshops, that is, shops where you can't buy toilet-requisites or pop records, just books. In West Germany there are 6,000. There are large provincial towns in Great Britain with no decent bookshop at all. Somebody willing to start one could be supported in one or more of several ways: with a grant or loan for fitting out the premises, buying the initial stock, meeting some of the overheads, etc. To bring such a shop into being would be a real community service, and those many who live out of **reach** of **oiic** will probably agree with me that it's **as** important as establishing any sort of theatre, and much cheaper. The arrangement would also benefit authors, which is no bad thing. Some of the expense could be offset by stopping the subsidies to little magazines that mainly or largely publish poetry. **The** provision of unearned cash, cash that comes **in** whatever and whoever you print, almost inevitably results in a magazine of that kind becoming the preserve of a clique, a disability to which poetry is peculiarly liable, and that is a bad thing, and not a trivial one either. **As** so often public funds turn out to be harming to the very people they were intended to help. It's odd that Conservatives of all people should seem not to have noticed that after thirty years.

Endnotes

1. In *The Arts: the way forward*, Conservative Political Centre, September 1978.
2. *The Arts and the People*, The Labour Party, October 1977.
3. Somewhere in the works of Eric Gill. I'm not going to read them through to find out where.
4. p.163, *What Became of Jane Austen? and other questions*, Cape, 1970.
5. In *Encounter*, October 1977.
6. **As 5.**
7. In *Encounter*, November 1977.
8. I have no quarrel with the expert as such, who can be very useful in his proper role of supplying me with specialist information and helping me to form my taste. If, instead of making up my own mind, I let him tell me what's good and what's bad, I'm abdicating my responsibility, encouraging in him an inflated view of his own importance and increasing his already-excessive power. Art is for the public, not for experts.
9. Some part in that argument would be taken by the example of the Glyndebourne opera, which is privately supported. It is, however, a comparatively small scale venture, and **was** founded at a time when conditions were more propitious.
10. In *A Policy for the Arts: Just Cut Taxes*, The Selsdon Group, July 1978.
11. In *As You Like It: Private Support for the Arts*, Bow Publications Ltd., n.d.
12. As 1.