
THE BFI'S CONSULTATIVE PAPER
"POLICIES & PRIORITIES FOR
DEVELOPMENT" [JUNE 1985]

*

THE IFVA's RESPONSE
SEPTEMBER 1985

=====

IFVA RESPONSE TO THE BFI'S CONSULTATIVE PAPER "POLICIES & PRIORITIES FOR DEVELOPMENT", [JUNE 1985]

=====

1. The IFVA, and the independent sector it represents, have been clearly and consistently opposed to the abolition of the GLC and MCCs. Our reasons for taking this position were outlined last year in "Strangling The Cities". In that paper, we stressed that what was at stake was not, in the last analysis, simply an argument about money. Taken as a whole, the financial backing given by these bodies to the sector has been noticeably uneven, and -given the sector's chronic underfunding- there was still considerable scope for improvement.

2. Although their financial backing was very welcome, the most important aspect of this developing relationship with the sector has rested in its more broadly political character. In other words: the GLC and MCCs funding has developed within a framework of policy-making and research which has been genuinely open and democratic to an unprecedented degree. Again, the record here is uneven, but the practice of allocating public monies in pursuit of the goals of countering racial and sexual inequality, fostering economic development, and so on, has unquestionably altered the terms of cultural debate and practice. This attempt to widen the scope of cultural policy is the distinctive achievement of the GLC and MCCs, and it is also - quite evidently - a major reason for their abolition.

3. It has been clear for some months that abolition would take place, and discussion in the sector has rightly begun to focus on the questions of what can be done to limit the amount of damage and disruption that will inevitably take place.

4. In this "post abolition" context it has become obvious that the BFI's response to the situation in which we all now have to work will be crucial. The Institute now finds itself in a situation not of its own making, but one in which its decisions - and the policies which guide those decisions - will be even more decisive for the sector's prospects over the next few years than anyone expected or looked for.

5. It is in this context that the IFVA's comments on the Consultative paper are being made.

6. To begin with, the IFVA welcomes the BFI's publication of the Consultative Paper. We are pleased to see that the Institute recognises the damage that abolition is likely to do to the sector's development, and the clear statement in paragraph 4 of the need for the BFI to "...reassess its work and to re-think its policy in the light of this changing situation.."

/...

7. We are also aware of the fact that this is only the first of 3 papers the BFI is publishing, in what is in any case a rapidly evolving context. Also that there is a danger of reading too much into any single statement of intent, when what finally matters is the policies actually pursued in practice.

8. Having made these allowances, it is still the IFVA's view that this paper is a very inadequate framework for guiding the decisions which lie ahead, and one which leaves far too many of the crucial issues un-discussed. In what follows we take issue with a number of the major emphases in the paper, and propose some measures that we consider would increase the sector's confidence in the Institute's operations over the coming months.

9. In view of the points we have made above, we cannot accept the distinction that the paper attempts to draw between "quantity" and "quality". This strikes us as a wholly unreal and untenable opposition, whether or not it is couched in terms of a "spectrum" of activity. In any actual context these 2 terms are inseparably interwoven: any particular process of funding ALWAYS involves value judgements and political perspectives. The question is rather whether or not these are openly acknowledged and argued for, or simply treated as a given. In the IFVA's view the opposition is especially objectionable as a way of discussing the differences between the policies of the BFI and those of the GLC/MCCs. As used in the paper, the contrast operates as a substitute code for the totally anachronistic "mental/manual, high culture/low culture" position, with the Councils firmly placed on the "wrong" side of the tracks. It seems to us that the BFI's record does not entitle it to to carp at this arrival of new ideas and new monies in the sector, particularly [in our view] since it has turned out to be the unexpected beneficiary of the political work done by the GLC and MCCs in making these developments possible in the first place. Indeed, the paper's use of the "mindless spending vs. thoughtful penury" argument simply invites the riposte that the Institute's use of this unhelpful dichotomy is only a cover for its lack of success in securing more funds from Government through its own efforts, rather than by finding itself accidentally cast in the role of residuary legatee. Put like that, (in a way which ignores the enormous hostility of central government to funding a film & video culture), the "quantity/quality" distinction can be seen as the absurdity it undoubtedly is. The real issue here is one of a political assessment of the gains which can be made by different policies in practice. In the IFVA's view the BFI has much to learn from the experience of the GLC and MCCs, and the Consultative Paper fails very markedly to register this fact, choosing instead to retreat into a supposedly safe place labelled Quality.

/...

10. The IFVA does not find the term "centres of energy" very clear or helpful. It has strong & unfortunate overtones of the Arts Council's term "centres of excellence", and also tends to suggest a narrow focus on physical sites/buildings, and on what the paper refers to as "appreciation" - the handing on of an existing body of work & traditions. Here, and in the paper as a whole there is far too little stress on the pressing need to radically CHANGE the values , power structure etc of the dominant culture and the organisations which maintain it, thru an ongoing process of political work and argument.

11. Although there are places where the paper points in other directions, its tone and vocabulary is still heavily saturated with a sense of literary notions of taste, and the handing down of a received culture.

12. One example of where the paper has clearly not worked thru the arguments being developed by the GLC/MCCs is its discussion of investment vs subsidy. Again the way the contrast is drawn suggests a very confused and unworkable distinction between public sector = loss-making = marginal= status quo; investment= intervention= viability=relevance. In our view this a caricature of the perspectives now being worked on. The point that needs to be made is that the independent sector is now starting to emerge as a large public arena in which economic criteria are both relevant and needed. But investment is not usefully called a good principle to be compared with the bad notion of subsidy. What is at stake here is the relation between a developing public sector of film & video and a private market dominated by narrow conceptions of "profitability". If the independent sector is to grow, it needs to engage far more with the issues of planning, markets, accounting, and so on - something which it will not be able to think thru within a framework fixated on notions of quality and lively stimulation - phrases whose practical value in understanding the political economy of audio-visual work is approximately zero. But an engagement with the concepts and methods of political economy is not the same thing as a capitulation to them. In other words the sector will have to operate "in and against the market", just as it works "in and against the State".

13. Given the points made in section 2 above - about the GLC/MCC activities aimed at countering racism and sexism - the Association does not consider the very brief comments made at the end of the Consultative Paper about "discriminatory practices" and "affirmative action" to be in any way adequate, nor to have the prominence within the paper as a whole that they require. The BFI must come forward with a much fuller and more detailed

/...

response to these issues, and make absolutely clear how it will meet the challenges they represent. Neither the IFVA, nor the independent sector more generally, has yet done anything like enough to foster initiatives on these urgent matters. Even so, the BFI has a key responsibility to give a lead here.

14. Our last general criticism relates to the rather muted and un-developed references in the Paper to issues of national identity. Given the Paper's status as a proposed reworking of previous statements of the Institute's Regional Policy, the remarks made about 'culture in this country', 'diverse components', etc are both gestural and evasive. There are 2 distinct matters involved here, neither of which are properly addressed in the Paper.

a] The 1st is the 'national' dimension of BFI operations. The assumed and traditional territorial context of BFI activity involves 3 nations: Scotland, Wales and England. Each of these has different histories, cultural institutions and political trajectories - ones which cannot be glossed over by an unexamined repetition of the terms 'Britain' and 'British'. The major consequence of this is that the Paper is able to avoid specifying clearly any policies designed to counter the traditional slippage from 'Britain' in theory to 'England/English' in practice. This strikes us as unacceptable, and also somewhat at odds with the BFI's support - on other occasions - for discussions & publications which raise these issues.

b] The 2nd issue is that of 'regional' policies. Here again, the GLC & MCCs have been engaged in a major reconstruction of the terms of debate, but the Paper contains no discussion of this fact, or the lessons to be drawn from such work. A 'regional' policy for the late 1980s needs to be far more detailed and responsive to the variety of particular situations on the ground. There are many different 'regional problems', requiring different approaches and solutions. Audio-visual culture is notably a product of uneven development - as can be seen (for example) in the varied degrees of crisis affecting film & video funding at RAA level.

15. In the light of the comments made above, it is the IFVA's view that the Consultative Paper will require very substantial revision before it could be endorsed as the major statement of BFI policy it is intended to be.

16. As well as clarifying the above issues, the IFVA would like to propose that the BFI takes the following measures:

/...

a) The BFI should publish a breakdown of how the figure of #2.5 million has been calculated, (i.e. what the overall ratios of spending amongst the GLC and MCCs has been), and should make a clear and unequivocal commitment to allocating the "Gowrie #1m" in line with the pattern of expenditure this indicates.

b) As well as following the broad pattern of allocation pursued by the GLC & MCCs, the IFVA considers the BFI must make a more specific commitment to positive action/funding decisions which defend and strengthen groups & organisations involving ethnic minorities and women.

c) Given that the BFIs receipt of these funds represents a major loss of local control and accountability, the Institute should undertake to devise funding procedures and perspectives which locate the actual expenditure of the "Gowrie" monies at as devolved a level as possible.

d) In the IFVA's view, the funding & policy decisions the Institute is about to embark on over the next year have already become the subject of considerable uncertainty and tensions within the independent sector - a situation which we feel the Consultative Paper has done almost nothing to alleviate. As a result, there is a widespread expectation (based on the BFIs very erratic record in the past) that the actual decisions about who gets what will be taken by BFI senior officers "behind closed doors" - i.e. in effective isolation from any process of feedback/2nd thoughts/review.

We therefore urge the Institute to consider setting up a small advisory group, whose membership would be drawn from individuals familiar with the current situation in the GLC and MCC areas. The groups's role would be to support & advise the BFI over allocation, and to act as a point of contact/information for the sector during this critical phase in its history.
