

Alan Howarth tribute

A long time before I was in the House of Lords, I was a keen observer of significant political moments, fascinated by the ebb and flow of the main political actors' ups and downs.

Alan Howarth drew my attention by switching from one political party to another, 'crossing the floor' as parliamentarians call it. I remember reading about the former Conservative MP and was delighted when he was appointed by the government to the post of Parliamentary Under Secretary for the Arts. He'd already had responsibility for education policy, so to me this was a perfect combination of interests and expertise. Alan understood the arts and the sector's relationship to education and health. Unlike other career politicians, he didn't regard Minister of Arts appointment as either a sign that your political career had just begun or just ended. A common view was that it was regarded as a promotion if the incumbent moved to another department.

Three years in arts, preceded by a year in the Treasury department, and just over three years as Under Secretary of State for Education, Alan played a key role in polytechnics becoming universities. This had resonance for me, as the expansion of polytechnics' offer played a key role in the academic and political development of many of us who had not been viewed as sufficiently academic for traditional universities.

Before that, from the late 1970s I began to engage beyond the familiar landscape of cultural politics, discussing and taking part in the debates on practice and theory of visual art, film, performance, and so on. As for many others, politics was an inescapable subject during the 1980s (another period in UK history, featuring an all too familiar political landscape with obvious deep social divisions, unthinkable levels of poverty ready for exploitation by individuals and organisations on the far right, and thousands of fatalities brought about by several, viciously fought wars).

It's worth noting because it's not always acknowledged how significant the arts were in exposing and confronting racist violence in all kinds of ways, and I'm not only referring to rock against racism. Many arts practitioners and those who enjoyed taking part in the arts found it was both a way to tell our stories and experiences during that period. It was also a way of combatting and coping with exposure to pernicious ideologies, the mental and emotional toll it took. Throughout the 1970s and into the 1980s popular music, reggae and ska, alternative theatre, theatre in education, agit prop and more came to prominence and articulated in an accessible language the hopes, fears, and longings of a

wide range of people.

The point is whether we're talking about a battle rap or a sonnet, a painting or a print, we make art in an attempt to understand the world and ourselves.

I say this because I have never really understood how it is that so many politicians fail to grasp the significance of the arts in our lives: arts perform their magic—healing and giving us hope. We listen, we corral sounds and make images and objects and have done since we stood up and drew animals on our bodies and the walls of our caves.

In the late 1990s when he was Minister for the Arts, Alan's perceptiveness, and commitment to robust evidence based policy-making and no doubt his tenacity, led him to make strategic links between his department and the Department of Health, helping, for example, to normalise the inclusion of arts programming in new hospital buildings. The now well-established Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment was another initiative in which he was highly influential.

Alan was made a Life Peer in 2005, becoming Baron Howarth of Newport and he clearly had a deep commitment to arts and culture. When I saw the announcement of his forthcoming Introduction to the House of Lords, I was delighted. The number of peers with a deep love of and career in the arts was steadily growing but here was someone who also knew about the rough and tumble of everyday politics and policymaking from the inside come in to swell our ranks.

In 2013, Alan proposed the establishment of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Arts Health and Wellbeing, a pivotal moment in the development of the sector. The APPG inquiry led to the publication of the report: [Creative Health: the Arts for Health and Wellbeing](#).

At one of the evidence sessions I attended, a former soldier spoke of how mask-making helped him to process his PTSD, vent his anger and disappointment with himself and others. There were numerous other examples of patients, doctors, care workers from across the country testifying about the healing power of creative activities.

The evidence presented and the backing of healthcare professionals and arts practitioners meant the work made a substantial contribution to the field. It felt like a manual of good practice had emerged, accessible across the arts, health and creative sectors, and a potentially invaluable resource for government. I remember having a conversation with Alan at one of those meetings and I although I'd only read about him before, I recognised him as someone who

embodied the idea of both a gentleman and a man tuned into the modern world. He was very persuasive because it was easy to believe in him and he was what he was trying to do.

My involvement in setting up the commission which followed on from the report was quite small, especially in comparison to Alex Coulter. She and Alan worked seamlessly together, and so when Alex asked if I'd become a patron, I knew that the NCCH's integrity and values would be upheld. My only reservation regarding becoming a patron was whether I'd be able to do the role justice.

Alex has been and continues to be a vital advocate for this subject area, and in partnership with Alan has driven the project forward with the kind of leadership that enables and encourages colleagues to give their best.

I hadn't been fully aware of Alan's passion for poetry, but in conversation with Alex drew this to my attention. Alan's love of poetry was evident in his support for Poems in the Waiting Room, for example, which is 'a library of uplifting poems for every mood'.

So, like many others, I am incredibly grateful for Alan's inspired and inspiring committed leadership, even when he was terribly ill. I think we can best celebrate the late Lord Howarth of Newport, by making our own commitment to this work loud and clear.

Baroness Young of Hornsey