

## EXCERPT FROM AN UNFINISHED SCRIPT

...

In his book 'The Pound, A Biography', David Sinclair makes an unexpected comparison between the Tudor king and a prime minister of our recent past. "The king - unusually for a monarch of the period - had a shrewd financial brain and in some respects shared the sort of philosophy that propelled Margaret Thatcher towards becoming prime minister in 1979. Allowing for historical differences, the conditions in which they took power were remarkably similar. Both inherited a country in the latter stages of a long period of stagnation, punctuated by short-lived bouts of optimism and economic boom, and more or less equally unsuccessful attempts to make the good times permanent. In Thatcher's case Britain had failed fully to recover from two world wars that had robbed it of empire, economic power and self-confidence. Henry took over an England seemingly still paralyzed by the shock of the Black Death and reeling from the uncertainties of the War of the Roses. Each responded by relying heavily on monetary and fiscal policy, by establishing a cult of personality, by promoting a sustained expansion of trade, and by reforming the systems and practices under which the country operated." In contrast to the king's efforts to introduce a new denomination however, the new prime minister upon taking office moved to apply limitations on the printing of money in an effort to slow the rate of inflation.

Two of the pillars of Thatcherism were privatization of the public sector and deregulation of the private sector. Government interference was to be kept at a minimum whilst the public, now free as 'individuals' within an open market, were encouraged to use their initiative, to partake in an 'enterprise culture'. Lord Young was one of the chief proponents of enterprise within government and by 1987 had been promoted to Secretary of State at the Department of Trade and Industry. By this point in the 1980s a wave of consumerism had been unleashed and the country was drowning in choice. With everything seemingly for sale, the government had necessarily understood the importance of how things are sold and had initiated a full-blown and unprecedented love affair with advertising and design. The Department of Trade and Industry was central to this development and at the bequest of Lord Young was itself given a makeover by the brand consultancy Wolff Olins. Founded in the mid 60s by Michael Wolff and Wally Olins and whose early work included the branding of the London borough of Camden and the design of the labels for Apple Records, Wolff Olins was one of the first and most successful agencies of its type. Although commonplace today, the methods of extensive research undertaken to build up a kind of portrait of public perception of a corporate client—and to subsequently beautify that picture—were almost unheard of. Because there was no competition at the time, Wolff Olins were on top from the start. For Lord Young, they

designed a zippy, lowercase logo that rechristened the department as the DTi. Comprised of ascendant left-to-right diagonals, the logos structural lines echoed the rising stock indices of the time. By the time of this titular shrinkage, the DTi's budget was swelling to nearly £14 million, a more than threefold increase from 6 years prior, and with the DTi acting as conduit a good amount of this government money was being channeled into the Design Council, a non-departmental body historically somewhat ignored by Downing Street but now seen as a vital intermediary between companies and the ever-increasing number of design and brand consultancies. The Design Council obliged with the Funded Consultancy Scheme in which companies were offered 15 days free consultancy on a design project, and in publications and brochures like 'Profit by Design' in which things were really made explicit: 'To put it simply, the design process is a planning exercise to maximize sales and profits.'

Under the chairmanship of John Sorrell the Design Council had organized a discussion group featuring involving various heavy-hitters (Sir David Putnam, Alan Yentob, John Hegarty of advertising agency Bartle Bogle Hegarty) from broadcasting, advertising, design and journalism, the purpose of which was to consider Britain's identity at the end of the century. The findings of the discussion were published in a paper called New Brand for a New Britain on the very same day that New Labour won the general election with a huge majority. Shortly afterwards, a report was commissioned to develop some of the ideas put forward in the paper, and to see how they might translate in policy. The job was awarded to Demos, a think-tank with close ties to New Labour and under the direction of Geoff Mulgan, who would eventually become a special advisor to Blair. Titled Britain™, the report featured a zingy lime cover by Wolff Olins who themselves had got in on the act, publishing the survey Made in the UK – whose statistics appear throughout the Demos report – and producing a filmed segment that aired on the BBC's The Money Programme in which they proposed redesigning the Union Jack.

Britain™ begins: 'Britain's identity is in flux. Renewed national confidence in the arts, fashion, technology, architecture and design has coincided with the departure from Hong Kong, devolution, further integration with Europe, the imminence of the millennium and Princess Diana's death.' It goes on to detail the degrees of embarrassment 'Britishness' provokes at home and abroad. The general consensus is that it is a country whose few positive attributes are seen to be firmly historical, bound up in the traditions and fixed certainties of the pre-war and immediate post-war era. Abundant with bad food, snobbery and poverty, the UK is held in low regard throughout the world, if it is regarded at all: 'To most people in China or Brazil, and even to many in the United States or Russia, Britain has neither a positive nor a negative image. It simply has no clear image at all.' The domestic self-image is noted for being closer intertwined to its core institutions (monarchy,

the Beeb) than other nations and it is therefore more vulnerable to confusion and disillusionment when those institutions betray the public trust or are under threat. The report's author, Mark Leonard, then presents evidence as to how all of these institutions are damaged in some way, summarizing that privatization 'has diluted the 'Britishness' of a series of utilities. John Betjeman once remarked that Britain was founded on 'democracy and drains', and the great civic and municipal institutions that took shape in the last century were without doubt an important part of Britain's sense of itself as a progressive and fair society. More than a decade of privatization has left a very different landscape.' With this particular institutional erosion in mind it seems strange that the ameliorative approach the report suggested using—the various strategies of corporate management, particularly rebranding—were complicit in the previous act of destruction that now necessitated a fresh redeployment.

The report mentions the arts repeatedly - held as vital in embellishing the national brand with a gentle non-conformity and dynamism, a tasteful tarnish. These various cosmopolitan trills, Leonard suggests, could come together as a chorus in exhibitions and museums housed in airports to greet international visitors. In attack mode, Philip Dodd (then director of the ICA, which hosted a series of preliminary lunches where contributors to the report first discussed some of these ideas) suggested that traveling exhibitions organized by the British Council should stop going 'down old colonial routes ... We should go to Washington and take over the National Gallery there. It is time to think big!' The indistinct word 'arts' actually appears less frequently than its trendy cousin, the even more nebulous 'creativity'. In the ergot of marketing, the term 'creativity' is so useful because it acts as a catchall - it can just as easily be used to describe a new design for a wine rack as it can a painting. In addition, whereas 'the arts' refers to the tangible manifestations of various practices - the play performed, say - 'creativity' can encompass both the production itself (the talents of actors, director, costume design etc) and also the business that surrounds it (the nifty sponsorship deal, promotional copy and so on). In fact the creativity that doesn't directly yield anything, the pure speculative idea, could arguably be said to be the most valuable kind to the entrepreneurial class. By this point in the late 90s with the concept of job security increasingly under threat and the rise of the internet harboring in new systems of access, distribution and gain, the weightless creative thought began to have more and more currency. Creativity in this state was easier to transmit and receive, or co-opt if necessary. It had, to use a financial term, liquidity. Describing the dot in his 'Primer of Visual Literacy', Donis A. Dondis states that 'When any liquid material is dropped on a surface, it assumes a rounded form, even it does not simulate a perfect dot.' The rounded form, which will come to spread through this text like frogspawn, in this instance materializes toward the end of Britain™ as an illustration featuring six overlapping circles, within each a 'story' of which Britain could be proud, 'Creative Britain' among them. It looks nothing less than a new flag.

Still in use at the time of writing, the Union Jack was the flag the country actually had, and by the end of the twentieth century had absorbed all the confusion and doubt that now seemed like a part of everyday life, as familiar as the milkman. It wasn't always thus. In 1980 John King (latterly Lord King) had been appointed chairman of the still-nationalized British Airways in order to drastically reorganize and prime it for floatation. As well as sacking 23,000 of its 57,000 staff, King hired Landor Associates to redesign every aspect of BA's visual identity, from check-in areas and tickets to staff uniforms and cabin interiors. The fleets exteriors which had previously sported the Speedbird logo were now emblazoned with a 'Speedmarque', a sharp bright red bisected arrow that ran across the fuselage, the rest of which was pure white and navy blue. The angle of the Speedmarques point echoed an abstracted slice of the Union Jack that served as the tailfin livery. Just to really ram the point home the tail also sported a coat of arms which viewed from a distance, as liveries necessarily are, was designed to be intentionally misread as belonging to the Royal family.

As suggested in the Demos report, by the mid-90s this flag-waving monarchial image was beginning to look too conservative (small and large C), too closely aligned with symbols of heritage that had lost their lustre. With the concept of Britishness playing out terribly abroad and British Airways being the most visibly international UK company, they decided they had to reconsider their image entirely. The British Airways rebrand of 1997 can be understood as the first of many concerted efforts between business, government and branding consultancies to present a new visual identity for the UK to its people and the rest of the world. Two of the principle architects of the rebrand, BA chairman Bob Ayling and John Sorrell of design consultancy Newell & Sorrell which had won the commission, had also been heavily involved in the 'New Brand for a New Britain' discussions, and their proposal for this manifestation of the new brand worked by making Britain itself invisible. Under the name of the 'Utopia' scheme the new liveries did away with the starchy singular design and replaced it with a variety of over 30 designs sourced from all around the world, a process of inversion and multiplication. Among the styles featured were Canadian wood carvings, Delft Pottery, Indian textiles, an Egyptian scroll and art of the Ndebele people of South Africa. The Newell & Sorrell press release 'Art gallery on the wing' sought to define the exercise not just within internationalist terms but also as an embrace of craft and creativity. By seeking help from 'galleries, cultural attaches, embassies and art experts' they had collated a portfolio of 'world images' that would better reflect the UK's new sense of openness and modernity. It was a curious choice, then, for BA to mount a trade-show style display of this spirited new artwork on model planes at the Conservative Party Conference — never the grooviest place and presumably doubly dour in 1997. In full view of the press, the models were shown to a visiting Lady Thatcher who was so appalled

she covered one of the planes tailfin with her handkerchief.

This PR disaster didn't bode well for Ayling who, in addition to being British Airways CEO was also chairman of the Millenium Experience Company, who were in charge of the Millenium Dome enterprise. Both the Dome and a corporatized BA were Tory projects and Ayling was trying to make them work under a new government. What this meant was not altering the fundamentals at the bequest of New Labour – who didn't want to change course at all – but rather a shift in tone. If part of the problem with the BA rebrand was its specificity, the grab-bag use of various styles deeply rooted in cultures and places as a way of bypassing the supposed embarrassment that was modern Britain, Ayling made sure that his next BA branding exercise would be free of the burden of national identity and its attendant complexities. In the same month as Thatcher's veiling, BA announced they were in the process of creating a new company to compete with low cost carriers such as Ryanair and Easyjet, both of which had seen massive growth throughout the 90s. Prioritising cost-cutting almost to the point of absurdity, their revolutionary operating model informed both airlines brand identities as brash, quick, and slightly queasy. For this new venture Ayling had a blank slate. He turned to Wolff Olins, who had proved themselves to understand the abstract nature of young companies springing up in the wake of new models of business and technology. Unencumbered by history or nationality these businesses could be represented as anything. So an internet bank could be called Egg, and a mobile phone carrier just a colour, Orange, and this is exactly what Wolff Olins did. As a nod to the stripped-down economy of the operation, Wolff Olins named the airline Go, rendered in lower case white and encapsulated within a green dot. Although this logo was featured on the aircraft itself, the television and print ads positioned the singular green dot in a grid of other dots in differing colours. This multicolour matrix, floating on a sea of white and wholly abstract, served as a visual framework which could evoke the two time periods UK advertising likes best – the present day and the Sixties. The latter was conjured up in television ads featuring animated sequences of the dots bouncing, synchronized, across the screen. Coupled with knowingly 'lite' lounge music, the effect was something like Austin Powers meets untethered Swiss design. The print ads simply reproduced the grid pattern, knowingly invoking the dot paintings of top creative Damien Hirst, so much so that he threatened to sue. The circular grid suggests an uneasy, if comfortable, order. A modular system in which the component parts keep contact with one another to an absolute minimum if indeed they touch at all. Resulting in a composition the structure of which is dependant upon the spaces between the individual parts as much as the parts themselves.

...

*(This document was automatically generated by Contemporary Art Library.)*