

The hunt for 260 elephants and a Picasso

Gail Brown wonders at the impact of elephants, Cluedo and some rather old fashioned burglary on the political process.

During May 2010 London became a particularly interesting place. Yes there was a general election (more of that later) but there was also a rather unexpected outdoor arts event, a parade of 258 elephants making their way through the city until July. The project is part of an ongoing campaign to save the Asian elephant and to encourage human understanding that the world is to be shared between man and beast, not just man and man. The charity responsible is Elephant Family and since 2002 they have been working to improve the natural habitat of the Asian elephant, to enhance communities, reduce elephant and human conflict, and to generally raise awareness and encourage ethical living. This arts project aims to raise over £2 million, subsequently benefiting 17 UK conservation charities alone and to engage audiences of at least 25 million people.

The Elephant Parade arrived, interestingly, four years after the magnificent Royal de Luxe, Sultan's Elephant journeyed to London. More than one million people watched this particular voyage and with the joys of the web many more continue to take pleasure in this project. It is a curiosity to note that for the last two UK general elections, elephants, the public and not so public ones, have become part of the experience. Is it a coincidence or do the people of the UK have a sense of how many elephants are actually in the room? Perhaps they like to celebrate politics with elephant art? It is something to think about. Both of these extraordinary events have had the cultural power to transform people's lives and communities; the art endeavours to positively alter the world. Today perhaps the biggest elephant in the room (although no-one has any idea whether it will manage to do any of the things these previous 259 elephants have achieved) is the Lib Dem and Tory coalition government.

The dust continues to settle after the 2010 election and whatever anybody expected the outcome to be, chances are it wasn't a coalition agreement between Liberal Democrats and the Tory party. It is also safe to say that no one expected a feeling that potentially borders on optimism. The coalition agreement includes, among other things, well thought-out ecological strategies and it is a coup for the Lib Dems to have achieved such a presence within the programme. But will the content and the intentions of the programme be delivered? The route map to coalition town is a bumpy one. Since the general election the political gauntlet has well and truly been thrown down. On 17 May Liam Byrne, Labour's former chief secretary to the treasury, left a letter for his successor simply saying, "Dear Chief Secretary, There is no money left." Funny? Not particularly. The comedy of errors here is Labour unconsciously admitting to their mistakes, laughing at their blunders while risking the public's already shaky wellbeing. And we had yet another schoolboy boob with the leak of the Queen's speech, which was due to be delivered at the state opening of parliament. Is it possible that upset civil servants or wounded Tories or Lib Dems unhappy at the coalition have leaked elements of the speech?

If the schoolboy route is the future of the country it might also be worth the 29,653,638 people that managed to vote (no need to discuss the embarrassment of hundreds if not thousands of people not being able to vote) knocking on the door of Number 10 and asking the Cameron and Clegg families whether the adults can stay in the house and play while the kids and young people come out to run the country, after which everybody could then play the single most exciting global and audacious game of hide and seek in the hope that somebody might (a) find a clue and (b) potentially find the five pieces of priceless art that have been stolen from Paris's Musée d'Art Moderne. A Picasso, a Matisse, a Braque and a Léger and the fifth, by Modigliani, were taken from two different exhibition halls. Despite several pieces of evidence being found, including a broken padlock on a gate, a dismantled window, footage of a masked intruder caught by a surveillance camera and five picture frames lying against a wall outside the museum, this particular uninsured game of cultural Cluedo remains unsolved. We hope that Jeremy Hunt, secretary of state for culture, Olympics, media and sport already knows who the villain is. There would be nothing worse than in six months time to find Hunt opening the classic Cluedo black envelope to see his own face staring back at him unmasked and caught red-handed as the villain that left British art and culture uninsured and unprotected, left wide open to risk and loss.

There have been mixed reactions within the cultural, creative and arts sector to the cultural detail of The Coalition: Our Programme for Government but there is an unexpected sense of optimism as it would seem that Hunt has, dare it be said out loud, passion. He ended his first speech in the new job with: "I am totally passionate about the



One of the 250-odd elephants in the room

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arts and culture in this country. For me culture is not just about the jobs in the creative industries, not just about its economic impact, and not just about the thing that's enjoyed by the millions who go to the cinema, theatre and concerts every week, or visit our museums and galleries. Rather, it's what defines us as a civilised nation. It helps us understand the world around us, explain it and sometimes escape from it – and we are all the better for it."

In the same month an equally zealous speech was given by Joanna Lumley on behalf of Elephant Family. Lumley asked the world to: "Remember elephants never forget. Let's make sure they will still be there to remember that we didn't turn our backs on them." Clegg, Cameron, Hunt and all the MPs would do well to bear that same sentiment in mind for the people of the UK. It is hoped that the coalition will remember not to turn their backs on their constituents, to leave the playground pranks to the children, to insure, protect and preserve our art better than Paris managed and to reduce conflict by naming the elephant in the room, not just the ones that are parading in the streets of London.

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Gail Brown is arts manager for Kent and chair of advocacy and research for Nalgao, the National Association of Local Government Arts Officers

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