

**Martin Bright** and **Pete Barrett** argue that the way we think about working in a recession is unconstructive, and offer an alternative.

# Turning the recession on its head



**Martin Bright** and **Pete Barrett**

We are facing a national emergency. In a matter of weeks, a quarter of a million new graduates will swell the ranks of those already seeking employment. At the same time, we risk losing whole lifetimes of experience, expertise and knowledge from older people who find themselves out of work as the unemployment figures rise above two million. Unless we act immediately the effect could be catastrophic. New Deal of the Mind is a coalition of prominent figures in the creative industries, the media and academia who believe that the received wisdom of the recession should be turned on its head. This is the moment for action, collaboration and inventiveness, not for despair. This is especially true of the arts. If the creative potential of the nation can be harnessed in innovative ways, this could be the start of a new cultural movement, which could become the driver of recovery.

## Setting out

Instead of wringing our hands, we should be asking ourselves three questions: Are there projects of national and local significance that can be carried out in a time of surplus labour that are difficult to recruit for in times of relatively low unemployment? How do we put an end to the pernicious culture of free labour that has permeated the creative industries and the media over the past decade, and replace it with sustainable paid internships, apprenticeships and training? How do we encourage a new entrepreneurship to allow creative individuals to devise their own solutions to the predicament in which we find ourselves? New Deal of the Mind began life in January as an article in the *New Statesman*, which argued that Britain needed to learn the lessons of Roosevelt's 1930s New Deal and devise work creation programmes for artists, writers and musicians to see them through the downturn. What began as a 'think-piece' grew into a campaign and is now an organisation working with government and

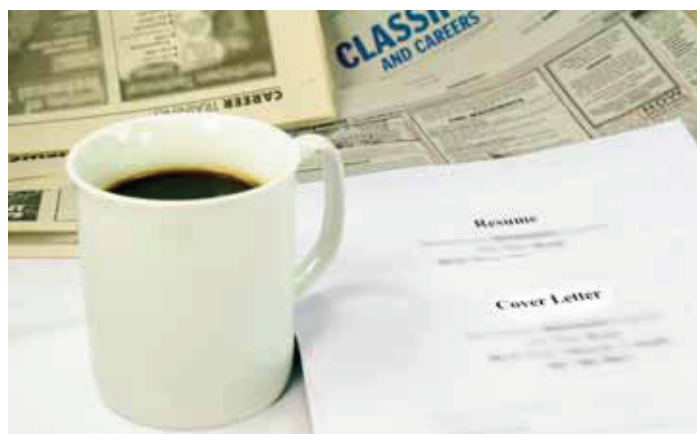
partners across the creative industries to prevent a generation of talent being lost to the recession.

The organisation's launch at Number 11 Downing Street at the end of March was described as "a remarkable moment in history" by Lord Puttnam; the American current affairs magazine *The Nation* devoted its cover to the project and urged the United States to follow Britain's lead. Since its inception, New Deal of the Mind has been working closely with government and prominent figures from across the creative sector to develop strategies for employment. But the fact that we have also received support from senior Conservative and Liberal Democrats demonstrates that this is a campaign which transcends party political boundaries.

**“Our creativity is now arguably our greatest economic asset”**

## Nature and nurture

It is highly encouraging that so many have pledged their support for our cause. As Britain faces the prospect of a deep and prolonged recession, the need for bold, creative, resourceful leadership has become ever more acute. Our creativity is now arguably our greatest economic asset. If Britain's historical position as a pre-eminent world financial centre is destined to decline, its reputation as a global hub of twenty-first century innovation must not be allowed to. Now more than ever, the creative industries need nurturing. In proposing measures for tackling this crisis, New Deal of the Mind draws its inspiration from the arts programmes of Franklin D Roosevelt's New Deal, known as the Works Progress Administration (WPA). Under the leadership of Harry Hopkins, the WPA



put millions of unemployed Americans back to work during the Great Depression and it is his words that inform the principles of New Deal of the Mind: "Give a man a dole and you save his body and destroy his spirit. Give a man a job and you save both body and spirit."

As increasing numbers of British artists, writers, designers and architects join the lengthening Jobcentre queues, we must ask ourselves how we can best use their skills and knowledge for the economic, social and cultural benefit of contemporary Britain.

Re-opening some of the UK's thousands of abandoned commercial properties as cultural and artistic space would seem an obvious and exciting first step. There are signs that the government is beginning to get the message. The Budget announced last month revealed the extent of the Government's commitment to job creation backed by borrowing. The £1.7bn injection into Jobcentre Plus, the guarantee of a job or training for all under-25s unemployed for a year, the £260m scheme for "industries with strong future demand", and the £750m emerging technologies fund demonstrate the political will is there. Alistair Darling even allowed the phrase "creative industries" to pass his lips at one point. Nevertheless, inherent problems persist. We need to urgently examine the accepted system of internships and the rhetoric surrounding the concept of free labour. The proliferation of unpaid internships, particularly in the creative sector and the media, continues to undermine economic development by largely excluding the vast majority of young people unable to work for free.

## Supporting partners

Following the Downing Street launch, a New Deal of the Mind steering group was formed at the instigation of Jude Kelly of the South Bank Centre, Tony Hall from the Royal Opera House and Jenny Abramsky at the Heritage Lottery Fund. This has since been joined by other leading organisations from the subsidised sector. From discussions has emerged the proposal that larger arts and heritage institutions could act as 'hubs', providing up to 200 internships, apprenticeships and jobs to the long-term unemployed. In addition to this New Deal of the Mind wants to establish 'pop-up' centres across the country providing rehearsal, studio and gallery space to young creatives alongside career and business advice. We are already in discussions with the Arnolfini in Bristol to create the first regional New Deal of the Mind centre.

With proper support, the creative industries can play a huge role in leading Britain's economic recovery. But to achieve this, there needs to be innovative thinking at all levels of leadership within the political and cultural spheres. We need to work together in new and inventive ways to find a way out of this crisis and there is no time to lose. If we fail, the generation leaving school and university this summer we will be picking up the pieces for years to come. ■

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