

'No' in colour

David Gentleman

An interview

David Gentleman, who created the Parliament Square installation which is featured on our cover, has been centrally involved in the protests in Britain against the war in Iraq. At the beginning of January, he gave an interview to the Socialist Worker, which we feature below, by kind permission. The questions are in italics, and David's replies in ordinary text.

Many people know you for your stamp designs. How did you first come to be involved in that?

I was invited out of the blue to take part in a limited competition to design a set of stamps for National Productivity Year, a very Stalinist-sounding subject. My designs combined a map of Britain with some energetic and productive-looking arrows.

Were you allowed to design in the way that you wanted or did you have to make changes? What sort of process was involved?

Only the subject was specified. How to tackle it was left to me. Once the design was accepted, I developed it to make it simpler and easier to print well.

I don't remember ever altering an idea, though I was once asked to. In the 1980s I designed some stamps for 'Ecology and the Environment'. It was at the time when people were beginning to get worried about threats to the environment, so it was an important subject. I produced a set of four designs showing the kind of creatures whose environment was under threat, such as fish from acid rain, symbolised by a power station cooling tower in the background. They were dramatic and easy to understand, and had an important message.

The Post Office's advisory committee liked them and proposed that they should go ahead. But before showing them to the queen for her approval, the Post Office also submitted them to Downing Street. This was during the Thatcher era, and the message came straight back that they must be made more 'industry-friendly'. I felt that toning down the message would have destroyed it, so the Post Office had to get somebody else to design the stamps.

You tried to take the queen's head off stamps. How did you go about that?

That's certainly what I had a shot at. In the mid-1960s, when Tony Benn became postmaster

general, he asked anybody who was interested to write to him with suggestions for making stamps more interesting. I'd already designed a few sets of stamps, and I'd found out that stamps had very restricted subjects and that incorporating the queen's head on them meant cramming two conflicting kinds of image into a very small area. So, motivated by design considerations rather than by republicanism, I wrote to him saying that stamps would look better without the queen's head on them. Tony Benn then commissioned me to design an album of 100 stamp designs without the head, and took it to show the queen. The queen, or at any rate the palace, preferred the head to remain on the stamps, but accepted that it should become a small silhouette, which sat better alongside the real subject of the stamp. That's how it has appeared ever since.

Where can people find other examples of your work?

Londoners can find it on the Underground at Charing Cross on the Northern Line platforms, where my mural runs the length of a couple of platforms and shows the people who built the first Charing Cross and how they did it. I've also made a lot of lithographs, and I've written and illustrated half a dozen books about countries and cities. *David Gentleman's Britain* was the first. Others were about London, the Coastline, Paris, India, and Italy. The pictures were in watercolour, a medium I love for its freedom and practicality – it's the one I'm most at ease with. Last month I had a retrospective exhibition of watercolours at the Fine Art Society – 50 of them, one a year ever since I stopped being a student.

How did you get involved in designing for the Stop the War Coalition?

I started thinking about designing a protest poster when it was clear that Bush was preparing to attack Iraq and that Blair might let this country get dragged in. The best kinds of banners are the ones that people do themselves, because individually they have a wonderful creativity and anger about them. But I'd seen a photograph in the paper of a protest march with lots of people carrying banners. While it had a marvellous energy and vitality about it, it also looked a muddle, and you couldn't read the banners. I thought that if Stop the War Coalition were going to print their own posters, it would be worth making them as simple and as powerful as one could. My first design was a big, simple 'NO'. I stuck a lot of reduced copies of it over the press photo of the march to make a sea of 'NO's, and sent it to the Stop the War Coalition. That's probably what persuaded them to use it – it's certainly what the march looked like. Other designs followed for later marches.

How do you explain the contrast between your watercolours and these aggressive poster designs?

Even technically, they have more in common than you might think. The splashes of blood on the posters were made with watercolour, dropped onto handmade watercolour paper from about six feet high. But I've always been interested in ideas as well as appearances, and I don't think they're mutually exclusive.