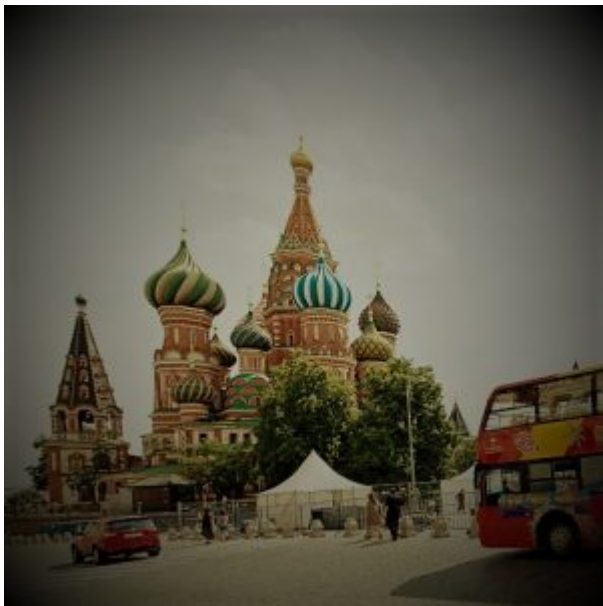


Always Keep Your Pass



I could not believe my eyes. Could it be real? Was it a trick of my imagination? A mirage perhaps? What was before me was an Ulsterbus. But why on this road as it was not a bus route? Where was the driver?

Could this be the first chance ever to use my Bus Pass? It was the only concession I had been awarded two years ago after a lifetime of paid taxes and contributions. Free spectacles, free dental treatment, free chiropody and the rest? Forget it! All a futile socialist dream...

Now was my chance to hop on the bus for a free ride to Tempo. I fumbled for my wallet and fingered over the various plastic cards it contained. Damn! I had forgotten to bring it. Never mind, I still had the one I never leave home without: my Greater London Council Security Pass.

I had worked in County Hall, just across Westminster Bridge and a short stroll from The Houses of Parliament for eight years until it was abolished by Margaret Thatcher in 1986. She had condemned it as the '*Citadel of the Looney Left; the Trotskyite alternative seat of government, the Bolshevic Kremlin,*' but everyone in County Hall knew that Lambeth & Southwark Town Halls were where the Militant politburo really held sway.

My supreme political boss was Ken Livingstone. "Red Ken" worked in the main original building while my cadre was situated in the tacked-on gulag known as *The Island Block*. It was built on a traffic roundabout and entered from the second floor of the main building's South Block by an enclosed corridor bridge. From my desk I had a panoramic view that took in St. Thomas' Hospital, The Palace of Westminster, The former Lambeth Women's Lying-in Hospital, the metropolitan taxi's entrance to Waterloo Station, and The Florence Nightingale Pub, our team's watering hole.

Our work area, coded PILWASWOL – *People In London Without A Settled Way Of Life*, was positioned between the *Squatter's Liaison Section* and the *Grants*

Unit. From the latter, according to myths put about by the pro-Thatcher press at the time, Ken's staff dispensed unrestrained largesse to lesbian, gay and ethnic minorities and was even said to have channelled funds to Libya, Cuba, the IRA, and freedom movements world-wide.

The chair Ken sat on when visiting our Section was venerated with mock reverence and reserved for him exclusively. Between times, it held my Chairman Mao type overalls, *Class War* dungarees and a change of battle-fatigue style *Solidarity with Nicaragua* trousers. After Abolition I won the chair in a sweepstake. I brought it with me when I moved to Northern Ireland in 1997. Later, when I bought a vintage Ferguson tractor it became the driving seat.

The other token I retained was my GLC Security Pass. Colleagues had laughingly said to me that, armed with it, I would be able to enter any public building in the world: The Coliseum, The Tower of Pisa, you name it! They recalled the story put about by his opponents of when Ken Livingstone visited Russia:

Like all devout socialists, he decided to visit the Tomb of Lenin. Although the queue was nearly a mile long Ken was informed that, due to his status, he could bypass it, and found himself at the front. The guards demanded to see his identification. He duly showed his passport.

The response was "Niet!"

He then showed his special visa documents.

"Niet!" was repeated.

He presented his return air ticket. "Niet!" once more.

Then Ken had a brainwave: he produced his GLC Pass. The effect on the guards was immediate.

"Da! Da! Da!"

He was escorted in with enthusiastic back-slapping. When he completed his visit and came out into Red Square an official car with outriders was standing by to escort him to his hospitality dacha. *Dastvedanya! Comrade Livingstone!*

The Ulsterbus was empty of passengers. Soon the driver appeared from behind a hedge. I bid him the best of the day and he explained that he was "...off route and out of service" before driving away. My bus-pass is still unused, but perhaps one day my ex-GLC pass will be of use – when I finally set off for that around the world in eighty days trip that I have been promising myself before I die.

Anthony Brady was born in Romford, Essex. Since his retirement he has had prose published in *Ireland's Eye* and *Ireland's Own*, and poetry in *The Guardian* and *The Spectator* blogs. He is a former Chair of Fermanagh Writers.