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Dear James,

Submission to Cultural Commission

Proposition:

"The citizens of Scotland have the right to participate in an appropriate and meaningful way in a high quality of cultural activity"

I took the opportunity recently to air this wording in a piece for the Sunday Herald. Forgive me for reiterating it, especially when it is so potentially vague and meaningless. My only excuse is that any general statement of cultural rights, if it is to be sufficiently broad, runs the risk of being equally nebulous.

What I think might be useful about it is a debate as to what the practical political implications might be of each of its key terms. I would like to suggest a few definitions from which actual policies might take a lead.

1) "The Citizens of Scotland"

The word "citizen" has a republican resonance, of course, which may or not be intentional on the part of the executive. What I take it to mean is an inclusive definition of residence, and personal identification that is multiple.

Amin Malouf, the French speaking Lebanese Protestant Arab novelist in his book "On Identity" puts forward a multiplicity of possible and available self-identifications as a working definition of being a free citizen of the world.

For Ali, his identification as a citizen of Scotland means a Scottish cultural presence in the world is something he has a right to feel a part of. It also means that there should be things going on in Falkirk to which he has access. His enthusiasm for science fiction should have a creative channel available to it for its expression. He is a young person and should be able (but not obliged) to be involved in activity suitable to his age group.

Like everyone else in the country, he has an amalgam of identities. The very definition of civilised life (which includes the situation of "peace") , according to Malouf , is that all and any of these identities should be freely expressible, or substitutable, at any time, if that's what Ali wants. His identity is defined by groupings that his different identifications mean that he potentially, voluntarily belongs to. If his identity is curtailed or limited by any one of them, that is a situation of oppression...or even of war.

Which is an unacceptable position for a citizen of Scotland to be in.

2) "have the right"

I am no legal expert, but does this not imply a statute or formal declaration? Or at least that there are accountable mechanisms in place whereby citizens, as artists, audience members or as taxpayers have before them a transparency of decision making which they can influence?

The very language of rights certainly entails a different model of decision making. I have direct experience mainly with the boards of theatre companies, but I imagine that a number of the same social factors play a part in boards of galleries and orchestras.

These factors being that boards tend towards self-perpetuation in their own make-up and in employment decisions. That they work on assumed cultural values toward which (as in the case of Scottish Opera) there is no accepted means of challenge. They are a pre-democratic hangover, in other words, and tend to be so even when elected political figures swell their numbers.

Of course, balances must be struck between the demands of all the potential

"stakeholders" in any given artistic organisation, but it is surely worth addressing questions of representation and executive decision making, perhaps of at least creating mechanisms where audience members and performers (in a theatre) had a forum through which to address a small and possibly part-elected executive board.

If this sounds a bit like reforming the House of Lords, I don't think that parallel is

entirely far fetched.

If the word "right" is to have a meaning, however, professional practitioners and participant/consumers need some kind of structure whereby their concerns and ideas can at least influence a board who they can, at least in part, elect. Even a biannual meeting that actively (and one hopes, no TOO cynically) attempted to engage with artists and audiences would insulate all of the above from the eccentric and unaccountable actions of self-appointed collections of the great and the good.

3) "...to participate.."

To begin with, this describes a range of potential activity that I will address further under "appropriate". But its essence is ownership.

Again, falling back on the familiar model of theatre, in the best cases, performers and audience share a feeling of ownership, of the event, and of the process, and eventually, perhaps, the repertoire and identity of producing theatres and companies. This sense of ownership is a fragile and crucial factor for everyone from the smallest amateur group to the National Theatre of Scotland.

It is encouraged by educational and outreach activity being absolutely integral to the artistic direction of the institution of whatever size. This is hardly ever the case.

It is encouraged by practitioners having a sense of being valued and secure in what they do. This is hardly ever the case.

It has implications not just for the public accessibility and profile of the institutions to those who don't work there, but to the status and quality of experience of those who do.

With particular reference to playwrights, for example, there is a widespread

feeling that the current commission led model is becoming restrictive and inadequate. This feeling comes from management and playwrights.

The cultural commission can again influence these matters by encouraging accountable and flexible structures for change, the spread of models of good practice and above all by following through on what the rhetoric of inclusion means, not just in terms of broadening social access to the arts, or encouraging (and supporting) artists in reaching for places they may not have had the ambition or capacity to reach, but in making concrete the political and cultural decision that these things matter. That cultural participation is an essential aspect of membership of this society, and that the creative practical support of

professional artists so that they can fulfil their own potential and enrich the lives of all of us, is not a dutiful drain on the public purse, but a positive expression of how we value ourselves. That within Scotland and the wider world we take pride in the achievement of our artists, and that we expect more and better of them in exchange for that support and status.

The Creative Scotland Awards are an attempt at this high profile celebration. However, they are still project grants, in essence, whose merits are decided upon by how good the application is.

The Irish model of tax breaks and pensions is perhaps not to be directly imitated. But the practical recognition of excellence, past and future, of individual artists is.

If we want to encourage the broadest possible social range of participation in the arts, then it is no contradiction, at the top of the tree, as it were, to accept and celebrate the contribution of an academy, a fellowship of our most outstanding figures. If we don't value the artists, it is meaningless to say that we value the arts.

4) "...in an appropriate and meaningful way.."

In a way this is just saying horses for courses. What is appropriate and meaningful for Liz Lochhead is different for a first time poet or playwright is different for someone who comes along to a writers workshop is different for someone who comes to see a Liz Lochhead play, or who wants to put one on in a church hall with their local drama group.

However, what they all have in common is a specificity of requirements which need some form of institutional support, and that this support be flexible and agile. The key to all of which is responsiveness.

This quality is terribly dependant on luck. A good cultural co-ordinator can work wonders on a shoestring. A bad one can fritter thousands on nothing. A good workshop leader can grow novelists and poets, a bad one can take the money and run. (or given that its normally a pittance, can at least get the bus). Any holistic view of cultural production needs to recognise that highly specific needs require highly specific skills and qualities to meet them. This is as true of running the Citizens theatre as in running a workshop in a hospital or prison.

There is no adequate quality control or model of practice in any or either of these. This again, I think, is rooted in unaccountable and opaque decision making, in a lack of recognition of the enormous opportunity for the creative

employment of artists in the community at all levels can entail if the horses for courses implications are followed through.

Areas of training and professional development are engaged here, as well as employment decisions. The facilitation of the arts cannot but take account of the criteria of "appropriate and meaningful" and must follow this up with the educational and developmental strategies to make it stick.

It may well be that this is the area in which self-sustaining virtuous circles of good practice in training and in teaching the trainers can engage with Education and Enterprise portfolios in an organic and creative way.

There will always be stars...they will find a way through. But there is the potential for a good level of groundbased activity too, in schools, hospitals, community centres etc etc that will help create an engaged and informed and participating public for the stars to shine on and inspire.

5) "...in a high quality of cultural activity..."

This seems to enter the realm of the wildly subjective. But given what I've already said, in a context of well trained and well rewarded artists and facilitators, it ought to take care of itself.

I think it is worth talking about a universal expectation of quality, however, in specific opposition to centralised and culturally predetermined notions of

excellence. If we instead talk about the "quality of experience" as a right, then we can make demands not just upon artists, but on schools and local government that this quality be delivered.

It might be that the participatory groupings I suggested within professional arts institutions could well be extended socially and geographically. Certainly, if there was an expectation on a local gallery, for example, that they would have a full time educational officer who took slide shows round schools and invited open discussion on visits in a skilled way, that alone would do a good deal to cement the gallery in the affections of local taxpayers. And if the citizens had a forum in which to review and support this activity, then it might get even better next time.

What is crucial is that we do not divide ourselves into producers and consumers who try to get one over on each other. We are all participants with specific, and as I indicated at the beginning, multiple needs and identities. Only a high quality of participation in decision making as well as production and consumption of art can truly "naturalise" the arts as a defining and life enhancing element of our lives together. We cannot be told what is good for us anymore. Likewise, we need the arenas in which to articulate our own needs and pleasures.

Our culture is not a single thing for us as individuals, let alone as a geographical entity. It is an argument. That is the meaning of our history and it will continue to be like that.

The culture is a place for us to have those arguments, and for our democracy, in a way, to have a second chamber. The arts is another parliament, and deserves all the support and scrutiny of such an institution.

Yours sincerely,

Chris de...-1

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