

HIGHLAND GALLERY STEERING GROUP

James Boyle
Chairman
The Cultural Commission
Broughton High School
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6 December 2004

Dear James

Submission to the Cultural Commission – the case for a major Highland Gallery

I write to you in my position as chairman of the working party for the creation of a major gallery for the Highlands in Inverness. This is a project guided by the ambition to create a national visual art facility located in the Highlands. It is a real and practical vision and it seems it should fit into several of the declared priorities of the Scottish Executive in both culture and education.

The working party includes representatives of the Highland Council, Inverness City Council, Inverness and Nairn Enterprise, UHI Millennium Institute, the Scottish Arts Council and the National Galleries of Scotland. The presence of national bodies on the working party reflects the ambition to create a national facility located in the Highlands, not one that is only local in its significance. It is a question of aspiration. If people in the Highlands are to have access to the kind of art that is readily available in the Central Belt, then a facility is needed capable of taking international exhibitions. The case for this has been clearly made by a feasibility study and a wide range of discussions and consultations as the project for a Highland Gallery sited in Inverness has evolved.

The objective is a gallery equipped both to host and to originate major exhibitions of contemporary art, but with provision for a historical display which would provide a context for this. Here partnership with the National Galleries of Scotland is central to the project. The objective is a gallery that would be equipped to cultivate an audience and so give access, through better knowledge and understanding, both to historical and to the work of contemporary artists. The two aspects would support and complement each other through long term and temporary exhibitions and through education which would be a vital part of the provision.

The presence of the UHI Millennium Institute on the Working Party is very important therefore. There would be a real opportunity to plan co-operation from the start between the gallery and the Higher Education sector with all the advantages that would offer in terms of research and the broadening of horizons.

The SAC also has a clear interest in the project. Its strategy is very properly to bring access to the arts to the whole population of Scotland. This new facility would compliment the development of Eden Court and help make Inverness a major centre for the arts.

The Highland Gallery Steering Group includes: Inverness & Nairn Enterprise, Highland Council, Hi-Arts, Eden Court, UHI Millennium Institute, Scottish Arts Council and National Galleries of Scotland.

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Certainly, if there is a case for public subsidy of the arts, then, in justice, the policies governing it should include the widest possible access and inclusion. It is important to recognise that it has a **geographic** as well as a **social** dimension; it is proper to pursue policies of social inclusion within the Central Belt, but it is equally important to extend access to cultural facilities to that part of the population that lives outside the area in which by far the greatest concentration is presently concentrated.

This is important across the arts, but it is particularly important with visual art, not least because it is increasingly the subject of real public interest. The Highlands provide a clear example of this. The real demand for provision in the visual arts within the region has been reflected over recent years by the development of a number of galleries, both public and private, throughout the Highlands and Islands. These are all small however. For example, the remarkable exhibition of the work commissioned for *An Leabhar Mor* could not be shown in any single gallery in the whole of the north of Scotland. Yet such galleries often attract visitor numbers which are directly comparable (regardless of size of catchment population) with their Central Belt counterparts in receipt of Scottish Arts Council core funding. The proposed gallery would act as a hub for this existing network raising their level of access to touring exhibitions, education programmes and conservation services.

These galleries, and their numerous commercial counterparts, currently also suffer from the lack of a wider artistic context show within the Highlands and Islands for the work that they show. To see major collections 'in the flesh' involves a drive time from the Highlands of not less than three hours (Inverness or Fort William to Glasgow/Aberdeen/Dundee) and as much as six hours (from Caithness and Sutherland).

In recent years both the National Galleries and the National Museums of Scotland have made real commitments towards truly national outreach. These good intentions are, however, undercut by a number of issues:

- Local partners can be required to contribute significantly to the costs of hosting touring exhibitions from the nationals, so that taxpayers are in effect paying twice for a national resource
- These institutions are understandably reluctant to risk work from their core collections to facilities which do not meet sufficiently high standards of security and environment
- Even when such works are toured, as with the recent 'Winifred Nicolson' exhibition, only small, cut-down versions of the original exhibition are feasible to fit within existing spaces.

Thinking here therefore involves more than the bland ideal that access to art is a good thing.

As well as creating new educational opportunities, there are clear economic and social advantages. Participating in contemporary thinking and practise in art creates other opportunities too. An internationally visible gallery would help change wider perceptions of the Highlands, both internally for the resident population in terms of self-confidence and self-awareness, and from outside. The area is already a major tourist destination, but as the experience of Tate St Ives has shown as well as similar experiences in

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Scandinavia, providing a high level cultural attraction can have a dramatic impact, not only on visitor numbers, but also on length of stay and length of season.

The remarkable economic success of Inverness would be consolidated by the enhancement of the cultural provision available there and by the creation of a new infrastructure in the visual arts. A properly staffed and equipped gallery in Inverness would not only be a leader for the Highlands generally, it would also be a hub and service provider in terms of exhibition making, conservation and education.

There is symmetry between the proposed Highland Gallery and the project for a gallery in Kirkcudbright. Though the two projects are different in character and therefore not in direct competition, both are locally generated, but deserve central support because their ambition coincides with the declared ambition of the Executive to improve access to the arts. The example of the French FRACS is a useful one here. Established twenty years ago in partnership between central and regional government as centres for contemporary art, they have evolved in diverse, but very successful ways into internationally significant local centres for the visual arts.

Finally, a new facility on this scale would entail new money. The example of the FRACS suggests that this should be found through a partnership between the Scottish Executive and the local authority, in this case Inverness City Council and the Highland Regional Council.

Yours sincerely



Professor Duncan Macmillan

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