

Other

Rec'd by Jeff
5/11/05

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Mr James Boyle
Culture Commission

Dear Mr Boyle

I understand that the Culture Commission is open to expressions of opinion from all and sundry. So I am impudent enough to send you the enclose effusion, which was provoked by a need to sort out my own muddled thoughts after taking part in a confused discussion with some fellow members of the Scottish Civic Forum over a year ago. I have no particular expertise in these matters; I just try to be a fairly responsible citizen.

Yours sincerely

Andrew R Morton

5 January 2005

Culture and Scottish Governance

The term 'culture', like many other words, has **several meanings**, depending on the context and especially on any contrast which is being drawn. Here are five possible meanings.

I. In the **culture/nature** contrast, it stands for the fact that humanity is not only what human beings are given (nature) but also what they make of themselves (culture); in other words, humankind is a self-creation or social construction which is chosen, as well as a biological or natural reality which is given not chosen. This is the realm of the humanities and human or social sciences as distinct from that of the natural sciences.

Corollaries of this for the **Scottish Parliament and Government** include that:

- 1) They should not underestimate their capacity as human institutions to change human life, they should have high aspirations.
- 2) They should put as much emphasis on the humanities as the sciences at all levels of education.

II. Whereas culture in that broadest sense, as human self-creation, includes politics and economics, in a slightly narrower sense it is distinguished from them. In the **culture/politics-economics** contrast, culture stands for what underlies politics, economics and everything else, namely our basic understanding of life and way of life, i.e. our philosophy-cum-ethic, with all that is associated with that - concepts and images, myths and rituals, theories and practices - what might be called our 'take' on life.

One corollary of this for the **Scottish Parliament and Government** is that:

- 3) They should encourage parliamentary and public debate and reflection on 'the vision thing', without which political and economic activities become starved of oxygen.

III. Another and closely related contrast is the **culture/institution** one. We talk of institutions, like political parties, private corporations or whatever, as well as communities and whole societies, as having their particular culture. Sometimes we call it their '**ethos**'. In other words, an institution or community or society is what it is, not only because of its institutional structures and processes, procedures and practices, which are usually visible and acknowledged, but also because of this more elusive thing, its culture or ethos, which is not so visible or readily acknowledged.

Corollaries of this for the **Scottish Parliament and Government** include that:

- 4) They should be aware that their own success or failure depends on their own implicit culture or ethos as well as on their explicit powers, structures and processes.
- 5) They should appreciate that changes which they seek in the society in general or in specific institutions or communities within it may require change in ethos which is not generally amenable to legislation as much as in those more visible things that are.

IV. The term 'culture' has a rather different kind of connotation when it is pluralised i.e. when we talk of particular **cultures**. Here the contrast that is highlighted is not between culture and something else, like nature or politics-economics or institution, but between cultures; it is the **culture/culture** contrast. In this context, the point being made is that there is not only one 'take' on life (philosophy, ethic and all that) which is shared by the whole of humanity, but many 'takes' in what is a **multicultural** or culturally plural world, and moreover that the sub-groups which have their own particular 'take' include both nations and groups within and across nations.

Corollaries of this for the **Scottish Parliament and Government** include that:

6) They should respect, allow for and facilitate cultural diversity, both that which distinguishes Scottish culture from others and that which distinguishes the cultures of groups within Scotland from one another, whether these be based on ethnic origin, religion, gender, class or whatever.

7) They should recognise the need to distinguish between the permitted, prescribed or proscribed practices which, for the sake of the common good of the whole population, need to be universal and those which need not be universal and so may be particular to particular groups, appreciating that this distinction is not always easy to draw and that there may be difficult borderline cases.

8) Recognising that no human sub-group and its culture can be totally separated from the rest of humanity, that there can be creative interaction between sub-groups and their cultures and that the common good of Scotland may require this, they should facilitate and possibly encourage such creative interaction. Since this may include mutual learning, they should consider its implications for all levels of education.

V. A fifth and rather different meaning of culture is what is sometimes called 'high culture' ('haute culture'). This is a sub-set of culture in at least some of the other senses. The contrast here is presumably **high/not high**. Culture in this sense is a rough synonym for **the arts**, understood to include art, literature, music and much else. This is sometimes characterised as **expressive** activities in contrast to **instrumental** ones and as above all involving creativity and imagination. A common misunderstanding of these activities, reinforced by the misleading term 'high' culture, is that they are the concern of an exalted few, an elite, whether at the giving or receiving end of them, and also that they are of secondary importance, a luxury, an optional extra, mere icing on the cake. While they may rightly be described as 'high' in the sense of being a sign of high human maturity and of being highly important, the creativity and imagination which they express are part of universal humanity; in other words, they are within the potential of all and not just the few, and they belong to the fruit **in** the cake not the icing **on** it.

Corollaries of this for the **Scottish Parliament and Government** include that:

9) They should provide ample opportunities for the whole population both to express their own imaginative creativity and to receive the fruits of others'.

10) They should recognise that the arts and politics and economics are three essentials for the wellbeing of the nation, which should be three-in-one i.e. in mutual contact and influence, since expressivity and instrumentality are complementary. They should therefore resist any tendency to subordinate their politics solely to the instrumental purposes of economics. They should also be aware that they themselves can become wholly absorbed by the necessary instrumentality of politics and need to be nourished by the expressivity of the arts. (It could be argued that politicians who love the arts as well as politics and allow the arts to help them stand back from politics make the best politicians.)

In short, culture in all its senses is essential not optional, central not peripheral within the integrated human whole; therefore neglect of it by Scottish or any other politicians puts politics in peril.