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Why Should Government Support the Arts?

Tessa Jowell

Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport

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What follows is a transcript of a speech Tessa Jowell gave at an event organised by the Institute of Public Policy Research, Why Should Government Support the Arts? at The Royal Opera House, London, 7th March, 2005.

Last week I published our proposals for the future of the BBC. It included keeping the licence fee for another ten years. No one begs to pay an essentially regressive tax. No sensible government likes imposing them. Yet the licence fee is surprisingly popular, market research shows. And I had no qualms about maintaining public subsidy for broadcasting. Because it is in the public interest to have public service media. Because we only have to look at countries like the U.S. to see what happens when we lose that universally available public service. And, most importantly, because some markets deserve to be distorted. *Laissez faire* does not apply to every kind of human endeavour. Without public subsidy, the content of TV would be prey to unfettered market forces. What commercial broadcaster would make a profit out of Radio 3 – the biggest commissioner of new classical music in the world? And who could afford to keep a national network of regional and local stations? So we have never apologised for the BBC or its funding.

Exactly the same principle applies to the arts. Because the danger we face is a gradual homogenisation of culture. The rich mixing of cultures which has always marked Europe could be replaced by a market-driven, bland, one-stage-fits-all arts scene which benefits no one except the accountants. That's why I want governments, politicians and the public to argue about arts funding and cultural identity with the enthusiasm they currently reserve for the economy. Because public subsidy for culture is not just a matter of keeping ticket prices low, important though that is. Government spending can keep innovation alive and it can ensure that the public have a real diversity of art to choose from. The market keeps the West End theatres – and they are a vital force. But only subsidy could give you the National Theatre – *Elmina's Kitchen*, or *Iphigenia at Aulis*. Only subsidy could give you *Die Walkure*, or the Baylis education programme.

Without government support, the possibility of dazzling new work, of far-reaching innovation, of new insights is also diminished. We support the arts because they are, and should remain, a key part of the programme of any government that wants to transform society for the benefit of all its citizens. I've been making speeches on the arts for the last four years and my message has been consistent: what the arts do that only the arts do is most important. Out of that come other benefits, but the art comes first. I have said that we need to find a political and public discourse that helps us better be able to describe this, that helps me better to place the arts at the centre of this government's programme, that will help us better to argue for the investment we seek.

Since 1997, funding has leapt ahead. The lottery has made a massive difference too. But part of the way in which we got that money was by stressing the contribution the arts could make to other agendas, especially education. We said this in public and perhaps laid ourselves open to accusation that we couldn't see what the arts were for, let alone say it. I think it fitted with the approach of the post-1997 government, where we had to take a technocratic approach, and we had to have an approach where every aspect of government was able to be measured. So this meant measuring increased numbers of visitors from different social groups, and I stand by that. But in a sense we were measuring the measurable. What we must now do is to find a way of focusing on what the arts can do in themselves, and this will lead to a more rounded definition of what we are about in funding the arts.

To turn briefly to the funding settlement – I wish I'd got more than £412m for the arts in 2006/7. But I didn't, and in a tight round I had to make choices. I chose to keep the arts' top line constant but to free up money within that top line to ensure that arts organisations do not suffer overall. Yes, it was tough, and it is a test of the mettle and professionalism of the Arts Council to deliver the best from what they have. I know they have worked hard, and I am grateful for this.

Demand Side/ Supply Side

A key part of any modern approach to funding the arts is the ability and willingness to look at both the demand side and supply side of the equation.

Let me explain. In thinking about arts funding we have traditionally only thought in terms of the institution, such as the opera house. But what is the point of us simply looking at that if our children in schools are not getting the opportunities to experience performances?

This is not social engineering. It is a social mission, but the essence is to give people the equipment, the possibility, of choosing. I referred to Beveridge, who, at the time the Arts Council was set up, referred to slaying the Five Giants. I think the arts and culture, if we get it right, can help us slay a sixth giant – that of poverty of aspiration, or if you like, and as Nye Bevan put it, poverty of imagination. And that is what the arts can help us do, but only if we get the arts right. That is why they should be, and are, at the heart of any transforming government.

As I have said, since 1997 we have made much play of the importance of the arts and sport in achieving social policy objectives such as lower crime, increased community cohesion, better attendance at school. And it's true that engagement with arts and culture can certainly do that. There's plenty of evidence to show it.

But I worry that we talked about these objectives so much that we actually rather missed the point. And the point is this: I'm lucky enough, and millions of others have been, to make sure their children grow up loving music, going to the theatre, enjoying art and reading books. We don't do that because it will get our children better jobs. We do it because we have loved doing it and we think they will too.

Too often we've allowed our approach to children from deprived backgrounds to smack of Gradgrind:

- My children are cultured
- Your children aren't intellectual but are terribly creative
- Their children must improve their educational attainment if they are to be of use in the employment market.

We've had enough of Gradgrind. I think it's about time for us to try the Mr. Chips approach. When it comes to education and the benefits of culture, enlightened parents have recognised the positive effects for some time. They've done the options appraisal for us. For years they have seen the benefits of getting their children involved in a range of cultural and creative activities. In years gone by it was private piano lessons or Saturday morning ballet classes. These days it's much more. It is such an important part of their development, but it has often been the choice of the well-off because they are the ones who have been in a position to pay for access to culture.

The lesson Gateshead teaches us is that wanting the world of culture to be available to everyone is not, as some say, dumbing down, an artistic version of 'all must have prizes'. Far from it. The lesson it teaches is that people of every background deserve the very best. Because some barriers are overcome not by lowering them, but by increasing the ability of people to

leap them.

Measuring Value

People value the arts. In this sense they are ahead of the curve of political and public discourse. The Arts Council's most recent survey shows that four out of five people attended an arts event in the twelve months before the survey, and almost nine out of ten people had participated in the arts. And Creative Partnerships has provided opportunities for almost a quarter of a million children and young people to experience the arts. These figures mean that we are well on the way to building the audiences of the future and providing the opportunities for the Frederick Ashtons and the Alex Wilsons of the future, whose work can be enjoyed upstairs [in the Covent Garden Opera House].

But as you are aware, we need to keep making the case. Because we are still arguing for resources against health and education; because there is still 21% of the public who aren't convinced the arts should receive public funds – taxpayers' money. And because we can't be complacent and think that we know best and the case has already been sufficiently made if only people would listen, or see, or believe.

And we need to make the case in a way that reflects the reasons why we fund the arts that I mentioned earlier, reflecting the impacts and the delights that they offer – their value, in all its complexity. This vocabulary does have to go beyond targets, but it does not mean we should abandon them, they should be embedded in a more complex narrative of value.

One of the benefits of valuing the arts in terms of social policy outcomes, for instance, is that it enables the arts to speak outside of what some see as their dedicated space, as if the arts were something separate – separate and optional. Thinking about the arts in terms of health, of regeneration, of civil renewal enables more people to realise what we know already – that the arts are an integral part of the public realm, integral to our personal and national life.

And we do need to make the argument, not only because we all want to see the arts continue to develop and prosper but because, in the end, when we are talking about government funding for the arts we are talking about funding on behalf of others – the taxpayer, the citizen, the public. And we are talking about funding along with others – the business, the local authority, and every individual who buys a ticket. We need to account to them for their money.

I need to be able to account to the electorate for the amount of money we spend on ballet, on orchestras, rather than say, classrooms, or hospitals. And I need to be able to do so in a way that means something to the person asking me that question, rather than the arts professional or the politician. And you, the Arts Council, you need to be able to account for the money you spend. To the members of the public, and to your constituents in the arts – not just to those organisations you fund directly, but to the wider arts sector, the community arts, the voluntary arts.

Public Value

One of the questions I asked at the end of 'Government and the Value of Culture', was: 'How, in going beyond targets, can we best capture the value of culture?' Looking at that question now, I think there is only one thing wrong with it, and that is the word 'capture'. We will never 'capture' the value of culture, pin it down, constrain it, describe and measure it, once and for all. But we can try to convey it. And to do so, we need a vocabulary that can deal with the sophisticated, the complex, and the changing, that moves away – you'll be pleased to hear – from the bureaucratic. We need to start talking in terms of public value.

There are many definitions of public value. For me it means the value the public places in institutions, organisations and concepts, above and beyond but not excluding their economic or individual use value, a value reflected in the public's willingness to share, keep, uphold and pay taxes for these institutions, organisations and concepts.

I believe that people rightly demand that we invest in arts and culture not just to address 'market failures', but to provide the opportunities for shared experiences as citizens. They trust us – the government – and you – the Arts Council – to spend their money to do so. What we need to do is show how we repay that trust. In a public value framework I might ask of the Arts Council:

Do you enable artists to deliver innovative and high quality creative and cultural experiences to a wide range of people. How do you do it? Do you do it in a way that is deserving of the public's trust? Do you look to ensure cost effectiveness, fairness and access? Do you encourage and support modern and accountable governance in your own organisation and in the organisations you fund? Do you look to deliver to the public and involve the public in what you do and how you do it? If the answer to all of these questions is 'Yes,' and I think it is, then we are well on the way to speaking that new language, conveying the value of culture in all its complexity.

I want to end with a much shorter answer to the question 'Why should government support the arts?' In 1912, the textile workers of Lawrence, Massachusetts began a nine week strike for better conditions and an end to discrimination against foreign-born workers. The women picketing their factories carried a banner with the slogan 'bread and roses'. This inspired James Oppenheim to write a poem 'Bread and Roses' with the refrain:

*Our lives shall not be sweated from birth until life closes,
Hearts starve as well as bodies - Give us bread but give us roses*

That's the best answer I've ever heard. That's why the government supports the arts.