

Playing politics with Cultural Capital

By the time Gordon Brown had announced the date of the general election, numerous organisations and special interest groups had already launched their manifestos. Jonathan Ives considers the impact of Cultural Capital, the document that seeks to make the political case for art and culture.

The announcement of the date for the 2010 general election came as little surprise to anyone with a calendar and a basic grasp of what passes for the British constitution but for the numerous organisations and special interest groups with manifestos to promote it is likely to have come as blessed relief. Cultural Capital: A Manifesto for the Future was culture's contribution to the great political debate and the conglomeration of cultural organisations responsible for the publication had taken the opportunity to get their arguments out onto the stump a couple of weeks before the prime minister drove the pleasant walk from Downing Street to Buckingham Palace to make his case for dissolution. This elementary example of theatrical timing by the publishers of Cultural Capital ensured that the case for culture had its time in the daily news cycle before the political playing field became swamped by photo opportunities, battle buses and what passes for debate when politicians are placed under studio lights. Here was a moment to explain why, as the publication's subtitle states, investing in culture will build Britain's social and economic recovery.

Launched with no little fanfare by some of Britain's finest cultural advocates, Cultural Capital sets out to explain why the government should maintain its investment in culture. It is, of course, an argument with a long history. Over the years many and varied organisations and publications, professional bodies and national newspapers among them, have tried to "make the case for culture" but there is still an obvious concern within the sport, leisure and culture sector that it remains vulnerable when budgets get tight. Few still involved in the management, development or promotion of what used to be called 'leisure services' are able to quell the fear that when pressure is being felt in the finance department culture remains an obvious target. Here, in the Cultural Capital document, is an attempt by the most articulate, best connected and most cultured groups of individuals and organisations to make the case for a different response..

Standing under the mesmerising geometry of the roof of the British Museum's Grand Court, the British Museum's director, Neil MacGregor set a clear political agenda for the document's launch. "We want to give politicians the confidence to put on their CVs not what football team they support but why life without Schubert is impossible. Culture works. This is a bit of national life that is extraordinarily efficient and effective. It is a huge employer and the economic activity it generates is ever more important... Culture gives us our place in the world; it reminds us what we are and what we could be."

Alan Davey, chief executive of Arts Council England, picked up the financial theme. "Every day public money is combined with private funds to produce miracles on a shoestring," he said. "The cost to the public is less than the cost of half a pint of milk. We need to cherish it and not spill it."

Roy Clare, chief executive of MLA, the museums, libraries and archives commission, pointed to the statistics that show every pound invested in culture produces two. This, he argued, should not be ignored. "Culture and the arts face serious cuts across the country. The manifesto challenges the assumption that these are somehow optional, discretionary services. In fact, culture and the arts are crucial nourishment to the spirit of people struggling to cope with a time of setback, restraint and recovery. Right now especially, culture and the arts are an opportunity, not a cost."

Most politicians would acknowledge that these are all persuasive points well made but the history of the case for culture is strewn with fine words and articulate arguments. Will the manifesto document itself be able to take the campaign forwards and assuage the fears of the cultural sector? The introduction outlines a nation in which culture and cultural engagement is thriving after more than a decade of government investment in culture and the arts: "museums and arts galleries are more crowded than ever; libraries are busy, theatres and concert halls full, heritage attractions flourishing, the creative industries booming". Government investment has been repaid by the cultural organisations feeding the creative industries, inspiring young people and enhancing the quality of life of the nation. "This is not escapism," the manifesto notes. "It is a real engagement, right across the nation."

The document wastes little time in getting into the figures. In 2009 over 99% of children between the ages of five and ten were engaged in cultural activity outside school, with 99% of 10- to 15-year-olds engaged in and out of school. In 2008/09 the national museums received well over 40 million visitors and the National Theatre played to 93%



Making a cultural point: Sayako Tomiyoshi holding a Hirst

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capacity, with over 800,000 tickets sold. Outside London, 850 organisations in the Arts and Business survey reported an average 12% increase in attendances. The argument is developed to explain that if the arts and culture sector is flourishing so too is the economy. The sector under the auspices of the Department for Culture, Media and Sport accounts for 10% of the UK's gross domestic product. The economic benefits of the UK's major museums and galleries are estimated at £1.5 billion a year, music brings in some £5 billion a year, theatre £2.6 billion a year and all around the country cultural investment projects are rejuvenating local economies and encouraging local enterprise. The manifesto notes that the creative industries, a sector built on the foundations provided by art and culture, employ nearly 2 million people. In 2007 the National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts calculated that this sector generated £57 billion in gross added value to the national economy.

Leaving to one side the omission of sport from this manifesto's commitment to "a joint approach" and some occasional metaphorical flourishes ("Against a darkening economic sky, these organisations have kept their lights bright and their doors open"), it is difficult to deny that these are impressive figures. However, there will be some concern among managers in the leisure sector currently wondering about the shape of next year's budget that these figures, or variations on a theme, have been part of the case for culture for decades. Will these statistics be able to deliver the political impact required to sit alongside and outweigh the numbers offered by the Department for Transport or the Ministry of Defence? Are our figures sufficiently robust to compete and win when the hard decisions are being made? The message of the document's conclusion is that while the culture sector has benefitted from a period of sustained government investment it has delivered demonstrable benefits to the nation: "Fifteen years of public investment in culture have started to create the physical and organisational infrastructure for the arts and heritage that the country deserves." And that, having enjoyed the benefits, people will not want to see it disappear: "They do not want to see the investment of the last fifteen years squandered".

The Cultural Capital document makes a valuable and timely contribution to the case for culture but, for all its impressive figures, there is a suspicion that it may well fall short of holding its own in the public spending dog fight that all the major political parties seem ready to unleash. The concern for the sport, leisure and culture sector is that despite all these well-marshalled arguments the Treasury mandarins might simply infer that it is high time that there was some trimming of governmental largesse. However, it is worth remembering that this is not necessarily a facts-and-figures argument. It is said that New Labour's willingness to invest in culture and the arts was in no small part due to a leading figure of the arts establishment making an articulate, impassioned and personal case to a prime minister then newly in post. While the cold, hard facts are a necessity, it may be that they will not be sufficient. A plea on behalf of the nation's quality of life may yet win the day.

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Cultural Capital, a Manifesto for the Future via the MLA website at www.mla.gov.uk

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