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Arts funding: a parliamentary debate

Just after 2pm on 3 February Joan Bakewell rose in the House of Lords to deliver her maiden speech as Baroness Bakewell in support of funding for the arts. Here *The Leisure Review* presents a few highlights of an erudite argument in favour of investment in the nation's cultural life.

A debate moved by the Earl of Clancarty to call attention to public funding for the arts; and to move for papers.

Baroness Bakewell:

My Lords, it is with great pride that I rise to give my maiden speech in this House on a subject that has played a sustained and sustaining role throughout my own life. However, I first wish to thank noble Lords from all sides of the House who have given me such a warm welcome and to acknowledge the help that I continue to receive from the outstanding staff who work here. It is with pleasure that I thank my two distinguished sponsors, the noble Baroness, Lady Kennedy of The Shaws, and the noble Lord, Lord Puttnam.

I understand that I must first declare an interest. I am chair of the touring theatre company Shared Experience. I was for six years the arts correspondent of BBC television and for six years the chair of the National Campaign for the Arts. I have served on, among others, the council of the Aldeburgh Festival, the board of the National Theatre, the BFI, the council of Friends of the Tate and the Film Council.

It sounds, perhaps, as though I was to the manner born—that this came as some sort of birthright—but it is not so. My grandfather, an iron turner in a Salford factory, died at the age of 33 and my father was sent to Chetham's Hospital, then an orphanage for poor boys in Manchester and now a world-famous music school. Chetham's had, and still has, one of the finest 17th-century libraries in the country. My father grew up loving books. The importance of libraries in the life of a child should not be underestimated. He left school at 13 to work in a foundry and enjoyed a career in engineering. My mother, the daughter of a cooper in a Manchester brewery, also left school at 13. Many years into their marriage they made up for the lost years by studying at the Workers' Educational Association. I am the child of their aspirations. I grew up in the 40s and 50s, enjoying a grammar school and university education without fees and without debt. My life is a testament to social mobility. My arrival in this House is surely its crowning glory.

This, then, is the life that has turned to the arts to understand the world about me. From reading that encompassed Jane Eyre and Mrs Gaskell's novels about industrial Lancashire, visits to Manchester City Art Gallery and concerts by the Hallé Orchestra, I have continued to find nourishment in the sensitivities of those who create and perform works of art. I believe profoundly that the arts are more than the entertainment that awaits us at the end of the working day—a light relief from the real business of living. I believe the arts to be a core essential in shaping and sustaining our human values. So it is not surprising that I am passionate that the rewards should be available to everyone in our society.

Let me speak particularly about how public funding of the arts outreach programmes touches ordinary lives. Not long ago, I opened an art exhibition at the QUAD arts centre in Derby. The exhibition was called Objects of Delight and was curated by 14 people between the ages of 55 and 75, who were given total freedom to select their own show, with works of art freely lent from the Arts Council's wonderful collection. The show was full of surprises. It included art by Hockney, Ken Kiff, Gillian



Parliament pondering the value of the arts overseen by a Henry Moore

“Today, at a time when this island is in desperate need of every scrap of creative energy and imagination, it would require a very particular genius to fail to support and nurture both.”

Ayres and Grayson Perry. The ferment of the curator's excitement spread throughout Derby, with friends and family catching the mood. This one modest venture was, for those involved, transformational.

It is important to stress that the central purpose of arts funding is to encourage the artistic spirit; that is its absolute undertaking. Art is not a form of social work but, if the enjoyment of art is to be confined to those who can easily afford high prices, public money is not being responsibly spent. Outreach features in the budgets of all our major companies. The Tate currently works with 70 children in Orkney creating art. The sums of money involved are relatively small, but they are important. They are less likely to attract sponsorship or media attention, but they change lives- 76 per cent of adults engaged in the arts in the past year. This is why I commend the matter of the debate today and urge your Lordships not only to enjoy the arts to the full but to endorse a funding strategy that gives all our citizens access to and participation in work that can be uplifting and life changing.

Lord Puttnam:

My Lords, it happily falls to me to warmly congratulate my noble friend Lady Bakewell on a wonderful maiden speech. The fact that it was knowledgeable and eloquent was no surprise at all, but it was a tremendous bonus that she allowed us into the background to her achievement. It speaks volumes for your Lordships' House that in their time both the noble Baroness and my noble friend Lord Bragg, who I am happy to see is in his place, have respectively and respectfully been described as the "thinking person's crumpet"-no Andy Gray moment for me. I was reminded of that last week when, during her introduction, I glanced across at a packed Bishops' Bench to see what I can only describe as a group of men glowing with anticipation at her arrival. I am sure that the rest of us felt similarly and I hope that we will hear from her much more and at much greater length over the coming years.

I, too, am extremely grateful to the noble Earl, Lord Clancarty, for securing this timely debate. I should begin by declaring an interest as chair of the altogether excellent Sage Gateshead and as president of the Film Distributors' Association.

Aneurin Bevan, when drawing attention to the capacity of Governments to pursue counterproductive policies in moments of crisis, famously observed in 1945: "This island is made mainly of coal and surrounded by fish. Only an organising genius could produce a shortage of coal and fish at the same time".

Today, at a time when this island is in desperate need of every scrap of creative energy and imagination, it would require a very particular genius to fail to support and nurture both. The fulcrum around which originality leading to the development of intellectual property is based- the coal and iron of the 21st century- is access to and enjoyment of the arts; that is to say, all of the arts and for all of the people.

On 18 March 1998, I had the privilege of introducing a debate in this House to call attention to the importance of the arts in the life of the nation. During that debate, I suggested:

"The arts are an essential element of the cultural and creative lifeblood of any nation. They sustain the conscience and vitality of a society. One measure of any community wishing to regard itself as truly civilised is the quality and depth of its artistic achievement ... Even in the most enlightened state, there will never be enough funding for the arts".
[Official Report, 18/3/98; cols. 717-19.]

That was the challenge that I set out for the then newly minted Labour Government. Despite the enormous changes that we have witnessed in the world of art and culture since that debate, some things have not changed. I continue to stand by my assertion in that debate that, if we want the arts, we find a way of paying for them. For a society such as ours to consider itself civilised, there is, to echo one of the coalition's favourite phrases, simply no alternative.

During the past 20 years, successive and extremely engaged Secretaries of State consistently sought to expand access to and

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participation in all forms of the arts, to the benefit of audiences and creators in every discipline right across the UK. At the same time, these policies sought to bring together the arts with education in new and innovative ways. As they did so, it became generally accepted that the type of skills fostered by engagement with the arts—among them, self-confidence, empathy and teamwork—have a value both for the individual's self-development and for nurturing our sense of connection to others.

This sea change was made possible by combining a sufficiency of funding with a series of strategic interventions designed to maximise the value of that funding and connect it with the widest possible range of audiences and creators, while all the time seeking to raise the bar for artistic and cultural excellence.

Free admission to our wealth of museums and galleries was just one way in which the then Government sought to achieve this. So popular and successful has that policy proved that even the coalition has come to the reluctant conclusion that it dare not touch it. According to the National Museum Directors' Conference, in 2008-09 24 million people visited just our national museums; that is, a 70 per cent increase in 10 years.

The enhanced popularity of our museums has also had a very positive impact on tourism, now accounting for eight out of the top 10 visitor attractions here in the UK. At the same time, there was also an early recognition of the power of digital technologies massively to increase access to the arts and to allow people to create, share and re-use artistic ideas in ways that were previously quite undreamt of.

A year ago, when it came to the arts, we had a very great deal to be proud of, but, in the space of barely nine months, I am afraid that the coalition has managed to undo or at least put in jeopardy many of the most effective achievements of the past decade. I regret that time does not permit one to list the full extent of them.

Of course, we all recognise the financial challenges that the nation faces, even if many of us on these Benches reject the coalition's rather broad-brush and cynically inaccurate explanation of how we came to find ourselves in our present position. Self-evidently, the arts and culture more generally are not and cannot stay immune from the financial pressures that are being brought to bear, most particularly on the public sector. But what I find truly egregious is the arbitrary and ill thought through way in which many of the cuts are being implemented, seemingly devoid of any meaningful attempt to assess their likely impact or, indeed, the value of individual initiatives, the roots of which are being hacked away at. I fear for the arts. I fear for the ill considered impact of cuts on UK tourism, on UK jobs, on UK education, on this country's sense of self-confidence and on the sustainability of its future as a culturally vibrant nation.

Baroness Young of Hornsey:

My Lords, I thank my noble friend the Earl of Clancarty for securing this debate, which is already proving to be a landmark occasion, and for providing a comprehensive and subtle overview. I also welcome the noble Baroness, Lady Bakewell, and hope that I can extend as warm a welcome to her as she extended to me when we both served on the board of the National Theatre. I am very pleased to see her contributing today.

I should declare a number of interests. In short, I have been a researcher, consultant, adviser and creative producer and have served on numerous boards in the cultural and creative sector, working, for example, with the Arts Council, the Heritage Lottery Fund, the BFI, the Cultural Leadership Programme and so on. My contribution today will echo what some other noble Lords have said, but what I am driving for is much more clarity about the intentions for the arts from the coalition Government. In that sense, I echo what my noble friend the Earl of Clancarty said earlier. I want to know the longer-term vision of the Government for the arts and the creative and cultural sector, what the strategy is for achieving that vision and, perhaps most important, what the underlying principles are of that vision and strategy.

Public subsidy might be a major part of those underlying principles. If we are going to say that substantial public subsidy for the arts is at an end, that it will not recover but will be reshaped forever, we need to know that now. One issue faced by many arts organisations, in particular those that are not large, national and urban, is that they do not have the capacity-I refer to human and financial resources-to take advantage of what few opportunities there are. Often, because they are firefighting a lot of the time, they do not have the capacity to think forward and work out how they might take advantage of some of the opportunities that might arise or produce some opportunities for themselves. That capacity building is necessary. This was alluded to by the noble Baroness, Lady Bonham-Carter, who is no longer in her place.

I will look at some of the work that I have been involved in over the past couple of years, which has been about the socially engaged arts, culture and critical practice. I agree with the noble Baroness, Lady Bakewell, that artists should not be social workers. However, a number of arts organisations, and indeed artists, have a strong commitment to producing work that will have an impact on people's lives, with a determined set of social objectives lying behind that commitment.

When asking about the strategy of the Government, I am concerned not only about some factors referred to earlier by the noble Earl that will impinge on the arts sector but about a number of other issues, such as cuts in department budgets. Much of the work that I referred to, which concerns reducing reoffending, working with young offenders, working with children in deprived areas and so on, is dependent on obtaining funds from other government departments. The issue is not just the lack of money available from sources directly related to arts activities.

I am a strong supporter of public subsidy for the arts because I believe that the market alone will not give us the creative edge, the innovation and the risk taking that artists, practitioners and entrepreneurs in a thriving arts sector need. We are globally very competitive in the arts and creative sector because we have had an ongoing commitment to invest public funds in the arts. It is possible to see that as an investment because of what comes out in future.

Talk of philanthropy and corporate sponsorship is all very well-we have had that to an extent over the years, so we are not starting from scratch-but we do not have an embedded culture of philanthropy or corporate sponsorship that can see beyond the needs of certain kinds of organisations. I get very concerned that, not only in government discourse but elsewhere, the kinds of organisations that are referred to as being the arts sector often fall into the category of national, London-based bodies, which are quite well funded in comparison with smaller organisations. That issue must be addressed.

Bearing in mind the reminder about timing that we were given at the outset of the debate, I have not been able to make all the points that I wanted to make. The key question is: how do the Government see the long-term future of the arts and the role of public subsidy within that?

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