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Culture shock: *The Leisure Review* lecture

Invited to challenge his audience to embrace a new way of thinking about the sport, leisure and culture sector, Sam Jones delivered *The Leisure Review* lecture and fulfilled his brief with aplomb.

The centrepiece of *The Leisure Review* symposium, the inaugural TLR lecture, was delivered by Sam Jones, an associate of the think tank Demos. Jones has recently finished a year's secondment with the Department of Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) during which he wrote the pamphlet *Culture Shock*, an assessment of the role of culture in modern society and a provocative challenge to the way policy-makers address access to culture and cultural provision. His first act at the lectern was to dissociate himself from the title 'Culture Shock'. His chosen title, he explained, had been rather more academic but this was changed somewhere along the way. It was an early sign that attitudes within government to the complexities of culture might leave something to be desired and his telling of the story was an early indication to the lecture's audience that Jones is not the dry academic that he might first appear.

As he explained to the symposium delegates, when drafting the pamphlet he had been invited to be radical and *Culture Shock* was making case for change in the way government relates to culture, one of the hardest words in the language to define. Offering the castels of Catalonia as an example of a spectacular but unconventional form of culture, Jones offered the broadest definition. "I use the term widely as something that is a vital constituent of society and democracy," he said. "It includes sport and all aspects of peoples' lives, alongside arts and theatre."

Folk culture, he argued, is still culture and, while the net result of sport might be improved health, the decisions to take part are cultural. Whether one improves one's health by physical activity is an intensely personal and social decision, and is therefore cultural decision.

"You might think I'm confusing a complex word but the reluctance of policy to take that complexity on is part of the problem," he said. "Complexity of culture gives us reason to consider why it matters." It puts cultural spending in different light and is also important for how leisure professionals make their case for funding. The question within DCMS is what is culture for? They might also ask whether there is such a thing as the cultural sector but culture is one of few areas of policy that people choose to do and this choice makes it difficult for governments to involve themselves in culture. Greater interference can be paternalistic or might be deterministic, directing or restricting people's ability to choose.

Jones explained that in the *Culture Shock* pamphlet he tries to suggest a way forward: governments at all levels need to be much clearer about how and why they invest in culture. This requires distinctions between the anthropological context, in which culture is the very essence of society and the cultural realm is a dynamic continuum of our collective social life made manifest by what we choose to do, and cultural forms, the visual arts, products, food, or dress that help people make sense of their world. This later concept of culture was, he argued, brilliantly expressed in the British Museum's *History of the World in 100 Objects* presented in partnership with the BBC. Such is the importance of culture in these contexts that it really matters if some people are left out. Jones was quite clear that how access to culture is made equitable really is the role of government policy.

"Government and others have tended to protect a fixed idea of the form of culture rather than protect the concept of the wider current of culture that flows through society," he said. "Governments tend to think cultural provision means having a museum or a gallery but not enough attention is paid to what is going on in cultural organisations or buildings and what they are actually doing."

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Sam Jones delivers *The Leisure Review* lecture at Wadham College

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Jones argued that cultural importance is lost when government focused on the cost. Cultural services might be seen as areas that can be cut but the current cuts must be seen in context of massive change. This requires thought about what society really needs. The role of the state is being pulled back in response to the need to save money and also a commitment to localism but such short-term changes are potentially dangerous to the nation's culture. Huge changes are taking place in the way people see society and he offered Finland's concept of the welfare state changing in response to immigration, highly apparent cultural differences in a previously homogenous society, and the Polish diaspora within the UK as examples. Both, Jones argues, represent part of give and take of society. Culture is the sphere in which such change is tangible and palpable. Consequently technical and social change needs to be given greater attention.

New media is shaping the cultural realm in a huge number of ways, shifting the power to express opinions from the few to the many and creating new opportunities and attitudes. The Big Brother controversy involving Jade Goody and Shilpa Shetti was given as perhaps an unlikely example to illustrate the complex array of skills that people need to operate successfully in a modern cultural environment. The flash points here were cultural and the argument was about the inability to appreciate cultural conflict. In a very complex world people need highly nuanced cultural capabilities and it is an increasingly pressing issue. While it is difficult for people to keep pace with this change, individual actions can have a massive impact and government at all levels needs to help people make sense and deal with a new world.

"What does this mean for policy makers and professionals?" Jones asked his audience. "The cultural sector should be thought of as infrastructure through which people achieve expression and develop capabilities they will need as citizens. This requires a different way of thinking about sports clubs, theatres, etc and requires a change in the way they present themselves."

Jones noted that while some councils have cut cultural spending, others have not. This, he suggested, is where localism becomes problematic. At State of the Arts conference Ed Vaizey talked about local decision-making in culture but the decision is not as free as might be supposed. If arts can be a fundamental part of some communities, why are they not fundamental to all communities? Such inequality of provision raises a very different question and can lead to a form of cultural apartheid.

The Culture Shock pamphlet sets out a new challenge: how does the sector help people cope? It also asks, what is the role of the expert and ultimately does local government need to fund culture? This last question is being asked more widely and if we are to offer a coherent response there needs to be greater association of cultural institutions with the idea of the public realm.

"Survival in the long term," Jones argued, "will require answer to a much bigger question: what is the function of the cultural sector? Is it necessary that governments to ensure cultural opportunity? The answer in the pamphlet is yes." However, the challenge for the cultural sector is the need to focus policy on culture and its importance in the public realm and find ways of demonstrating it to draw on different sources of revenue and public funding. "Culture is central to society but this is not reflected in the importance given to it in public policy. It's an easy cut to make. Culture shouldn't just be about keeping theatres or museums going. It's about what they do, what they provide and the role they provide in the public realm. Rather than seeing culture as a luxurious cost, what is the cost of losing cultural opportunities? It is not about putting culture at the end of public policy but putting it at the heart of public policy."

The closing message of the lecture offered a clear challenge: "The cultural sector needs to take control of that argument and policy-makers need to work with them to generate the evidence that is needed. There is no silver bullet to deal with the current cuts but in the coming months and years it will be vital to address the things I've discussed today."

***The Leisure Review* lecture was presented by Sam Jones as part of *The Leisure Review* symposium at Wadham College, Oxford on 31 March 2011. A summary of the Culture Shock pamphlet and links to the full text were published in the February issue of *The Leisure Review*.**

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