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Exeunt omnes: time to walk away

Having studied government policies for the arts in some depth and even considered those relating to sport, James Bryce thinks he may well have found the answer to the apparent policy problem.

I am in rant mode but glance at the news, both local and national, will, I trust, make my mood understandable. And it is all to do with our current object of worship: money.

First, we have that old chestnut, arts cuts. A proposal to effectively cut the Newcastle City Arts budget by 100%, the 100% cut to the Westminster arts budget, and, not least, the axing of The Byre Theatre in St Andrews.

The where? Briefly, The Byre (which translates as cowshed to southerners) was started more than half a century ago by enthusiastic amateurs and students. It grew, a professional company was established, received an Arts Council budget, and in 2001 a spanking new theatre was built – a beautiful space with astonishingly-good acoustics. In 2010 the Scottish Arts Council cut the company's grant so it became a touring-house. Now the theatre itself, a mere 12 years old, is to be closed. God knows what will happen to the building.

It is not the only example of putting buildings before activity. The Centre for Contemporary Arts in Glasgow reopened in 2001 after a massive refit and since then has twice gone into administration owing to lack of operational funds.

We are told it's all to do with saving money. But for what?

The aforementioned Scottish Arts Council now wears a new label on its coat – no doubt stitched on at great expense – called Creative Scotland. This now deals with all, however vaguely related, arty things, including cinema, which I'm sure, even after a century of activity, is still regarded with infra-dig suspicion. The awards for this year have now been announced. Several companies which formerly could plan ahead (as any business has to do – isn't that the basis of banks doling out money?) with a guaranteed two- or three-year funding, are now on single-project grants. This is rather like saying, "Yes, we're interested in backing your retail photography empire, so here's a camera. If you sell that, we might give you more."

Budgets of course, as we are told daily, have to be cut. Project funding (aided and abetted by the lottery of the lottery) helps do this in the short term. To balance this, and ensure that the budget doesn't get too cut, several quimpos have been appointed [Quimpo: quasi-informed marginally-practical administrator]. There is now someone at Creative Scotland who can give advice on ways of developing international links. The director of one company I know was summoned to discuss this. Creative Scotland, who had been funding them for some time, was apparently unaware that the company had mounted several acclaimed trans-European co-productions over the years, with punters in Naples waving flags bearing the director's name. This is not the only example; I can reel off at least three other Scottish Companies that have been tramping the international circuit for years.

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Mind you, they are trying hard. It appears that £30,000 has been granted to Deveron Arts “towards initial research and development to explore cultural exchange between Rio de Janeiro, Brazil and Huntly, Scotland”. Huntly, I should point out, is a town in the wilds of Aberdeenshire, estimated population 4,500.

I am observing that the important thing in lots of organisations these days is that, whatever happens to the practitioners (play-makers, writers, artists, dancers, etc), the administrators must not be strangled by the squeeze of the financial belt. Administration seems to be a Kafkaesque growth-industry. In the mid-seventies one well-known Scottish theatre had oneperson on publicity, and very effective she was too. Now it has seven. Of course, these have to be paid for so the theatre now mounts many co-productions, an effective cutting of the budget for actors, the folk we go to see in the first place. This is rather like saying, “We need to improve Blipwick Rovers. Bring in a herd of office-staff, but we'll have to cut the number of players down to six.”

I invite readers to google advertisements for arts administrators and see how many come up. Then note how many are on salaries over £25,000. As a follow-up, I now ask you to compare the number of advertisements for practitioners of the arts – performers, artists, writers and similar vagabonds. Note how many are asked to do it for nothing. Personally, I know very few professional practitioners who have ever actually achieved 25K in a year.

By the way, if you think I am being ‘jobist’ about administrators, I refer you to the £30,746 Creative Scotland awarded “towards establishing a senior academic leadership post of a Chair in Creative Industries as the basis to establishing a new Centre for the Study of Creative Industries”.

It seems that talkingabout the arts is vastly more important than doingthem.

Never mind, we are all labouring under the same fiscal burden; sports get it too. Our glorious leader proclaimed that the London Olympics would encourage an interest in sport throughout the country. To show his commitment and belief the government have just announced cuts to the sports budget.

Could it be that all this talk of the importance of the arts and sports is mere lip-service?

A glance at some of the recent post-Olympic posters lets us know where our real priorities lie. It is not about artistic endeavour, works that might move us to become better people who are encouraged to think about life and the world we live in. It is about success, returns on the money we spend.

You think I am being cynical? UK Sport has just announced that for the next Olympics in Rio guaranteed funding will be only for those sports which will definitely spawn medals. If each country take our lead, we can expect the Japanese to provide only table-tennis players, the Russians gymnasts, the Brits cyclists, and so on; and of course when we, the Brits who are oh so keen on the spirit of fair play and ‘Play Up and Play the Game’ don'twin any medals in Rio, it means that at the nextOlympics in 2020 in Dubai (or some other profitable venue), the Japanese pingpongers will have the joy of competing only against themselves, while Bradley Wiggins and whoever takes over from Chris Hoy can race each other across the cultural desert.

The arts and sport cannot be run on so-called ‘market-led’ profiteering grounds, although of course they need capital. Football has bought into the market and what a mess we have there; ‘local’ teams, like Manchester United, made up of every nationality in the world, with players whose weekly wage would keep an arts centre solvent for a

year.

But that's the way it is at the moment. Forget humanity, forget "The game's the thing", forget artistic insights, whenever they are there and wherever they are.

I propose we give in. The arts and sports are ephemeral. All the government is interested in is in keeping a dying, debt-soaked system going, the province of the wealthy few. They were elected by a sort of democratic method, so I think we should support them. So let's build lots of new arts centres and sports facilities but not pay anyone to run them (it will save on electricity, but, boy, will they look impressive and forward-looking). Instead, let's give over the arts to the likes of Simon Cowell; he knows how to give the country exactly the Ronald MacDonald nutritionless fare some of it drools over. Let's create thousands and thousands of administrators to check whether he's doing it right. Let's give more and more money to the pro players and football money-managers. This will increase competition and encourage the youth of Britain to seek success at all costs. But definitely don't give them anything like balls or safety-nets or sports clubs (which will be shut anyway); too expensive, too community-orientated and that's without mentioning the health and safety issues.

Actually, let's get straight to the root of all this. Give the whole Arts Council and sports budget to the shareholders. After all, they are the only ones who really matter.

James Bryce is an arts practitioner and a regular contributor to *The Leisure Review*.

***The Leisure Review*, February 2013**

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