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The end of economics: why numbers are killing culture

Inspired by the culture secretary's recent speech at the British Library, Jonathan Ives argues that the time has come for the government's department of culture to ask the Treasury that most difficult of questions: why?

I have to confess that the question 'I wonder what Maria Miller is up to?' rarely pops into my head but a little while ago that precise thought was triggered by electronic notification from the DCMS regarding a keynote speech to be delivered by the culture secretary on the subject of arts and culture.

Having not heard from Ms Miller for some time (despite our obvious connection – she the secretary of state representing a significant proportion of the interests of the sport, leisure and culture sector at cabinet level, me the editor of a magazine that covers similar ground – we are not close) and having not been invited to the British Library to hear her deliver her thoughts in person, I made the negligible effort to find out what she'd had to say by clicking a few links on the DCMS website the following day. Given that her colleagues in government had recently presented the nation with a vision of a further £25 billion of cuts to the public sector and a state of permanent austerity the better to shrink the state for the preservation of our collective ability to create wealth, the stage seemed to be set for an explanation of how the culture and sport elements of the secretary of state's remit might be planning to meet the challenges of this difficult future.

I was not disappointed. I should have been, but I quickly realised that my expectations of national cultural policy have been so deeply eroded over the years that anything approaching competently composed platitudes adequately delivered now registers as something of a political achievement. It may be that I do Ms Miller an injustice. I have only read the original script, which, as the DCMS press office, notes "may differ from the delivered version". She may have followed the example of the late Tony Banks, who, as an unlikely minister for sport in the first Blair administration, stood on the podium of the national sports development seminar in Nottingham, leafed through the speech prepared for him by his staff, put it down on the lectern in front of him and told his audience: "You can read what I've had written for me later but what I really want to say is this...". But I suspect she did not.

The speech prepared on her behalf began with a reference to Dylan Thomas, referenced the merits of Elgar and Mumford and Sons, and outlined how she marshals the arguments in favour of investment in cultural matters during her day job. Miller criticised the "selective hearing" of those people (we may infer that she was referring to the media) who had emphasised the point she made in a speech last April that the arts add value to the economy as if it was the only point she had made. With this reprimand issued, this speech continued, making repeated references to the value of the arts and culture to national economy and quoting Apple's founder, Steve Jobs, who said, "It's technology married with liberal arts, married with the humanities, that yields us the results that make our heart sing." Indeed this quotation was so central to her message that she repeated it, throwing in a reference to Jonathan Ive [sic], Apple's British designer, who could be included among the 1.6 million people who work in the UK's creative industries, "a sector worth more than £70 billion last year and which www.theleisurereview.co.uk

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grew faster than any other sector in the economy”. Signing off, the culture secretary urged her audience to “above all, carry on making hearts sing”.

It is, of course, not the job of politicians to make anyone’s heart sing – the abandonment of ethics and integrity in favour of claims of managerial competence saw rhetoric and passion leave the political scene several generations ago – but this speech did little to dispel the suspicion among some observers of the sport, leisure and culture sector that the staff at the DCMS have little more to do with their time than sit around flicking playing cards into a top hat.

This was a speech that could have been delivered by any culture secretary of any political persuasion at any time in the last three decades. The message was steadfast in stating that the arts and culture are a Good Thing, that there is great economic value in the cultural and creative industries, but that culture is about so much more than the money. Culture is of course about its ability to make life-affirming, life-changing connections, not only for people who can appreciate Peter Grimes at Aldeburgh (“extraordinary”) or Othello at the National (“so believable, so powerful, so painful...”) or the music of John Tavener at Winchester Cathedral (“spellbound... eternal...”) but even for young people (“collar turned up at a bus stop in the rain”). Culture is even for people who listen to Mumford and Sons who use public transport.

Despite such insight, I did find the culture secretary’s speech interesting but for its context rather than its content. While Miller was affirming the cultural values of Mumford and Sons (“such nice, well-educated young men... so many banjos” – no, she didn’t say that) her colleagues in government, the prime minister and the chancellor, themselves such nice and expensively educated young men, were instigating, explaining and justifying perpetual austerity as the *raison d’être* of government. While Maria Miller was calling for the inclusion of an A for arts in the education acronym of education aspiration STEM (which currently stands for science, technology, engineering and maths in the Goveian world of education policy), George Osborne was calling for a further £25 billion of cuts to public expenditure to ensure that columns deemed to indicate a healthy economic status are finally showing the correct numbers.

With such economic aspirations from the Treasury, aspirations that would effectively spell the end of any responsibility for cultural matters for national government and the end of any involvement in cultural matters for local government, one might expect the government’s own culture department to be addressing the issue and if not actually coming up with some answers at least being able to give some indication that they have understood the question.

But let us not be too harsh on the DCMS: these are difficult times and there are many difficult questions. My suggestion is that the department makes the most of their secretary of state’s degree in economics and starts with the question that goes right to the heart of cultural matters. The question is not what is the point of culture but rather what is the point of economics?

The question should be rather easier to answer now that there is a general agreement that the neo-liberal economic tenets of wealth creation, privatisation and trickle-down has, like the application of Marxist-Leninism before it, been proven to have failed its practical. The DCMS can look to the CBI, who say that business must pay people higher wages to afford the goods they produce; to Adair Turner, chairman of the Financial Services Authority until its recent abolition, who has likened the management of the UK economy to someone reaching for a hair of the dog while still in the throes of a hangover; to the nationalisation of the banking system via initial crisis bail-outs and the subsequent policy of quantitative easing; or to the mayor of London,

who says that his police force will need water canon to maintain order on the streets of the capital this summer.

With the support of his colleagues in cabinet, the chancellor is persisting with the claim that the numbers are all that matter, that everything and everybody must be sacrificed to the attainment of the correct economic indicators. Maria Miller should be well qualified to ask: why? What happens when the correct numbers have been achieved? What will the government be able to do once the pain has been borne, the economic tide has risen and three cherries appear on the chancellor's slot machine?

As Ms Miller and everyone else with a degree in economics knows, the answer is: nothing. The numbers will never be sufficiently favourable: there is always another battle to be fought, another financial foe to be vanquished. Austerity without end is the chancellor's vision but it might more accurately be presented as austerity without an end, in the sense of 'without purpose'. Like Oceania's state of perpetual war in Orwell's 1984, perpetual austerity is now required to justify the imposition of any hardship, the appropriation of any wealth or benefit, the denigration and criminalisation of any minority or dissident.

Although the culture secretary quoted the late Mr Jobs, she might also reflect Apple's close neighbour, Google, and more particularly on the image of the Google bus stuck on the streets of San Francisco. The story of the Google bus, you may recall, is that the company provides a transportation service between its headquarters, the Googleplex in Paulo Alto, and San Francisco, the city 20 miles to the north in which many of its young and aching trendy staff prefer to live. The nuance for cultural inquisitors is that many Google staff choose to live in San Francisco because of the lifestyle options provided in a vibrant, culturally mixed urban environment. However, it seems that one thing these wealthy young hipsters do not want to do is mix with any of the less-than-wealthy people who also live in this vibrant, culturally mixed urban environment, hence the luxury Google-branded coach service that makes sure the company's staff do not have use public transport. That one of these coaches got stuck on San Francisco's legendarily steep streets is not particularly remarkable (it has happened to other long vehicles taking an unsuitable route through the city); that this bus gathered a crowd of local residents who expressed their feelings for Google and its principles by throwing bricks at it probably is remarkable.

Should the staff of the DCMS have time on their hands, they might usefully reflect on this unscheduled bus stop and consider what it might tell us about what culture means and to whom it belongs. As the culture secretary correctly points out, culture is far more than a highly effective contributor to the nation's balance sheet but equally culture is not something in the gift of the government. Culture is made by, and belongs to, those who create it, not as an economic statement or a business venture but by virtue of what they do and what they wear, who they talk to and how they choose to live.

It might be an uncomfortable truth for ministers but the government does not allow culture to exist by virtue of its funding largesse; it would be more accurate to say that it buys association with it. Ministers would be well advised to remember that it is a short step from punk to politics. The politicians so quick to condemn the nihilism and rebellion of youth movements in their day are the same politicians who are so quick to embrace the same young people when they become revered musicians, artists or designers. How quickly the intolerable job becomes the celebrated engine of the creative economy.

The culture secretary might remind her colleagues that culture will not stop if the Treasury stops investing in it. Music, art, sport, literature and everything else will still happen but where, when and with whom will be difficult to predict. Some of it will be uncomfortable for politicians to

countenance and the majority of it will be beyond their control. Politicians supporting the demands for perpetual austerity should ponder the comparison between the graffiti in their constituencies and the graffiti in the undercroft of the Southbank Centre in London; or on the extent to which the culture of football, now dominated by the economic powerhouse that is the Premier League, was once dominated by racism and violence.

Economics is an interesting tool for exploring the cause-and-effect processes of historical study or speculating on social developments but few economists have any track record as futurologists and those that do only have them by virtue of having been proven to be correct many years after they were ignored or ridiculed. Yet economic arguments have been allowed to dominate the political agenda to the extent that they become the sole motivation and sole justification for the government of a nation.

The culture secretary should insist that all economic debate and declarations should be followed by a simple question: why? If the answer is not to improve the lives of the people in whose name and by whose indulgence the government acts, the economic argument should be deemed void. In preparation for the next economic debate in parliament politicians would be well advised to spend some time considering the nature of culture, what it means and how it is created. If they also spent some time with the cultural professionals in their own constituencies and asked 'how' or 'even 'why not' they might find their jobs a little bit easier and a whole lot more rewarding.

Jonathan Ives is the editor of the Leisure Review. He is not, much to the lasting regret of his family and his bank manager, the designer of the iPod and the iPhone.

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