

British cultural policies 1970-1990

Oliver Bennett Arts organisations in Britain find themselves in a double bind: they are inadequately supported by an inadequate system, and are therefore thrown back on to the market place where they encounter increasingly fierce competition from the cultural industries. They occupy a kind of economic no man's land. The old idea of the democratisation of culture, with its associated certainties, no longer holds. Unless it can be replaced by a persuasive alternative, arts policy in Britain is unlikely to change and British arts organisations can expect another very uneasy decade.

An Englishman attempting to address an international audience on the subject of cultural policy embarks on a hazardous course. It is not just because the French can speak easily of *politiques culturelles* or the Dutch of *cultuurbeleid*, while the English are uncomfortable with *cultural policy*. It's the associations of the word culture itself, and the resulting confusion that so often surrounds discussions of comparative cultural policy. The many different assumptions behind the word become only too apparent when international groups of Cultural Managers - again an uneasy expression in English - get together to try and share their ideas and experiences. At the start, therefore, we must define out terms.

The three senses of culture

The late Raymond Williams has observed that the word *culture* is one of the two or three most complicated words in the English

language.¹ The oldest sense of the word, that of tending a natural growth - as in agriculture for example - still survives, but it is the later, metaphorical applications of the word that are of most interest. In his fascinating historical study of the word², Williams suggested that modern usage was based around three different senses:

Firstly, it is used to describe a general process of intellectual, spiritual, and aesthetic development. From this sense, we get the adjective *cultured*, and the idea of the man or woman of culture. There is a nineteenth century Romantic legacy in this sense of the word, which endows culture with superior values. Culture - in Matthew Arnold for example³ - was presented as a humanising alternative to the mechanistic and aggressively individualistic values of industrial civilisation. In this way, the values of culture became opposed to the values of industry.

Secondly, the word is used to describe a whole way of life - whether of a period, a people, or a group. This is the dominant sense in T.S. Eliot's *Notes towards the definition of culture*. His memorable description of postwar English culture comes to mind: 'Derby Day, Henley Regatta, Cowes, the twelfth of August, a cup final, the dog races, the pin table, the dart board, Wensleydale cheese, boiled cabbage cut into sections, beetroot in vinegar, nineteenth century Gothic churches, and the Music of Elgar.'⁴ The list reveals much about Eliot, but the drift of the argument is nevertheless clear. In later adaptations of this sense of the word, we get youth culture, gay culture, sub-culture and so on.

In the third sense, *culture* refers to the *products* of intellectual and particularly artistic activity. This clearly relates to the first sense of the word - the *process* of intellectual and aesthetic development. Culture is thus music, film, dance, literature, painting, and sculpture. On this gets built a huge linguistic superstructure of *cultural industries*, *cultural products*, *cultural consumption*, *cultural statistics*, *cultural professions*, and so on. Given the opposition of culture to industry that is implicit in the first, Romantically influenced, sense of the word, the very idea of a cultural industry or a cultural product can to some appear as a paradoxical juxtaposition.

In French, it is the idea of *culture* as the arts that is the dominant sense; not so in English, in which we move equally between all three senses of the word, sometimes in the same sentence. When the British speak of *culture*, they are therefore likely to confuse not only the French but also themselves. This is perhaps why they generally avoid speaking of cultural policies. But they do have them, and it is interesting to look closely at the ideas on which they are based.

What are cultural policies?

This brings us to the next problem. What are cultural policies? If we continue to use our three meanings of culture, we have three ways of looking at it. Let us begin with the first - *Culture as process*, the process of spiritual, intellectual, and aesthetic development. We can see immediately that in this sense, cultural policy will have a very broad application, relating to personal development, formal and informal education, and aesthetic sensitivity. An enormous range of agencies are implicated: government, local authorities, schools, colleges, universities, the media, arts organisations, charities, voluntary organisations, political parties, Trades unions, professional societies, the church, the family, and a great deal of commercial enterprise. All these are instruments of cultural policy.

Using the second meaning - *culture* as the whole way of life of a group or a people - we encounter even greater problems. The very idea of *policy* implies planning, and it is hard to conceive of a *whole way of life* being planned. Even if Marx's metaphor of base and superstructure is invoked⁵, few people would seriously argue that the relationship of the economic base to the cultural superstructure was one of simple determinism. It is worth recalling Eliot's contention that *culture* (in this sense of a whole way of life) is the one thing that cannot be deliberately aimed at. 'Culture', he argues, 'can never be wholly conscious - there is always more to it than we are conscious of; and it cannot be planned because it is also the unconscious background of all our planning.'⁶ In the sense of *culture* as a whole way of life, the idea of a cultural policy thus becomes rather meaningless.

This brings us to the third sense - *culture* as the products of intellectual and particularly artistic activity. It is in this, more limited sense of *culture*, that the idea of cultural policy can

appear most straightforward. It can be seen to relate to policies designed for the production of art, and for the presentation of art to audiences. These policies can be put into two categories:

1. Those developed in the public sector, or those developed by organisations supported by the public sector.
2. Policies developed in the private sector. These can be further broken down into: firstly, policies developed by small organisations, such as private galleries, and commercial theatres; secondly, policies developed by the so-called cultural industries of film, video, television, publishing, broadcasting, and recording.

However, even when using *cultural policy* in this last, most limited sense, there are still difficulties. Can an organisation be said to have a cultural policy, just because it produces or sells cultural artefacts? Can a policy be cultural when the profit motive is dominant? When does a policy become cultural? The old tensions between art and industry are all too clear.

Given all of these difficulties, it was tempting to avoid the problems posed by the idea of cultural policy, and to plunge straight into the question of public policy for the arts in Britain. I chose not to do this for two reasons: Firstly, the overlapping meanings of art and culture, and of the different senses of the word culture, are themselves illuminating. They represent a complex argument about the place of artistic and intellectual activity within general human development. The different meanings of the word are a record of that argument, and that argument still goes on. Secondly, the arts supported by the public sector represent only a small part of the totality of cultural artefacts produced, and one might add, consumed in Britain. They by no means correspond to even our most limited sense of the word *culture* - the

products of artistic activity, or the whole body of the arts. The arts supported by the public sector have to be seen alongside those produced by the private sector, and in particular by the cultural industries. They are, in any case, closely interconnected.

British arts policies: structure

With the broader context established, we can now proceed to an analysis of public policy for the support of the arts in Britain. What are its key features? And what have been the significant changes in the period we are looking at - the last 20 years? A good place to start, especially for those not familiar with the British system, is the *structure* of arts support.

The most important point to grasp is that responsibility for supporting the arts is divided between many different government departments, local authorities, and *QUANGOs*. (For those unfamiliar with the term, it is an acronym for Quasi-Autonomous Non-Governmental Organisations). There is no single Ministry of Culture, headed by a senior Minister with extensive responsibilities in the cultural field. There is, instead, a Minister for the Arts, usually of junior rank and with additional responsibilities in other fields. To complicate matters further, the system of arts support differs in the four constituent countries of the UK.

The system as a whole is often said to operate under an *arm's length principle*.⁷ The arts, it is said, are far too important to be left to the politicians, and decisions about them must be taken at *arm's length*. These decisions are therefore taken by independent organisations, funded by the government, but operating as a 'buffer' between artists and the State. However, the idea of an *arm's length principle* - applied generally to the funding of the arts - is misleading. Even if we accept that the

organisations concerned are independent of government (and it is a big if), both central and local government support and finance the arts directly in a number of ways.

Let us look at England. Central government support for the arts is mainly the responsibility of the Office of Arts and Libraries (OAL), headed by the Minister for the Arts. It funds three of the so-called *arm's length organisations* - the Arts Council of Great Britain, the British Film Institute and the Crafts Council. Of these, the Arts Council is by far the most significant, accounting for nearly 50% of the OAL's total expenditure on arts and museums. However, the OAL spends nearly the same amount *directly* on the major museums and galleries - the Victoria & Albert, the Tate, the National Gallery, and so on.⁸

Then we have the local authorities. They also spend directly on the arts and museums. Their expenditure is roughly equivalent to the total amount, direct and indirect, spent by the OAL. So we can see that the *arm's length principle* operates in just one part of the system - that is, if it operates at all.

There is some irony in the resignation statement of Luke Ritner, Secretary-General of the Arts Council of Great Britain up until the Summer of 1990. Unable to accept the sweeping reforms that the Minister for the Arts proposed to introduce into the funding system, Ritner argued that the *arm's-length principle* was in danger. Much the same thing had been said when Ritner himself was appointed in 1983. A former Conservative councillor, and previously director of the Association for Business Sponsorship of the Arts, Ritner replaced Roy Shaw, a distinguished professor of Adult Education with Labour sympathies. Influential in Ritner's appointment was the then chairman of the Arts Council, William Rees-Mogg. Rees-

Mogg, a close associate of Mrs. Thatcher, had himself replaced Kenneth Robinson, a former Labour Minister, two years earlier. Robinson and Shaw had been appointed under a Labour Administration; Rees-Mogg and Ritner under Thatcher's. Rees-Mogg's successor, Peter Palumbo, is a well known supporter of the Conservative party.

However, to return to structural questions. Government support of the arts does not end with the OAL and local authorities. Other government departments are also involved. For example, the Department of Education and Science supports central institutions for professional training in the arts, such as the Royal College of Music and the Royal College of Art. The Foreign and Commonwealth Office funds the British Council. The Ministry of Defence funds Military Bands. These might not sound significant, but it's worth noting that in 1987/8, the Ministry of Defence spent £62 million maintaining its military bands.⁹ In the same year, the Arts Council spent around £10 million on all music and opera.

Public support for the arts in England is thus channeled through a number of diverse agencies. The responsibilities often overlap. A network of regional arts associations was created in the 60s and 70s, funded by both the Arts Council and the local authorities. The relationship between the regional arts associations and the Arts Council has never been easy, with continuing disagreement over who should do what. In some parts of the country, this kind of disagreement is also common amongst the two tiers of local authority. Both the district councils and the county councils are empowered to support the arts, although neither are obliged to. There is often conflict between the county and the district authorities, and this can be exacerbated

if the county and the districts are of different political persuasions. The degree to which a local authority is prepared to support the arts can vary significantly from authority to authority.

There is no doubt that the system of arts support in England is administratively untidy. It is amusing to recall that when the Arts Council of Great Britain was set up in 1945, John Maynard Keynes, its first chairman, made an inaugural radio broadcast. 'I don't believe it is yet realised what an important thing has happened', he said. 'State patronage of the arts has crept in. It has happened in a very English, informal, unostentatious way - half baked if you like.'¹⁰

Today, such virtues are no longer fashionable. Ministers want value for money. The uncertainties over exactly who should be doing what prompted the Minister for the Arts to commission a review of the structure of arts funding, which was completed in September 1989. However, owing to ministerial changes, there has been a delay in consideration of the recommendations. The detail of the future structure is still unclear, but it will undoubtedly result in clearer lines of responsibility between the Arts Council and the regional arts associations - or regional arts boards, as they are now to be called. Whether these structural changes will be welcomed by the arts producing organisations remains to be seen. The untidiness of the current system, or to describe it in positive terms, the plurality of sources, has had one distinct advantage for arts organisations. There is no single, controlling bureaucracy; and if one door closes, the enterprising arts administrator may well find others that will open.

I have dwelt on the English system and although the detail in Wales, Scotland, and

Northern Ireland is different, their systems share broadly the same characteristics. In Scotland and Northern Ireland, there are no regional arts associations, and the structure of local government is different. But in all three countries, there is still a plurality of funding sources, with government departments, local authorities, and independent arts councils all formulating policies for arts support.

Key features: the 70s

The sum of the policies pursued by all of these agencies - often independently of one another - represents public policy for the arts in Britain. These policies are of course strongly influenced by the many organisations which produce and promote art, and it is these organisations that give meaning to the policies. At the same time, those policies have a profound influence on the nature of the work that is produced, and the way in which it is presented to audiences. Given the very particular concerns of each art form, is it possible to draw out any common themes? If so, will they be so general as to be meaningless? Can a policy for literature, for example, have anything in common with a policy for dance?

I believe it can. In looking back over the past 20 years, I think it is possible to detect a distinct shift not only in the preoccupations of policy makers at almost every level, but also in the very language in which they use to discuss the arts and their policies for support. This shift roughly coincides with the end of one decade and the start of the next: it is possible to see in the 70s the continuation of a particular tradition, and from the 80s, the beginning of a break with that tradition. This of course parallels changes that we can see in so many other aspects of the public sector in Britain. The tradition to which I refer is that of trying to make the arts more accessible. It's an extremely complex issue, but in its various forms, this seems to me to be the recurring

Leitmotif in thinking about arts policies during the 70s.

It has a long history. When the Arts Council was established in 1945, the objective of making the arts more accessible to the public throughout Great Britain was enshrined in its constitution. Before that, in 1922, it was to be an aim of the new BBC. The BBC would be, according to its first general manager, Lord Reith, 'a drawn sword parting the ignorance of darkness.'¹¹ Its function would be 'to offer the public something better than it now thinks it likes.'¹² Before that, in 1869, in *Culture and anarchy*, Matthew Arnold argued that 'the true men of culture must work until the raw and unkindled masses of humanity are touched with sweetness and light.'¹³ Going back even further, we find Wordsworth, in 1800, complaining of the 'degrading thirst after outrageous stimulation', and the 'awful neglect of the great works of Shakespeare and Milton.'¹⁴ The context of the message changes from generation to generation, but its drift is clear: art must be brought to the people.

In the 1970s this idea was dressed up as the democratisation of culture.¹⁵ Stripped of its earlier missionary overtones, it was represented as a kind of human right. For reasons of socio-economic disadvantage, it was argued, the mass of the population was culturally disenfranchised. The role of the State, therefore, was to enable the population as a whole to enter into its rightful cultural heritage. Although statistical evidence was incomplete, it was generally accepted that the arts (at least those arts supported by the State) attracted no more than 5 to 10% of the population. This had to change. It is against this background that the major policy initiatives of the 70s have to be seen. Some were continuations of policies begun in the 50s and

60s. Others were new. If we look briefly at them, we can see clearly the strategies for the democratisation of culture at work.

Firstly: *regionalism*. One explanation for the general public's indifference to the arts was the absence of opportunity to experience them. Physical access was seen as one of the major problems. The development of new facilities and support for artists in the regions therefore became a priority. Interest in this issue led to Robert Hutchison's influential report *A hard fact to swallow*.¹⁶ The fact in question was the unequal division of arts subsidy between the south-east of England and the rest of the country. Hutchison concluded, at the beginning of the 1980s, that there was still much to be done, and that culturally we were still two nations.

The second initiative, and this is related to the first, concerns *touring schemes*. If everyone was to have access to good arts facilities, then the best available work - wherever it originated - was to be shown in them. If, for example, you were not able to get to the Royal Opera House in London, then you should at least be able to catch the Welsh National Opera on tour. There were also numerous experiments in different kinds of touring. If people would not come to art, then art would have to be taken to them - in youth centres, sports halls, pubs, village halls - wherever they were accustomed to meet.

Thirdly, we come to *ticket prices*. It was asserted that high ticket prices kept people out. Free admission to museums was almost sacrosanct. Prices for the performing arts were to be kept artificially low through subsidy. Some organisations, such as the Citizens Theatre in Glasgow, decided that whatever else might stop people from coming to the theatre, it wouldn't be money. For many years, as a point of principle, they would not charge anyone more than 50p for a ticket.

Fourthly: *marketing*. In the face of initial suspicion, marketing experts moved into arts organisations, bringing, they claimed, not the ethics of business, but new tools for widening access. People stayed away from the arts, it was argued, because arts organisations did not know how to sell themselves. Marketing would change all that.

Fifthly: *education*. It was argued that hostility or indifference to the arts often began at school. Arts organisations perceived that they could break down barriers, and build audiences for the future, by working in schools. Many of them began to employ arts officers. Theatre in education flourished.

Sixthly: *arts buildings* themselves were seen as part of the problem - unfriendly, intimidating, exclusive. The concept of the arts centre took root. They opened in every conceivable kind of building - churches, engine sheds, disused schools, old fire stations, new buildings. Many different art forms would come under one roof, and there would be a mixture of amateur and professional work. Great emphasis would be placed on the social ambience of the place. People just coming for a drink, it was suggested, would get interested in the arts.¹⁷ People interested in one art form, would be drawn to another.

Finally: *money*. Democratising culture required resources. There was, of course, never enough. But annual increases from the government exceeded the rate of inflation. Organisations could, from time to time, afford to fail without going bankrupt, and modest support was available for experiment and new developments.

It is not my purpose here to assess the validity of these policies for democratising culture, or to assess the extent to which they were successful; and I have only mentioned some of them. It is more to create a sense of the pre-occupations of the time. Nor do I wish to

avoid the complexity of the issues. There was, as always, vigorous debate about which arts should be supported; and the whole notion of widening access to the cultural heritage was challenged by an active community arts movement. The Arts Council, in particular, was attacked for what Raymond Williams once described as the Fabian tone in culture: that is, the ideal of leading the unenlightened to the particular kind of light which the leaders find satisfactory for themselves.¹⁸

Acrimonious as these policy debates sometimes were, they did reflect a genuine and serious concern with the relations between art and society - a concern which in the 80s gradually diminished in the face of more pressing issues. As the Thatcher Administration got into its stride, the arts world was squeezed. The increases in public funding for the arts slowed down substantially, and the experience of most arts organisations from the mid 80s onwards was levels of grant-aid well below the rate of inflation. Often, it was at cash standstill or less.

This has resulted in a quite different set of policy concerns from those we observed during the 70s. They can best be characterised as the policies of survival.

Key features: the 80s

Some of the old policies lingered on into the 80s. Occasionally, they would flare into life, only to disappear as quickly. For example, amidst much sound and fury, the Arts Council launched its *Glory of the Garden*-strategy in 1984. The then chairman, Rees-Mogg, confidently announced that one of the Arts Council's original aims had been achieved: London was now probably the greatest artistic metropolis of the modern world, challenged only by New York. However, in the British Garden of the Arts, he declared - with a rather curious reference to Kipling - 'there was a magnificent display at the Centre,

but it was surrounded by empty beds and neglected shrubberies'.¹⁹ In other words, regional development was now to be the priority. However, 4 years on, in 1988, the disparity between Arts Council expenditure per head in London and that in the rest of England was even greater than in 1984.²⁰ Unless money was to be taken out of the artistic metropolis that had been so carefully nurtured, new funds were needed. They were not forthcoming.

So one of the key strategies in the democratisation of culture - improving geographical access - virtually ground to a halt. Similarly, encouraging access through low ticket prices - another key strategy - also foundered. Ministers talked of a 'welfare state mentality' in the arts, and arts organisations were told to go out into the market place and earn more. Ticket prices had to go up - faster than average earnings, faster than the Retail Price Index. As subsidy stood still, or declined - organisations could only survive through increasing their sales. More and more museums abandoned their policies of free admission. As the 80s wore on, preoccupations with the market became more intense. Arts administrators were encouraged to see themselves more and more as business executives. There was a boom in training, and arts administrators were called upon to acquire new business skills. Arts consultants proliferated, offering three year plans, time management, and bigger and better markets.

The very language in which the arts were discussed began to change. The emphasis on the importance of the arts to the individual and society, gave way to an emphasis on the arts as an economic commodity. The spirit of the times was brilliantly reflected in John Myerscough's book, *The Economic importance of the arts in Britain*, published in 1988.²¹ In it, the arts were measured according to their local economic

impact, their stimulus to tourism, their contribution to overseas earnings, and so on. At the same time, the drive for sponsorship intensified. Businesses were exhorted to see the public relations benefits that could accrue to them through sponsoring a prestigious arts company. The arts product became a tool of corporate publicity.

All of this had its effect on the nature of the work that was produced. Arts administrators became increasingly apprehensive about taking risks. The survival of their organisations depended upon increased sales, and these would be threatened by experiment and unusual programmes. The number of small cast performances increased: they cost less. This affected theatre writers: they wrote new plays for fewer performers.

The changing values perhaps had the greatest impact on younger artists, particularly those forming new performance companies. It became increasingly difficult for them to break into the market. The funding organisations found it difficult to enter into new commitments. Sponsors wanted prestige and a track record.

Conclusion

At the beginning of the 90s, we thus find British arts policies in a muddle. They are caught midway between the European model of state support, and the American model of private and corporate donations. British arts organisations suffer from the worst of both systems: the bureaucracy of the former, and the capriciousness of the latter - and with the resources of neither. However much Britain might aspire to the American model, it simply does not have the tradition of private giving to the arts that exists in the US; and public expenditure on the arts in Britain is nowhere near the level of that of her European and

Oliver Bennett

was Head of Arts Administration at Leicester Polytechnic and Chief Executive of the Phoenix Arts Centre in 1991

Scandinavian neighbours: Germany, France, The Netherlands, and Sweden all spend more than twice as much per head as Britain does. They also spend a correspondingly higher proportion of their GDP.²²

If London really is, as Rees-Mogg claimed, the greatest artistic metropolis of the modern world, it has been achieved under extraordinarily adverse conditions; but it does, of course, depend on what he means by artistic. This brings us back to where we started - the danger of making the arts supported by the state synonymous with the idea of culture, even in the most limited sense of the word. If we do that, we clearly mistake a part for the whole.

Standing back from public policy for the arts, we see that the arts supported are in fact a very small part of the cultural sector. It's worth reminding ourselves of some revealing UK cultural statistics:

- In 1989, 7.2 million videotapes were hired each week. 10 years earlier, this industry had barely existed. More money is now spent per year on hiring videotapes than on admission to all live theatre, concerts, and other arts.
- The most popular UK soap opera on television is currently *Eastenders*. One episode will be watched by more people than attend live theatre in one year.
- In 1989, 92% of all households had record or tape equipment, and 77% had both. 9% had CD players and 25% of all adults owned a personal or portable stereo.
- In 1987, 97% of all households owned a TV set, 57% owned more than one, and 17% owned three. The average person was watching three and a half hours of television a day.
- In 1988, the average household owned four radio sets, and 20% owned six or more.
- Half the population claimed to have read more than 10 books in 1988.

These statistics²³ provide a sharp reminder of the enormous popularity of the personal cultural centre. It's based in the home, and it's well equipped: with TV (terrestrial and satellite), radio, video, hi-fi, and whatever else the technology can produce. It's safe, its comfortable, it's convenient, and it's cheap. Programmed by the cultural industries, it offers multiple choice at all times of the day and night: TV programmes, radio programmes, videos, recordings (on CD, cassette, and vinyl) and books.

Arts organisations in Britain thus find themselves in a double bind: they are inadequately supported by an inadequate system, and are therefore thrown back on to the market place where they encounter increasingly fierce competition from the cultural industries. They occupy a kind of economic no man's land. As we have seen, the old idea of the democratisation of culture, with its associated certainties, no longer holds. Unless it can be replaced by a persuasive alternative, arts policy in Britain is unlikely to change in the near future, and British arts organisations can expect another very uneasy decade.

Notes

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2. *Ibid.*, pp. 76-81.
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