

ARTS POLICY AND A SCOTTISH PARLIAMENT

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As I write this article, the 1996 Edinburgh Festival has begun. The capital is packed with performers, critics, journalists and plain honest gawpers. Church halls, school gyms and masonic lodges have been pressed into service as venues, and tourists crowd Edinburgh's re-organised city centre. Stamina depending, those visitors could sit for thousands of hours in front of an ever-changing spectacle of theatre, comedy, music and dance. Behind the scenes a smaller number of people have worked as promoters, stage managers, venue operators and box office staff. Behind them are the policy makers, the Directors of the International Festival, Fringe and Film Festival. The audiences aren't concerned with the policies which have helped create the shows they watch, and the administrators won't have time to see all the shows that their efforts have helped bring to fruition.

In this respect, the Edinburgh Festival, which often seems like a crazy and untypical *mardi gras* in the Scottish Arts year, is typical of the arts in general. The ratio between its tiny number of administrators and the massive number of visitors who might enjoy the shows is repeated across the board in arts programming. In Scotland many thousands of people have the opportunity to consume art products which are produced according to parameters set by the actions of a tiny, highly informed elite. Historically Arts Policy has tended to be a matter for micro-policy making and debate within the Scottish Arts Council and the Scottish Office rather than political debate between the parties, or wider public discussion. The details of Arts Policy, like funding levels and financial support, provoke little interest in those who aren't on the inside of the information loop as politicians, civil servants, journalists and

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arts administrators. For most politicians, Arts Policy is only interesting if it allows for political point scoring. For many newspapers Arts Policy is only interesting when it is *news*, which means when it has to do with swingeing cuts, forced amalgamations or sackings. Then with the appropriate twist, an interview with a colourful gallery director or theatre administrator and the addition of few hot tempered comments from the usual hot tempered commentators, the latest row about murals/orchestra cuts/new galleries will get news coverage. For the rest of the time Arts Policy is of interest only to a tiny minority of the minority who are concerned with and committed to Scottish artistic life. Nor has the specifically Scottish dimension of arts policy making received much analysis by political scientists. Even as micro-administration the Scottish Arts Council hasn't attracted much detailed comment. Two recent books on Scottish politics and government, Lindsay Paterson's **The Autonomy of Modern Scotland** (1994) and Arnold Kemp's more anecdotal **The Hollow Drum** (1993) fail even to list the SAC in their indexes.

Nevertheless, it is vital that Arts Policy in its widest sense comes under the remit of the Scottish parliament, and not only because it provides an opportunity to safeguard the distinctiveness of Scottish culture. Such a remit could also assist in the legitimisation process. Any devolutionary parliament will clearly need to establish its legitimacy, and whilst part of that legitimisation will occur on a legal, political and fiscal level, it is also important that legitimacy be established on a cultural level. If the parliament assumed responsibility for cultural policy, that would inevitably help to secure for itself a strong cultural relationship with Scotland. I stress the importance for Arts Policy to be conceived in its widest sense because there are clear advantages for the parliament or whatever reformed SAC it chooses to create to embrace not just the traditional remit of Literature, Theatre, Dance, Visual Arts, Combined Arts and Music but also Scotland's Traditional Arts and Crafts, Television and Film and liaise closely with the bodies concerned with the status of the Gaelic language and culture.

The argument for this expanded role goes beyond administrative tidiness. It recognises that the high arts are part of a continuum which in the Scottish context also includes a vibrant folk and traditional arts scene. The evidence that the SAC could effectively step outside of its high arts role and expand its consultative processes already exists. Earlier this year the Scottish Arts Council conducted a wide polling of those who might be interested in the traditional Scottish music sector, and sought their views in a survey which proposed various models for the future of that significant part of Scottish life. The exercise received an unprecedented number of responses, which

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indicates not just that there is a good deal of committed interest in this area but also that Arts Policy *could* effectively be made in co-operation and consultation with a far wider number of people than currently. It is important for a whole range of reasons, some of them explicitly political, to challenge the notion that Arts Policy is a mandarin preoccupation.

Unfortunately there is a marked reluctance on behalf of the arts administration bureaucrats in the Scottish Arts Council and the Scottish Office to see their area being subject to a detailed political debate. This is partly out of a fear that if funding became a more explicitly party political issue, the likely balance of political parties in a Scottish parliament might have strong ideological objections to the current thrust of arts spending in Scotland. An assembly dominated by West of Scotland Labour MPs might have clear political cause to question the money going to Scottish Opera or Scottish Ballet, particularly if other policy areas which are perceived to have a greater connection to the lives of their constituents, like perhaps housing, are being squeezed.

Traditionally there has been a broad based support for the arts in Scotland as a component of the idea that the arts are a valuable and possibly civilising influence which as wide a number of people as possible should have access to. Like many of the compensatory myths which have been told about Scottish society in the absence of political power, it remains to be seen how resistant this idea will be when fiscal responsibility serves to focus the mind and sharpen the knife. There has already been a shot a cross the bows from the Scottish Office Minister Lord Lindsay who suggested to an audience of arts administrators at the beginning of the Edinburgh Festival just what the dangers might be of allowing the arts to come under the remit of the Scottish parliament. The clear implication of his remarks is that the Government will play the 'better the devil you know' argument not just to the Scottish electorate as a whole but in a way which is appropriately tailored to specific interest groups. For those who benefit from the *status quo* by receiving large grants under the current system, there might be a case for resisting the democratising of Scottish Arts Policy. As I will go on to show, there is far more to be gained by a distinctively new approach.

THE DISTINCTIVENESS OF SCOTTISH ARTS POLICY

Though Arts and Cultural policy will probably join fiscal, housing and other devolved responsibilities within the remit of the Scottish parliament, there is one respect in which Arts policy is crucially different from the others. A

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successful housing policy can produce good houses, but a successful Arts policy can't produce good art. Art is by nature unpredictable, mutable and non-rational and it isn't made by Arts policy makers. Policy makers can create frameworks which allow artists to work, but even good frameworks can't create good art. Unfortunately bad frameworks can certainly destroy good art by preventing its creation. Nor is there even any straightforward connection between the health or strength of the arts and the state of the wider political culture. It's striking for example that the 1980s which were a fairly miserable time for Scotland in an economic and political sense were a very productive time artistically, with successes in theatre, the visual arts and perhaps especially literature.

Cairns Craig has offered a powerful analysis of this apparent paradox which argues that the flowering of the arts and culture in Scotland which occurred after the disappointment of 1979 is in some way a response to and an engagement with the political failure of the devolution campaign (Craig 1996). He has suggested that the energy which had been devoted to the political cause during the 1970s came during the 1980s to be ploughed into the arts. This is a compensatory argument in two senses. It suggests that the proliferation in the cultural arena was a kind of compensation for the dearth of creative political activity. But the argument itself is a kind of compensation, because it suggests that the energy which propelled the nationalist and self rule movements of the 1970s wasn't dissipated but was rather redirected.

Whilst in the desolate 1980s it was reassuring to believe that the energy of politics hadn't vanished, just been redirected, in the possibly more politically fruitful 1990s a worrying thought occurs: does the argument work in reverse? If the 1990s demand the exercise of political power should we assume from this argument that the energy which was expressed in the 1980s as art will be redirected into the rational and political framework of politics and that Scotland is in for a period of political plenty and artistic famine? I tend to think not, and not only because I don't accept Craig's model: the issue as I see it is to do with the intangible quantity of *confidence* which is strengthening in many areas of Scottish life. Scottish artists and writers as diverse as Tom Leonard and Steven Campbell have been able gradually to create a sense in the wider culture of the absolute validity of distinctively Scottish approaches, accents and experiences. The parliament will if anything confirm the sense that the centre of gravity doesn't have to be elsewhere, and there is no reason to assume that the centring of political power in Scotland should marginalise our artists.

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It is vitally important to think about the kind of policy framework which would enable artists to produce their best work. For many years it was thought that the best way to serve the interest of Scotland and of the arts was to create and support Scottish national arts institutions. These institutions like Scottish Opera, Scottish Ballet and the various orchestras were seen to satisfy several different criteria. They allowed for the best artists in any particular field to be brought together in permanent companies, and so they provided employment for many Scottish performing artists. They had a touring role and covered the country, thus spreading the benefits of arts spending beyond the central belt where they tended to be based. They allowed the presentation of an artistic repertoire which was wide enough to take risks, and they tended to temper this with favourites which would ensure a reasonable box office. They were also, in a less tangible sense, seen as feathers in the country's cap, prestigious ornaments like the Scots crown jewels or the Scottish regiments.

The 1980s saw fiscal restrictions on the national institutions, and a series of amalgamations, cut backs and other restrictions, as in the announcement in November 1995 of Scottish Opera's intention of going part time. These tangible cut backs, however, merely disguise the fact that there was never a golden age for the national institutions. It's an open secret amongst arts administrators and journalists that whilst some of the institutions maintain respectable artistic standards, others are uneven and one or two are frankly third rate. In fact the whole national institution model has had its day, and the model which could effectively serve as its replacement is best demonstrated by a close comparison with another broadly similar political and cultural system.

THE IRISH EXPERIENCE

My own thoughts about the changing importance of national arts institutions were clarified during a visit to Dublin in July 1995. The Abbey Theatre's company were about to come to that year's Edinburgh International Festival and I was presenting an arts programme for Radio Scotland about the Abbey, with a follow-up article in **The Scotsman**. I was able to interview the Irish Minister for Culture and leading commentators and journalists about the Abbey and wider arts policy. During the course of making the programme it became clear to me that the Irish experience held several lessons for Scotland.

Firstly the Abbey Theatre itself. The Abbey is deeply and intimately bound up with the literary and cultural nationalism which helped lead to the foundation of the Irish State. Since the founding in 1903 of the Irish National

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Theatre Society by W.B. Yeats and Lady Gregory, the Abbey has been the site of many of the formative occasions of Irish theatre, including the premiers of **Playboy of the Western World** and **The Plough and the Stars**. It is also identified with many of the riots and political agitations which often accompanied those theatrical *debuts*. One of Ireland's younger writers, Colm Toibin, refers to the Abbey as 'the building in which Ireland had been so intensely invented', and the place still has a romantic appeal to those who identify with the cultural ferment in which the modern Irish state was created.

Now, however, it is widely seen as a drain on the Irish Arts budget, since it absorbs almost a sixth of the total expenditure, and its role as the 'National Theatre' is perceived by many to have been superseded by a network of smaller and more experimental companies. The **Irish Times** columnist Fintan O'Toole has blasted the Abbey's 'byzantine power structures' and 'institutional sclerosis', but its crisis is as much to do with ethos as organisation. The burden of expectation on the Abbey is immense: the hope is that it will produce 'national' plays which engage with the dilemmas of Ireland today as once it was able to do in the past. In fact the play which the Abbey took to last year's Edinburgh Festival **Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Towards the Somme** by Frank McGuinness shows that it *is* possible to produce a play which engages with the current problems of the nation, albeit that the nation here is imagined as embracing the experience of Ulster Protestants. Nevertheless, the Abbey's own powerful history is a burden rather than a blessing. Precisely because the Abbey is so closely connected with the birth pangs of the Republic, it is inhibited from functioning effectively in the culture of the contemporary state. As a historical product of a highly coherent, indeed virtually mono-cultural, society it finds it hard to find an authoritative voice in an increasingly poly-vocal country.

How modern and pluralist that country is becoming can be seen by simply watching television. In Dublin most homes receive RTE 1 and 2, BBC 1 and 2, ITV and Channel 4. Satellite and cable inevitably add another swathe of programmes. RTE - the Irish Broadcasting Company - was established in its present form during a period of corporatism during the 1960s when every self-respecting European state had its own television company, airline and railway service. The corporatism at RTE involved the state securing workers rights, full time contracts and pension schemes. That model of broadcasting is now virtually defunct, as the experience of the BBC, which now operates an internal market, demonstrates. That the two Irish stations now nestle alongside British terrestrial television programming and supra-national satellite broadcasting indicates that national boundaries in the broadcast

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media are now virtually irrelevant. Sky television has opened a new office in Dublin and the Irish Sky reports are slotted into international news bulletins.

A further sign of the internationalism which is altering Irish culture can be seen in the area of Dublin south of the Liffey called the Temple Bar. Built with funds from the European Union, the Temple Bar is a specially demarcated area which has become a glorious market place for galleries, restaurants, small theatres and clubs. The Temple Bar project has revitalised the heart of the city, and has indicated that small preserved areas can allow the growth of specialist artistic environments.

Irish culture contains three very different models for the supply of artistic services:

- The Abbey represents a model of an artistic institution which was identified with the state but also had a privileged position as the cultural conscience or mirror of the nation. Its role of offering up a critical image of a mono-cultural state was historically and culturally appropriate in its time but by the 1960s was redundant as a model for other arts bodies.
- Historically that model was superseded by a national corporatist system which aimed to take arts bodies directly under the wing of government and had secured workers rights and competition policy by restricting the market. The pressures exerted by cheap technology and international news gathering networks has forced a change of policy at RTE and encouraged the opening up of the broadcasting system. If RTE was to be founded today it wouldn't be in the big national corporatist framework which it once occupied, and the range of services currently available on Irish Television sets indicates that the broadcasting environment has changed utterly.
- The final means of arts supply is demonstrated by the Temple Bar. There a specially created environment, funded with EU money, has allowed many small galleries and studio spaces to spring up. Taken with the far-sighted Haughey budget of 1969 which abolished income tax for artists, it has allowed artistic endeavour to flourish without overt policy prodding or planning.

The current model of national arts institutions which dominates the Scottish arts indicates that our arts policy is stuck in the corporatist national mindset of the 1950s and 1960s. Indeed, one of the biggest rallying cries of the last

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few years in Scotland by some campaigners has been for the foundation of a national theatre, which would add to the national institutions at a time when the experience of many comparable countries has been to question whether their existence is beneficial at all. One of the great cultural benefits in Ireland of the collapse of the national/corporatist model has been an increasing pluralism that is now altering daily life in Ireland for good, and has led to a growing liberalisation of social *mores* and a transformed sense of where the centres of power lie. That pluralistic model for the arts is one which would have immense benefits for Scotland too.

In a word, in a world of expanding boundaries, national institutions are not necessarily the best way to help support national culture.

CONCLUSIONS: TOWARDS A POST-NATIONAL ARTS POLICY

The Scottish parliament has been awaited for so long that one of the dangers facing it is a sense of *at-lastism*. *At-lastism* is the mindset which sees the parliament as the chance to implement all the policy initiatives that Scotland has been waiting for since the beginning of the 1970s.

It is vital that the parliament actually comes up with plans for tomorrow not yesterday. The danger of inappropriate policy making is particularly pronounced in the area of the arts. Whilst it is easy to imagine that the new Scottish parliament might want to mirror its own creation as a national body with the creation of new national bodies like, say, a National Theatre, for the reasons I have outlined above it is important to be sceptical about policy initiatives which might have been appropriate in the 1970s but are inappropriate now. Indeed the appropriate model for the arts in the Scotland of the future comes not from the National Theatre but from what has happened to Scottish theatre in the *absence* of a National Theatre. Instead of functioning within a monolithic national model, the tapestry of small theatre companies in Scotland cover the nation, and speak in diverse voices. That poly-vocal and independent model should be adopted across the full range of artistic policy.

This would involve a shift in policy and funding priorities away from individual companies, no matter how prestigious, and towards sector funding and facility support. The Scottish parliament or reformed SAC could arrange to fund large facilities in Scotland's major cities. The creation of large rehearsal and performance spaces in Edinburgh, Glasgow, Dundee, Aberdeen and Inverness which were not the sole home of individual companies, and

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were available for use by domestic and international companies, would provide solid infrastructural support and leave artistic freedom in the hands of those who are best placed to exercise it, namely the artists.

One indication of how a new arts policy might work can be seen in the response to the success of films like **Braveheart**, **Rob Roy**, **Shallow Grave** and **Trainspotting**. Instead of attempting to set up a national Scottish Film School, the organisation Scottish Screen aims to focus on offering facilities to visiting film makers, marketing the potential of Scottish location shoots and emphasising the attractions of Scotland for international and domestic film makers. It has also been suggested that a 'Tartan Pimpernell' should be appointed who would be based in Hollywood and could respond actively to any projects which Scotland could be involved in. Partly this strategy is a response to the nature of the film industry - highly capitalised, mobile, opportunistic, and *not here*. But it is actually a viable model for a wider policy which would emphasise the co-ordination of existing resources, and the offering of attractive facilities to foreign and domestic companies.

I began this article by describing the start of the 1996 Edinburgh Festival. There is another lesson to be learned from the Festivals which run in Edinburgh during August. The Fringe, which has grown exponentially since its inception, exists as a market place, monitored by a small bureaucracy which offers assistance to performers who wish to come and perform. The film festival combines promotional opportunities with premieres and a chance for the film community to meet and mingle. Even the International Festival under its current director has moved from trying to make things happen itself to inviting high profile directors and performers to perform in Edinburgh with enough space to create their art. In other words, all these three elements of the Festival operate by creating attractive environments and offering appealing opportunities to individual artists and companies. This model could work on a larger scale, if the aim of arts policy is seen as the creation of the venues, training facilities and rehearsal spaces which would entice foreign companies to work in this country and provide opportunities for the domestic companies who are based here. The attraction of this strategy is that to some extent it is already working successfully, in some of the most successful areas in the Scottish arts. If the strategy succeeds on a national scale there will be more successes to build on.

Expectations for the Scottish parliament are dangerously high. The many demands on the parliament during its first few years will mean that the arts may not be a major priority. In one sense the biggest danger facing the arts is not that the wrong policies are put in place but that too many policies are. The

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lesson which the arts have to teach is that policy making may be beloved of politicians but it can't make good art. If Scotland's politicians really want to secure a confident and successful Scottish cultural scene they should aim to create the facilities and structures which allow artists to do their work - then sit back and wait.

REFERENCES

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August 1996