

‘Changing the culture’: Governance and trust in the post-crisis public cultural sector

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Culture has never been more important to democratic states, as an area of conscious policy, than it is today. In Europe particularly, where the ideological force of both politics and religion has steadily declined since the 1950s, culture has filled the vacuum, responding to people’s continuing need to find meaning and transcendence in their lives. Cultural policy now extends, in different ways and degrees, far beyond the obvious domains of art and heritage to include the global industries of sport, the mass media, and the creative industries, all transformed by the communications and information revolutions of the past 30 years.

It provides or adds value to many of the products on which consumer capitalism depends. It is a tool of diplomacy and soft power. It is seen as an answer to the intractable social problems of modern societies, from youth offending to unhappiness. It is bound up in questions of identity and values that have arisen from a new recognition of Europe’s cultural diversity. There is scarcely a department of government whose responsibilities are unaffected by culture, though not all of them, or indeed all governments, see it yet.

This growing importance has presented democratic states with major new challenges in cultural governance as they have struggled to contain, if not control, forces with great influence on society. The tensions exposed by the current public inquiry into the conduct of the British press is one example. Since is the third such public inquiry in the UK since the Second World War there are clearly unresolved issues here.

At their heart lies the fundamental dilemma between democracy’s commitment to liberty of belief and expression and the right of governments to govern. Once culture touches on every aspect of society, as it now does, how does the state make cultural policy without falling into the temptation of control? The

question is ancient, of course: we owe to Plato and Aristotle the idea that poetry and art in general should give pleasure *and* instruct. That view has shaped the philosophy of art in Europe ever since. It was implied in the phrase ‘Use or Ornament?’ that I used as the title of a report into the social impact of participation in the arts some years ago.

But in making that reference, I did not anticipate that policy-makers would understand the benefits people gain from participating in the arts in such a narrowly Platonic sense. In other words, that they would see culture as a source of social instruction rather than of *self*-development. The distinction is of the greatest importance, since it relates to the liberty, autonomy and responsibility of the individual. This is the central dilemma of cultural governance today: how to balance freedom and control in a field that has grown so large and influential and which is so difficult to understand. Indeed, that difficulty begs the question of how far it can be controlled at all: or, at least, how far government attempts to exercise control over cultural activity and expression lead reliably to their intended outcomes.

The growth of evidence-based policy, at least as a rhetorical device, adds further ingredients to this unstable compound. Now that cultural policy is expected to achieve complex and ambitious goals, with increasing funds, there is an imperative to justify both policy and results with evidence. The political and academic debate about the benefits to the UK of holding the 2012 Olympic Games is a topical example. But, and I shall return to this point later, there is that nagging difference between whether benefits exist and whether they can be commanded. It does not follow that governments can command culture just because it is important, any more than a theatre director, with every talent and resource at her command, can be sure that her latest production of *Hamlet* will be a success. Something that everyone involved believed would be great can just fall flat on the first night; and sometimes, 20 or 30 years later, it may be seen as a landmark.

The idea that democratic governments do not have much control over the culture of the societies they govern, despite the importance of that cultural activity, can be difficult to accept, so it is worth looking at the situation in the UK to test the proposition. Although there are differences between British approaches to government and civil society and those of other European countries, the UK has often pioneered the new governance and management systems associated with the dominant economic model of the past 30 years and whose crisis now presents such profound challenges. The attempt to reduce direct provision of services, including cultural services, by contracting out to commercial and not for

profit organisations has characterised British public policy since the 1980s. With it came approaches to the control of independent organisations through contracts and performance assessment that have had, to say the least of it, mixed results and offer some useful lessons. This experience is, in many ways, a useful case study of the tensions between liberty and control, of the differences between instruction and self-development, and of the limits of government power over culture itself.

Before considering what has happened, though, it may help to sketch briefly the cultural landscape in the UK. The first thing to say is that almost none of it is directly controlled by the state. Apart from the Corps of Army Music (surprisingly, perhaps, the largest employer of musicians in the country) public libraries are the only directly provided cultural service and even they are run by local councils not central government. The Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS), which was established only 20 years ago in 1992, has many formal responsibilities, but little funding and less direct control over the cultural sector. To put it into perspective, the DCMS annual budget of £1.2 billion is about the same as is spent on public libraries, but the Department is responsible not only for libraries but also broadcasting, the arts, museums and galleries, sport (including the Olympics), tourism, the historic environment, gambling and racing, the creative industries and much else besides. This works because the DCMS provides funding for a relatively small part of the cultural sector in Britain: principally the Arts Council, English Heritage, some national museums such as Tate, and a small number of other bodies. The rest is financed through other arms of national and local government, commercial activity, trusts and foundations, sponsorship and a huge amount of voluntary effort.

Apart from the very mixed funding pattern, which naturally leads to an equally distributed pattern of control, the second important characteristic of the British cultural sector is its corporate autonomy. This will be unsurprising in the case of the private and the voluntary sectors. But it is also true of almost all cultural organisations supported by the state. Britain has the oldest charity law in the world, dating back to the Reformation when it became necessary to create a mechanism to protect the social services formerly provided by monasteries, notably education, health care and assistance to the poor. Today, there are almost 162,000 charities in England and Wales, with a collective income of about £53 billion. Millions of people give time, skill and money to support them: government estimates that almost half of British adults volunteer at least once a month. While most charities are concerned with social services of various kinds, the

charitable purpose of education has allowed many cultural organisations to become charities and benefit from their distinct social and legal status. The Tate Gallery, the Royal Opera House and the National Theatre are all charities, as are thousands of other arts facilities, heritage centres, museums and sports groups. Charities are independent corporate bodies, like companies, but governed by a distinct body of law. Each is legally owned by trustees who cannot benefit themselves from its work. The trustees hold the charity's assets – which may amount to many millions of pounds – on behalf of those it is intended to benefit, which, in the case of cultural organisations, means the general public.

The sector is regulated by the Charity Commission, which sets clear and demanding standards of conduct for governance, stating that:

Trustees have and must accept ultimate responsibility for directing the affairs of a charity, and ensuring that it is solvent, well-run, and delivering the charitable outcomes for the benefit of the public for which it has been set up.

This obligation to act for the benefit of the public in accordance with their objectives is legally binding and guarantees their independence. In some circumstances, trustees can be held personally liable for a charity's debts, so it is remarkable that 900,000 people act as charity trustees today. Their enacted belief that one person can be trusted to do something without personal gain for the benefit of another is a powerful idea, and one to which I shall return, because it is weakened by the government's current approach to cultural policy and governance.

The most important effect of this independence is that British culture ministers cannot easily direct how any of these organisations act. They cannot appoint staff, alter policy or programmes or change any other aspect of their work. Ministers do appoint some trustees of major bodies, such as Arts Council England, which distributes public funds for the arts, but even this is a limited and uncertain power. Instead, the British government has three principal tools with which to influence cultural activity:

- first, by providing or withholding finance although, except for the large public bodies such as Tate or the Arts Council, grants to individual cultural organisations are not under ministerial control;
- secondly, by changing the legislative or regulatory frameworks, though this can be slow, complicated and produce unintended results;

- and thirdly, by setting broad policy and the sometimes narrow targets that the organisations it funds are expected to meet.

It is this third aspect that has received most attention in the past 30 years as different governments have sought to gain influence over a cultural sector whose economic and social importance has grown so much, while trying at the same time to respect its independence and a political commitment to the idea of a smaller state.

The creation of English Heritage was an early example. In 1984, the ancient and historic monuments held by the state, including sites such as Stonehenge, Dover Castle and Hadrian's Wall, were transferred from the Department of the Environment to a new non-departmental public body called English Heritage. There were advantages in this change, since it could be a membership organisation, similar to the National Trust, a popular, independent and self-financing heritage charity founded at the end of the 19th century. As an autonomous organisation, English Heritage could also secure funds that were not available to government.

But following independence, ministers were no longer able to instruct the leadership of the organisation as if they were civil servants, despite still providing most of its funds. Instead, it established a contractual relationship under which the Minister sets out the policy goals and operational targets. In October 2010 English Heritage was told that, while its budget would be cut by 32% as part of the government's deficit reduction measures, it must 'ensure that its planning advice, grants for heritage at risk and the conservation and maintenance of sites in care are protected and have a cut of no more than 15%'. The Minister also required a reduction in administration costs of 50%, an increase in self-generated income.

The details of the settlement are not the point here: what matters is the contractual nature of the relationship between the Department of Culture and a quasi-autonomous public body through which it aims to achieve its policy goals and services for the public. Similar contracts have spread throughout the cultural sector, for example between the Department of Culture and the Arts Council and between the Arts Council and the arts organisations and individual artists to whom it awards grants. Indeed, although the term grant is still used, there is no gift involved: arts funding is now a contract for services.

Contracts inevitably bring a need to measure performance and so the development of contractual relationships in public services, including culture, has re-

quired new systems of performance assessment, mostly drawn from private sector management practice. Contracts, service level agreements, targets and performance assessment have become standard. For example, the last government set the Arts Council the target of raising overall participation in the arts by 3% in three years. This idea was based on a flawed image of arts activity that took no account of large parts of people's artistic lives, either because the work was not directly financed by government or because it took forms that were ignored by cultural administrators. Even so, since the 900 arts organisations the Arts Council then subsidised were all independent charities, its ability to bring about that change was negligible. The contracting culture did not help much since withdrawal of funds is the only real enforcement mechanism and that is really feared only by smaller organisations who, by definition, can make the smallest contribution to any policy goal. A government without effective control over cultural activity was imposing a contractual obligation on a public body with not much more control. The target, unsurprisingly, was not met.

But performance direction and assessment is only half the story. Although an organisation may perform its contracted work well, the work itself may be of limited value, particularly when compared to other goods that might be purchased at the same cost. So a contracting (and sub-contracting) culture very quickly raises questions about the value of services themselves. Combined with the increasing importance of culture in post-industrial consumer society, and its permeation of so many aspects of contemporary public and private sector activity, this need to demonstrate value has led to a greatly increased concern with evaluation. In particular, government has become preoccupied with demonstrating the economic and social value of cultural activity – or at least that part of it which it funds or is otherwise interested in.

The effort to understand better how and why people engage with the arts and other forms of culture is undoubtedly important. I have myself worked on those questions and I believe recent work in this area has enriched policy, practice and discourse. The problems begin when the complex processes of art, and the equally complex ways in which people engage with it individually and collectively, are yoked to a contractual culture intended to police the delivery of guaranteed outcomes at specified costs.

We are back to the confusion between art as instruction and art as self-development. Except in very broad terms, there is nothing about artistic creation and reception that can be reliably controlled or guaranteed. It is therefore unwise to plan policy around narrow, predetermined outcomes. To make decisions about

funding conditional upon those outcomes, and to express those conditions in the form of contracted targets, is to take cultural governance into dangerous territory.

This approach, which now permeates cultural policy and governance in the UK, has had at least three damaging consequences.

The first is a steady erosion of trust between cultural agents, although they broadly share values and goals. Relationships have become transactions defined by contractual obligations. I do not for a moment suggest that there was a golden age when government, funding bodies and cultural organisations all understood one another perfectly and worked cheerfully towards a shared vision of the common good. There was and remains much that is wrong in our public culture, starting with its inequalities, and bringing more transparency and rigour into the relationship between commissioners and providers is a step forward.

But doing so through a one-sided imposition of targets and contracts based on simplistic ideas of culture's operation in society is not the way to improve things. The benefit, in terms of better cultural services, is marginal, if it exists at all. The cost, just in terms of the reduction of trust is certainly damaging. As the philosopher Onora O'Neill has argued,

The intrusive methods we have taken to stem a supposed crisis of trust may even, if things go badly, fuel a crisis of trustworthiness, and so may lead to a genuine crisis of trust.

Which is a more complicated way of saying what Seneca wrote to his friend Lucilius nearly 2000 years ago: you make a person trustworthy by treating them as such. Trust in selflessness is vital in cultural governance, even in countries where politicians have more direct control over cultural institutions than they do in England. But where control is weak or absent, cultural policy makers have little choice but to proceed by building trust, understanding and, as far as possible, common purpose.

The second damaging effect of this approach is its effect on arts practice itself because, especially in those community and education programmes that are expected to achieve specified social outcomes, it shifts the focus from an artistic goal to a social one. Since those who are supposed to benefit from the activity might be unaware of that goal, such hidden agendas threatens the autonomy that is intrinsic to self-development. Often though, like over-tested school children, the participants in such programmes are aware of the remedial purposes that have justified it to the funders. What is then on offer may be reduced to the level

of an exercise in conformity to – or rebellion against – those expectations. Instruction there will certainly not be, while self-development is threatened by the attempt to produce it.

And the third damaging effect, I suggest, is the way that cultural discourse has been impoverished. The languages of science and business, so authoritative in a political world naively confident of its own rationality, have gradually eclipsed the language of the humanities that has been used to reflect on art and culture for centuries. Concepts such as investment, measurement and impact, are used with little acknowledgement of their actual meanings and less sense of what distortions their misapplication may produce. Among the wider consequences is a further exclusion of citizens from debates about their own culture, although it is subsidised through their taxes. If their aspirations and purposes are marginalised by a discourse of professionals, it is not surprising if they seem alienated from aspects of public culture.

The economic crisis that began in 2008 with the banking collapse has complex causes and unpredictable effects. It is challenging many long-held assumptions, not only about economics, but about politics, society and, no doubt in time, about culture. Budgets have been cut and will be cut again. The cultural sector, which benefited in the boom years, is tightening its belt. But the challenge will not end there. Whatever world emerges is likely to bring new questions about the purpose, value and operation of culture in democratic societies.

This is surely an opportunity to rethink the relationship – not the transaction – between government and cultural actors and to try to establish a discourse that is less naïve, less utilitarian and less controlling. Culture is far too important to be reduced merely to a source of pleasure or instruction, or even both. It is the lens through which we see ourselves and the world we inhabit. It is the tool with which we make and remake both. We need systems of governance and cultural policies that contribute to individual and social wellbeing while leaving each of us free to fulfil our own potential, in our own terms. The starting point must be each person's inalienable right to govern his or her own engagement with culture.