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A National Policy for the Arts: What the State Can Do

Alan Riach and Alexander Moffat (Friday 22 April 2016)

What difference does it make? The arts look after themselves, don't they? We certainly don't want government interference, do we?

Well, yes and no. Artists and poets, writers and composers do what they do in whatever ways we can. But if the work is any good, it needs to be enjoyed, appreciated, taken up and learnt from by others. It's there for people. Any artist might be wayward, singular, exceptional, elitist, but the work produced is always open to anyone's approach. This means that education in the arts is essential. And public knowledge of the arts is equally essential. How are we informed? How are we encouraged to be critical? What gives these poems, novels, plays, these paintings, these string quartets and symphonies, these operas, these folk songs, qualities other ones don't have? How would you describe that quality? How do you value what these works bring you?

Sharp critical understanding of our own cultural achievements helps ensure a parity of recognition internationally, to deal nation to nation as equals. The political, educational and cultural stature of national identity can help confirm this vertebrate identity. This is where the cultural investment and institutional foundations are required: museums, galleries, libraries, schools, universities, theatres, orchestras, publishing, media, the whole state-supported system which structures education and cultural understanding, and gives self-worth and dignity a quality of integrity. Or fails to.

With the Scottish election approaching, the Sunday Herald (10 April 2016) carried two pages of mini-statements by Culture spokespersons from each of the main political parties, mainly predictable platitudes. Labour, Tories and LibDems made gestures to the BBC.

So often political speeches are given their moment and then forgotten. There's one in recent memory that should be kept in mind.

On Wednesday June 5 2013, Scottish Government Culture Secretary Fiona Hyslop gave a speech at the Talbot Rice Gallery at Edinburgh University, entitled "Past, Present & Future: Culture & Heritage in an Independent Scotland". She acknowledged the location in which her lecture was taking place, the Georgian Gallery, a masterpiece by one of our greatest architects,

William Playfair, and linked it with her place of work, the Scottish Parliament, the very modern creation of the Catalan architect Enric Miralles. She said: “These two buildings tell us much about what is great about Scotland – the way that past achievements from the Scottish Enlightenment and other great periods in our history mingle with modern successes and developments – and the way in which our own artistic achievements can be celebrated, along with those from other lands.”

Then she set out five key areas which, she promised, underpin the Scottish Government’s approach to culture and heritage in Scotland, and how that approach differs from that of the UK Government in each of these areas.

The first was the value of culture and heritage, in and of themselves, because they bind and connect our past, our present and our future and tell the stories about where we’ve come from, who we are, and help us reflect on who we could be.

The second was how culture and heritage roots us in place, and helps to empower, enrich and shape our communities.

The third was how culture and heritage in Scotland is of us all and for us all, so requires participation and ways to enable all of Scotland’s communities to benefit, not just from the great cultural wealth and heritage of this nation, but also the world’s.

The fourth was about the wealth of other benefits that culture and heritage bring to our communities, both social and economic.

And the fifth was an attempt to bring all of this together to address the idea of a shared ambition and vision, to build an independent nation where our cultural and historic life can flourish.

She claimed that the present Scottish Government is the most culturally ambitious government that Scotland has ever had, and that it is founded on the belief that public funding of the arts is a fundamental good.

It’s instructive to compare this speech with an earlier one that Fiona Hyslop herself delivered in November 2012 at a major museums and galleries meeting in Edinburgh. On that occasion she failed to name one single artist or describe any work of art, even though she was speaking to a conference of museum and gallery people. Emphasis was placed on the role of art in the economy: “adding to the social value of museums and galleries is the economic value they bring to the nation”. Without mentioning any painting or portrait, she was emphasised the

value of calculating the return on arts festivals and the so-called “creative industries”.

What’s wrong with this?

Well, insisting that the arts are primarily instruments for economic purposes damages them. It asks them to do what they can’t do directly and ignores what they are. And it alienates the artists. The Talbot Rice speech reflected a very different approach: “I have said before that it is not the Government’s job to tell artists what to paint or authors what to write or craftspeople what to fashion. Nor is it the Government’s job to tell people what art to see, what books to read or what crafts to buy. It is our job, however, to create the conditions which enable artists to flourish and as many people, groups and organisations as possible to benefit from and enjoy our culture and heritage.”

Now, that’s on the nail. That’s the essential distinction, the point that really matters.

She went on: “The Scottish Government already accepts the case for the role of government in supporting the cultural sector. We actively support the case for public subsidy of the arts. We understand that culture and heritage have a value in and of themselves... So, for this Government, the case has been made.”

What was new and important about this was that Hyslop repudiated all previous Scottish government pronouncements on these issues. When the SNP first formed a government they seemed keen not to talk about the politics of cultural independence – in fact they didn’t have a defined cultural policy so they went along with existing New Labour ideas. That included the development of “Creative Scotland”. At the heart of the official British vision of creativity were the harnessing of culture to the growth of the national economy and a grandiose post-imperial design to make the UK the world’s “creative hub”. The SNP version was the harnessing of culture to the growth of the national economy. Not much difference really, until this speech.

What Hyslop said in this speech was a credo, a manifesto for government.

The question is, did she mean it? Pre-referendum “bravetalk”, or truth?

She said: “Scotland’s cultural life and heritage cannot be reduced to a single style or image; rather, they are a wealth of what we might describe as ‘stories’ that take many different forms, as diverse as the land, peoples and places of this complex country.”

And then came the crunch: “There is no one thing that defines us. There are, of course, iconic images, poems, films, artists, writers, performers, compositions, buildings and

landscapes that evoke our sense of ‘Scotland’. A Scotland that is steeped in meaning and history but which is continually on the move – engaging with its past, looking beyond borders, seeking new and innovative ways to engage with the world.”

Allowing for sound-bites and the liability of cliché, this is still a crucial statement of intent, a credo of lasting value. We can applaud the Culture Minister for having the courage to change her mind and listen to what artists were saying, and for putting together an arts policy with real vision and substance.

But, so far, of course this is all just words. Who will implement the promise?

The Minister for Culture has one of the most important jobs in the cabinet. We need a strong Culture Minister at the heart of government if the new arts policy is to succeed. Hyslop herself told us why: “Art is not always comfortable. It does not need to be easy or ‘feel good’. I want us to embrace what’s difficult, what’s challenging and what’s uncomfortable. It is the very measure of the health of our democracy to welcome and embrace the role of artists to challenge our expectations, to nudge us from our comfort zones and encourage us, individually or collectively to reflect on how we could do better and how we could be better.”

Brave words, indeed. So how do they fit? How are things now, do you think?

More brave words: “History is peppered with stories and ideas that define us. Some give cause for celebration, others almost for lamentation, because any nation’s story has its darker moments and these are also part of our heritage – urging us all to reflect on acts that both have harmed us and have done harm.”

We might think of James Robertson’s novel, *Joseph Knight* (2003) and Louise Welsh’s “Empire Café” project in 2014, and the exposure of Scots’ complicity – no, eager engagement – in the slave trade. We might think of Kirstin Innes’s novel *Fishnet* (2015), and its exposure of the sex trade industry, or Karen Campbell’s ostensibly thriller-genre novel *Rise* (2015), anatomising sexist abuse, guilt, love, anxiety, all in the ancient landscape setting of what seems unmistakably like Kilmartin Glen. Moral crusade is not art’s only priority but art holds out the possibility of redress of injustice like nothing else. And Hyslop recognised this: “When Picasso painted *Guernica*, he didn’t do so to merely adorn a wall, he did so to make a profound and powerful political statement.”

Pause on that. Has any government minister in London or Edinburgh ever held up the example of Picasso’s *Guernica* in this way? Picasso’s political work is always avoided. After all, he was a member of the Communist Party. The profundity of the painting is about humanity

and the vulnerability of living things in war. The politics of it are always with us. And that international vision was brought home: “Scotland is more than a nation bound by a border and oceans, it is a nation of ideas and our innovation and creativity is an intrinsic part of our increasingly global lives. A story, a piece of theatre, a stone circle or a song can expand those boundaries and take us beyond borders. To give you a quote from the Canongate Wall, Hugh MacDiarmid asked, ‘Scotland small? Our multiform, our infinite Scotland *small*?’ Our size is only limited by our imagination, our reach as extensive as our desire and capacity to explore.”

That was a brave thing for a Minister of Culture to say so boldly. It was good to see MacDiarmid quoted there – like Picasso, MacDiarmid was a member of the Communist Party – as well as a founding-member of the National Party of Scotland – so once again what Fiona Hyslop was saying there was that the poets and artists help us protest against what’s wrong in the world, to want change, to want a better world. Historical allegiances are what they may be, but the truths of art go deeper and last longer.

The critical thinking needed to create a new framework for a long-term plan for the arts appeared to be in place when she said these words, back in 2014. So we’re talking politics as well as culture now – and here’s the question:

How will we underwrite the necessary arts in an independent Scotland? What sort of service do we want? Will the Scottish Broadcasting Service support an orchestra as the BBC does? Will it support cultural television channels as France and Germany do? Will it have a cultural radio service like Radio 3?

If the decline in quality newspaper circulation continues, will there be support for first-class investigative reporting? How about extensive reviewing by a range of well-informed critics considering exhibitions, concerts, publications? How will informed critical opinion and reviewing be sustained in journalism? These are unanswered questions.

Will the SNP stick to Fiona Hyslop’s promises? Where are the signs of this today? Why have there been no key cultural speeches since 2014? Surely there should be one at least once every year?

We need to hold all politicians to their responsibilities to the arts. That’s our job and the job of every responsible citizen in Scotland. For the Culture Minister to make an annual public speech of achievements, failures, and intentions is one way of inviting that accounting. And it needs to be widely and honestly reported.

If we’re going to tell the truth to ourselves, about ourselves, and make certain such truth

is published, our arts are where that happens, and the Minister needs to be truthful too, not just once, but consistently, and folk need to know about that.

In New Zealand, many years ago, there was a visit from the Irish President, Mary Robinson, and she said this, and it should be a motto for every member of the Scottish parliament: “The arts are the genius of your country, and education is the key with which you unlock the door.”

[Boxed off:]

Fiona Hyslop in her own words (June 5 2013)

From the Stones of Stenness, built, we believe, to connect our ancestors to their past, through to the fragility and beauty of the work of Scotland’s contemporary sculptors such as Karla Black... The connections and threads between our past, our present and our future are flexible and fluid; we both take and create meaning when we look deep into the history of our nation, shaped by those who have settled here and those who have left for faraway shores; our connections with other countries, other peoples all linked by these threads connecting people, forms and ideas... I want Scotland to be recognised as a nation that not only nurtures and is nourished by wonderful songs, poems, stories, drama, dance, paintings, and sculpture but as a nation that welcomes artists and creative practitioners from all over the world to come, to inspire and to be inspired, to innovate and to create.