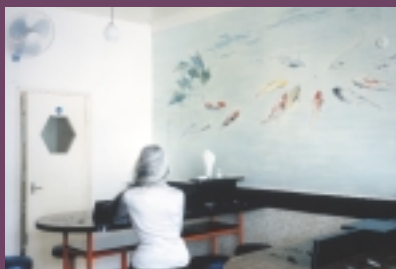




Government and the Value of Culture





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March 2002, 2002 C-type photograph
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Government and the Value of Culture

Introduction and assertions

1. Sixty years ago Beveridge set this country a challenge: slaying the five giants of physical poverty – want, disease, ignorance, squalor and idleness. At the beginning of this century, in a country hugely richer than it was at the end of the second world war, it is time to slay a sixth giant – the poverty of aspiration which compromises all our attempts to lift people out of physical poverty. Engagement with culture can help alleviate this poverty of aspiration – but there is a huge gulf between the haves and have nots. Government must take this gulf as seriously as the other great issues of national identity, personal wellbeing and quality of life.
2. Culture is a slippery concept. The term is now used in so many senses that one has to start with some definitions and exclusions. In this essay I am talking about the cultural life of the nation, the intellectual and emotional engagement of the people with all forms of art, from the simplest to the most abstruse.
3. Personally, I don't think the term "high culture" is very helpful to any party to the discussion. The distinction I want to pursue is not between high and low, popular or elite, but between simplicity and complexity, between entertainment on the one

hand and cultural engagement on the other. There is no easy dividing line between the two, but one definition which works better than most is that “culture” as opposed to entertainment is art of whatever form which makes demands not only on the maker or performers but on those to whom the work of art or performance is directed – whether it be a new piece by Moti Roti or a piano work by Schubert. This is the element of “culture” I want to single out for attention.

4. It has been said that art is what anyone who calls themselves an artist produces, and the definition at least does not suffer from being exclusive. But when government spends the nation’s marginal income – taxation – on “culture” in the sense that I have indicated, it cannot avoid, whether by delegating the task to quangos or making direct decisions, the making of value judgements. Why is it right for the Royal Opera House, to receive huge public subsidies? Why do we subsidise symphony orchestras but not pub bands or pianists? Why do we subsidise performances of Shakespeare and Mahler but not Coldplay or Madonna? Why do we spend millions on a square foot or so of a Raphael? Why is the *Madonna of the Pinks* more important than the *Singing Butler*? Is it, actually, and if so why? Why is mass public demand not the only criterion of perceived cultural “value” – indeed the lack of mass demand often mocked as *the* criterion for subsidy?

5. These are not questions which government can shirk, nor is it enough to do good by stealth and to duck the challenge of explanation. Value judgements, when fine judgements are required, are certainly to some degree subjective. But the kind of value judgement we make when we allocate millions to the Royal Shakespeare Company cannot be justified on subjective grounds: we need to be able to explain why it is right to do so to a critical bystander or a sceptical voter. We need to find a way to demonstrate the personal value added which comes from engagement with complex art – “culture” in my defined sense.
6. One of the wonderful things about great art is that true lovers of it never want to keep it to themselves – they want all the world to know. There is nothing selfish or exclusive in their enthusiasm, nor does wider appreciation weaken the force of the art. The argument for public subsidy accordingly rests above all on the desire that all, not just a minority, should have access to the thrill of engagement with great art.
7. We live in a complex world; the result is that we prize, and perhaps sometimes even suspect, those who understand its complexities. We not only celebrate the genius of great scientists or technological pioneers, but we make daily use of their inventions, and we now do things with nonchalance which would have astonished our ancestors. But the *internal* world we all inhabit – the world of individual birth, life and death, of love or pain, joy or misery, fear and relief, success and disappointment –

that, too, has its genius discoverers and inventors, people who can show us things we could not see for ourselves, and experts who can help us to understand them. Their insights are no less accessible than the workings of the internal combustion engine. Society seems to take for granted that learning what are in fact complex skills about the external world is within the range of far more people than developing an appreciation for the insights of great art. But there is no reason why that should be so.

8. Those who have, however it has come about, had the transcendent thrill of feeling, through chance exposure or patient study, the power of great art in any medium, have gained the use, however seldom or often they may use it, of a sense to add to those of touch, taste, smell, sound and sight. And grappling with the complexity is almost always the necessary condition of access to that enriching sixth sense. I am not saying that culture has to be complicated, or that what is not complicated cannot have cultural value. But I do believe that the rewards of grappling with great art in any medium are enormous. The reluctance of so many to attempt that challenge is a terrible waste of human potential, with a concomitant loss of human realisation.
9. That is why, in a nutshell, subsidy for “high culture” activities is a proper task for government: not to provide the “cultured” wealthy with a night out cheaper than it might be but because if great works of art are not exposed, the chance of acquiring that

sixth sense may not be on offer at all. These thoughts prompt me to make a number of assertions:

- (a) Complex cultural activity is not just a pleasurable hinterland for the public, a fall back after the important things – work and paying tax – are done. It is at the heart of what it means to be a fully developed human being. Government should be concerned that so few aspire to it, and has a responsibility to do what it reasonably can to raise the quantity and quality of that aspiration.
- (b) Markets have their place, but theatres, galleries or concert halls also need intelligent public subsidy if complex culture is to take its place at the heart of national life.
- (c) Developing a much greater audience for the complex arts will only happen as the result of determined policy initiatives – like this Government’s realisation of free entry to national museums and galleries.

10. Two reservations: I do not wish to be taken as asserting either that all cultural activity which is not complex is not important or valuable, or that government should not be interested in simpler cultural forms and activities. Secondly, what I have to say relates to all forms of cultural activity (in the sense of what goes beyond entertainment) wherever they are found – jazz, dance, the music and forms of expression of all the continents, not just the western canon.

Culture and the language of politics

11. We lack convincing language and political arguments for how culture lies at the heart of a healthy society. This might be a peculiarly British thing, and it might be part of a reaction on the one hand against the totalitarian regimes of the past who have tried to enrol culture as a tool of political oppression. On the other hand it might stem from a national distrust of intellectuals.
12. Too often politicians have been forced to debate culture in terms only of its instrumental benefits to other agendas – education, the reduction of crime, improvements in wellbeing – explaining – or in some instances almost apologising for – our investment in culture only in terms of something else. In political and public discourse in this country we have avoided the more difficult approach of investigating, questioning and celebrating what culture actually does in and of itself. There is another story to tell on culture and it's up to politicians in my position to give a lead in changing the atmosphere, and changing the terms of debate.
13. Offering improved access to culture *for what it does in itself* is a key weapon in fighting the sixth giant, as I have called it. But for it to be effective in this way we have to understand it and speak up for it on its own terms – not a dumbed down culture, but a culture that is of the highest standard it can possibly be, at

the heart of this Government's core agenda, not as a piece of top down social engineering, but a bottom up realisation of possibility and potential.

14. Two 19th century philosophers illustrate the problem and hint towards the solution. An analysis informed by John Stuart Mill focuses on a largely materialistic notion of wealth: how to maximise the greatest happiness of the greatest number. Where is culture in this model? Cultural enterprise may be important because of the wealth it generates. It is important also if it can help with education, with keeping society stable, but these are indirect benefits.
15. A wider definition, associated with Ruskin, sees a nation's wealth as including personal happiness and fulfilment. It's an obviously broader view, into which culture fits more readily. It's a definition of wealth which better describes what matters to people, and I believe better gives us a key to real transformation in society. Culture lies at the heart of this definition – its impact is more central, but difficult to measure in mechanistic terms. I think we need to find a way to express this as politicians and as leaders. As a Culture Department we still have to deliver the utilitarian agenda, and the measures of instrumentality that this implies, but we must acknowledge that in supporting culture we are doing more than that, and in doing more than that must find ways of expressing it.

16. There is a caricature that politicians are interested in mass access above all things. Giles Waterfield parodies it beautifully in *The Hound in the Left Hand Corner* with a dashing museums Director spending every hour filling in forms for the Department of Culture, which was to be renamed ACCESS! How we got here is well charted; how we get away is not so easy.
17. The access v. excellence argument is as old as the hills; and just as static. I wish that the arts had some of the self-confidence on this of, say, sport, where the need to widen as well as deepen sporting excellence is hard wired. It is unthinkable that sportsmen and women would see striving for Olympic success for a small number of the gifted as anything other than complementary to the growth in grass roots, weekend leisure sport. On the contrary, widening access to sport and providing ladders of opportunity will raise standards, not reduce them.
18. Bringing the benefits of complex culture not just to a privileged few but to as many people as possible who are interested is an old one in the model of state patronage of the arts. A well known figure in postwar classical music in this country was the conductor Otto Klemperer – a model of excellence, and of the western classical tradition at one of its highest levels of achievement in this country. But his first job was to lead a movement that has many echoes in modern Britain. As director of the Kroll Opera in Weimar Berlin his mission was to make high quality opera available to working class subscribers – more

accessible and affordable than the Unter den Linden Opera or the *Deutsche Oper* on the other side of town. It was part of the Ministry of Culture's mission to achieve social change through art. But the whole point was that it was to be art of the very highest standards – and it was, with Klemperer producing often challenging productions which rivalled in quality the more staid productions elsewhere. The experiment showed that access and excellence could co-exist. It was shut down by the Nazis.

19. Klemperer's legacy lives in Opera Houses across the world – including our own in London. And in his home city, Simon Rattle and the Berlin Philharmonic, using British expertise, are creating possibly the finest classical repertoire in the world, alongside programmes to teach music and the love of it to young people who would never usually conceive of entering a concert hall.
20. The mission in both cases is the same: achieving change by bringing people the possibility for experiencing the best in opera and music – by giving them access to resources and possibilities that were hitherto the preserve of the middle and upper classes.
21. In this country the arts in the war became part of many peoples' lives for the first time thanks to the wartime activities of CEMA (Council for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts) which, post-war, became the Arts Council and the means

by which government made money available to the arts.

But that early Arts Council was not necessarily concerned with increasing access – it was to preserve elite arts forms that were thought to be in danger as popular culture and mass media developed. Only in the Lee/Goodman era did we get an articulation of what the arts could do and the Arts Council and Government's role in spreading the benefits the arts can bring.

22. I like some of the parameters set out by Jennie Lee. She began by saying that people are free to accept and enjoy – or to reject through lack of interest, the best in all the arts. They were not forced to do so. But, she said, offer them the best. I prefer to think that we can do better; slaying the hydra headed sixth giant is a noble mission. It cannot be beyond the wit of the fourth largest economy in the world.
23. Her successors as Arts Ministers arguably reversed this trend and followed a more elitist line. And in the eighties, the arts were regarded as lazy teenagers who needed to stand on their own two feet, to earn what public money they were given, and to expect less and less of it. This led to a number of problems. As subsidy receded, the costs of admission to expensive art forms became more and more unaffordable for most people.
24. Some art forms were forced to try and pursue box office at all costs, and some wider aspects of pushing forward boundaries were lost – although at the same time the ingenuity of artists

still allowed excellence and innovation to shine. But the dichotomy between accessibility and excellence was made worse. The elite art forms arguably became less relevant. Audiences, especially young audiences, never engaged. This was part of a double whammy, as arts activities in schools fell away. If music is no longer taught, how will young people engage with classical music? Funding got worse, we fell into a spiral of decline.

25. We got things onto an even keel, greatly aided by the creation of the Lottery in 1994. This government built up funding for the arts from £198m in 1998 to £411m next year. The arts have a breathing space from which to show us what they can do. We've introduced free admission to Museums and Galleries – so access to the national collections is not inhibited by the cost of entry. And it has worked, attracting nearly 11 million extra visitors since December 2001, 50% of them new.

Culture on its own terms

26. When we undertake policies in Government, the first thing we do is look at the evidence. We might engage focus groups or undertake market research to tell us what the view of people is. In terms of the intrinsic value of culture, in the lives of citizens, I'm not sure we need it. Why do so many parents take their children to Museums and Galleries, why do they get them dance

lessons, music lessons and the like (as well as sports lessons)? Because they know it's important, not because they think their children are necessarily going to become artists or performers – although they may – but because of the value of what this exposure to culture gives them for the rest of their lives.

27. You can describe this value in various ways. It can be described as a hinterland, some deep landscape of personal resource on which people can draw at key points in their lives, part of a store of tools for getting through life and meeting its challenges. Without an expression or a connection to complex culture I firmly believe we have fewer resources from which to draw on in life. I regard this as a personal heartland rather than a hinterland.
28. Many more affluent people have it because they get it from home. Others less fortunate may not. That's what I mean by access, giving everyone the possibility of benefiting from what complex culture has to offer: building these private reserves and the lifelong enrichment they bring.
29. We are tackling material poverty across the board, and improving the education system and the health service, improving the material life chances of everyone, no matter what the circumstances of their birth. This equality of opportunity to material wealth and chances for material fulfilment are a key part of this Government's overall agenda. But engagement with

complex culture can offer us more – an understanding of, an engagement with and the satisfying of the deepest of human needs. Addressing poverty of aspiration is also necessary to build a society of fairness and opportunity.

30. What we need to do is to make complex culture, and the benefits it can bring, a reality to as many people as possible. They may choose not to pursue it until later in their lives, they may decide to use it to help them make a living in various ways. But they will have had the chance to engage with it.
31. This suggests we should view the funding of culture as a whole across government. There is no point in my funding the Royal Opera House at one end if schools are not giving pupils the equipment to understand opera as an art form, therefore restricting future audiences to those who have the benefit of an elite education. We need Music Education in schools – which we are trying to put right. We need the mechanisms in place so that a child with a talent will be able to take that talent as far as they wish to go, bounded only by the limits of that talent, and not constrained by their social and economic circumstances. If they decide to take their talent as far as it can go, we need the means to support them in this. Many of the building blocks are in place, many more are still to be put there. But only by accepting that it is a child's right to be given the means by which to engage with culture will we be able to move forward.

By accepting culture is an important investment in personal social capital we begin to justify that investment on culture's own terms.

32. This isn't saying that only the culture we teach you and which we support has value – it's like being given a set of keys so that people's curiosity and self confidence to explore is stimulated. Public money is how to give them the means of understanding and of making sure that the full range of art forms and cultural experiences are available to them. In this sense public subsidy produces what the market may not sustain – it is almost a bulwark against globalised commercialism that might not be sensitive or responsive to local and national cultural expression. It makes possible what might not otherwise be available, and it makes available the best.
33. So in seeking access, we want to make sure we are supplying access to the best. Access to the substandard is access to disappointment which will translate into an unwillingness to keep paying. It will not inspire or raise levels of aspiration, and in the end is not worthwhile. That is why excellence has to be at the heart of cultural subsidy, and that is what we must insist on.

Culture and identity

34. Culture has an important part to play in defining and preserving cultural identity – of the individual, of communities,

and of the nation as a whole. England has a tradition of importing and exporting culture – from Beowulf, via Handel to Vaughan Williams (whose tonality derives from his teaching by Ravel). And today we have the new melding of cultural traditions that is the result of population transfer and globalisation; the acceptable face of globalisation, one might say. Consider a choreographer like Akram Khan, who is British but draws on both Western and Eastern dance tradition to create something unique.

35. So we are inventing new forms of dance, of music, of drama that transcend traditional boundaries, and help give us a national identity which is uniquely ours. Culture defines who we are, it defines us as a nation. And *only* culture can do this.

Conclusions and questions

36. So politicians have enough reasons to support culture on its own merits to stop apologising for it by speaking only of it in terms of other agendas. Yes, we will need to keep proving that engagement with culture can improve educational attainment, and can help reduce crime. But we should also stand up for what culture can do for individuals in a way that nothing else can. Culture alone can give people the means better to understand and engage with life, and as such is a key part in reducing inequality of opportunity, and which can

help us slay the sixth giant of modern times – poverty of aspiration. This must be the next priority in the mission at the core of this Government: to transform our society into a place of justice, talent and ambition where individuals can fulfil their true potential.

37. Culture can do this only if it is faced on its own terms and with a recognition of what it does. I'm a politician, not a cultural theorist or practitioner. I can't express this unique power with the eloquence of a Neil MacGregor, a Nicholas Serota or a Christopher Frayling. But I have experienced it, both in my own life and seeing the lives of others as a politician. As a politician I can give leadership on this, and risk the ridicule of commentators who might prefer to avoid the question.
38. Many questions arise from this brief essay.
- (a) Is my analysis of the intrinsic value of culture correct?
 - (b) Is there any value in saying it? Or should politicians just keep quiet?
 - (c) How, in going beyond targets, can we best capture the value of culture?
 - (d) Do we underpin targets with something else – longer term funding agreements underpinned by a lighter touch but more intelligent review that focuses on cultural outcomes?
 - (e) How can we achieve this?

39. As culture secretary I believe it is my duty to raise these questions, and I think it is the duty of the cultural sector to engage and respond in a constructive way. I look forward to the debate.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Tessa Jowell". The letters are cursive and connected, with a distinct flourish at the end of the last name.

Tessa Jowell

May 2004

