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Talking arts for arts' – and Scotland's – sake

Opinion Focus

STEPHEN COTTON explains why a debate at the Traverse Theatre this week over our country's culture aims to put the arts at the heart of the election

DESPITE its role down the generations in saying to each other and to the world who and what we are, and despite its adaptation to all sorts of new media, culture usually plays the part of the poor relation at elections.

It was not always so. In Linlithgow on 6 January, 1540, *Ane Satyre of the thrie Estaites* was deemed strong and potentially dangerous stuff. And a visit to almost any of Scotland's museums and art galleries will show how active Scots were in cultural affairs long before the 16th century.

So what has happened? Is it just that artists have often struggled to be taken seriously in their lifetimes? Burns explains that frustration eloquently:

*Ne'er scorn a poor Poet like me
For idly just living and breathing,
While people of every degree
Are busy employed about naething.*

Perhaps, in today's internet and text-messaging age, the antiquated badging by some people of what constitutes our nation's culture – theatre, museums, galleries, poetry, novels, opera, classical music – with connotations of elitism, snobbery, boredom and black ties, has too tight a grip on our collective preconceptions. This is about other people's lives and interests, not ours, this interpretation says.

However, if we swap in some other badges – *Black Watch*, the visitor numbers at the revamped Kelvingrove Museum, *Trainspotting*, the planned Proclaimers musical, Franz Ferdinand – we get to the nub of it. Badges don't matter, our culture is all-pervasive. It is both fixed and fluid at the same time.

Or does culture suffer from the syndrome I hear all the time – “I'm not interested in politics” – to which I reply:



The creation of NTS and shows such as *Black Watch*, left, give fresh reasons to be proud of Scotland's culture
Picture: Manual Harlan/AP

“Sorry, I thought you were alive.” Try this one: without using Google, name some non-Scots contemporaries of Robert Burns, Robert Louis Stevenson, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, Sir Sean Connery, Ewan McGregor, Billy Connolly or Rod Stewart who are better known to the world.

My point is simple: Scotland has never lacked creativity and artistic talent, nor an international cultural reach, but somehow, instead of seeing it as a fantastic resource to be nurtured for the sake of producing and enjoying art and a source of economic and political activity, which can create jobs and present Scotland to the world, we contrive to make things complicated and somehow distant or inaccessible.

So the big question for our politicians is: what are we all going to do to mine this wonderful resource?

The last few years have seen culture

creep a little further up the political agenda, with the language of subsidy being replaced by investment, and some reference to our creative enterprise or “industries”. Yet while there was much to applaud in the First Minister's St Andrew's Day speech – plus the work of the Culture Commission, the creation of the National Theatre of Scotland and the imminent birth of Creative Scotland – I wonder if we have yet designed the right platform to go forward. To me, this is about being proud of our artists, rather than passing legislation about them.

For example, does anyone know what “cultural entitlement” actually means? Is it about audiences or artists or both? How do its beneficiaries get access to it?

While appreciating the need for safeguards, my impression of funding and support for the arts remains one of

uphill struggles and complex bureaucracy, each involving boxes to tick and forms to fill in. If that is the right approach (and if it is, I will be happy to be proved wrong), then surely the answer is to provide expert form-fillers for the artists?

Wouldn't it be better either to make the funding arrangements more fluid and user-friendly or, even better, empower existing artists, within agreed budgets, to get out into our communities and write seedcorn cheques there and then? Shouldn't the role of non-artists start and stop with the governance questions: is this within the agreed budget; is anyone stealing public money? If the art is interesting, audiences will come to see it. If it's not, they won't and artists must reassess.

Moreover, contrary to popular prejudice, my experience of artists and executive arts practitioners is so far

removed from popular stereotypes. Most are highly self-critical and in favour of the money following true artistic merit. In short, let's stop getting obsessed by occasional examples of self-indulgent artists, or bodies getting funding or awards, and concentrate on what the overwhelming majority of artists are trying to do: create wonderful work for people to enjoy.

There are other good questions too: is it a sensible democratic notion that some national companies are directly funded by, and answerable to, the Executive? What are “cultural hubs” and, if they are a good idea, how do our politicians work with the artistic community to develop them?

If our country's local, national and international festivals are a good thing, what more could be done in practical and financial terms to support and develop them? Given the enormous injection of tourist cash, is it so unreasonable for festivals throughout Scotland to expect some material reinvestment and stability?

And why have we in Scotland now excluded ourselves from competing to host productions that feature smoking in enclosed sets? A two-line amendment to allow actors performing on stage or to camera to smoke real cigarettes is hardly likely to undo the health benefits of the smoking ban.

I very much welcome *The Scotsman's* support in promoting this Thursday's debate about culture at the Traverse. I also welcome the attendance by leading politicians and so many practitioners and artists. Most of all, though, I'm looking forward to seeing Joyce McMillan, *The Scotsman's* theatre critic, pressing for answers and to hearing the opinions of the many members of the public who have booked a place. I only wish we could have invited the whole Scots population to take part.

Hopefully, the debate might see some new thinking from our politicians which can genuinely take the debate on culture forward, and some real brass-tacks measures our cultural organisations and artists can deploy to real effect within months, not years.

● *Stephen Cotton is the chairman of the Traverse Theatre, Edinburgh, Scotland's new writing theatre.*

THE BIG ARTS DEBATE

AT THE TRAVERSE THEATRE, EDINBURGH - THURSDAY 12 APRIL, 7PM
JOYCE MCMILLAN IS IN THE CHAIR AND ALL THE MAIN PARTIES ARE ON THE PANEL.

We have a small number of readers' tickets for the debate and drinks reception afterwards. To apply, email a question for the panel to artsdebate@scotsman.com by the end of today

