

The state and cultural policy in Britain

By Clive Gray

Diversity and fragility. Probably the most telling point about the relationship of the British state to cultural policy is that Britain does not actually have a cultural policy in any sense that Scandinavian readers would recognise.



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For a variety of political and social reasons the usual attitude of the British state towards cultural issues has tended to be to ignore them for as long as possible, and then to do as little as possible to actually resolve them. The consequence of this has been that the cultural policy sector as a whole is divided in organisational, policy and economic terms, with no detailed central direction or control of a fragmented and highly complex network of actors.

To demonstrate this lack of explicit control of the cultural policy system one could refer to any of its' component parts – ranging from architecture to museums, libraries to sport, or computer games to heritage, for example.

Control of the arts, for example, is fragmented across a range of actors within the system: overall responsibility for the system in England rests with the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS), which is not a significantly important Department as far as central government is concerned. The most important function of the DCMS would appear to be to act as the intermediary between the Treasury, which holds the purse-strings, and the large number of quasi-autonomous agencies (known as quangos) responsible for actually distributing the money: in the case of the arts this is through Arts Council England.

At best, the DCMS provides general policy direction to the system by making broad policy statements which then need to be turned in to effective action by this plethora of quangos. The reluctance of the DCMS to intervene actively in these decisions allows for some effective autonomy from direct party political control of the arts, and also lets the DCMS evade responsibility for the decisions that are then made. In Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland similar relationships exist between the Parliament/Assemblies and their own arts quangos.

A second important source of direction within the arts system rests with local authorities which have a statutory duty to provide libraries, and a discretionary duty to support the arts and culture. Even in Scotland and Northern Ireland, where these duties are statutory, there are major differences between local authorities in terms of levels of service provision and the types of services that are provided. In England and Wales, where discretion applies, these differences are multiplied greatly. The absence of a national cultural policy means that local authorities are free to make their own choices about arts provision, and to create their own arts policies altogether, which has been more enthusiastically pursued in some places (such as Birmingham) than in others.

In the case of museums almost identical considerations apply: the DCMS, Scottish Parliament and Welsh/Northern Irish Assemblies act as money-shifting devices between the respective Treasuries and either national quangos (in England, for example, the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council; in Scotland, Museums Galleries Scotland), or individual museums (the "nationals", such as the National Gallery, the British Museum, and the Tate Galleries). Local authorities in England can also support local museums. This, notably, is, again, a discretionary rather than statutory function, leading to wide differences between parts of the country as to how enthusiastically museums are maintained.

A final component of the overall system for managing cultural activities in Britain lies in other major financial resources provided through the National Lottery and charitable donations. The arts, sports and heritage are, between them, given 50% of the profits

arising from the Lottery, with this money being distributed through the quango system. In the case of the arts, lottery support amounts to approximately one-quarter of the money that Arts Council England provides in total to the arts. The major private source of organised philanthropy for the arts in Britain is provided by Arts and Business which raises about 1% of the total spent by Arts Council England, but is largely funded (approximately 80% of its' income) by the four UK Arts Councils, and is thus largely just another state device used for funding purposes.

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The emphasis that has been placed on state funding is slightly unfair for many parts of the cultural sector in Britain. For many aspects of culture the private sector has always been, and remains, the dominant source of financial support that exists, and even the heavily subsidised Royal Opera House raises over 35% of its' income through

the box office. These funds come in many forms, even if voluntary donations to culture are dealt with much less favourably through tax mechanisms than in the United States, for example. Compared with the European mainland, the wider role of the state in supporting the cultural economy directly or indirectly is less pivotal: even the cultural industries sector has now fallen from grace for the DCMS following the arrival of the new coalition government.

While it is still too soon to be entirely clear as to the approach that the coalition will be taking towards large parts of the cultural sector there is no doubt that hard times are coming. The funding agreements that the Labour Party introduced for large parts of the cultural sector are due to end in 2011, and cuts in future levels of grant-aid to not only quangos, but also to local authorities have

already been announced. Given that culture is largely a discretionary activity for local authorities there is reason to assume that there will be even heavier cuts to these services than will be imposed on statutory services such as education, with some local authorities already proposing to shut some of their museums, for example. Whether the "big society" will provide an adequate replacement for the support that the British state currently, if somewhat patchily, provides for culture remains to be seen. Overall it is likely that the grudging role of the state in this sphere is going to be severely tested in the immediate future.



Culture policy from constrained public finances. Prime Minister David Cameron and TV producer Phil Redmond in Liverpool, July 2010. Crown copyright © The Prime Minister's Office