

People should not ask *why*, but only say *because*.

Public submission to parliamentary committee discussions of Creative Scotland and the Public Service Reform Bill, from *Variant* magazine

The Public Service Reform Bill states its “overarching purpose ... is to help simplify and improve the landscape of Scottish public bodies, to deliver more effective, co-ordinated government that can better achieve its core functions for the benefit of the people of Scotland.” Our submission argues that this is certainly not the case in the proposals concerning the formation of Creative Scotland. The bill’s proposals for Creative Scotland instead represent an historic revision and backward trend in cultural policy. We argue that the organisation of Creative Scotland, as it is presently proposed, erodes certain key values, such as the arms length principle and the universal distinction between culture and commerce.

These first principles were established under popular governments in the UK from 1945 onwards and in the UNESCO *Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions* which came into force in 2007. *Variant* is an arts organisation that depends on these national principles and international standards being upheld if we are to survive in Scotland. We are already seeing the erosion of our rights to freedom of expression in official interference with the distribution of our publication thanks to contemporary policy increasingly geared towards the synergy of a promotional culture in Scotland.¹ The pressures now put upon us reflect the underlying logic of “single purpose government” rather than reflecting normative democratic values in cultural policy. We therefore object to the current proposals for Creative Scotland on the basis of our human rights.

Michael Russell MSP, Minister for Culture, External Affairs and the Constitution, has stated Creative Scotland is to be “an entrepreneurial organisation”. Indeed, the design of the organisation owes more to a mixture of bureaucrats and business people than it does to cultural practitioners or to those with independent critical expertise in cultural policy. The discursive isolation of Creative Scotland from broader-based debates about cultural policy has impoverished the discussion of its functions. The recent Holyrood governments that proposed its creation have sought to reconcile economic instrumentalism and pure artistic freedoms (or “arts for arts sake”). However, this dichotomy, which Creative Scotland is said to transcend, is part of a complex history that has still not been fairly debated and assessed, as it should be, before making fundamental reforms to the ethos of cultural provision.

In his work on the post-1945 period, the historian Alan Sinfield summarises the view that democratic culture in the UK became relentlessly “squeezed between art and commerce.”² Only by ignoring such studies can an entrepreneurially orientated organisation be projected as a solution to a classic issue of cultural policy. Most scholars of cultural history would call into question the idea that freedom of artistic self-expression is synonymous with the defence of broader cultural rights, yet this is what has been implied time and again by politicians voicing support for Creative

Scotland.

Creative Scotland offers a fundamental reform to a key aspect of democratic society, yet it is being pushed through as part of much wider bill aiming for a whole range of technocratic efficiencies which dissolve the arms length organisations – overwhelmingly these are scrutiny bodies at a time when failure of public accountability is salient.

Although reforms of cultural provision may be long overdue, without a more fully informed parliamentary enquiry to deepen MSPs discussion about cultural policy, the proposals for the organisation remain premature. The lack of parliamentary discussion about how to best pursue UNESCO treaty commitments to diversity of cultural expression (which include the diversity of political expression) has shown how far removed Scotland’s civic discourse on culture remains from a country like Sweden which pays greater attention to UNESCO standards. Sweden recognises the need to counteract “the negative effects of commercialism”³ and how markets may distort and reify culture as a series of global commodities. However, the branding and commodification of culture in Scotland is one of the key motivations for the new organisation. Indeed throughout the promotion of Creative Scotland the idea of branding has been used in an entirely uncritical sense. On the other hand, scant regard has been paid to popular

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cultural institutions such as libraries and how popular cultural institutions and leisure may be strengthened and developed.

There is little or no evidence that an avowedly entrepreneurial organisation, more directly geared to economic policy, is needed or will improve existing relationships of sponsorship and/or synergies between the arts, culture and business. In this sense, the development of Creative Scotland’s mission, or ‘core script’, appears to be more about ideological engineering than economic necessity, improved service levels, or the public good. Moreover, the unintended consequences of the shift towards an entrepreneurial ideology in the public provision of culture have not been tested in free and fair public debate. Marketplace “truths” require far greater scrutiny, as has been amply demonstrated in recent months.

The risks of direct political influence over the arts was a preoccupation of the Arts Councils in the UK for many years, as Nicolas Pearson has charted, from the Arts Council of Great Britain’s Eighth annual report (1953): “Every organisation [the Council] assists, large or small, has its own governing body and it self-determined policy”, the importance of this being that, “Certain local authorities have shown an excess of zeal by providing concerts and plays under their own management, an endeavour which could be seen to be – even if not designed as such – a movement towards *L’Art Officiel*, and on that ground as dangerous as similar provision by a central quasi-governmental body such as the Arts Council”.⁴

However one judges the record of Arts Councils’

autonomy, and there are many scholars like Raymond Williams who thought that the arms length principle was in fact only a “wrist length” from the ruling establishment⁵, the danger of Creative Scotland is more far-reaching than that of *L’Art Officiel*. Creative Scotland opens the door to a corporate-friendly *Culture Officiel* under the guise of cultural nationalism. This comes just at the moment when corporate power and the rule of markets are increasingly questioned by ordinary citizens. It would be naïve to assume that an agency set to abandon an already weak arms length principle in favour of a commercially orientated cultural policy could uphold the very criticality concerning culture and commerce that is already under threat.

Notes

1. Following a complaint from Culture & Sport Glasgow (CSG), *Variant* were informed that the magazine had been removed from Glasgow venues managed by CSG following the publication of ‘The New Bohemia’, an article by Rebecca Gordon Nesbitt that critically mapped the political network of CSG. The interference with the distribution of *Variant* would appear to contravene the author’s rights to free political expression as determined by the European Court of Human Rights in cases such as *Lingens v. Austria* (1986), *Oberschlick v. Austria* (1991). See, ‘Freedom of Expression on Trial: Caselaw under European Convention on Human Rights’, by Sally Burnheim, <http://www.derechos.org/koaga/i/burnheim.html> (Accessed May 2009.) See also, ‘Comment’ in *Variant*, issue 33. An extract from CSG’s complaint to *Variant*, 23/7/08, states: “The images you chose to illustrate the piece are in no way representative of Culture and Sport Glasgow and the work that it does. They would appear to have been chosen to illustrate the city of Glasgow in a negative way and thus associate Culture and Sport Glasgow with negative imagery.”
2. Alan Sinfield, ‘The Government, the People and the Festival’, in Jim Fyrrth (ed.), ‘Labour’s Promised Land?: Culture and Society in Labour Britain 1945-51’, (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1995).
3. “The objectives of national cultural policy include safeguarding freedom of expression and creating genuine opportunities for everyone to make use of that freedom; taking action to enable everyone to participate in cultural life, to experience culture and to engage in creative activities of their own; promoting cultural diversity, artistic renewal and quality, thus counteracting the negative effects of commercialism; enabling culture to act as a dynamic, challenging and independent force in society; preserving and making use of our cultural heritage; promoting the thirst for learning, and promoting international cultural exchange and meetings between different cultures in the country.” ‘Sweden’s objectives of national cultural policy’, www.sweden.gov.se/sb/d/3009/a/72002
4. ‘The Quango and the Gentlemanly Tradition: British State intervention in the visual arts’, Nicholas Pearson, *The Oxford Art Journal* – 5:1 1982.
5. Williams, R. (1989 [1979]): *The Arts Council*. In: Williams, R.: ‘Resources of Hope. Culture, Democracy and Socialism’, (Verso).

The image shows two handwritten mathematical equations on a whiteboard. The top equation is $E = mc^2$ and the bottom equation is $E = hf$. The handwriting is in black marker on a white background.