

**Speech**

**DEMOS**

Building  
everyday  
democracy

**Saved for the Nation  
12 June 2008**

*This speech was delivered at the summit, 'Planning a positive Future for Conservation Education', which was convened by the Textile Conservation Centre at University of Southampton. The summit was held at the Courtauld Institute of Art, University of London.*

[Check against delivery]

Good morning.

I'm from the thinktank, Demos.

We've been sponsored by the Textile Conservation Centre Foundation - with the support of The Clothworkers' Foundation - to look at the cultural value of conservation

The title of today's event is 'Planning a positive Future for Conservation Education', and the purpose of our research is to provide a broader context for the future in relation to wider social and political concerns.

Today, I've been asked to talk about issues that will provoke discussion: so, along with David [Leigh] and Simon [Cane]'s presentations, the contexts that I'll talk about will provide material for the group discussions that we'll have later today.

Taking account of wider social and political issues will be central in building the public and political support that conservation needs to attract public funding and develop awareness of its values and to demonstrate the need to support education.

As you'll see from the provocation paper, we're also examining the impact that the loss of conservation education and research would have on culture and heritage in the UK.

And, from this, we will identify what changes that might require in the future.

In particular, what will the role of the conservator be in the future?

And what skills will conservators require?

How, and through what sort of collaboration, will those skills be developed?

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Addressing these issues now is important

First, the closure of several leading courses puts the future of parts of the sector in doubt; and second, politically speaking, there is a window of opportunity.

In January, Roy Clare, the Chief Executive of the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council put it simply: the next Comprehensive Spending Review, or CSR, is a year and a half away.

It's when policy-makers across government make the case for funding for their various sectors to the Treasury.

Put at its baldest, it's when decisions are made as to what money goes to anything from either healthcare or refuse collection, to defence ... or conservation.

Between now and then, the leaders of publicly funded cultural institutions will be making their cases as strongly as possible.

Decisions made will hang upon what value culture and heritage bring to the public.

Conservators must take the chance to put the sector on that agenda.

To do this, they will have to raise awareness among policy-makers and the public of the place of conservation in relation to culture and heritage, and its importance to society more widely.

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To provide context, it will help if I explained a little bit more about Demos: who we are, what we do, and why the TCC spoke to us in the first place.

We look at issues that are important to political considerations and provide recommendations for policy-making in the future. We do that from the perspective of the public, and the benefits that the public can gain from the work of experts.

Last year, for instance, we published *Cultural Diplomacy* – a pamphlet that has influenced policy-makers in the DCMS and the Foreign Office, and has been reflected in the announcement of the World Collections Fund earlier this year.

It was based on the realisation that cultural activity of all kinds and at all levels has tremendous impact on international relations.

We'll come back to the implications that this has for conservation in a moment, but – more generally – our work on conservation focuses on the importance that it has in wider public and political terms, and hence the need to support the education that sustains that importance.

The important thing to stress is that – as a think tank – we're independent, so we don't work for any particular party, and we don't work for the government.

We are also an educational charity, and not a consultancy, and we are funded by people with whom we choose to work and who choose to work with us.

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A few years ago, my colleague, John Holden, wrote about the concept of 'cultural value'

It came in response to years of culture being sidelined in politics and of cultural provision being judged or evaluated according to instrumental measures, and its contribution to other walks of life, which distracts from its value in cultural terms.

Certainly culture has wider value– but it couldn't have that if it wasn't for the people's interest in it in the first place.

Cultural Value can be expressed in terms of:

- Intrinsic value: the value of culture and heritage as experienced by the audience or user;
- Instrumental value: the knock-on effects of people's participation in culture or heritage and so the benefits and goods that result from people's cultural engagement - things like improved health, economic benefits or social representation. They show how culture and heritage fit into a much bigger, social picture ,and this is one way of explaining it;
- And, finally, there is Institutional value: the values delivered by the way that cultural and heritage professionals work – their expertise and so on.

In order to be properly recognised, all these types of value need to be expressed and articulated.

Cultural Value therefore depends upon a set of audiences or constituencies:

- The public in its widest sense, without whose interest in the intrinsic values and without whose participation, culture and heritage could have no value;
- The politicians, whose support is needed to provide for culture and who can recognise cultural provision as a public good: this group can include policy-makers within government at cultural and non-cultural levels, and the leaders of the cultural, heritage and higher-education sectors whose job it is to raise and allocate funds and determine priorities;
- And the professionals, whose values can be communicated to the public and which comprise the expertise and skills to draw the most out of all the values that culture can represent.

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Cultural Value provides a lens through which to look at conservation and determine how its values can best be expressed to given interest groups.

This will be essential as conservators seek to make their case more widely.

Importantly, though, it is more a case of finding new ways of articulating the sector's value, than of reinventing practise.

The values that conservation has, and the spirit in which its professionals operate, can bring great benefits to society.

However, because conservation is often invisible to the general public, it can be overlooked and undervalued: for example, preventive work is at its most successful when conservation isn't evident to the public.

The challenge will be in making the values of conservation clear and demonstrating them in their widest possible terms.

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The Cultural Value framework helps to structure that.

The future of the heritage conservation sector depends on identifying new ways to link conservation values with changing political and social contexts and expectations.

In the second half of my presentation, I'm going to introduce some of those contexts and talk about how conservation connects to wider trends of policy-making and society today.

The important thing is that this applies equally to the public and private sectors of conservation.

Although there are many differences, there are a number of reasons why the public and private sectors must pull together:

- First, many publicly funded cultural and heritage institutions now contract work out to the private sector and so the parameters within which they have to act will apply in some measure to the conservation suppliers;
- Second, because the overall public image of conservation will be a determining factor in the wider market of conservation
- However, over and above these two reasons, it is essential that conservators present a coherent case based not just on practise, but on the idea and values of conservation

Conservation is a way of thinking, and this is where it can contribute a lot to society as a whole.

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Conservation is integral to the cultural and heritage sector.

However, the nature and the expectations that people have of the cultural and heritage sector are changing.

The first big change is that culture and heritage are seen as playing a role in other areas of policy and, in particular, the important subject of identity.

In 2007, for instance, the Commission for Integration and Cohesion recommended that cultural engagement be examined as a means of enhancing community relations.

This gives conservation new significance.

In 2006, the DCMS's pilot programme, Culture Online, conducted a survey to identify icons that people in England considered to represent a sense of being English.

The result was a list of seventy-five icons, some of which are material, others abstract.

Of the list, almost a third has undergone some kind of direct conservation treatment: it includes the Lindisfarne Gospels, the Magna Carta, HMS Victory (whose sail was conserved by the TCC and documented by the Tetley Workshop), the Sutton Hoo treasure and Constable's *Hay Wain*.

All these objects all demonstrate just how intrinsic conservation is to our sense of identity.

Conservation is about caring for the material world and all that it symbolises.

This is what makes it so important, and its also what makes it so pertinent at the moment.

For over a decade, policy-makers and political scientists alike have been troubled by a perceived decline of social capital.

Social capital is a term made famous by the US political scientist, Robert Putnam, who defined it as "the social networks and the associated norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness".

He described the decline of Social Capital in America by looking at dwindling participation in communal activities – most famously the decline of bowling leagues.

Social Capital is the glue that holds us together as a society, binding us to the public realm: it is anchored in the physicality of the material world around us, and in the objects and artefacts that we have produced throughout history and all the links, connections and symbols that they represent.

Should we not be asking what looking after these manifestations of social capital stands for?

From incidences like the destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas, we are well aware of the gross consequences of damage; what then of the vast benefits of care?

By answering this question, conservators have the opportunity to demonstrate their contribution to this agenda and identify how else they might contribute in the future.

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A second big change is that public attitudes to cultural and heritage provision have become more participatory .

More and more, museums and galleries are offering people the chance to respond to the works and objects they see, and help shape the way that they are exhibited.

In New York, for example, young visitors to the Museum of Modern Art [MoMA] can use the website and events with artists and others to ask questions and make suggestions for future display: the museum has also worked with them to broadcast interviews and record podcasts of their thoughts.

Practise like this makes engagement in culture and heritage not only a means of maintaining senses of identity and providing people with information about those around them, but also of helping people to shape new relationships through culture and heritage.

In the future, cultural professionals must use their expertise both to provide information and care for objects, and to enable the participative creation of meaning around those objects in ways that reinvigorate society more widely.

As cultures ... in the UK and globally ... meet, merge and mingle as never before, this will become increasingly important.

Culture is one of the most important means we have of getting a grip on others and their attitudes, and participatory cultural engagement allows people to express and share values.

In combination with the symbolism of care just mentioned, this puts conservation in a very important position.

By communicating the values and principles of conservation more widely, it will be possible to engage more people in the decisions of what can be conserved, and allow people to participate in caring for the material world around them.

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This is a very significant point on which the trajectory of the sector depends.

Conservation is based on expertise, and its future will be built on the maintenance of that expertise, and innovation in how it is presented.

A spectrum runs from the high-level practise of skilled, professional experts, through to the decisions that we make in our daily lives.

When it boils down to it, the decisions made in the most highly professional contexts are based on the same values as those we all make when we decide not to leave a photograph or book we like in the sun, or not to drop litter on the street.

Making this spectrum clearer, and making the links between conservation and everyday life more tangible will help broaden awareness of the sector's value; it will also provide the basis for encouraging engagement in the sector and recognition of professional values.

Already, some public engagement initiatives in cultural institutions do this, but there are opportunities to go further.

First, there are practical collaborations.

The social theorist and government advisor, Charles Leadbeater, has just released an important book called 'We-Think'. It is about the significance of mass innovation.

Leadbeater argues that the web has both created a platform for wider engagement and - more importantly - it has stimulated the appetite and expectation for collaboration.

It has created a culture in which more people than ever can participate, share and collaborate in creating and responding to ideas and information.

This culture both reconstructs conventional models of innovation, and also reinforces the idea of the professional.

Leadbeater stresses that there is always a place for the expert: as he put it in relation to another sector, "an amateur did not write *A Brief History of Time* - but in the future, aspects of astronomy will depend on dedicated amateurs working in tandem with professionals motivated by a shared sense of excitement about exploring the universe".

When botanists at the Natural History Museum embarked upon a survey of lichen in the UK, they soon realised that the task was far too big for their small team to undertake. However, by corralling the enthusiasm of amateurs all over the country, they found that they could guide and channel interest in ways that served professional ends.

The point is that wider recognition of the values by which professionals operate can strengthen their role but, at the same time, professionals must also open their knowledge in ways that allow for collaboration and open new opportunities.

Already, organisations like the National Trust and the National Archives have demonstrated the benefits of working with the public in conservation; but what further opportunities might this idea have in relation to the sector?

Thinking in terms of the future of the profession, wider public engagement could broaden entry points to the sector, encouraging more people to pursue higher education.

There are also large challenges that conservators can meet by encouraging mass collaboration. Mapping changes in insect populations is a good example: such a task is complex and would be expensive and difficult for conservators to meet alone.

Another example is the Deliberately Concealed Garments Project.

As well as extending the reach of the sector, there are further advantages to be gained through mass-collaboration.

It is only by opening the decision-making processes of conservation that the role of the professional can achieve the respect and valuation that it deserves

Again, parallels can be drawn from elsewhere. Accountants recognise that it is only by turning outwards, making rules and norms transparent to non-professionals that that sector can hold itself to account and see what it means to others.

Standards comprehensible to non-experts enable different concepts of value to emerge and be reflected. They also make clear the position of the expert, opening people's eyes to complexity makes expertise more tangible.

What is the potential of conservators doing the same as accountants, and opening decision-making processes to new values that reflect the make-up of today's society?

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However, being open to new values does not mean compromising the expertise, integrity and professionalism of the sector, and this, too, ties into government policy.

In early 2008, Sir Brian McMaster's review of 'Excellence' changed the tone of cultural policy-making. 'Excellence' is defined by the cultural sector itself and the people it serves and is increasingly being adopted as a central tenet of the government's cultural policy.

This plays to conservation's strong suits: expertise, professionalism and its contribution to wider political concerns in its own terms.

Ready for when the leaders of the cultural sector make their case at the next CSR, conservators must supply them with a clear statement of values that relate to the different constituencies mentioned earlier: the public, the politicians and the professionals.

First, they must highlight the implications of the current threat to the sector:

- The immediate loss of skills, research and innovation;
- Direct economic impact on tourism and specialist suppliers of materials and services;
- Immediate damage to the UK's position as the world leader in conservation education;
- And a strongly adverse impact on the implementation of social cohesion policies, because heritage conservation provides a means of creating and sustaining community identity and fostering community participation.

And they must also demonstrate the areas in which the sector can add value, highlighting the challenges that policy-makers are currently grappling with, that conservators can help meet.

One of these is the agenda of **living together** in multi-cultural Britain. In the decisions made over what to conserve and how, conservators make explicit statements about values.

At the National Trust's Clandon Park, for instance, the Maori community is involved in the conservation of Hinemihi, a meeting house in the gardens of the property. As a heritage object, Hinemihi is conserved

not as an illustration of the past, but as a working example of a living culture. It is important in expressing the values of that culture, and in providing a focal point for London's Maori community.

Hinemihi also relates to another of the Government's central concerns: cultural diplomacy. Working with Maoris to bring their values and traditions to providing for Hinemihi shows significant respect.

The same applies for many of the objects in UK collections – demonstrating respectful care will be important as images of objects are broadcast around the world via new technologies, and more and more people can visit collections in the UK.

It will also be important in engaging people from Diaspora communities in the UK in caring for objects that reflect their culture and heritage.

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Cultural Diplomacy also entails the international exchange of knowledge and professional expertise.

All of these are high on governmental agenda in both the Department for Culture Media and Sport (DCMS) and the Foreign Office.

Conservators must demonstrate the sector's contribution to these areas.

Although the UK is a globally-renowned a centre of expertise and learning for conservation, one of the challenges will be in sustaining this impact and communicating its effect more wide, and this has implications on how conservators must present themselves in the future and must play a part in educating the next generations of the sector's leaders.

Similarly, and as the ICONS list mentioned earlier implies, conservation has a big part to play in the Tourist Economy.

DCMS figures show that tourism is a vital part of our economy, contributing £85 billion \each year and is directly responsible for 1.4 million jobs and 85% of overseas visitors say that they come here for our museums galleries and heritage.

Without conservation, we could not sustain many of the reasons for which people come to the UK and, ultimately, the economic benefit to which that leads.

To get the recognition that the sector deserves, conservators must emphasise this. The Tower of London, for instance, is the 8th most visited tourist attraction in the UK: at the moment, it is being conserved and is under wraps. However, rather than apologising for this, the Historic Royal Palaces have taken the decision to champion conservation as being part of their role and responsibility.

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A final, emergent area of policy in which conservation has a significant role to play is in Building Cultural Literacy. This is the skill by which to read and adapt to the many different cultures that we encounter in an interconnected world.

We need to think now about how to broaden curricula to include not only knowledge about the many different cultures we encounter, but also the skills to think about cultural forms from the objects we see in museums, to the media we see and the food we eat, as conveying something of people's identity and attitudes.

As examples like Hinemihi and the Deliberately Concealed Garments Project show, conservation is an effective means of doing this

In February 2008, the DCMS and Department for Children, Schools and Families -the DCSF - announced funding totalling £135m to achieve the ambition of giving 'young people in England the chance to experience high quality arts and culture'.

In particular, they proposed the 'cultural offer': five hours of cultural engagement for each schoolchild, each week. This amounts to an open offer: how can conservators work with schools to educate people in the values of conservation, making clear the spectrum mentioned earlier?

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These are just some of the most salient policy areas to which conservation can and, in many cases, already does contribute.

In the future, one of the skills of the conservator must be to demonstrate this in the widest possible terms and to seek more areas in which conservation adds value.

All of this is based on the fundamental importance of conservation and its ideals: public engagement is vital and will be central to the skills base of the future.

There are several examples of effective public engagement including work at the HRP, the Fitzwilliam Museum, the British Library, and the National Museums of Liverpool.

Future success will depend upon building on these precedents.

To develop awareness of the sector's importance, and its role as a creator of culture, professionals must also engage the public in the processes and decisions of conservation.

This will require finding new ways of working that marry existing professional values and high standards of quality and expertise with changing contexts and expectations.

Conservation education will have to build the skills by which conservators can do this. It requires operating within the widest possible definition of culture and heritage, and This means adopting an

activity-based definition of conservation, which acknowledges the tangible and intangible attributes of objects and sites; the past, present and future; and the active role of the public in shaping cultural heritage.

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What is important, is that when the leaders of the cultural sector make their case to the Treasury in late 2009, they can do so armed with the full benefits that conservation brings, and can bring in the future.

Thank you.

**Samuel Jones,**

June 2008