

Valuing Culture

Speech by Rt Hon Chris Smith, Director of the Clore Programme for Cultural Leadership

I remember when I first became Secretary of State for Culture, back in 1997, having immediately before that been the Shadow Secretary for Health, a friend characterised the move from one subject to the other succinctly. Remember, he said: Health is a *sine qua non*; Culture is a *raison d'être*. And that perception has, I think, lain behind much of the discussion that we have had today.

The fundamental point, made time and again today, and increasingly heard across the world of the arts, is this simple proposition. The arts – cultural activity and endeavour and engagement – require no justification other than their innate ability to move us, to excite us, and to enhance our lives. And Governmental support for culture should acknowledge that truth.

I have to confess that it is easier to say that outside Government than it is inside. We should recognise the difficulty that any Secretary of State for Culture labours under. After all, the most important thing that any Minister can do for culture is to ensure that more funds are available to support it. Reform is all very well. Reshaping organisations can help, or sometimes not. Changing personnel can make a difference. But it is the money that goes to support cultural activity which is the most important.

And there have been significant advances in the past few years. Three spending reviews, each with major increases in funding for the arts. Exchequer increases far exceeding those in most Departments. Substantial rescue packages, for example, for regional theatres. All of this is very welcome, but the question now being insistently asked is: does all of this come with too many strings attached, too many labels and requirements and targets, and is all of this stifling the creative energy which lay at the heart of what you wanted to support in the first place?

Spare a thought, however, for the poor old Minister, faced with the daunting task of getting the increased funding out of the Treasury to start with. The Treasury won't be interested in the intrinsic merits of nurturing beauty or fostering poetry or even "enhancing the quality of life". So I acknowledge unashamedly that when I was Secretary of State, going into what always seemed like a battle with the Treasury, I would try and touch the buttons that would work. I would talk about the educational value of what was being done. I would be passionate about artists working in schools. I would refer to the economic value that can be generated from creative and cultural activity. I would count the added numbers who would flock into a free museum. If it helped to get more funds flowing into the arts, the argument was worth deploying.

And I still believe, passionately, that it was the right approach to take. If it hadn't been taken, the outcome would have left the arts in much poorer condition. Such a method however has two drawbacks. The first is that it ignores the fundamental life-force of the cultural activity that gives rise to the educational or economic value in the first place. (Not, I hasten to add, that there is anything wrong in hailing the value of the educational or economic impact of culture; culture can be profoundly important for a fulfilling education and for a flourishing economy; it is simply that these should not be elevated above the innate value of the art of itself.) The second drawback is that any measurement of numbers, quantity, or added value by figures is necessarily going to be inadequate.

If, for example, you try and assess the impact a great museum or gallery can have on those visiting, it is a relatively easy task to measure the number of people coming through the door. There is no harm in doing so: the huge increases in numbers attending the national museums since the policy of free admission was introduced are testimony to the success of the idea. But it isn't enough. How on earth do you "measure" the joy on a child's face, or the quality of the learning experience, or the thrill of discovering something new and previously unknown? These are some of the things that a museum can do for you. But they can't be encapsulated in a target or a Treasury Performance Assessment.

So, use the measurements and figures and labels that you can, when you need to, in order to convince the rest of the governmental system of the value and importance of what you're seeking to do. But recognise at the same time that this is not the whole story, that it is not enough as an understanding of cultural value.

Today, however, we have seen something new, something stirring beyond that simple proposition. Cultural leaders have begun to state openly that they no longer believe that artistic activity and value should cower behind labels other than the cultural. Have begun to assert that there will be fine educational and social and outreach work done by arts organisations, that they come as a natural development of the work that is being done, that they are of course important and need to be supported, but that they are not the heart of the matter. There is a new self-confidence about this abroad in the cultural world, born partly from strength and partly from frustration. And it is surely welcome. It is not necessarily going to make life any easier for Secretaries of State or Treasury officials, but it is welcome.

It is significant, surely, that today's Conference has focused so sharply on this issue, and has carved out a clear sense of value for culture that doesn't depend on attached benefits, but depends ultimately on the presence and quality of the cultural experience itself. Four years ago, the cultural sector would almost certainly not have had the sense of self-worth to begin making this claim. And it is significant, too, that this gathering has been called together by two of the outstanding new leaders in major cultural organisations, from the National Gallery and the National Theatre. It says much for the self-confidence and sense of vision they have injected already into the

specific artistic work of their respective institutions, that they are able to take a lead in raising such an important public debate.

It is in part what leadership is about. The ability to identify the central purpose in an organisation or enterprise. The courage to articulate it, even when it may not be a popular message. The sense of confidence that will convey it effectively to a wider world. And the dedication to begin a public debate about the impact this vision can have.

What we are seeing is a number of leaders in the cultural sector helping to restore confidence to that sector as a whole. And I hope that this will also become one of the defining goals of the Clore Programme for Cultural Leadership, which is now being established. I took up the Directorship two weeks ago. The Programme is about identifying and developing the cultural leaders of the future; and our initial aim is to take about twenty fellows a year, and offer them a varied programme of study, research, work and experience that will equip them to be able to take on leadership roles in the future. The programme will be individually tailored to the needs and strengths of each fellow. We envisage that the programme will consist of some or all of a menu of elements, including academic study, periods of intensive research, secondment to cultural organisations completely different from those they come from, mentoring, working with a coach, business tuition, and an intensive leadership course that will bring all the participants together.

We aim to work in partnership with academic institutions, cultural organisations and statutory bodies. Our core funding will come from the Clore Duffield Foundation, but we hope that others might be persuaded in due course to sponsor a number of fellowships. The aim will be, of course, to close what does appear to be a serious gap in the cultural sector. We have some outstanding leaders in our field, but they seem to happen by accident rather than design. And putting in place a mechanism for securing the “design” bit of that equation will help to ensure that there is a pool of available and skilled and talented people, ready to take show greater leadership in their existing roles, but also ready to take on higher challenges in due course. Nothing like the Clore Programme has been put in place before, and to a certain extent we will learn by doing, but I and my Deputy Sue Hoyle are determined to make a success of it.

We will spend the next six months putting the pieces of the jigsaw together, and hope then to be in a position – early in the New Year – to invite applications for fellowships. We will need to have a rigorous selection process, of course, to identify those who can come onto the programme; and I would hope that – as well as a majority of applications coming from within the cultural sector – we might be able to attract applicants from, for example, those in the world of business who want to make the move across to the arts. Even perhaps from the world of politics wanting to make the same move!

But I want to emphasise that the Clore Leadership Programme will not just be about the individual needs and successes of the twenty or so fellows who participate. It will also be about spreading the lessons of leadership much more widely across the cultural sector as a whole; and about acting as an advocate for the importance of culture, the value enshrined within it, and the possibilities it opens up. I hope that our Programme can not only bring a sense of confidence to the twenty fellows, but can help to bring a greater sense of confidence to the wider cultural sector too.

The Clore Programme will, I hope, be able to take forward many of the issues and debates that have emerged from today's discussions. We will want to ask "what next?" and explore some of the answers. We will try to nurture leaders who can engage in that debate with vigour and knowledge. We will hope that the ways in which leadership can be nursed and developed in an individual can be applied to whole organisations and even the sector itself. We will disseminate best practice. We will share the experience we and our fellows have, through publications, articles, lectures, conferences and other events. In short, whilst we will focus primarily on the learning experience of our fellows, we will want to engage actively and prominently in the wider debates about the future of culture as a whole.

Let us not forget, however, that it is the cultural experience itself which is the central point here. It is the profound understanding of the interaction between human beings and war that comes as you watch *Henry V* here at the National Theatre. It is the appreciation of beauty and the mastery of paint that comes as you walk in awe through the Titian exhibition at the National Gallery. It is the thrill that cuts to the heart when you hear a sublime piece of music, or watch the sinuous coordination of dancers on a stage. Leadership can help you to understand all of this, can explain it, can entice you in, can exhilarate you about it. It can help you to value culture. But ultimately that sense of value will come from within, from your very own interaction with the work of art.

Two centuries ago, William Hazlitt wrote the following. He was perhaps being a little hard on the Scots, but he put it very well:

"Scotland is of all other countries in the world perhaps the one in which the question 'What is the use of that?' is asked oftenest. But where this is the case, the Fine Arts cannot flourish, or attain their high and balmy state ... for they are their own sole end and use, and in themselves 'sum all delight'. It may be said of the Fine Arts that they 'toil not, neither do they spin', but are like the lilies of the valley, lovely in themselves, graceful and beautiful, and precious in the sight of all but the blind. They do not furnish us with food or raiment, it is true; but they please the eye, they haunt the imagination, they solace the heart. If after that you ask the question, *Cui bono?* There is no answer to be returned."

Yes, indeed. That, emphatically, is the heart of the matter.

