

**MODERNISING BRITAIN**

COLL P

8358

**Creative  
futures**

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## CREATIVE FUTURES: CULTURE, IDENTITY AND NATIONAL RENEWAL

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CREATIVE PATTERNS: CULTURE, IDENTITY  
AND NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

1. The historical context of the study
2. Theoretical framework and research objectives
3. Methodology and data collection
4. Findings and discussion
5. Conclusion and implications

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## INTRODUCTION

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*Michael Jacobs*

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Setting out his vision for British society before the last election, Tony Blair said that he wanted Britain to be 'a young country'. This was a rather shocking idea. Britain may be many things in our minds, but being young is not generally one of them.

It is this that Tony Blair and the new Labour Government are seeking to change. Under the banner of 'modernisation', a concerted attempt is being made to refashion Britain's sense of national identity. What is perhaps most interesting, and certainly welcome, about this project is the central role being given to culture. This is not a subject, frankly, to which British governments in the recent past have given much attention. But today we have a new Department of Culture, with a new mission of making the arts accessible to all; new funding mechanisms through the National Lottery; a Task Force set up to devise a strategy for maximising the strength of Britain's 'creative industries'; an exhibition planned for the Millennium Dome to celebrate British innovation in science and technology; and prominent figures in fashion, design, music and film being conspicuously invited to party with the Prime Minister at No 10.

It has been easy for superficial commentators to mock some of this as cheap (or expensive) populism. But the deeper purpose here is important. For it is through culture that collective identity is largely formed. This is true in both senses of the word. In its broad sense 'culture' refers to those characteristics which make individual societies distinctive: language, customs, faiths, traditions, sciences and the vernacular arts. The crucial feature of culture in this sense is that it is shared: in helping to define a particular society - local, regional or national - it gives the individuals within it a common identity, and through this a sense of belonging to something bigger than themselves.

By contrast, in its narrower usage to mean the high and popular arts of music, literature, drama, painting and so on, one of the crucial roles of culture is to question identity. Here there is no necessary sharing: there is iconoclasm, rebellion, individuality. This is crucial to the formation of identity. It is the human imagination, cultivated and expressed in artistic activity, which can explore

what kinds of people we are, and who we could be. And there isn't a single version of this: in the modern world we have multiple identities, both as individuals and as a society. This diversity is both created and manifested in the flourishing of the arts.

It was to explore these questions that the Fabian Society organised in September 1997 a major conference in London entitled 'Culture, Identity and National Renewal'. Supported by Classic FM - which is itself a remarkable example of our changing cultural identities - the conference attracted over 250 people from throughout the arts and cultural world to debate the role of culture in our national life. Drawing on examples of both national and local arts activity, the conference examined the extent to which a government-led cultural policy could become a focus for shared identity, and through this an engine for regeneration: not only nationally, but in local and regional communities.

This pamphlet reproduces, in edited form, four of the speeches given at the conference. In different ways each of these essays explores the complex relationships between culture, identity and nationhood, and the role that government can play in fostering creative endeavour.

The conference took place at a momentous time, immediately following both the funeral of Princess Diana and the devolution referendums in Scotland and Wales. These events forced upon British society new questions about our national identity - both about the nations we live in and the kind of people we are. These questions will not go away. The devolution processes in Scotland and Wales (and in Northern Ireland) have only just started; and the ramifications for English identity have yet to become clear. The impact of Diana's death both on our sense of collective values and on some of our oldest institutions is still to be fully worked through. Meanwhile the approaching Millennium - a quintessentially collective event - will inevitably make us ask who we are as a nation, and where we think we're going. We hope that these essays will contribute to these debates.

The Fabian Society would like to express its thanks to Sarah Atkin, whose own imagination generated the idea of the conference, to her conference co-organisers at Neil Stewart Associates, and to Classic FM for their generous financial support of both the conference and this pamphlet ●

## CULTURE AND OUR SENSE OF NATIONAL IDENTITY

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1

*Rt Hon Chris Smith MP*

**R**obert Kennedy once wrote: 'The gross national product does not allow for the health of our children, the quality of their education or the joy of their play. It does not include the beauty of our poetry or the strength of our marriages, the intelligence of our public debate or the integrity of our public officials. It measures neither our wit nor our courage, neither our wisdom nor our learning, neither our compassion nor our devotion to our country. It measures everything, in short, except that which makes life worthwhile.'

I'm not sure he was entirely right, because he was ignoring the strands which were already developing then, in the 1960s, of interconnection between culture and national economy to which I shall turn in a moment. But he was pointing with characteristic forcefulness to a profound truth: that there is a bundle of emotions, experiences and life-defining elements in all our lives that cannot be pinned down in mechanistic definitions, that cannot be counted by an accountant, that cannot be readily measured in a calculus, but that together form the most significant components of our character, and of our purpose in life. These elements form themselves into what we might call our own individual culture, our own sense of identity and self-worth; taken broadly together, across groups of people, they form what can more generally be seen as the culture of a community or a nation.

These are almost impossible things to define with precision. If you ask for a definition of the word 'culture' you will receive as many definitions as there are definers. It is a little bit like the word 'socialism', I suppose: it can accommodate as little or as much as the user wants. It can encompass the whole history



of a people, or their current way of life, or their ideas for the future, or their religious beliefs, or the corpus of their thought or their literature or their music or their art. Matthew Arnold, of course, defined culture as 'the acquainting ourselves with the best that has been known and said in the world, and thus with the history of the human spirit'. I have always thought that this - fine concept though it is - has tended to place culture too formally outside the individual experience of the person, in some great intellectual tide that is seen as being divorced from the personal and that has to be struggled for and connected to before it becomes valid. I prefer to follow Kennedy and T. S. Eliot, in seeing culture as that which 'makes life worth living' - both as individual human spirits and as communities.

As someone rather neatly put it to me, when I migrated from being the Shadow Health Secretary to being (as it then was) the Heritage Secretary: 'Health is a *sine qua non*, but culture is a *raison d'être*.'

No-one who has lived through the weeks following Diana's death here in Britain can doubt, either, that there is such a thing as a national cultural sense, as well as a series of individual cultural experiences. What we have witnessed, I believe, is a real feeling that we are coming together as a nation, in shared grief but in shared purpose too. I felt it a little bit in those terrible weeks three and a half years ago when we lost John Smith, when suddenly the values of social justice to which he was so passionately devoted swept through the national psyche and became the normal stuff of political discourse in way that would have been inconceivable before. On a larger scale we are witnessing something of the same happening now. The death of the Princess of Wales has unlocked a tide of emotion that we scarcely knew we felt: of compassion and commitment to those who are marginalised and disadvantaged; of informality and a touch of irreverence; of respect for vulnerability; and of wanting to be part of something bigger than just ourselves. What a sea-change this represents from the go-getting, me-first, thrusting Thatcherite world of 1980s values. We are rediscovering the truth that there is such a thing as society after all.

We must be careful, however, not to run away with the notion that there is some sort of monolithic British culture that shapes one form of national identity and one only. How can you possibly describe our national identity? Is it warm beer and the sound of leather on willow and old maids bicycling through the country mists to morning communion? Is it what goes on in Albert Square or Coronation Street? Is it the Notting Hill Carnival? Is it the crowd at Wembley rising silently to *Candle in the Wind*, or roaring at the goals that followed? Is it Italian opera at Covent Garden, Scandinavian plays at the National Thea-

tre and Russian music at the Proms? Is it wallowing in the mud at Glastonbury? Is it marching down the catwalk in Paris, or designing a new gallery in Stuttgart?

It is, of course, all of these things and a great deal more. Culture - or perhaps we should talk rather of cultures - have to be seen on the widest possible canvas. Today Britain embraces cultures from all over the world, as we always have, and the diversity of our society and of our experiences is precisely part of what makes for the richness of our cultural environment. Many parts of those cultures that we have gradually absorbed have already become so familiar to us that we no longer think of them as foreign at all. Someone hearing a sitar or South African close harmony on the radio immediately accepts it as *music*, not "foreign music", in the same way that we have as a nation widened our gastronomic tastes over recent years, drawing on the best culinary effects of a wide range of traditions. So when we try to understand how our national culture and sense of identity intertwine, let us remember first and foremost that diversity is one of the key ingredients of both that culture and that identity.

In this interweaving of cultures in Britain, there are now so many different and wonderful threads that make up a rich tapestry, and help to give us a new and modern identity. Just think of writers such as Ben Okri and Salman Rushdie and Kazuo Ishiguro. Bands such as Massive Attack and Eternal. Singers such as Ronnie Size and Jazzie B and Apache Indian. Flourishing new fashion designers such as Ozwald Boateng. All these are new ambassadors for a new creative Britain. And all contribute to a diversity we should be shouting about from the rooftops.

Sitting side by side with the concept of diversity is another equally important characteristic of our national culture: that it spreads - or should spread - across the *whole* of society. Cultural experience and activity must, I passionately believe, be available to the many and not just to the few. If I had to identify a defining motif of our new government and our new Department it would be precisely this: that developing our own individual sense of identity through cultural experience, and touching a sense of shared identity through shared cultural emotion, must be achievable by everyone no matter what their circumstances or class or background or location may be. Things of quality must be accessible to all.

That is, I believe, a legitimate aim of government. No government can or should attempt to create culture, to dictate what its components are, or to second-guess the creative impulses of individuals. But governments can ensure that the framework is in place that permits those creative impulses to flourish, and can ensure that as many people as possible have the chance to enjoy and

absorb.

There is a perpetual danger that 'culture' will be seen as something alien to the vast majority of people, something just for an elite and for special people in special privileged places. We must fight as strongly as we can against such notions. I have said on many occasions that culture, the arts, sport, the enjoyment of creativity are for all. I have also said that they must become much more a part of everyday life, not just reserved for special events. Both points are central to any understanding of how our sense of ourselves as a people can develop. But there is a further point to add, too. We must not define ourselves solely in terms of the past, or tradition, or what we have inherited. Culture and personal and national identity are every bit as much - if not more - about the future.

That is of course one of the reasons why I felt it was important to change the name of my Department. Important though the conservation of our heritage is, it did not represent all that our work should be. I wanted something that was a bit more all-embracing, and a bit more forward-looking. Our new title reflects much more the modern nature of what we are about.

This is something we perhaps need to take note of as a nation, too. The recent Demos report on British identity is frightening in the evidence it amasses about the way in which as a nation we look backwards - and the impact this has on others' view of us, as well as on our own view of ourselves. Japanese consumers have a higher regard for British products than we do ourselves. Only 37% of 18 to 34 year olds believe that Britain 'is a better country than other countries'. British companies are dropping the word "British" from their titles. And the Demos authors drily tell us: 'Around the world... Britain's image remains stuck in the past... Britain is seen as a backward-looking has-been, a theme park world of royal pageantry and rolling green hills, where draughts blow through people's houses.' 1

That is the perception, though I suspect that it is changing for the better in a way that the Demos polling work has not yet picked up. But contrast that with the reality. We export more per head than the USA or Japan. We lead the world in many of the new and growing industries, in design and fashion and music and computer graphics and the audiovisual world. Even the Japanese government admits that 70% of the products that have fuelled their own economic success in recent decades have been invented in Britain. Eight out of ten of the most profitable retailers in Europe are British. We have the busiest international airport and we host the largest international arts festival in the world. London buzzes with life and energy. 1.4 billion people live in countries where English is an official language. These are strengths. They are pointers

to our future sources of wealth, and to our potential sense of pride and identity. But we have to play to these strengths, and this is where government can help.

Recently the British Tourist Authority launched its new Union Jack-based logo. I think it's rather good. The research that led up to its development is very significant. In all the survey work amongst visitors to Britain, and potential visitors, two contrasting themes constantly emerged: that Britain was a place of tradition, and that Britain was a place of innovation too. Pomp and pageantry alongside 'cool Britannia'.

We are of course a nation that is both buttressed and circumscribed by our history. This is true of every European country, in a way which North America and Australia, for example, are not. Nearly every piece of ground in our country has been worked on, lived on, loved and changed, over the centuries. Nearly everything we do has gradually evolved from things that have been done before. This is a simple fact of life. It is a strength, and it is also a limitation. But what we need to do is to use this platform of history and tradition in order to build a new and innovative future. In many fields of human endeavour we are now seeing a real renaissance of activity and imagination, here in Britain. It is true in everything from the performing arts to medical science. Let us make sure that - in setting out for ourselves a new sense of our culture and our identity, we keep fully in view that synergy between tradition and innovation that is almost unique to us, and that can give us a real edge for future success.

That is why the initiative we have taken in establishing a Creative Industries Task Force, to work across the whole of Government, to draw together Ministers from all the relevant departments, and to work in coherent fashion to see what we can do to assist the development of these incredibly important industries, is so important. These are industries that depend on individual creative talent, and intellectual property, for their added value. They range from music and the visual arts through to film, television and design. They depend on a cultural ferment of talent, ideas, and encouragement to flourish. And none of that can or should be dictated by government. But what we can do is to make sure that the international framework of copyright law is right, that problems of piracy are being tackled, that the domestic market is not hampered by anti-competitive practices, and that the education system is enabling talent to emerge. These are the issues to which the Task Force will be turning its attention. If we get it right, then we will be able to assist some of the most important industrial sectors for Britain in the next twenty or thirty years. These are where the jobs of the future and the wealth creation of the future are going to come from, in substantial form. And I have to say, at last we have a Government in place that recognizes this, and wants to help.

Nor should we ignore the importance of cultural activity and development for social regeneration as well as for economic success. Some of the work by Comedia published recently has shown this particularly strongly. Work to provide cultural opportunities in local communities - in the arts or theatre or multimedia or sport - can be far and away the most effective way of providing a spurt to wider regeneration of a neighbourhood or an estate. Providing cultural opportunities for local people to enjoy themselves, to find fulfilment, to develop skills they never realised they had, and to find the excitement of working together with others to make things happen - all this helps to generate a sense of purpose and of self-worth amongst those who have been constrained or patronised for years. This is a classic demonstration of the links between cultural activity and a sense of identity - personal identity for individuals, and local identity for communities.

And it can lead on to the most remarkable rejuvenation of neighbourhoods in other ways too. Look at what has happened in areas all around the country, where music workshops or mural projects or creative writing schemes or mini-festivals have been established: often in a small-scale way, but with enormous benefits for everyone involved. This is why I am so devoted to the future progress of the Arts for Everyone programme put together so imaginatively by the Arts Councils. And it is why I am looking further at how - within the proposals we have put forward in our recent White Paper for the reform of the Lottery - we can make further progress in the use of lottery funds in this way.

Without education, however, there can be no culture. And the final point I want to make relates to this. Education is all about the best possible individual development for a child. It is about finding fulfilment and developing skills and equipping yourself for the world and becoming a citizen. It is also about becoming a full person. In order to achieve all of this, we must not and cannot ignore the cultural aspects of education. A very young child finds something magical, something wonderful, about singing and dancing and painting, and relating to the world through the medium of what in an adult world we would recognize as cultural activity. Yet whilst much of our subsequent educational provision for that child is about logic and reason, we must never let the magic be suppressed. I want to ensure, naturally, that high standards in the basic skills of reading and writing and counting and relating to others are attained. But I also want the magic and wonder of the world of culture to be there too, alongside the other skills that are being learned and honed. Without that, fulfilment will not come and society as a whole will be the poorer for it.

Nurturing our sense of culture in ourselves and as a society; cherishing diversity; ensuring that the opportunities to do so are available to all; building on

our sense of inheritance to shape an exciting future; recognising the economic and social success that can come when married to a sense of culture; and ensuring that our education system encourages such a development: these are the key themes for anyone - particularly a government that dares to consider itself civilised - who wishes to ensure that a proud sense of cultural identity leads to a proud sense of national achievement.

Sheila McKechnie recently remarked that for many people the word 'culture' represented something that you grow tomatoes in, or something you grow viruses in; but that it was actually something you can grow people in. Or rather: something in which people can grow themselves. In the end, after all, that is what this is all about ●

**Note**

1 Mark Leonard, *Britain TM*, Demos, 1997

# 2

## BRITISH IDENTITY AND CULTURAL RENEWAL

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*Trevor Phillips*

**W**ho do we think we are? The referendums on devolution in Scotland and Wales in the autumn of 1997 were - indirectly - supposed to answer this question. The lack of enthusiasm in Wales, and the only just adequate turnout in Scotland, should really make us wonder whether we asked the right question. Are we trying to impose a kind of national identity that no longer has meaning for many of our people? This can lead to disaster. Let me explain what I mean by this.

When we talk of taffs or jocks, niggers, yids or pakis we all understand the power of these words. In most circumstances they would cause serious offence if used by someone who is not himself or herself of African, Jewish, South Asian, Welsh or Scottish descent. They are offensive not just because they are terms of abuse; they are offensive because they carry very specific, limiting ideas about people just because of where they or their families may have been born. These words carry baggage, and when they are used by others, they dump that baggage, usually unwelcome, on the person addressed.

But what is most offensive is that someone else believes that they can decide who and what we are. That is why I for one have always been uneasy about most discussions about identity. Most such discussions frame the issue of identity principally in terms of nationality or religion or race. For someone with a Caribbean heritage this is a serious problem.

I am clearly an African of sorts though I have no clue of which African nation, and no knowledge of any African language; I have a Scottish great great grandfather, an Indian great grandmother, and for heavens' sake a name which I share with dozens of people in every village in Mid Wales. My children, like millions of other British children, can claim a heritage that spreads across four

continents.

So who are we? The fact is that, as any Artful Dodger knows, the answer to the question "Who are you?" is: "Who's asking?" In my own case, the answer could be any one of a dozen things - British, English, black, European, Londoner, journalist; today, the most important could be part of the Chelsea tribe, since we're near the top of the Premiership. My point really is that efforts to fix identity, to describe it in such a way that an individual can put it on like a suit are, today, pointless - except that they make it easy for everyone else to say - ah yes, I understand what he or she is about. There is unfortunately a thin line here between identification and prejudice.

For centuries Caribbean slave owners believed that they could preserve the idea of a pure European by classification. They created a system in which you could trace identity through seven generations, and there was a name for every possible combination - mulattos, quadroons, octoroons, down to 88 parts African and 40 parts European, the so-called marabouts. That idea failed, of course - broken on the rock of human nature.

I would urge us not to get too hung up on difficult, abstract, arguments about what it means to be British or English or Scottish or Welsh or European. It may be useful if what you want to do is market UK plc; in that case the task might simply be to work out what might be *included* when we talk about the British. The academic Stuart Hall got it right when he said recently that being Black is now just another way of being British - implying that there are a series of ways of belonging to the British tribe. Identity should not become a new cage, trapping us in a set of expectations; but should be a chance to express the range of opportunities implied in the word British.

(I give a big tick, by the way, to Robin Cook for noticing that the Foreign Office is all-white and largely male. It doesn't surprise me. Some years ago, at a Foreign Office briefing one senior official told us that, "Of course, the Tanzanians are the niggers in the woodpile". He then looked at me and muttered "Only an expression". Amazing that this should take place in a department where attitudes can cost us trade.)

So much for national identity. So how do we get a handle on the idea of "culture"? We should, I think, try to distinguish between three things, which we all from time to time confuse. One is identity, which seems to me to be an individual quality, which not only changes from person to person, but may be different from time to time and place to place. The second is heritage, which is given, fixed and derives from birth, and perhaps ownership of land; and the third is tradition, which involves rituals, practices, habits, even language shared by groups of people and often handed on from generation to generation. It is



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tradition, perhaps, which most closely helps us to define what might be defined as a national culture. Unfortunately the word has come to stand for the stuffy and backward looking aspects of our history.

But it need not be so. If we think of our culture as what we have done and achieved as a people, rather than what we are and have been, we can begin to think of our culture as inclusive, embracing a series of traditions. Anyone can share in them. For example: who, a generation ago, would have imagined that two black women would be wearing ermine this autumn? Traditions also belong to the people, and - as we have seen recently in respect to the royal family - can be thrown off by the people if they become suffocating straightjackets. And lastly, tradition has the virtue of being susceptible to - vogue word - *modernisation*.

It is worth adding one last point about what culture is. Broadly speaking we tend to think of this word as meaning our artistic, craft, and sporting traditions. I regret that we are not making greater strides to include science and technology in our definition. The British story involves Newton just as much as it does Shakespeare, Faraday as much as it does Elgar, Crick and Watson as much as it does Henry Moore. It is a pity that we don't see scientists and inventors, just as intellectually vigorous and innovative as artists, in conferences like this. The proposed National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts is a powerful bow in the right direction, but we need to go further than that.

Of course, as well as trying to work out what culture *is*, we also have to address the question of what culture *is for*. Everybody knows that culture is now big business. The sector makes billions of pounds each year for the nation, and it supports hundreds of thousands of jobs. But let us not fall into the trap of thinking of culture simply as brand marketing for UK plc. A nation's culture reminds us who we are - and it points us to where we are heading. It is the story of our communal life. And today, the story that we tell of our own lives is increasingly told in the terms of film, television, popular print and music, media which are virtually instantaneously available, universally understood, and hugely persuasive. More than at any time in our history, our culture is playing a role in our democracy; the climate of opinion is crucially affected by the way in which our story is told.

Thus we have to consider the role of our culture in the turn of the century world against a much wider background than simply what is good and right for audiences and artists, or what the government or the arts funding system might or might not do. Government does have a role, and that is a role of leadership - establishing some aims for us in respect of a cultural policy. In my view there are three great issues that a cultural policy must confront above all else:

globalisation, technology and the capture of talent.

Globalisation could mean a culture that is bland, cheapening, dumbing and vulgar. Or it could mean that the ease of communication across the planet brings people closer together, making new ideas and experiences available to more people. It could mean support for innovation where it was never available before. And for Britain it could also mean massive new opportunities that in themselves work against social and economic exclusion. Our capacity for cultural innovation and our language have made us world leaders in several sectors - media, publishing, multimedia products. Most of all, we know that cultural innovation thrives best in an energetically diverse society, and Britain is probably one of the most successfully and comfortably diverse societies on earth. Part of government's role should surely be to encourage us to take advantage of globalisation rather than to fear it.

Technology: without doubt, the satellite dish, the video camera, and the digital transmission of information have transformed the manner and the speed at which we construct and reconstruct our history, and with which we can share cultural products. That is not to say that we are less entranced by live performance or the direct encounter with a piece of art. But once again, technology has made design, theatre, music so widely available that their ability to express our values as a society has been multiplied hundreds of times in a decade. But how do we make it the property of the people, rather than the exclusive preserve of the rich and the elite?

The capture of talent: in the past half-century, private patronage has been supplemented by patronage by the public purse through the Arts Council and other bodies, including local authorities. But now, increasingly the ownership of musicians, artists and writers and their intellectual property is in the hands of huge global conglomerates. There are major principles at stake here: how much of a book or a piece of music or an image, say, belongs to the artists and how much to his or her backer - and does any of it belong to the public? Increasingly, as these assets are exploited, there are reasons for us to be clearer on these issues.

Most of all we all need to consider the lessons of the success of the cultural industries of our time. One of those lessons is that the purveyors of popular culture place great store by putting their products in front of audiences, where those audiences are, rather than forcing them to come to 'temples of culture'. If we truly want to encourage a people's cultural policy, the first and most important element has to be how we allow people to experience the arts and culture where the people are, rather than where we would like them to be.

This brings me finally to the issue of national renewal. All that I've said

implies that I believe that this is not something that you can engineer. However I do believe that governments can give a lead by offering opportunities for us to celebrate our culture, composed of traditions old and new. That is one reason, despite the cost and all other misgivings, to support the Millennium Exhibition at Greenwich, and just as importantly the Festival that goes with it. But let's pay attention to something else that is taking place. As technology and affluence offer us all greater choice about how we spend our time, there is clearly less emphasis on the historic communal activities that bind us together - church-going for example. We know that one of the villains of the piece here is of course television. But in the past year or two we have seen a new communal phenomenon in which TV plays a unique part.

On VE Day, during Euro '96, for Princess Diana's funeral, a whole nation shared a single experience - but not simply as couch potatoes. In each case most of us spent part of the day at home, on our own or with our families; for part of the day we joined our friends at home or in community centres; and if we had the chance we joined in a local celebration. We all witnessed the same events and for once were talking about the same things. One might say the same about May 2nd 1997. Each of these moments was a time of national expression, telling us new elements in our national story - in the case of Diana's funeral, for example, it was obvious that we are now a hugely, comfortably, diverse nation - you could see that fact in the crowds on the streets. It's a lesson we can draw on. The moments of national renewal need to be embraced and prepared for rather than constantly taking us by surprise. We know for example that there will be another such moment on December 31st 1999. We won't all get into the dome, and we probably won't want to be - we'll want to welcome the new millennium with our friends and those closest to us. Should we not now be preparing for that day and night?

The Millennium Party will start at 4pm in London, when the International Dateline in the Pacific passes midnight, and it will culminate in midnight at the meridian (that's a good name for a show). Why aren't we investing in the technology that would link a thousand communities on the day? Why aren't we harnessing the abilities of our regional arts boards to bring together the performers and artists we fund to create wonderful entertainment throughout the day and night, showing off what they can do, and bringing people together to celebrate their brilliance? We could and should put massive screens in every town square in major shopping centres and in public parks, so while we party with our friends we can see and hear what is happening across the nation, even across the planet.

And by the way, a thousand video screens would be a brilliant legacy to the

21st century - carrying local information, offering pictures of, let us say, performances in local theatres and schools, the work of local artists, neighbourhood cable output - putting the most advanced technology at the service of local communities.

You might say what a typically Caribbean outlook - let's have another party. Well, perhaps, and why not? Our tradition too is now part of British culture, and this is, in part, what I think of as national renewal. I hope that when we talk about cultural policy, in the midst of the no doubt soaring ideas and strategies, we find time to talk about the very practical possibilities for the expression of national renewal and culture. Let us not become too theoretical, too French; after all one of the great British virtues is pragmatism - our tradition is to get things done. Our tradition is of course, to look backwards; but let's change that and start to look forward. Our culture should surprise us and delight us with experiences we've never had, or that we never even knew were possible ●

# 3

## CULTURE AND THE NEW POLITICS: REFLECTIONS FROM A SMALL COUNTRY

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*Bridget McConnell*

**T**he referendum on Scottish devolution on September 11th 1997 was a historic moment for our country. But the 'Yes Yes' result was not a mandate for politicians, civil servants, local government officers or any other public sector officials to take on extra powers 'on behalf of the people.'

This was a clear demand for a new kind of politics, a new way of doing things: a learning approach, a more participative democracy and a more egalitarian society. I think many of our 'high heid yins' will have a rude awakening when they eventually realise what this means. It is the inevitable culmination of more wide-ranging and profound changes in Scottish, and indeed British, society.

Over the past decade it has been in the cultural field that these changes have been most clearly manifested. There have been a number of significant cultural developments in Scotland which have both advanced the process of 'national renewal', and at the same time, reflected a broad-based public desire for greater accountability and public participation in our politics. It has become clear that 'culture' - what it is and what it means in contemporary Scotland - cannot be considered apart from other aspects of Scottish life. Culture is inextricably linked to politics, education, economic development and community regeneration, all of which shape and influence our sense of identity - as individuals, as communities and as a nation.

This identity is not uniform. There is no single Scottish identity, as there is no single 'Scottish culture'. The Scottish Consultative Council on the Curriculum (SCCC) recently surveyed 1100 organisations as part of its Review of Scottish Culture and the Curriculum. 97% of respondents agreed that there was such a thing as 'Scottish Culture' and that this was something which was distinctive and unique to Scotland. But despite unanimity on the *existence* of 'Scottish culture', the variety and diversity of opinions on what that culture *is* proved

to be very wide.

Indeed, it would seem that the more we consider the question 'What is Scottish culture?', the more it fragments. On the one hand we have the Braveheart mythologies and the historical sentimentality packaged in tartan for tourists. On the other there is the modern, dynamic, internationally celebrated arts scene: Scottish films such as *Shallow Grave* and *Trainspotting*; in the visual arts the internationally successful Belamey, Campbell and Howie; bands such as Wet Wet Wet and Texas; and the more classical expressions of musical culture, MacMillan and Maxwell Davis. Yet looking at the returns from the SCCC survey, the definition of Scottish culture is clearly not found in any one organisation's or individual's analysis. Rather, it is the plurality of these different views, experiences and expressions which makes up modern day Scottish culture. As the report put it, 'The sum total of cultural houses found in Scotland constitutes the city called *Scottish Culture*'.<sup>1</sup>

It is crucial to recognise that these 'cultural houses' are not just those containing narrowly-defined 'arts' activities. A major contributing factor to the new cultural self-confidence found in Scotland is the affirmation at local and national levels of the value and significance of *vernacular* cultures previously ignored or denigrated. These vernacular cultures are themselves sources for internationally recognised arts excellence.

Scottish languages provide a case in point. Thanks to the efforts of bodies such as Comunn Na Gaidhlig, the Scots Language Society, and the Scots Language Resource Centre, the future of Scotland's indigenous languages - Gaelic and Scots - are well secured.

The Highland Clearances in the 19th century almost totally wiped out the language and culture of the Highlands. Less than 70,000 people in Scotland now speak Gaelic; but this is steadily increasing as local authorities and national government commit funding support to Gaelic teaching - and just as important, to Gaelic arts projects. Local authorities such as Fife and Highland have worked to ensure that local cultural and linguistic traditions are not sentimentalised and packaged as 'museum pieces', but are part of a living heritage, which local people can develop in modern contexts. A network of Gaelic initiatives from playschools to television programmes, rock bands to Gaelic magazines is allied to the burgeoning network of tuition-based local festivals in which Gaelic music, storytelling and other cultural skills are passed on to the younger generation. The international success of Gaelic bands such as Clannad has been nurtured from this local revival of Gaelic culture.

Meanwhile surveys place the number of Scots language speakers at between 1.6m and 3.6m. If the latter figure is accurate, this would make Scots speakers

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the second biggest language group in the country. The increasing value placed on Scots has been a result of several factors: effective lobbying, greater use of the language in broadcasting and the media, the inclusion of Scots in the 5-14 years curriculum, university courses in Scottish Studies and an expansion of publications in Scots. (Nonetheless, when a Scots teenager can be charged with contempt of court for using the Scots 'Aye' instead of the English 'Yes' in response to the Judge - as happened earlier this year - it is clear that the days when children using Scots at school were told 'to speak properly' are not yet entirely past.)

As national and international successes continue to accrue to Scottish writers, writing not only in English but in Scots, increasing self-confidence in Scots and its usage is inevitable. Examples include James Kelman, winner of the Booker Prize; Jeff Torrington, winner of the Whitbread Prize; Ian Crichton-Smith, winner of the Forward Award for Best Single Poem; and of course Irvine Welsh, author of *Trainspotting* and now an international literary figure.

The importance of these achievements cannot be over-estimated. No longer is the Scots language regarded as a dying force with a relevance only in centuries past. It is now seen as a vibrant and expressive language used and appreciated not only in Scotland but elsewhere around the globe. As Seona Reid, Director of the Scottish Arts Council, said at the British Council Edinburgh Festival Seminar in 1996: 'It would be a mistake to assume that all this interest in our traditions, our linguistic heritage, was self-indulgent wallowing in all our yesterdays. The Catalan artist Joan Miro once said that 'Art can only be truly universal when it is fundamentally local'. That is a truth which straddles every art form. An artist can only function properly on the international stage if he or she first has a solid sense of their own identity and culture. There is a growing sense of cultural self confidence in Scotland and it is having a noticeable effect at home and abroad.'<sup>2</sup>

Yet if you believed everything you read in the newspapers, you would think that Scottish culture was in crisis. To quote a recent headline in *Scotland on Sunday*: 'Culture is on the wane as the Nation rises'. To Fiona McLeod, the author of the accompanying article, 'the catalogue of Scottish arts organisations in disarray over recent months reads like a melodrama in its own right. From ballet to book, film to art gallery, almost all Scotland's arts organisations have been shaken by headline-grabbing rows'.<sup>3</sup>

Ironically, this article was next to another which revealed that it is not Scottish culture which is on the wane, but our elitist *definition* of culture. This other article described how 'a privileged few Oasis fans shared an intimate rock 'n' roll experience with their heroes - about 8,000 fans packed in to see the swag-

gering Mancunians play their first British gig in more than a year.' An intimate audience of 8,000 - this would be many arts administrators' fantasy!

In all this the question at issue here is: what do we mean by culture? And in terms of cultural policy, that inevitably comes down to asking searching questions about the kinds of national cultural activities which government should support.

These are questions which Scottish local authorities have been answering with increasing confidence in recent years. Local authorities are the main supporters of the arts in Scotland, collectively spending about £250 million on a wide range of cultural services. As the 'Charter for the Arts in Scotland', published in 1993, puts it: 'Local authorities are the structural pivot of cultural life in Scotland'. And over the past decade, a number of Scottish local authorities have been at the forefront of developing cultural policies and services which have sought to reflect the wider interests and needs of the community. Challenging elitist definitions of the arts and culture, they have increased access, enhanced the role of the voluntary sector, developed new partnerships, and nurtured personal and community confidence and pride in local traditions, achievements and abilities.

Much of the work I am referring to is locally based, involving a wide range of individuals and groups. And in my experience the work is often of a quality - artistically and organisationally - that is quite simply breathtaking, especially when it is recognised that most of this work is done on a shoe-string and often involves a huge element of voluntary effort.

I have experienced and seen for myself the ability of locally based cultural activity to change individual lives, to put the heart back into communities, to open up job chances for young people, to help rediscover local and national traditions and heritage, to give people a real sense of belonging and achievement and hope and ambition for their futures. I could give countless examples: ranging from the self-confidence found in painting and drama workshops by people with special needs in Aberdeen to the tangible pride in their community displayed by Castlemilk People's Theatre, winners of a Fringe First at 1995's Edinburgh International Festival. There are the young breakdancers in Stirling regularly playing truant from school to dance on old bits of lino in 1985 and now in employment as fully qualified dance teachers, mainly as a result of a local authority dance initiative. And the group of over-60s from Inverkeithing forming their own theatre group following a local authority drama project, and before we know it, performing in Spain as part of an exchange programme.

In Banff and Buchan a Folklore Archive has been developed as a result of local authority partnership with voluntary arts and heritage organisations. In



the Borders of Scotland, the Council initiated a combined project with the Galashiels Camera Club, a professional gallery - The Stills Gallery - and the Scottish Youth Dance Festival which resulted in a remarkable exhibition of dance photography.

In Fife, a major year-long music project has involved pupils in two primary schools, and their staff, with a professional musician and conductor from the Scottish Chamber Orchestra, the award winning composer Alisdair Nicholson and the local community orchestra. The project culminated in performances by the orchestra and school pupils and teachers of pieces they had themselves created, along with a specially commissioned piece on the theme of the Burns poem 'Tam O'Shanter' by Nicholson. The performances took place in two Fife venues and in the Queen's Hall in Edinburgh. For a number of the children, living a mere 20 miles from Edinburgh, this was their first visit to the city. And what a first visit - on a grand stage, in a real concert hall! They will tell you that this experience was one they, the school and the community will never forget. Through a cultural activity they were able to tackle, even if only in a small way, the poverty of aspiration which blights theirs and too many other communities.

This kind of work is not widely known about: in terms of media coverage of the arts and culture in Scotland it has a very low status. Yet in terms of cultural policy it is critical. Just what could be achieved if even a tenth of the money given to national organisations was instead invested in these local initiatives? The issue is a live one in the context of the new Scottish Parliament. Tom Brown, one of Scotland's most well known journalists and great supporter of Scotland's diverse culture (from classical music to Raith Rovers football team), spoke for many when he said recently: 'I hope that this new Parliament will take a different perspective and build from the bottom up, by encouraging local initiatives instead of doling out patronage to a few "national" institutions.' Local government in Scotland has much good practice to offer national policy making here.

Clearly, government at all levels has an important role to play in valuing and supporting those local traditions and cultural activity which underpin national cultural identity. However, just as important is *how* public institutions - including the Scottish Parliament - make policy. How will they respond to the public demand for a less aloof and more inclusive style of government, which ensures wider public involvement in decision-making and provides more sensitive and responsive services? The issue is as relevant in cultural policy as in any other area.

Interestingly, community-focused approaches to cultural policy at local government level, for example in my own Council in Fife, have been clearly influenced by, and have run in tandem with, the development of participatory models

of service delivery in other areas. A multi-faceted approach to community participation has increasingly been adopted, experimenting with methods such as citizens' juries, local referenda, community arts forums and so on. For the first time ever in Fife, our current Arts and Heritage Strategies will be scrutinised by a Citizens' Jury, as well as being put out to a range of local and national organisations (both arts and community-based) and local businesses. As a result of this approach, new structures for supporting and developing arts and cultural services are being implemented. The aim is to ensure a more consistent, meaningful and ongoing dialogue with local artists and local communities, and to ensure that consultation and participation are real, not tokenistic.

At the same time, many local authorities have sought to make cultural policy a corporate concern, integrating cultural work into other policy areas, recognising the role of cultural services in wider social, economic and environmental contexts. They have built new multi-disciplinary teams, encouraging the exploration of new ideas and new ways of working, and engendering a commitment to innovation, creativity and a preparedness to take risks.

Partnerships, openness, a different style of politics and management and a corporate approach across all government departments - these are key themes emerging from the Scottish experience of cultural policy development. They reflect the profound changes in public expectations of government which have occurred in recent years - changes which have both fed and been fed by the parallel awakening of national identity and self-confidence. In fact, it may not be too far-fetched to argue that the process of cultural policy development could itself help to restore public faith in the ability of government to make a difference to people's lives.

Thus is cultural policy an integral part of the new politics of Scotland and of our national renewal. Clearly, a sense of who we are is dependent on our awareness of our environment, our history, pride in the place we live, pride in our traditions. These in turn give us a confidence to engage with, and be influenced by, other cultures.

The kind of national renewal we seek is not introspective; rather it is outward looking and liberating. This is precisely what a flourishing national culture provides. The Scottish writer, William McIlvanney, speaking at a recent international writers' conference in Scotland, captured this well. 'My Scotland,' he said, 'has been given to me not just by my country but by many countries. Cultural identity is not something we hold like a passport, it is something we continue to discover by looking at ourselves through the eyes of other cultures. The world contains a fascinating Babel of diversity and the more we attempt to understand others without prejudice, the more we will be rewarded with an

enhanced understanding of ourselves.'<sup>4</sup> Let us hope that the advent of a Scottish parliament gives us the opportunity to make this vision a reality ●

### Notes

- 1 *Review of Scottish Culture and the Curriculum*, Review Group Paper 3, Scottish Consultative Council on the Curriculum, 1997.
- 2 Seona Reid, 'The Arts in Scotland', British Council Edinburgh Festival seminar, 22nd August 1996.
- 3 *Scotland on Sunday*, 14th September 1997.
- 4 *The Herald*, 7th August, 1997.

## THE SINGLE CURRENCY OF THE IMAGINATION

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*Jude Kelly*

**H**alf a century ago the Yorkshire writer J B Priestley wrote unforgettably of a Britain characterised by both the Lion and the Unicorn. The Lion, the physical might of empire and war, was then in decline, but the Unicorn, our unique talent for imagination and creativity, could flourish as never before. If the Thatcher years were characterised by a desire for the Lion to stalk again, I want our new government to decide that the Unicorn, like that other apparently mythical concept, society, can become real for us all.

We are familiar today with the fact that the 'creative economy' is now Britain's fastest growing sector of the economy and the fourth largest revenue earner for the Treasury. So it was only logical, though no less welcome for that, that the Government should establish a Task Force to develop a coherent strategy to further strengthen this booming asset. The real challenge is something else, something far more radical. This is the potential for a new civic enterprise on a par with health, housing and education - the commitment to providing creative expression and opportunity for all.

This is not such a far-fetched idea. Article 21 of the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights states: 'Everyone has the right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts and to share in scientific advancements and its benefits'. Yet to date no government has had the courage or faith to back human imagination as the most potent force for individual change and social vision.

In the last century and in this it took extraordinary belief and political will to introduce the concepts of education for all and health for all. Now these concepts are pillars of modern society. Why then should it be impractical or ro-

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mantic to introduce the idea that our next major enterprise will be arts for all? Let us make the development of the imagination a democratic right and necessity for citizenship.

Aristotle said, 'A citizen is one who has a stake in ruling and in being ruled'. But how in a 'stakeholder society' can we expect the participation of fully formed humans, confident emotionally and intellectually, when we still deny or marginalise most people's creative impulses? Our arts policy is still based on a theory of 'trickle down': the idea that if we provide arts for the elite, cultural improvement will gradually drip down to the masses. It is a theory we have long since rejected in the economic field, and we should reject it in the arts field too.

Government must blaze the trail for vision and idealism. The new Government's commitment to culture is very welcome; but there is still a cautiousness in its commitment to a *vision*; and in this particular territory of all territories, that caution is inappropriate. Why are we saying 'we would like as many people as possible to have an experience of the arts'? Why aren't we saying, 'Everyone *will* have this experience'? Why are we going to 'encourage' education to develop the creative agenda? Why aren't we *insisting* that it does so? Why are we going to 'enable' talent to emerge? Why aren't we saying that we're going to raise our whole nation's quality of creative engagement and we're going to do it through policies to be implemented *now*?

Education is surely the key to this. The arts and humanities are squeezed in schools because of the need to make education more relevant to the economy; yet a successful society needs to foster individuals with a sense of ambition, independence, individuality and uniqueness, and this is exactly what the arts can achieve. We need to recognise the fundamental role culture plays in raising self-esteem, strengthening and re-defining identity, fueling the entrepreneurial spirit whilst promoting moral and ethical responsibilities. Developing the creative capacity of every individual cannot be an afterthought of the national curriculum.

So many young people today have been denied the right to explore their creativity. So what starts as the potential for constructive engagement quickly turns to apathy or acts of energetic destruction. We know that the individualism of the entrepreneur is often founded in the difficulties of conforming. So why do we confuse and depress our young citizens by downgrading their personal excitements as irrelevant to current economic or educational needs? We need to recognise that this decade's youth craze may be next decade's small business trend or artistic enterprise - and applaud it not suppress it.

Allowing creativity to serve as a key stimulant within an educational context

releases talents and motivates learning for both basic skills and ambitious conceptual projects. The education process must be culturally rich, encouraging self-expression and using creativity as a means of investigating moral argument. In the 21st century we shouldn't fear individualism.

Related to education is training. The establishment of the National Endowment for the Arts, Science and Technology is excellent. But we could go further. There is a great propensity in this country to have a sort of an academy or conservatoire approach to training artists. Of course, there is an important place for that. But there are other kinds of appropriate training for artists: about morals, values, curiosity and engagement. We need to train the artist as somebody who works in other areas of public life and social policy. Many artists do in fact find themselves in this position, but they're generally untrained in it. I think that's something we should look at, because we have thousands and thousands of artists who could do a great deal more in partnership with the education system and community services if they had appropriate training. There is an under-nourished and under-used resource there which we should develop.

The preservation and celebration of cultural and artistic expression within the context of a changing urban and rural landscape is crucial to our sense of history, progress, memory and aspiration. As individuals, as communities and as a nation, we need to know who we were, to define who we are - and to shape who we would like to become. For that reason we need to view culture as an essential touchstone - the first evidence of where our imaginations are leading us.

Popular, contemporary forms of expression, often springing from youth or street life, tend to be seen as minority tastes and ephemeral. However it is these edgy, iconoclastic movements, often fueled by the urge to buck convention, that will eventually form our 'heritage'. Bob Marley, hip hop, reggae and graffiti art influenced black and white British young people alike. Here began the process by which diversity came to inspire harmony. Cultural heritage and contemporary cultural activity has the capacity to change the aspirations of present and future generations.

But if this is to happen, government must give proper status to culture. There is a huge ignorance in government, both centrally and locally, about all aspects of the arts. From inside the arts it seems that most of our political leaders, at central and local level, don't know what to make of it. Indeed sometimes this ignorance is worn as a badge of pride. 'I don't know anything about the arts, they say, I'm just a philistine.' Yet we cannot imagine now a politician saying, 'Well I don't know anything about lead poisoning, the ozone layer and rainfor-

ests. But we do give some money to the Environment Agency and they get on with it for us. I'm just a pollutionist.' We should no longer accept that attitude in the arts as we don't in the environmental field. We must bring the imagination into the proper sphere of political debate.

This might result in a more rounded recognition of the importance of the arts - not just in the arts field, but in society generally. Why aren't artists appointed to serve on public committees of all kinds, as industrialists are? Around the country there are thousands of fertile initiatives combining the energy and imagination of arts practitioners with all kinds of policy objectives: healthy living, citizenship, social inclusion, cohesive communities, urban regeneration, drugs education. So why not make artists a part of natural quango committee life, part of the framework of government (including local government) - in areas beyond just arts and culture themselves?

(Incidentally, if anyone within the arts fears that this risks fine art and high art being contaminated by these kinds of social commitment, I would urge them to relax. Nothing is going to prevent art being joyously anarchic, being a playground for the seemingly irrelevant and fiercely irreverent. Art will survive, because it's an essential human activity and it's as mysterious and fundamental as sex and it's often much more fun. There's nothing to worry about here.)

Bringing the arts in these ways into public life could play an important role in the achievement of the Government's wider political goals. Labour has set out on an ambitious attempt to change Britain's self-identity. It wants us to be an innovative society where pioneers and adventurers flourish; an inclusive society where diversity of class, colour, age and sexual preference are no inhibitors to respect and participation of all levels; a 'born again' civic society where duty is the exchange for having rights; and an outward looking society whose imaginative democracy can influence codes of moral practice worldwide.

Yet to harness the energies of a nation in these directions the imagination first has to be nurtured and refined. Culture is specific and local and yet it is at once universal, a common language available to all. As Britain enters the 21st century let us mint that other single currency - the single currency of the imagination; and distribute it widely ●

## CONTRIBUTORS

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**£5 CREATIVE FUTURES: CULTURE, IDENTITY AND NATIONAL RENEWAL**

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Under the banner of 'modernisation', the new Labour Government is making a concerted attempt to refashion Britain's sense of national identity, allying an ancient heritage to the new mood of 'cool Britannia'.

Central to this project is a new emphasis on the arts and culture. It is through inherited cultures that individuals share a common identity; at the same time it is through the flourishing of the arts that identities are questioned, challenged and redefined.

In this set of essays, four leading figures in the cultural field - the Rt Hon Chris Smith MP, Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, Trevor Phillips, writer and broadcaster, Bridget McConnell, arts adviser to Scottish local authorities, and Jude Kelly, Artistic Director of the West Yorkshire Playhouse - explore the complex relationships between culture, identity and national renewal.

As the processes of devolution in Scotland and Wales, the aftermath of Princess Diana's death and the approaching Millennium force us to reappraise what we mean by national identity, and the role in this of creative expression, these essays represent a timely contribution to public debate.

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