

Introduction

It is almost exactly ten years since Mr. Edward Heath asked me to take on responsibility for the arts. I had in mind several things which I wanted to do. We had agreed, for instance, that we would be the first government to give significant support to the crafts. Should this be done by adding a new department to the Arts Council or by setting up a parallel body? I chose the latter because I felt that craftsmen might find the headquarters of the fine arts a somewhat forbidding address. The Crafts Advisory Committee started in a modest way and has grown well, so that today the crafts are in much better shape as a result of its actions. When we think about the arts and politics we should always include the crafts.

Another problem to be faced in 1970 was the much-criticised allocation of the Arts Council's grant as between London and the regions. The able managers of the Council were in a strong position to appreciate the quality of the great national companies such as Covent Garden or the symphony orchestras. They thought it right that the lions share of whatever money was going should be given to the metropolitan centres of excellence and prestige. Then, as now, that prestige was a national asset with a value beyond calculation. Not everybody shared this view. At the other end of the arts lobby voices were raised in favour of distributing the grant geographically on a strictly population basis. The provincial champions of this drive for equality were unmoved at the prospect of sharply reducing the subsidies to the national companies. I listened to the advice, patiently I hope, but I had been in politics long enough to know that there is no future in the idea that if you get rid of the flower at the top of the tree there will be more fruit for everybody on the lower branches. What is true of medicine and education is also true of art: if the aim is to raise standards all round you must cherish examples of excellence wherever you find them. In fact most of the pre-eminent examples of British art were in London, but that made it all the more desirable to foster the growth of others in the regions.

In this situation the grant could be more fairly distributed only if the total were increased and a large slice of the new money earmarked for the Regional Arts Associations. This we did and you have reason to know how much progress has since been made. The country has greatly benefitted from the build-up of the Regional Arts Associations. In offering them my warm congratulations may I ask them, please, not to spend too much on administration. The original purpose of the grants was to give direct help to the arts in the regions. Some guidance is useful, but too much would defeat the object of stimulating truly local initiatives.

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The Arts and Politics Today

Turning now to the future: given that we are suffering acutely from inflation, recession and unemployment, on what scale should the arts be supported from public funds? The prospect looks bad so long as our first priority must be to reduce government spending and borrowing. In such circumstances can there be any valid reason why the arts should not be cut like everything else? The argument is heard that the arts should be supported as a kind of poultice for unemployment and shorter working hours, providing something extra to do in our leisure-time. Of course the problem of jobless growth is very serious. It has come to stay, but it hardly affords us an argument strong enough to convince the other services and departments that the arts should be an exception to the cuts which they have now to suffer. It looks too much like equating the arts with bingo and the pools. I am therefore going to base my case on different grounds.

For a start I put this question: why are services like medicine and education publicly financed to the tune of thousands of millions a year while the arts are treated so differently? The answer is clear: the public regards the arts as a luxury whereas medicine and education are necessities of life. If the case for the arts is to stand up, this distinction has to be attacked and broken down. Who then has been responsible for it? Who made the public believe that the arts are a luxury? Only to be enjoyed by a select few? It never used to be so, but during the nineteenth century it began to be believed that only a small minority of the British people could ever be moved by aesthetic values. The superior persons who invented this view would be right about the general public if art had no significance beyond the recognition of beauty for its own sake. If that were true something like four out of five men and women might never join the charmed circle, but in the real everyday world this definitely is a nonsense. It is like saying that you cannot enjoy a visit to Florence or Venice unless you can speak Italian. Of course the language helps, but it is not essential to the pleasure in crossing the Alps. Nevertheless, it is this highbrow doctrine of art for art's sake only that has disqualified the arts as a necessity of life. Let us therefore throw the definition away and return to the lessons of history which show clearly that everyone, or almost everyone, can get something out of the arts and crafts, and why this experience would be specially valuable today.

Believe it or not there is a sound reason for bracketing the arts with other necessities of life, and one to which politicians should listen. The list of necessities has never been static. Fresh items are added as social and economic conditions change. Among the latest are radio and television, which are now accepted as a basic need in British households. The influence of broadcasting on everybody is still growing and will increase rapidly with the new developments in communications and technology and the introduction of the fourth television

channel. These developments will work in favour of the arts. Producers, authors, composers, musicians and actors will have a wider field for their talents, with the result that the arts will become a still more dominant ingredient in a product already recognised as a necessity of life.

This is good ground on which to discuss with politicians what the arts should mean to everybody. Politicians never stop thinking about the media, and they know as well as anyone that the media cannot live without the live arts. Further, politicians have reason to be worried about the quality of British education. Television competes with what the children learn or fail to learn in school. The listeners and viewers, old and young, are learning something all the time. In broadcasting the arts and education are seen to be inseparable, and it is the arts which drive the lessons home. If the picture is a good picture, you don't forget it. If it is bad, you switch off. The media, the arts and education, combining to form a single necessity of life, now exercise the strongest influence in our culture. This is why the BBC should be adequately financed for responsible growth.

Coming to the further question why in the 1980s it will be particularly important that the arts should be available to everybody, and in forms which suit different levels of appreciation, always with the emphasis on quality and rising standards; I suggest that we approach this subject from a personal angle. If we look honestly at ourselves, at the way in which we are behaving as individuals and as a nation, if we examine the balance-sheet of our educational assets and liabilities, in what kind of knowledge are we most painfully deficient? Not in scientific knowledge. We are rich in that. We can make more and more sophisticated nuclear weapons, but science and technology tell us nothing; they are deadly dumb about whether or when we should launch these missiles. The lack of accepted principles on how we should use our twentieth century wealth is a threat to our society, but hardly surprising while we rely so much on science, which has never been able to describe or sort out social, political and moral problems. By contrast, since the beginning of history, art has held up a mirror to nature in which men and women have seen reflected truths about themselves and about how they can live in understanding and peace with each other, in other words what is worth caring for. Art has conveyed insights about the human condition of which we are desperately short in comparison with what we know about the physical world.

We should take heart from the fact that the arts were a necessity of life before the invention of printing in the fifteenth century. In the Middle Ages the arts were openly acknowledged as an arm of government, creating pride in the place where you lived and acting as the principal teacher of religion and morals.

Architecture, painting, sculpture and the drama of religious ceremonies carried the Christian Gospel to the hearts of the people. In our day, especially given the power of television over the printed word, the arts could again be the

principal messenger of self-discovery and exponents of the common good. Sometimes the messages are inspired by nations, sometimes they come from the artist himself. No man has taught me more about the mystery and dignity of old age than Rembrandt. You have only to think of Hamlet instructing the players to act the murder of his father, "to touch the conscience of the King"; or of Proust telling us that he did not so much want readers of his book, as readers of themselves in his book; or of Picasso's painting of Guernica. The artist conveys the message that takes root. The arts enlarge the space in which we are able to see and do things that were beyond our reach until the artist lent us his imagination. It is in the power of the arts to communicate the reality of human life that we can claim, in our age of over-concentration on economies, that the arts can redress the balance of our culture.

I am wholly convinced that as belief in material progress falters we should be right to ask the Government and Local Authorities to recognise the arts as a necessity of life. How best can we approach both public and private patrons? Iris Murdoch gives us a lead. She writes in her book on Plato:-

"Art is far and away the most educational thing we have, far more so than its rivals, philosophy, religion and science."

If you agree that in our secular age this statement is true, then the place for the arts will be somewhere, not as now on the fringe, but at the centre of the education budget running today at £9 billion a year. We have a good opportunity to secure this result because the Education Act of 1944 is due for revision. One section that must be rewritten is that dealing with adult education. Adult education, with the notable exception of the Open University, has been left neglected. Why? Because it was widely thought that the great majority of children could learn, between the ages of 5 and 16, all that they needed to know for the rest of their lives. But suppose we have the courage to start again, with a clean slate, to replan in a new Act of Parliament the whole range of education, is it not obvious that the needs of the 1980s would compel us to allot a substantially larger proportion of the total budget to education after the compulsory period in school? This is the area in which to recognise and treat the arts as a necessity of life, and as the Open University shows, adult education is likely to become more closely linked with radio and television, which are not luxuries, where there are no reserved seats, and where we can expect listeners and viewers soon to have a wider choice of programmes.

Most people, when they think of education after school have in mind specialist knowledge or technical skill required for a change of job. Such education and training are absolutely essential for our economic future, but what sort of economic future shall we have unless we keep our cultural and moral values abreast of the neutral discoveries of science and often inhuman aspects of money and markets? Who is to teach us how to master the economies? Iris Murdoch was right that in education for living the arts are the best we have.

We now come up against a difficulty. There will always be people of knowledge and experience to tell us that the arts can corrupt as well as cleanse our thoughts. This was Plato's view and it will not be easily dismissed. If any British government were to support the arts as a necessity of life what would they do about the artistic freedom of expression? We know the answer of the Communists. They must give theatres much larger subsidies than we do but they consider the arts too dangerous to be left uncontrolled. This is an aspect of art and politics not without interest. We cannot pretend that it does not exist. When I was the responsible Minister my opposite number in the Soviet government was Ekaterina Furtseva. This remarkable woman, hard as a statue, grand as a duchess, held the office of Soviet Minister for the arts from 1960 to 1974, surviving, as I believe no other minister did, fourteen years of purges and changes of government. From our first encounter we had for each other a kind of love-hate that developed into a knock-about act which gave considerable pleasure to our fellow-delegates at international conferences.

In private Furtseva was open to argument. She liked to compare the treatment of artists in Communist countries and in the West. She said that in pre-revolutionary Russia artists and writers had shown a deeper responsibility towards their country and its people than artists had done in the West. She would make an exception of Charles Dickens. He knew how rotten English society was. On the other hand all the great Russian writers had criticised life under the Czars because it was oppressive, and now, she said, Russian artists, with a few disgraceful exceptions, extolled the Communist state, because they saw it was good for the Russian people. I asked how she knew there were only a very few artists who did not wholeheartedly support the regime. If that was true why did the Soviet government control them so severely? To this she replied that the leaders of the Communist Party were sensible enough to know how powerful the arts can be in undermining a good way of life. One could not take chances. Since Communism was so obviously good for the people it would be ridiculous to give artists and writers a sporting chance to overthrow the regime. She was glad the Western democracies were so stupid as to allow artists freedom to say what they liked about those in authority, and into the bargain to subsidise them to do it. Such licence could only hasten the arrival of world communism, and when that happened, there would be nothing left for the artists to criticise. There, exposed by a great Soviet minister for the arts, is the problem raised when state subsidies to the arts reach large proportions. Our difficulty at Westminster would be moral rather than political. The British public would not, and I certainly think should not, pay for forms of expression which undermined the values that make sense of life and hold society together. If this were a real danger, and some people would say it was, it would be better not to ask for more support from the Government and Local Authorities, not to attempt to raise

the status of the arts from a luxury to a necessity of life. On the other hand if we do not take this risk I do not see how the balance of our culture can be redressed, and how we can stop the slide into materialism and anarchy. What other weapon than adult education have we got?

This dilemma is unavoidable. We must bring it out into the open, discuss it with artists and art administrators, and with the media, and try to discover how far responsibility towards the community could be assumed if the arts were given much greater support. So you see that it would be difficult, but not impossible, to win the argument for making the arts a major exception to reductions in central and local government expenditure. The tactics I have suggested are to show how inextricably the arts are bound up with the media, and how the media's influence on adult education will be a crucial national concern. The place of the arts in what must be a great expansion in education after school is one of those great human questions to none of which there is a final solution. We can only experiment in the right direction. We know what has to be done: the conscience of the public has to be furnished with values that make sense of life and hold society together. These are the basic values which form the framework within which political parties can advance their programme and do their best to govern the country. Today, unfortunately, these cultural and moral values have suffered from the dazzling triumphs of science and permissive notions of bewildered sociologists. There is no single way in which to restore the essentially human priorities of a free democracy, to define and make popular the pursuit of the common good, but I am persuaded that the arts are the most educational thing we have. I believe that when the arts are generously and wisely patronised the public is disposed to prefer what is good and true to what is false and ugly. We should take this risk. To what extent politicians, who know a lot about human nature, would share my optimism, that must always remain an open question.