

Civic Socialism

A new agenda for arts and culture

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Summary

Arts and culture have not been seen as a political priority for many years – and have tended to be regarded as ‘low hanging fruit’ in the search for spending cuts following the financial crisis.

This report, however, argues that arts and culture are actually of critical political importance; and that sustaining them presents a policy challenge that must be urgently addressed. All of Labour’s big election victories have had a strong cultural story: an inspiring, hopeful vision of how social democratic politics can lead to a better life for all. If a political party is unwilling to think about art, creativity and culture then it is closing its ears to the fundamentals of life as it is lived, and denying itself the ability to give voice to it.

But it is clear that cultural life in this country faces very real challenges, as the state withdraws and institutions and services that have relied on public funding seek new ways to survive. While George Osborne’s 2015 autumn statement spared the big national arts institutions from further cuts – a move which the Arts Council chief praised as “an astonishing settlement for arts and culture” – the squeeze on local authorities tightened even further. With cuts of more than 50 per cent to council grants, the temptation to close or restrict access to local arts institutions will only increase.

Civic Socialism: A new agenda for arts and culture argues that the left can develop a powerful new cultural story based around local and regional identity; but it must do so at a time when local culture is facing an unprecedented threat. In contrast to New Labour’s focus on big national institutions, the Labour party must now embed its approach to the arts in the places people live and interweave it with people’s day-to-day experiences. It is not just that funding restraints require this; it is the only way to respond to the rich diversity of our local traditions. As the world gets bigger, more challenging and more complex, our local identities matter more and more. A rich cultural life in our villages, suburbs, towns and cities can help us make sense of the diverse and fast-moving world around us, and enable us to forge the strong social relationships we need to sustain our lives within it.

Labour’s strategy for the arts will be a test of whether the party is capable of a different approach to politics; one that looks beyond its old administrative instincts of centrally-directed tax and spend, towards a more collaborative,

plural and decentralised socialism. For our cultural life is far too rich to be run from the centre; but yet it will always need nurturing by public institutions in order to flourish.

Civic Socialism argues that the left must:

- Seize the opportunities presented by devolution to forge a new civic socialism based around local culture and pride of place
- Empower people to take control of their own cultural life in their own communities, establishing a framework for encouraging community involvement in arts institutions and cultural services
- Experiment with new models of running crucial services and institutions that build partnerships across sectors.

Introduction

In the aftermath of the 2015 general election, much of the analysis of Labour's comprehensive rejection at the polls centred around the party's lack of a compelling 'story'. The party's electoral strategy had hung on a series of policy announcements that were memorably condemned by the American political strategist David Axelrod as "vote Labour and win a microwave".¹ Labour's own policy reviewer Jon Cruddas was equally scathing about the party's ultimate offer, calling it the "soulless politics of cash transfers".²

In contrast, all of Labour's big election wins have had a strong cultural story: an inspiring, hopeful vision of how social democratic politics can lead to a better life for all. For the Attlee government it was encapsulated by the Festival of Britain. This was, as the political theorist Marc Stears puts it, "the manifestation of an ideal":

"The Festival was intended to represent Britain as it should be. It was a practical example of what a free, orderly, generous, compassionate, and, most of all, democratic Britain would look and feel like. It was a place where people could come together, enjoy each other's company away from the strains of the workplace, and celebrate the best their country had to offer."³

For the Wilson government, it was given voice by Jennie Lee's white paper on the arts, drafted as the 1960s sprang vibrantly into life:

"More and more people begin to appreciate that the exclusion of so many for so long from the best of our cultural heritage can become as damaging to the privileged minority as to the under privileged majority. We walk the same streets, breathe the same air, are exposed to the same sights and sounds.

"Nor can we ignore the growing revolt, especially among the young, against the drabness, uniformity and joylessness of much of the social furniture we have inherited from the industrial revolution. This can be directed if we so wish, into making Britain a gayer and more cultivated country."⁴

This echoed Tony Crosland's famous claim in *The Future of Socialism* that "total abstinence and a good filing-system are not now the right signposts to the socialist Utopia". For Crosland, social democrats should instead set their sights on making Britain:

"A more colourful and civilised country to live in ... [with] more open-air cafes ... more local repertory theatres ... brighter and cleaner eating houses... more pleasure gardens ... more murals and pictures in public places ... statues in the centre of new housing-estates ... and so on ad infinitum."⁵

For New Labour, culture was central to the idea of Britain as a 'young country'; a modern, tolerant, progressive nation moving restlessly into the future. "New, new, new, everything is new", Tony Blair himself exclaimed. Blair skillfully allied himself with the emerging cultural self-confidence of Cool Britannia⁶ and what John Harris's book *The Last Party* called the "day glo fantasia"⁷ of Britpop. New Labour saw arts and culture as central to its political project and a clear public manifestation of how New Labour was in tune with the spirit of Britain in the 1990s after the grey Major years. Alongside the totemic free museums policy, this was supported in government with progressive social legislation and a programme of substantial investment in the public realm, strengthening both the nation's physical infrastructure and its social fabric. Arts buildings and facilities benefited from a capital investment surge that left UK cities looking and feeling very different after 13 years of Labour government than they had before.

The case for the arts

Since then, however, Labour has had no equivalent vision. The party has displayed little obvious interest in arts and culture, betraying a politics that is much more comfortable with the 'prose' of policy than the 'poetry' of how we live our lives together.

In many ways, Ed Miliband's approach to the arts showed the good and bad aspects of his leadership of the Labour party in a microcosm. Late into his tenure he gave a thoughtful speech on the importance of "arts for all", which recognised that "the arts, culture and creativity define us: who we

are as a nation” and he spoke warmly of his personal commitment.⁸ But in practice, his plan was limited to adding creative education into Ofsted inspections and establishing a Prime Minister’s Committee on the Arts. There was no sense, beyond the confines of this one speech, with its few small policy announcements, that the arts were a cornerstone of a broader cultural story for the Labour party.

Jeremy Corbyn made an early statement of intent about the arts. Writing during his first leadership campaign in summer 2015, he promised that:

“As leader I would want to prioritise the need for more investment in the arts generally and for the Labour party to offer an investment programme to rebuild the foundations of artistic enterprise in our country that are being laid waste to by the current government.”

This was a welcome change in emphasis and highlighted the potential of Corbyn’s leadership to, as Andrew Harrop pointed out, “draw forgotten issues into the mainstream”.⁹ It is, however, an approach that risks relying too heavily on public spending as the sole manifestation of Labour’s commitment to culture.

The first problem here is that it fails to take account of the fact that the public finances are unlikely, in the foreseeable future, to return to a situation whereby they would support New Labour levels of investment in the arts.

But it also fails to question *why* the arts have been seen as low hanging fruit in the search for spending cuts. According to the Institute for Fiscal Studies, the Department for Culture, Media and Sport was one of the big losers in the austerity-defining comprehensive spending review of 2010, with a real terms cut of 21.1 per cent. This saw the Arts Council England’s central government grant of £449m drop to £349m by 2014, a cut which Alan Davey, its then chief executive predicted would “inevitably have a significant impact on the cultural life of the country.”¹⁰ While there was vocal opposition within the arts community¹¹, and outraged coverage in the *Guardian* newspaper,¹² there was little resistance to these measures in the spheres of politics and broader civil society. This lack of public ‘buy-in’ reflects a long-term weakness at the heart of ‘the case for the arts’ that must be addressed before any argument for further public investment can be made or won.

There have been endless convulsions over many years over the relative

merits of intrinsic, 'art for art's sake' arguments against more instrumental public value arguments: crudely, 'excellence' versus 'usefulness'. The former argument states that art's value exists in its creation and quality, and attempts to quantify or measure its importance mistake its fundamental purpose. As one former chief executive of the Arts Council explained:

"Do people ever 'go' or 'do' to create more social cohesion, to contribute to the economy, to make an audience more diverse? Of course not. They 'go' or 'do' because they anticipate – tinged always with that healthy fear – that the arts will bring personal joy, insight, understanding, entertainment, challenge, reflection, disturbance, recognition, comfort, solace, or a hundred other human qualities."¹³

Others, however, have argued that a more practical case is required to strengthen the hand of culture in public policy debates. It is argued that the artistic community must prove their worth to Treasury bean-counters by linking "citizen contact with a vibrant arts system to overall quality of life, so the health of our cultural, transportation, and health care systems are one day considered to be of equal value by policy leaders".¹⁴ On this reckoning, the sector must prove increased quality of life of those who engage with culture, making art a highly valued public good, comparable to healthcare and education.¹⁵

In recent times, much of the advocacy for the arts has focused on its economic value. Many have pointed out that the high economic returns on funding in the arts make a strong case for continued government investment.¹⁶ In particular, in the discussions that followed the financial crisis about the UK's potential to shift to a high wage, high skill economy, the creative industries were recognised to be a sector where the UK has a natural competitive advantage, and one where the winds of globalisation are likely to blow in its favour.¹⁷ It was calculated that businesses in the UK arts and culture industry generated an aggregate turnover of £12.4bn in 2011, and contributed an estimated £5.9bn of gross value added to the UK economy.¹⁸ A study conducted by UK Music found that the music industry outperformed the rest of the British economy in 2013 by generating 9 per cent growth (compared with a baseline figure of 1.7 per cent) and contributed £2.2bn in exports.¹⁹

But the ultimate effect of this multiplicity of arguments – intrinsic and instrumental – has been to muddy the waters. 'The case for the arts' over

many years has been unfocused and confused. What's more, the nature of the campaign against the cuts often seemed remote and exclusive. Led by high-profile artists and arts leaders, the focus has been on lobbying government at a national level in terms which are often abstract and technocratic – gross national product and social return on investment. The arts have become detached from the day-to-day drama of people's lives and are in danger of becoming 'othered': something happening somewhere else, for someone else.

What is required, therefore, is a new, expanded, basis for arts and culture: one which leaves arts and culture less likely to bear the brunt of sustained fiscal belt tightening; but one which is about more than state funding and makes a broader, more fundamental case for why the arts matter.

The aim should be to place arts and culture at the centre of people's sense of identity, and – crucially – form a core part of a wider political narrative for the left. Political advocacy for culture should not be reduced to justifying a larger slice of the public spending cake. Rather, it should be about the state, the private sector and civil society working together to benefit all and develop a rich and fulfilling cultural life for our country and communities.

A new discourse on arts and culture

As the left begins the long and painful task of reimagining 'social democracy in one country' following the UK's decision to leave the European Union, there is an opportunity to develop this new discourse, one that has arts and culture at its heart. Michael Jacobs, a former general secretary of the Fabians, explained the importance of discourses to the New Labour project:

"Discourses frame the ways we think: they define political direction and values. They tell stories about what political parties believe and where they are heading. They thus help to identify and fix parties' political positions in the public mind."²⁰

Lurking in Labour's recent debates can be found a way of thinking about culture that could place it at the centre of the party's post-Brexit worldview. It was there in the language of Labour's policy review, which was rooted in "work, family and the local places people live in."²¹ This thought recognises that people's identities are closely, intimately intertwined with the places

they live, whether that means the national and patriotic or the local and particular.

As the Fabian Society report *Pride of Place* put it:

“While the globalised economy and digitally networked society has made the world bigger and our lives more mobile, it has not eroded our attachment to the specific places we live. In many ways, place may have become more important in providing roots in an insecure world.”²²

That report explored how people forge their sense of self in the environment that surrounds them and the communities they live there with. In order to grow strong social bonds, we need open, democratic places where we can meet our neighbours and build relationships. But, increasingly, communal spaces are disappearing. The latest figures from CAMRA show local pubs are closing at a rate of 27 a week.²³ The number of Post Offices has halved over the last 30 years.²⁴ Parks are increasingly under threat, and a significant number of local authorities are considering selling or transferring management of some of their parks and green spaces over the next few years.²⁵

The story is similar for local arts institutions. They offer the prospect of what the former Labour MP Tony Wright calls “an active citizenship in accessible arenas” and protection against the “fragmentation and individualisation of modern life”.²⁶ Libraries, for example, are widely recognised to be much more than places for borrowing books but important ‘community hubs’. Similarly, museums are increasingly crucial social spaces, as Tony Butler of the Happy Museums project has written:

“Given the way in which urban spaces are increasingly being transferred to private ownership, museums have become an important bulwark against the erosion of the public realm. A museum is first and foremost a place for encounters.”²⁷

Furthermore, NLGN’s report *On With the Show* demonstrated how “it is through theatre performances, painting classes and choir rehearsals that local communities can build up friendships and resilience that will see them

through the economic downturn.”²⁸

But like the rest of our community infrastructure, local culture faces an uncertain future. While George Osborne’s 2015 autumn statement last year spared the big national arts institutions further cuts – a move which the Arts Council chief praised as “an astonishing settlement for arts and culture”²⁹ – the squeeze on local authorities tightened even further. As the *Guardian* reported, “the arts and museums have proved something of a soft target for cash-strapped councils.” With cuts of more than 50 per cent over the spending review period to the central government grant to local authorities, the temptation to close or restrict access to local arts institutions will only increase. Newcastle City Council has already provided a particularly stark example of the consequences of these pressures, having initially announced in 2012 that it would scrap its arts budget entirely.³⁰

The NLGN report detailed what reduced local authority funding meant for arts and culture in the last parliament:

“Some changes are obvious, a local museum reducing its opening hours, or a local theatre having more dark nights and fewer locally produced shows. Other changes such as reduced social capital from a shared experience, or a young person unable to develop, or even discover, their talent are less easily quantifiable.”³¹

Since the 2015 election, the reality of the cuts have become more visible. Lancashire county council have closed five museums this year; Derby council are consulting on plans which could remove the bulk of local authority funding from the city’s museums by 2020.³² From 1 April 2016, Lincolnshire’s libraries have been completely outsourced to a not-for-profit organisation.³³ 15 ‘core’ libraries are supported by 32 ‘community run’ second-tier libraries; “which appears to be austerity code for largely reduced services, run on unpaid labour”, according to the *Guardian*.³⁴ One local librarian told the newspaper, working hours have been cut from 30 hours a week to just 11; and three of the county’s ‘community-run hubs’ have shut already due to lack of volunteers.

Towards a civic socialism

So the challenge for the left is twofold: to develop a new cultural story based around local and regional identity; but to do so at a time when local culture is facing an unprecedented threat. In contrast to New Labour's focus on big, shiny national institutions, the Labour party must now embed its arts approach in particular communities and interweave it with people's day-to-day experiences. It is not just that funding restraints require this; it is the only way to respond to the rich diversity of our local traditions. As the world gets bigger, more challenging and more complex, and Britain's role within it becomes more uncertain, our local identities matter more and more. A rich cultural life in our towns, cities and villages can help us make sense of the diverse and fast-moving world around us, and enable us to forge the strong social relationships we need to sustain our lives within it.

As the final section of this report will briefly show, there are particular opportunities for Labour to develop an agenda which captures this over the coming months and years, as it responds to the challenges of life after Brexit, and seeks to engage with the government's English devolution agenda and forge a new purpose in opposition.

1. Build a civic socialism shaped around local identity and cultural heritage

Cultural institutions are central to civic identity, with theatres, football clubs and concert halls huge sources of local pride. As globalisation continues to fuel a sense of dislocation and digital communication expands horizons ever further, arts and culture keep the flame of civic identity burning bright. This can come in the form of institutions like the Hepworth in Wakefield or the Arnolfini in Bristol, or the through the practice and legacy of individual creators; what The Beatles are to Liverpool, Ted Hughes is to Yorkshire: the personification of an area's vibrancy and an emissary to its history.

In the coming years, more and more cities and towns should have an opportunity to build on their distinctive cultural heritage, as the 'northern powerhouse' project takes root across the country. Greg Clark, when he was the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, asked "every place in this country to consider how they can assert their strengths and make their mark".³⁵ There are now 11 devo deals in place across England, with combined authorities under elected metro mayors being created in big urban centres and shire counties alike.

Scotland is an example of how devolution can reinforce cultural identity. Scotland has protected its culture spend in relative terms and Treasury figures show that spending per person on recreation and culture is twice as high in Scotland as England.³⁶ As the Scottish culture secretary explained, “our culture sits at the heart of who we are ... We are a nation that has always been shaped and nourished by our songs, stories, art, drama and music”.³⁷ Arts and culture form a crucial part of an open, tolerant and progressive civic or national identity.

So the ‘dash for devolution’ in England is a clear opportunity for the left to develop a civic socialism with local culture and pride of place at its heart. But at present, Labour is struggling to seize it, caught between its better angels, and its baser instincts of tribal opposition and historic centralism. But as Tristram Hunt warned in a lecture to Demos:

“We must not let the Tories steal this agenda. Our history of municipal, ‘gas and water’ socialism gives us a localist heritage. In Glasgow, Manchester, Birmingham and Leeds, it was progressives who built a vibrant civic democracy, confronted vested interests, and created the great age of Victorian and Edwardian civic pride ... Labour needs to win the race to hand power back to people and local communities.”³⁸

While Labour is out of power and increasingly adrift in Westminster, it has a particular opportunity to build this new type of politics through its local centres of power. Labour now has elected mayors in London, Bristol, Liverpool and Salford, and next year’s metro-mayoral elections could bring more high profile city leaders. Meanwhile, its council leaders in the ‘core cities’ and elsewhere are showing how innovative and practical leadership can respond to the twin challenge of rising demand for services and rapidly shrinking budgets. As politics goes local, a sense of civic pride can form the bedrock for a new cultural politics of the left. It is crucial that Labour seizes the opportunity presented by the devolution agenda to forge a new civic socialism.

Case Studies

Assemble in Toxteth: Art and architecture for the public good

Assemble are a collective working where art, architecture and design intersect. Eschewing cliquishness and the idea of the arts as a privileged realm, their projects are rooted in a particular place and local community.

A group of terraced houses in Toxteth, Liverpool have been consistently under threat from council demolition since the riots in 1981. But the residents have been fighting a spirited opposition, renovating their area by painting houses, planting greenery and organising a local market. Assemble have worked with the community to expand this work, doing up abandoned homes, gardens and streets with impressive results.

Their involvement built on the existing campaign and existing sentiment. Rather than parachuting in with their own ideas, they listened to and learned from the local community and helped put their vision into place. The Turner Prize winning outcome “celebrate[s] the idiosyncrasies” of place instead of imposing an abstract, top-down vision of regeneration from above. As a result, it has widespread support from locals who felt listened to.

Assemble’s work shows how artists can collaborate with local people to regenerate areas in a way that strengthens the character of the community rather than undermines it.

The Albany: Culture in the community

The Albany is a community and arts centre based in Deptford, London. Established in 1894 as a philanthropic project to alleviate the worst effects of poverty, it wasn’t until 1966 that it fused its original purpose with a focus on the arts. In addition to playing host to major names in music and comedy it has played a social role in the community, supporting Rock Against Racism concerts, for example. And it continues to do so, offering discounted prices for Lewisham Homes residents, providing free dance classes for young people and a social club for older people.

Today it functions as a social enterprise, majority self-funding but also supported by local government and the Arts Council. Two ongoing projects point towards the kind of fruitful partnership between civil society and the public and private sector that Labour should be cultivating.

First is their management, in collaboration with Southwark Council, of the Culture Space at the Canada Water Library. They are responsible for putting on a programme of music, theatre, comedy and more while managing the hiring out of high-tech spaces for meetings and learning. Second is their running of the Deptford Lounge with Lewisham Council. A community hub, it has a programme of events and activities in addition to providing adult education and health and sports facilities.

2. Support communities to take control

As spending cuts have taken hold, the bounds of what political debate suggests is possible have seemed to shrink. Yet this has not been the reality on the ground. As central government funding has dried up, many councils and institutions have found creative new approaches to designing and managing services, and new partnerships have been brokered. And as local areas become increasingly self-funding and autonomous, the moment can be seized to make the mechanisms we have work better to support community empowerment.

NLGN have outlined a number of alternative models through which local authorities are managing cultural services during an extended period of austerity. These include outsourcing to the private sector; sharing services across authorities; creating charitable trusts to run services at arm's length; and divesting to social enterprises or existing third sector providers.

In developing a civic socialism, however, particular priority should be given to encouraging participation. In seeking to create local culture, citizen control must be paramount. Fabian Society research has previously used the example of local green spaces to show how new management approaches which respond to the challenges of fiscal consolidation can also empower citizens, bolster people's sense of place and encourage democratic engagement.³⁹ In the report *Places to Be: Green spaces for active citizenship* we argued that community spirit doesn't emerge in a vacuum, it requires careful nurturing and professional support.

The same principle should apply to arts institutions and cultural services. It cannot be the case that councils simply strip themselves of responsibility and leave communities to get on with it. It is crucial that we establish a framework for encouraging community involvement and ensuring that volunteers aren't taken for granted, but their good will and determination is encouraged. A partnership between local councils and local communities is therefore crucial to bolster voluntary action with trained support and that councils retain a stake in local institutions and services, even if they are no longer themselves delivering them.

Case Studies

Lewisham Libraries: Crowding in

In 2011, five Lewisham libraries were set to be closed. Five years on, they all remain open. No extra funding was provided, so what happened? Faced with £88 million in cuts, the Labour council opted to transfer the endangered library buildings to the community, enabling local community organisations to acquire the properties at minimal or no rent. In order to qualify, the groups had to demonstrate a genuine regard for books and libraries as a public service, and keep opening hours at least as long as under Council control.

Unlike some other community library solutions to funding cuts, Lewisham Council maintains ownership of the libraries' stock and systems, allowing for a more cohesive library service across the thirteen libraries that comprise the Lewisham Library and Information Service (of which six are currently operating under community control). Local groups have been able to innovate where a lack of funds prevented local councils from doing so – in, for example, providing a 24/7 online service.

Lewisham is an imperfect example: workers lost their jobs and there was a brief transitional period were the services were closed. Yet it is an example of how a local council can prevent cuts to local government resulting in library closures, and shows that partnerships between the local council, local businesses and community voluntary organisations can maintain services in austere times.

Community Champions: Local leadership

Community Champions is a scheme running across three central London boroughs. Training local people to become community leaders, the project aims to instil a sense of civic pride by offering local services, raising awareness of public health, and providing a platform for young people to develop their talents in the arts.

The activities undertaken range from growing fruit and veg gardens in Mozart Estate,⁴⁰ to holding an Art of Wellness Day in Kensington and Chelsea in which hundreds of local residents enjoyed a day of poetry, performance and singing in their community, all the while spreading awareness about public health.⁴¹

£550,000 was initially invested into this scheme. Social Return on Investment evaluations have estimated that the social, economic and environmental value created by the Community Champions amounted to c. £2.56 million in just one year.⁴² While much of this impact is generated by the Community Champions' focus on public health, it is also an indication that investment in the arts in local communities has extensive implications for wider social well-being that can end up saving money for local authorities.

3. Form new partnerships across sectors

The state will always have a crucial role to play in supporting arts and culture. While it has been almost universally acknowledged across the political spectrum that both the budget deficit and public debt must fall, there is clear evidence that investing in creative industries is not at odds with this goal: it can help achieve it. What's more, in future, local authorities' funding increases will be increasingly dependent on the success of their local economies, making reducing support for arts and culture even more short-sighted, given the dynamic local economies that cultural and creative industries can ferment. And our cultural life as a nation will continue to be enriched by art which challenges societal norms and which only public funding can help realise.

However, it would be a mistake to see a return to higher levels of public funding as a panacea, especially given the long period of economic

uncertainty the country now faces. We are unlikely to see the political and economic conditions which allowed the levels of investment enjoyed in the late 1990s and early 2000s; and what's more it is unclear that the central state is the best placed agent for achieving a fulfilling cultural life across a diverse nation. Marc Stears points out that:

"States work best when a problem has a technical, mechanical solution which can be employed everywhere within a shared geographic space. They are at their worst when they need to respond flexibly to local particularities, when they need to act nimbly or with nuance, and – most importantly of all – when they delve into problems of the nation's spirit or of the human heart. Anything which requires difference, contingency and essential unpredictability is not going to be a skill of the state."⁴³

This is, of course, describes the fundamental essence of arts and culture, which means the future of support for arts and culture must lie not within the purview of government alone, but as a shared responsibility between state, market and society: in innovative partnerships across the public, private and voluntary sectors.

These instincts combine in the High House Production Park in Purfleet, Essex. Here Thurrock Council, the Royal Opera House and the Creative and Cultural Skills agency saw an opportunity to work together to build something that responded to the needs of the area, based on a clear understanding of the nature of the place. With strong leadership and trusting relationships they have driven up the local skills base, attracted new businesses and produced a flourishing creative hub. Central to this was leveraging the local enterprise partnership (LEP) to support the creative industries, as the chief executive Andrea Stark explained:

"We have developed a strong partnership with the South East LEP. But they didn't just come knocking on our door – I got in touch, found out about their work, provided a venue for LEP meetings and took the time to get to know my new colleagues.

"The real trick of making things work in a LEP is getting business leaders (like me) to roll up their sleeves and work practically as part of a large-scale public-private partnership. With this in mind, I volunteered to convene a group of willing creative sector leaders and their local

authority counterparts. This provided expert capacity to enable the South East LEP to collate a valuable evidence base about our sector. It turns out the South East LEP has a creative economy worth £2.5bn and it employs 30,000 people!”⁴⁴

This description shows the crucial importance of inspiring local leadership: to make sense of the emerging institutional landscape, convene partners, and leverage the opportunities that are out there to support local arts and culture. Through the LEPs, local councils and businesses can come together to determine the economic priorities for the area and lead economic growth and job creation. In a time of extended austerity, partnerships like these can point the way – especially in those sectors like the arts which are often seen as more expendable than our key industries – towards directing economic activity for the common good without excessive government investment.

Case Study

High House Production Park: Unlocking the value of partnerships

High House Production Park (HHPP) is a charity and centre for creative industries that emerged out of collaboration between local council authorities, national government and independent institutions such as the Royal Opera House. Based in Thurrock, the park is home to artists’ studios, a rehearsal and training venue for performance, as well as a Costume Centre that delivers a BA in Costume Construction in collaboration with South Essex College and the University of Arts London.

Its impact is considerable. In addition to the BA, all productions of the Royal Opera, the Royal Ballet and the Birmingham Royal Ballet are made at the park, for example.

The space was funded in part by Thurrock Council, as well as with money from Arts Council England and the now defunct public body Thurrock Thames Government Gateway Corporation. But it thrives largely due to third sector and private sector involvement – London-based charity Acme Studios built and maintain the site’s artists’ studios, for example – and the park describes itself as attempting to “[b]roker wider relationships and resources to advance joint priorities”⁴⁵.

Conclusion

Arts and culture have not been seen as a political priority for many years. The government did issue a white paper in March 2016 – *The Culture White Paper* – which was the first since Jennie Lee’s in 1965, but it was deemed an “unworthy successor”.⁴⁶ While many welcomed the fact that the government was making a statement of intent, the paper contained no new initiatives, no new core funding, no connection with the work of other government departments, and no broader sense of mission.⁴⁷ There remains an abiding feeling across the political spectrum that arts and culture are something that’s nice to have, but an expendable luxury in tough times and not high on the list of what voters care about. It doesn’t even warrant a mention on YouGov’s political issues tracker.⁴⁸

The truth is, however, that arts and culture are of critical political importance; and sustaining them presents a policy challenge that must be urgently addressed. Successful political parties are able to tell a simple story about the country, that’s built from the ground up. It is the story of how we do things every day, the troubles we face, the successes we celebrate, the dreams we dwell on. If a political party is unwilling to think about art, creativity and culture then it is closing its ears to the fundamentals of life as it is lived, and denying itself the ability to give voice to it. The cultural theorist Raymond Williams said that we use the word culture in two senses: to mean “a whole way of life”, the common meanings that develop between us; and to mean “arts and learning – the special processes of discovery and effort”.⁴⁹ It is this collision of how we understand our lives together and how we ultimately give expression to this understanding that makes art and culture the lifeblood of any broad-based political project.

But it is very clear that cultural life in this country faces very real challenges, as the state withdraws and institutions and services that have relied on public funding seek new roots in a different landscape. In formulating a fresh approach to supporting the arts, it will be a crucial test of the extent to which Labour is capable of a different approach to politics; one that looks beyond the old administrative social democratic politics of tax and spend and centrally-directed delivery, towards a more collaborative, plural and decentralised socialism. For our cultural life is far too rich to be run from the centre; but yet it will always need nurturing in order to flourish.

Brexit revealed to the political class the extent to which we are a nation divided – and it exposed the chasm that has grown between the Labour party and large areas of the country that once formed the bedrock of the

Labour movement. People's sense of identity is now the cornerstone of our politics, but the left lacks a language that is capable of reflecting it. In this moment of great national uncertainty, the left must seize the opportunities presented by devolution to forge a new civic socialism based around local pride of place; experiment with new models of running essential services that build partnerships across sectors; and empower people to take control of their own cultural life in their own communities. If Labour can do this, its 'story' will begin to write itself.

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