

# When you care enough to be the very best

Leigh French

Littering the living room floor is the residue, some truly detritus, of the processes of ongoing 'service reviews', 'consultations' and 'research' of the Arts Councils, Local government and associated arts agencies in what has become an endless game of central government 'Cultural Policy' deployment, validation and marketing.

While ingratiating programmes of 'Cultural Policy' advocacy escalated as part of the build up to the Scottish Parliament, given its new custodial mantle of cultural overseer, the phenomenon has to be seen as an effect of a broader intensification of an imposing of market philosophy across the public sector as a whole. Within this the specific focus on the arts is becoming increasingly technocratic, that is the arts are being seen exclusively in terms of their 'use value', having a 'cultural purpose' in regard to 'social inclusion', 'education' and 'regional development' criteria as defined by government.

To synthesise a few recent documents:

The Scottish Arts Council's *Scottish Arts in the 21st Century* is an attempt at a promotional/lobbying life belt for the SAC in the face of calls in Scottish parliamentary manifestoes for a euphemistic overhaul of the SAC. Hiring the 'out-of-house' 'celebrity' services of Ruth Wishart (see *Variant*, vol. 2, issue 7 editorial) it attempts to position the SAC as both a free-market advocate as well as an integral part of the public-service-sector accountable to 'the people'. Defending itself as committed to the demands of 'consumer access' is undoubtedly also an offensive against ceremonial accusations of elitism and media inspired controversy, real or otherwise, of where and how the public purse is being spent.

The *Creative Scotland: The Case for a National Cultural Strategy* circular, produced by an amalgam of agencies including COSLA, SAC, Scottish Screen, Scottish Museums Council, and the

Scottish Library Association, is designed to buoy their position regarding the focus already on the 'Cultural Sector' as a driving force for a talent driven society and the much vaunted entrepreneurial spirit, calling for a dedicated Ministry of Culture within the new parliament and a National Strategy for the arts. Once again a restrictive view of "cultural action", experimentation and innovation assures the arts are resigned to stimulating market growth.

Similarly there is the *Towards the New Enlightenment: A Cultural Policy for the City of Edinburgh 1999*, an Edinburgh City Council coffee-table brochure couched in the rhetoric of relieving the vulnerable whilst soliciting industrial partners. This is a sepia toned cheerleader for the instrumentalisation of the arts as an acceptable face of commerce within the city.

*Best Value Service review: Museums, Heritage and Visual Arts*, is Glasgow City Council's first stage report in an obligatory exercise for all Local Authorities as stipulated by government. Far from exploratory the document in verbiage of efficiency succeeds in drowning the scope of activity blanketed by the construct 'Culture and Leisure Services' within the cadre of market enterprise and regional (business) development. 'The arts' are to be sequestered to play promotional fiddle to the city's business community and 'Band-Aid' to an ailing social services —to be technocratically utilised for deterministic social, educational and economic purposes, confining funding to the ends of 'strategic planning'.

The SAC Lottery's *Summary or Responses to New Directions Consultations* [sic] is a marvel of efficiency. Its lack of substance as to how the priorities for the Lottery's New Directions were arrived at is simply awe inspiring given their repeated bulwark of an extensive consultation procedure. This has to be contrasted with the roving, full

technicolor press launches of its *funds\*: funds and schemes available from SAC in 1998/99* pack. Of course, it is stressed that the numerous suggestions within the guidelines of the kinds of projects that might be eligible for funding are merely illustrative. What this does underscore however is that 'cultural activity' is to be 'on message', that the agenda for funding is not 'discursive' but 'prescriptive'. As such, 'equal opportunities' and 'equality of access' are enunciated in terms of consumer development, the arts rather than a catalyst for social change appropriated as a constituent of job 'training'.

*Open Access Provision and Facilities for Artists in Scotland: The Review* is a SAC commissioned "investigation" into artists' workshop provision within Scotland by Peter Davies of the Arts Council of Wales. His responsibility was to assess current needs and provisions and recommend possible change, however these changes were principally as having to be done within the euphemistic "present financial climate". While the report acknowledges the necessity of workshop provision and the work done to date, it also concedes a lack of international standards and substantial gaps within areas of provision. The fetter of the "present financial climate" instructs the scope and thrust of the document and the resulting suggestions are predictably for an extension of market principles professed as a cure-all.

Such documents claim to make the process of discourse central to either their construction, as in the transparent and benign representation of the results of consultation, or as documents whose function it is to stimulate comment and feedback, asserting consultation as an integral agent to policy outcomes. It could be stated that since bodies such as the SAC are courted for funding, the relationship between them and those they establish to consult is often illusory, i.e. by the nature of con-

sultancy those consulted ultimately have a vested interest and as such may be reluctant to openly criticise. These can then become ritualised performances, purely formal exercises, leaving the real processes of decision making as being open and transparent questionable. Such knowledge produced for official use and funded accordingly rarely questions the fundamental aims and objectives of the client organisation and any such research is by definition subject to pre-existing agenda of policy and policy implementing bodies. A synchronous action in this process is the exposing of the public sector to marketing rhetoric where manipulation of 'market imperatives' as 'cultural imperatives' is a pedestrian constituent.

An initial argument for public subsidy of 'the arts' with the creation of the Arts Council of Great Britain in 1946 was to protect 'the arts' from the ravages and tarnishes of the commercial market — "not to teach or to censor, but to give courage, confidence and opportunity"<sup>1</sup>. The understanding that 'the arts' (initially consisting of the arts of drama, music and painting, broadened out in 1967 to encompass a wider remit of activity) could not exist without subsidy was of course never a sole reason for such support, other prime elements being the 'cultivation of the masses' — the political objective of social control through cultural discourse — and the use of public money to build institutions of national and international prestige — a cultural player on a world stage. The Arts Council's position was thus intended as an 'intermediary' body between the state and civil society, avoiding the view of direct government control over day-to-day practice as well as the perceived insidious pressures of an otherwise exclusive commercial arena.

In this sense 'Culture' was determined as consisting of a particular field of government, a broader sense of government than just governing the state, encompassing the mechanisms of social management — 'Culture' here referring specifically to the practices and institutions that make meaning. The very operation of policing 'Culture' through 'Cultural policy', aside from the etymology, raises questions of regulation, control and censorship, the tendency being to treat culture as though it were either a dangerous law breaker or a lost child.

In *Culture and the Public Sphere* (1996) Jim McGuigan traces the move from 'state' to 'market' within the public sector as a 'discursive shift' to "an administrative philosophy as a set of ideas for managing all institutions in the public sector; involving devices such as internal markets, contracting out, tendering and financial incentives... [which] coincided with the incessant promotion of a loud yet diffuse rhetoric of 'enterprise culture' which was not only about organisational change in both the private and public sectors but also about the cultivation of an 'enterprising self', a personal way of being contrasted with bureaucratic time-

servicing and vested professional interests in maintaining the status quo of public service."

He describes the fostering of 'market strategies' as a 'discursive shift' within bodies such as the Arts Councils as 'the arts' have not actually been abandoned to the ravages of the commercial sector; instead there is still a persistence of state intervention in the cultural field and public subsidy of 'the arts'. However he sees it not by chance that the total abolition of state-sponsored culture has not yet occurred, instead he sees a "continuing use of the public sector in the construction of a new common sense, the 'social-welfare-state' swept aside and replaced by a pervasive 'market reasoning'." Whereby "[t]he effect of certain discourses is to make it virtually impossible to think outside of them. In a society of discourse there are control procedures for what can be legitimately thought and enunciated: exclusion procedures that mark the boundaries of a discourse, defining that which is permissible and impermissible to say; internal procedures that regulate the distinctive operations of a discourse; and access procedures that regulate entry to a discursive field. Where once was 'the state' there is now 'the market' in discussion of cultural policy." It is then no small matter that such attempts to dictate the parameters of discourse through a pervasive managerialization of 'culture' threatens the outright commodification and privatisation of information through the total commercialisation of the public sphere.

The traditional discourse of 'quality' as a determinant of public subsidy was primarily the consumption of class 'taste' by naturalised arbitrators of cultural competence and aesthetic disposition<sup>2</sup>. Capitalising on not unfounded aspirations of elitism, these capricious 'qualitative values' have now been re-inscribed within a seemingly objective 'common sense' discourse of 'value'. That value and worth, as well as having monetary implications in the sense of 'value for money' have been equated as 'the right of access to cultural consumption', and that consumption has itself become evidence of 'cultural action'. The language of the market is deployed as the residually good intention of a 'constructive advance' towards a more 'cultured' nation, that being a nation with equitable consumer access to cultural goods — so much for cultural critique as an instrument for changing consciousness. Ultimately concepts of 'quality' and 'value' are utilised to function as qualification for encouraging and (willingly or unconsciously) suppressing cultural activity. Within the states' feigning of indifference, these are employed as mechanisms in the veiling of an imposition of a distinct market ideology.

The arts are currently 'marketised' to such an extent that their circulation now resembles that of the non-state sector; the 'private' market of cultural commodities. However, McGuigan makes clear that 'marketisation', as he uses it, "is not strictly to

be subsumed under the concept of commodification since the important point is to do with the *resemblance* to the market rather than a direct *identity* with it... insofar as the state continues to hold some responsibility for cultural provision through the collection and disbursement of tax revenue." There is of course a contradiction between the promotional ideology of individualism and choice, and the evidence of actual conditions. That this endless propaganda vastly exaggerates the power the 'consumer' has over their daily lives. As McGuigan asks regarding Pierre Bourdieu's writings on the field of cultural production: "How far is the real problem for Bourdieu the unequal social distribution of cultural dispositions and competencies or how far is it the power of those with cultural capital to impose a system of cultural value which fits in with their own tastes?"

"The most profound accomplishment of the New Right in Britain may be not that it literally rolled back the state in order to release the full blast of market forces but, rather that it inserted the 'new managerialism and market reasoning' into the state-related agencies of the public sector, in effect calling upon organisations that are not themselves private businesses to think and function as though they were.... The public sector has been required to function pseudo-capitalistically, which is not only an organisational phenomenon but a deeply imbibed ideological phenomenon and one which has enormous impact on cultural agencies and the network of arts-subsidising bodies."<sup>3</sup>

The Left and Right have coalesced in imbuing 'the arts' with the rhetoric of the market. However, in spite of this deployment oligopoly, the rule by a few, rather than 'free-market competition' is ultimately the driving force in order to operate a governmental pedagogy organised by the technology of moral supervision underscoring the promotion of 'market values'. In so doing the dissemination of critical ideas is suppressed. The implications for democratic debate and diverse cultural experimentation in the face of the censorial criterion of pan-promotionalism hardly needs spelling out...

#### Notes

1. John Maynard Keynes, *The Listener*, 12 July 1945; Raymond Williams, *The Arts Council: Politics and Policies*, An Arts Council Lecture, 1981.
2. Described as "timeservers in the turgid little canister of Scottish arts" —Norman Lebrecht, *Daily Telegraph*
3. Jim McGuigan, *Culture and the Public Sphere*, (1996), Routledge