

# CULTURE, CREATIVE INDUSTRIES AND THE COALITION: FIVE POLICY CHALLENGES

Kate Oakley and Paul Owens

The early years of the New Labour administration were marked by a flurry of initiatives in culture and the newly-anointed 'creative industries,' from free entry to museums to the setting up of the Creative Industries Taskforce and the production of 'Mapping Documents,' which attempted to measure the extents of activity in these sectors. Indeed, in the early days, 'Cool Britannia,' with its celebration of the arts, popular music and fashion, was seen as a hallmark of New Labour, to both its credit and detriment.

The Coalition by contrast, despite having in place essentially the team that shadowed these issues for several years in opposition, has less of an obvious story to tell on culture. This could be attributed to traditional Tory suspicion of 'grand narratives' in policy, but it is equally likely to be a result of the overall focus on cuts, retrenchment and austerity that is characterising the first months of the new administration. Cultural policy in the UK – legislation on gambling, Intellectual Property, and the regulation of the BBC aside – often consists of funding decisions. **We signal what we value in cultural policy in part by spending public money on it;** where there is less public money to spend, the signal grows rather weak. The Coalition's response to this is to announce its overall goal of raising corporate and philanthropic funding but, beyond exhortation, it remains to be seen what policy changes, such as tax breaks, may be put in place to facilitate this.

The policy challenges facing the Coalition on culture therefore are of a somewhat different nature than those which faced the Labour government in its thirteen years. For many observers, one of the achievements of the New Labour period in office was to establish the idea of the '**cultural and creative industries**' (as they became known) as a **connected realm** that included 'high' and popular culture; for-profit, subsidised and not-for-profit business models; and the core cultural and media activities, together with services such as architecture, design and advertising. The reality of these connections can be observed in the working lives of many practitioners: actors, musicians and writers who move between the subsidised arts, commercial media and community practice in a constant flow. The same is true of consumers and audiences.

The complexity of making policy for such a heterogeneous range of activities almost inevitably means that multiple and sometimes conflicting goals are established. Thus the DCMS under New Labour was criticised by some for 'social instrumentalism' (the idea that public cultural funding should seek to achieve outcomes in education, health or participation); by others for being overly economic and only focusing on jobs and growth; and by yet others for being insufficiently economic and not developing an industrial policy for the cultural sectors. These individual criticisms may have had merit, but the point is that **if one accepts the complex and interlinking nature of the cultural realm, multiple rationales for public spending and multiple policy goals appear to be inevitable.**

There are some signs that the Coalition wishes to move away from this mixture of cultural, social and economic policy. The tone of the Mayor's Cultural Strategy in London<sup>1</sup> – from a Tory administration, albeit one with a slightly different complexion than the Coalition – is that 'arts for art's sake' is back in fashion. But this leaves the Coalition with some pressing policy challenges:

1. The creative industries are still being held up as part of **rebalancing the economy** away from dependence on financial services and the public sector<sup>ii2</sup>. But the infrastructure that New Labour put in place to support this, from regional development agencies (RDAs) to business support programmes and employment schemes like the Future Jobs Fund, is being abolished or severely cut back. New Labour had very limited success in rebalancing the UK economy either geographically away from the South East, or in terms of activities. How much more difficult will this be in the absence of public sector support?
2. **How does a distaste for 'instrumentalism' stack up against the aspirations for the 'big society'?** If the latter phrase is to be any more than rhetorical, what is the role for arts organisations?

<sup>1</sup> Available at [london.gov.uk](http://london.gov.uk)

<sup>2</sup> Transforming the British economy: Coalition strategy for economic growth, speech by David Cameron, 28<sup>th</sup> May 2010.

3. The government seeks to reduce targets for the arts, and give museums more autonomy. But the **focus on philanthropy may mean that individual donors' goals, rather than public policy, determine what gets funded.** What are the implications of this for a democratic culture?
4. The Coalition is very keen to stress its desire to take power away from Whitehall and place it in the hands of communities. But its strategy in key cultural areas such as local TV or broadband is essentially market- rather than community-led, and a **lack of public funding for community groups and social enterprises means that they will struggle to develop the capacity to participate in this power-shift.**
5. Finally, however politically uncomfortable it may be, **aesthetics never really goes away in cultural policy.** The Cultural Strategy for London makes its commitment to 'excellence' clear, and the Secretary of State is encouraging the BBC to focus on the 'high end' of content production. But the 'slash and burn' approach to

funding raises serious questions about how this excellence is to be supported

The danger is that while attempts to understand and develop policies for culture are fraught with peril, the alternative is arguably worse. Fragmenting public policy back into 'the arts' (essentially subsidised and philanthropically-funded high culture) and the 'digital and media sectors' (which are seen as businesses, and hence subject only to market regulation), goes against decades of trying to understand the complexity of cultural production.

The case for cultural funding always rests on a variety of social, economic and cultural criteria. Nothing about the current situation changes that. If rebalancing the economy and achieving sustainable growth are the goals, and if we are to deal successfully with social challenges in this new age of austerity, a vibrant cultural and creative sector will be needed more than ever to help see us through.