



Practical and Authoritative Analysis of Key National Issues

IN THE ARTS WE TRUST?: POLITICS AND THE FUNDING OF CULTURE

by Jamie Cameron

THE PUBLIC TRUST

While the CBC's mandate has been under public discussion, there has been no dearth of advice to that hallowed institution. Some recommend that the CBC keep radio, but not TV; others oppose commercialized programming, sports broadcasting, or both; and, while some say the CBC should be privatized, still others would like it to be exclusively dedicated to public programming.

The CBC is, after all, a national institution; as such, it holds our culture and identity in trust for all of us. Any decision about its future will feel like a decision about ours. What's more, the CBC is substantially funded by taxpayers' money; as far as we are concerned, that

makes it accountable to the public.

Other segments of our culture that hold a share of that public trust also have been in the news recently. A decision by the Writers Union to sponsor an event open only to members of certain races has been nothing short of incendiary. Some say that if the Writers Union wants to have race-based policies and events, it should not be funded by the public.

Now the province of Alberta has announced that funding may be denied to arts productions that "offend the sensibilities and the community standard." That response was pro-

Continued, see "In the Arts We Trust" on page 118.

THE "NEW" NATIONAL UNITY DEBATE: ITCHING TO FIGHT THE SEPARATISTS

by Kenneth McRoberts

It is hard to believe that Canada has been plunged once again into a debate over national unity. After all, the last debate ended in a most ignominious fashion. In voting against the Charlottetown Accord, many citizens, at least in English Canada, seemed to be not only rejecting the

Accord, but protesting the very fact that the nation's leaders had invested so much time and energy into devising it.

Nonetheless, less than two years

Continued, see "The New National Unity Debate" on page 119.

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ARTICLES

In the Arts We Trust? Politics and the Funding of Culture
by Jamie Cameron 117

The "New" National Unity Debate: Itching To Fight the Separatists
by Kenneth McRoberts 117

REGULAR FEATURES

National Affairs
by Patrick J. Monahan 121

Quebec Report
by Alain Noël 122

Western Report
by Roger Gibbins 124

Economic Report
by Fred Lazar 125

Legal Report
by Bruce Ryder 127

CW Update
The Month in Review 129

Supreme Court Watch 131

Parliamentary Update 132

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*"In the Arts We Trust," continued,
from page 117.*

voked by *The Tit Show*, a lesbian production that, presumably, fixes some or all of its attention on "tits."

Should government be funding culture and the arts? If so, how should decisions about funding be made? In particular, do those who receive funding represent us and therefore become accountable for their work?

THE POLITICS OF GOVERNMENT FUNDING

It is not surprising that these issues have begun to command our attention. Almost daily, we are warned that soaring costs and the hoary spectre of a two-tiered system place universal health care in jeopardy. Anxiety about chronic budget deficits and the apparent intractability of the public debt remains high.

In such circumstances, we need to know whether we can still afford culture; has it become a luxury that has slipped out of our reach, at least for the time being? Some might argue that worthwhile projects and organizations will survive in any event, through support from sales, gate receipts, and charitable donations. From that perspective, public funding is only needed at the margins, by those whose work cannot cross that threshold of survival.

It is sometimes said that artists should neither need nor want public funding; there is a sense that it may corrupt art and artist alike. As John Updike put it, "I would rather have as my patron a host of anonymous citizens digging into their own pockets for the price of a book" than "enlightened men [*sic*] administering public funds."

Last, but not least, it is no secret that public funding has at times supported projects that are perceived as obscure, arcane, and even objectionable. A case in point is Karen

Finley, an American "post-Modern" performance artist. She, Robert Mapplethorpe, and two others [the "NEA four"] became causes célèbres in the battle over NEA [National Endowment for the Arts] funding. There is no question that her nude, chocolate-smearing act, performed live at a theatre funded by the NEA, was shocking and provocative. The question was whether she and others should be excluded from funding for work that challenged and engaged community values.

One Canadian commentator recently proclaimed that "art is politics." On that view those who seek government support should play the game and tailor their proposals to the prevailing political winds. Any who are unwilling would be left to their own resources.

But wait a minute. As taxpayers, we provide a heavy subsidy to politics, in the form of funding for political parties and their electoral candidates. Without strings being attached, those funds can be spent on offensive advertisements, or to promote views the public finds objectionable.

Few would dispute that art, in many cases, likewise *is* politics. Through the ages, it has been a source of caustic social commentary and has catalyzed us to rethink conventions we take for granted. Can it be a bad thing that art, whether at the CBC studio or in *The Tit Show*, confronts the status quo?

At least one political party discovered last fall that it would be held accountable, if only in small part, for an ad that was so inappropriate it had to be pulled. If art is in some measure politics, what then of *its* accountability?

THE PUBLIC'S TRUST

It is widely perceived in Canada that those who receive funding do so in trust for the public, and that im-

plies a relationship of accountability. Perhaps it is time to see that trust in a different light. What of the public's trust in the vitality of our culture and identity, and its faith in our capacity to experiment and grow, in part, through government funding?

Past successes include CBC Radio and the cultivation of Inuit art. In the case of Inuit art, it is questionable whether and in what form it would have emerged without the Canadian Eskimo Art Committee and the extraordinary cooperation among the Inuit, non-aboriginal "southerners," and government sponsorship that began in the early 1960s.

Should we renew our commitment to culture, we can look forward to further successes in the future. Though failure in some instances is inevitable, it should be seen as the price we must pay for the successes we rightly and proudly claim as our own.

It should also be remembered that what counts as success or failure in this context is largely a matter of perception. In many cases, projects and performances are labelled failures because they bare our souls and test our vision of the future. And that is exactly why they should not be barred by censorial standards of sponsorship.

Precisely because culture and the arts are at times overtly political, governments should keep their hands off decisions about the funding of particular projects. When support is tied to "the community standard," government approval defines our creativity. As history has shown, a monolithic vision of culture silences alternative voices and institutionalizes conformity.

Jamie Cameron is Director of York University's Centre for Public Law and Public Policy and is an Associate Professor at Osgoode Hall Law School, York University.

