

Scottish Artists Union Statement at the Culture Bill Debate

The following statement opened the proceedings of the Culture Bill Debate held at the Scottish Parliament 12/1/2007 and was presented by Terry Anderson, President of the Scottish Artists Union. The debate was hosted by Chris Ballance MSP and chaired by Joyce Macmillan.

Madam Chairman, assembled colleagues -

On behalf of the Scottish Artists Union, let me thank Chris Ballance for the opportunity to participate in today's debate. For those unfamiliar with our organisation, the SAU is the first new trade union of the 21st century, open to professional visual artists of all disciplines, supported entirely by membership subscriptions and as such is the only independent representative voice for visual artists in the country. When responding to the Cultural Commission's report in 2005, our aspirations for future cultural legislation in Scotland were encapsulated as follows:

- *Give artists parity with other arts professionals*
- *Support artists' grassroots creativity and energy*
- *Increase financial support to culture in line with the great aspirations the government has expressed for it.*

This third point was a reference to the First Minister's now infamous St. Andrew's Day speech of 2003, in which he said: "I intend that this country [should have] the courage and the faith to back human imagination, our innate creativity, as the most potent force for individual change and social vision."

He also said: "Culture should be for the many not the few. And the few must not be the only ones to experience or create [my emphasis] the most brilliant productions or the most outstanding works of art. It is absolutely central to my politics that excellence should be accessible and access should be to excellence."

How precisely his speech's sentiments - the notion of Culture being at the heart of every aspect of government and participation therein being a fundamental, inalienable right of every Scottish citizen - were reflected in the findings of the subsequent Culture Commission is open to debate. Whether you agreed with all its recommendations (and we didn't), the Report was unquestionably the result of extensive consultation and consideration and was a serious attempt to meet the ambitions of the Commission's remit.

The question before us today is whether this draft Bill is a worthy response to all the work of the last three years. Have all the promises to redraw the landscape been met?

Does it hand down a legacy that will revolutionise Scottish cultural provision for the next quarter-decade? The answer is resoundingly no: even a cursory reading of the Bill reveals an unbalanced document, singularly lacking in ambition. A closer interpretation suggests worrying ramifications for Scotland's cultural future and in particular her already marginalised and under-funded artists.

I wish to address my comments to the two principal portions of the Bill, both of which have the potential for great impact on our members- "Cultural Entitlements" and the new Creative Scotland agency.

"Cultural Entitlements" are, as we see them, a red herring and a misinterpretation of the First Minister's sentiments. Using the language of social inclusion the Bill turns culture into an inert commodity and a convenient panacea, to be simply allocated or prescribed. Of course the notion of "entitlement" to enjoy and participate in culture is a noble one and should be protected. However it's hardly radical, and as described in the Bill makes no mention of the rights of the creators and providers of said culture to make a decent living doing so. It's common sense that the people of Scotland want more enriching, educating and entertaining cultural experiences and it goes without saying that Scotland's artists are willing to provide them, given the chance to thrive. However the Bill's authors have chosen not to make the connection, instead making it a statutory requirement of Local Authorities to provide the former and not the latter. We're particularly concerned that a greater reliance on visual and applied artists (most especially, but no doubt musicians, performers and others too) to meet "entitlement" goals will lead to further pressure on and from Local Authorities to prioritise the provision of opportunities for audience participation ahead of genuine cultural development and proper remuneration for the creative talent involved.

Equally, we're baffled as to why the Bill appears to be formalising a two tier vision where the National Companies (including Creative Scotland) are directly responsible to the Executive with everything else apparently delivered through Local Authority management schemes, yet also states that these cherished entitlements "are not guarantees". The Scottish people cannot assume that, living in any given area, they can expect access to any given service. Nor do the Local Authorities need to do any more than "have regard to" the Bill when formulating their cultural planning. Is this truly a Bill (i.e. an attempt to create new laws), or merely a set of guidelines? In this regard the Bill appears to be a paper exercise that could easily come into effect with no tangible change at the grassroots, with the local resident having nor more or less access to culture and the local artist having no more or less opportunity to deliver it than today.

Meanwhile, we are given an ill-defined account of Creative Scotland, leaving us wondering how it will operate or, crucially, whether it will be an improvement on the current arrangements. Under the terms of this Bill, it appears Creative Scotland will be like nothing more than a new Scottish Development Agency for the arts, with special emphasis on "Creative Industries". While we support the ambition of a thriving Creative Industries Sector we have greater interest and concern for the creative individual who seems to have been largely forgotten or ignored. We learn that the eight-to-fifteen members of Creative Scotland will all be Ministerial appointments. Ministers will decide who Chairs, for how long members may serve, how much they'll be paid, where they will headquarter themselves, as well as reserving the right to attend any and all meetings. The truth is this, like all the other National Companies, this body will have the shadow of Ministerial influence and possible veto hanging over it, thanks to legislation that removes the arms length control previously enshrined and so highly valued by the independently-minded arts sector. I quote page 7 of the Draft Culture (Scotland) Bill document, paragraph 3.11: "The draft Bill also includes a power for the Scottish Ministers to give directions to Creative Scotland which they must follow."

The accompanying text does go on, in more than one place, to emphasise Ministers' reluctance to make decisions on what does and does not constitute the kind of "talent and excellence" deserving of Creative Scotland's support, recognition or reward. However it appears likely that, considering the importance the Executive has placed on the economic contribution to be made from "the creative industries" as well as to Scotland's reputation on the world stage, Creative Scotland will be positioned from the outset to prioritise commercially-minded initiatives (we note computer games are given special mention), "established" (i.e. big name) artists and large-scale, populist projects. While there is certainly a case to be made for more cultural programming with broad appeal (dovetailing as it does with the concept of "entitlement"), there is every indication that the overwhelming majority of visual artists in Scotland will not be in a position to benefit in any meaningful way from Creative Scotland's largesse. We believe artistic practice must not be judged and supported purely in terms of benefit to the community and/or economy. If culture is to be placed at the heart of the nation, then artists' rights must be placed at the heart of our thinking on culture.

In our view, the single most important omission of the Bill as presented is its failure to recognise that the true source of cultural development is the creative individual. The National Companies, our Local Authorities and - should its day dawn - Creative Scotland will have nothing to deliver without a flourishing source of creative talent. This Bill appears to be concerned solely with the management and control of the delivery of culture as a commodity with no real commitment to nurturing, developing or celebrating the creative, innovative individuals from whence it all springs.