

UK arts funding faces savage cuts

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The future of hundreds of local groups and organizations around the UK involved with literature, performing and visual arts and museums is threatened by the government's cuts programme.

In June the Conservative/Liberal Democrat government announced cuts of £19 million to the Arts Council England (ACE), as part of its initial budget. The ACE stated that it would apportion the cut in funding equally among the 880 local groups known as Regularly Funded Organisations (RFO). Community-based groups are particularly vulnerable, as local government has no statutory obligation to provide art funding.

ACE demonstrated that it was prepared to level deeper cuts against bodies such as the Creativity Culture and Education organisation (CCE), as it was deemed not to produce an "arts product". This definition demonstrates how ACE is operating increasingly upon a commercial rationale. The CCE delivers arts programs to school children in some of the most deprived areas of the country.

In addition to these grassroots organizations, the cuts in frontline funding will affect many national institutions such as the Royal Opera House and the Royal Shakespeare Company, which will lose £142,000 and £80,000 respectively.

Among the projects to be axed are those that have opened up access to the arts for people on low income. For instance "A Night Less Ordinary", a program run by ACE in conjunction with theatres nationally offering free tickets to those below the age of 26, will be wound down in March. This will make theatre beyond the reach of most students who are facing a hike in tuition fees.

It was presented as a reprieve that the ACE had been able to contain the cuts to 0.5 percent, rather than 3 percent. This was only made possible because it used £9 million of its reserves. However, it is clear that cuts

on a far greater scale are planned as part of the current spending review. In July, Arts Council Chief Executive Alan Davey wrote to the RFOs, telling them to prepare for cuts in their funding of 10 percent in 2011-2012 as part of the 30 percent that is expected over four years.

This puts the future of one in four RFOs at risk. Davey stated in the letter, "We would not be able to fund many organizations in the way we have been to date".

ACE accepts the need for the cuts as an article of faith and has confined itself to pleas for them to be modified. A news release was headlined, "You can cut us but don't kill us".

The government views the announcement of its "age of austerity" as an ideal opportunity to end state support for the arts. The cuts in arts funding have been accompanied by a particularly crude and divisive campaign whipped up within the mass media. The general thrust of this propaganda is to deride any state funding for the arts as a reckless indulgence, under conditions in which vital social provisions are being cut back. This line of argument is not only promulgated within the rightwing tabloids, but endorsed by the liberal political establishment. *The Guardian* has run several articles dedicated to accepting the premise that the arts must be cut back. Writing in the newspaper, the playwright Mark Ravenhill commented, "Substantial cuts in the money the arts receive from government are now inevitable. And why not? The arts are a vital part of our national life and need to share the nation's current pain".

Also writing in the *Guardian*, Polly Toynbee ruled out any idea that the cuts should be opposed on any other basis than commercial considerations: "In less than a year shrouds will be waving, bloody stumps displayed with the empty begging bowls as the coalition lays into public services", she begins. "It will be hard to tell who is most seriously injured as attention

focuses on rising hospital waiting lists, or falling hopes for a blighted, workless generation”.

She asks, “So how does the cause of the arts make itself heard in that maelstrom? Protesting thespians may get short shrift. Arts and heritage people are all too aware of their low priority in the pecking order of pain”.

Her answer is: “Start with the business case—the easiest, though not the best case to make”.

The net result is to browbeat any artists or organisations that intends to mount a principled opposition to the cuts. The counterposing of arts funding to the cash strapped National Health Service or other vital areas of social provision conceals the fact that much needed funding for all these public services is being siphoned off in order to compensate for the multi-billion pound bail out for the banks.

Arts funding accounts for only 0.7 percent of public spending—equal to 17 pence per person per week. Even so, ACE accepts that this paltry figure must be cut further. An appeal to Prime Minister David Cameron reassures him that “the cultural sector is willing to play its part in the country’s economic recovery with realistic cuts”.

The actors union Equity has also written a polite letter to Cameron, asking him to “give very careful consideration to what you propose to do in the worlds of arts and broadcasting”.

Beyond the open letter, there is little more than a meek suggestion to “contact your local MP”.

Cuts to arts funding is by no means the sole responsibility of the Tories and Lib-Dems. The previous Labour government had already announced funding cuts of £4 million for this year. The Arts Council has a history of cutting funding for minority projects, which offer real opportunity and access. In 2007 ACE ended all funding to hundreds of arts organisations. It has just axed the Royal Shakespeare Company’s arts journalist bursary project—a small scale program that connects the RSC to young audiences.

Combined with the drive to remove state funding is the promotion of the idea that future arts funding should be dependent upon private donations. By labelling art and culture as a “luxury”, rather than a necessity for a civilized society, the conditions are being created by which it becomes the preserve of the wealthy few.

While private donors might derive some prestige from funding national institutions, this is not likely to be extended to the less high profile arts organisations. Moreover, many patrons have stated that they are only prepared to match state spending rather than replace it.

At a more fundamental level this raises issues concerning artistic freedom, which has been generally played down. The actor and theatre director Sam West has raised the fact that this would increase the risk of political censorship. Speaking during a Radio 4 debate, he drew attention to the musical *Enron*—a satire on corporate greed and financial swindling—which he had starred in and became a West End hit. He stated, “*Enron* started in a tiny theatre. If I’d rung up a private investor about that original production I don’t think they would have returned my call”.

The present situation recalls the comments made by Trotsky in the manifesto “Towards a Free Revolutionary Art”, (1927):

“In the present period of the death agony of capitalism, democratic as well as fascist, the artist sees himself threatened with the loss of his right to live and continue working. He sees all avenues of communication choked with the debris of capitalist collapse”.

The fight against the cuts in arts funding needs to be joined with opposition to the destruction of the welfare state and the austerity measures in general. It is an inseparable part of the struggle against the socially destructive consequences of government policies directed towards making working people pay for the economic crisis.



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