

UK Arts Council slashes poetry funding

An interview with Poetry Book Society director Chris Holifield

Jackie Warren
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The Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition government has slashed the funding of Arts Council England (ACE) by 30 percent and ordered it to halve its administration costs. As a result, ACE has announced an end to the entire funding of the Poetry Book Society (PBS), a unique organisation providing vital support to poets, readers and publishers. The PBS sponsors the annual TS Eliot Prize, described as the most valuable and prestigious in the UK for a new collection of poetry.

PBS director Chris Holifield is also the co-founder of www.writersservices.com the largest writers' website in the UK. We spoke to her about the campaign to save the society and the wider implications of the attacks on the arts.

Jackie Warren: I believe the PBS was founded by TS Eliot in 1953?

Chris Holifield: It was founded by TS Eliot and friends—some poets, some booksellers—at the instigation of the Arts Council. It was about getting books to readers and stimulating poetry sales. It's grown over the years into a formal book club and a mainstay of the poetry-publishing world.

It's difficult for poets to get published and also for poetry publishers to sell their books. This trend has been accelerated by changes in the book world, particularly the pressure on bookshops to be more commercial in their thinking. A lot of them have very small stocks of poetry and there isn't much range available.

JW: Is this something you feel strongly about?

CH: I think there's a bit of a change going on in the Arts Council distribution of literature funding. The poetry publishing world divides itself into a few categories.

Faber is in a place on its own, because they've got such a fantastic heritage that they can sell their backlist very well. If you enter a bookshop with little poetry, they always have the Faber list, many of whom were friends of TS Eliot and who were encouraged by him. But they don't do much publishing of new poets.

Then there are the publishing lists that are part of the big book companies: the Jonathan Cape list, part of Random

House, and Picador. Then there are the two big funded houses, Bloodaxe and Carcanet, who get substantial funding from the Arts Council.

There are a number of smaller publishers that are partially funded, and then beyond that, there are an awful lot of small presses, pamphlet presses, that don't have any funding at all or occasional project funding from "grants for the arts". Mostly they subsist on very little.

You can see that Arts Council funding is absolutely crucial. Without it there would be a big gap in the middle, which is where an enormous amount of poetry publishing is going on.

JW: During the last few decades, I think there has been a downgrading of art and culture, with less valuing of art. How do you feel about this?

CH: I think it's a mixed picture actually. It seems to be becoming more available in some ways and less in others. There seem to be a lot more "poetry events" than there used to be. Obviously there's a big growth in performance poetry. There are also a lot more "new collection" related events. But it hasn't necessarily been accompanied by an increase in the sales of poetry books. And that's where we come in.

In terms of the arts in general, I have heard the last few years described a number of times as a sort of golden era. We may well look back on it that way—due to a lot of investment through the Heritage lottery fund.

JW: A golden era for poetry?

CH: Actually more to do with the galleries and theatres. I think that in poetry and literature, the investment has stayed pretty much the same. It's not been huge, the figure I've been quoting is 0.58 percent, which is just over half a percent of the total [of ACE's funding to the arts].

This will be true going forward in the new funding remit, but while the Arts Council is saying is that they've maintained the same percentage for poetry, if you're on the receiving end it doesn't feel like that. They've actually taken money away from quite a lot of organisations.

JW: These drastic cuts to precious organisations such as yours are part of a broader attack on working people

everywhere, based on the contention that a well-supported and decently promoted arts community is incompatible with the profit system. And all this takes place against a backdrop of incredible profits and bonuses being recorded in financial institutions.

CH: I probably agree with the general analysis, because we're all suffering from the banking crisis and will go on suffering for some time. It's obviously very hard for individuals who are being cut, who are losing their jobs, having to live on less benefits to feel that they are being affected by the fact that the banks have put us all into this terrible position. The bankers still seem to be doing very nicely, but they're not doing very nicely for anyone else. They still don't seem to be lending much money, mortgages and so on.

I think the politics of arts cuts are slightly different. You have the DCMS [Department for Culture, Media & Sport] in the forefront of the cuts and Jeremy Hunt [Culture Secretary] volunteered a 50 percent cut to his own department. Then he insisted that the same cut should be passed on to the Arts Council. Then there's been the cut to the money it gives out—but the insistence was that the “frontline arts” organisations should only suffer a cut of 15 percent. They haven't got to the cuts that are going to affect them yet. Those are still to come next year.

ACE has used this situation as an opportunity to rethink all their funding. So the National Portfolio, as it's called, which is what the Regularly Funded Organisations are now in, is based on a rethinking of how to allocate the money.

If you look closely at the literature portfolio, some organisations have not only continued to get the same amount of money, but have got very substantial increases, and there are quite a number of new organisations that have got regular funding.

One of the reasons the cut to the PBS was so totally unexpected is that we were in no way on the “critical” list. We'd been supported for 58 years. We had funding two years ago to set up two new websites, which we delivered late in September 2010. We weren't expecting to be cut, because we are the only organisation that focuses on poetry readers. This seems to me to display a strange lack of interest in poetry audiences, because I think that's supposed to be the second goal of the Arts Council's new strategy.

Poetry on the page is not as “fashionable”. I know it sounds trite, but it's what I think. We have had some grants, but in terms of regular funding we've had nothing other than inflationary increases for 10 years. Real inflation runs ahead of official estimates, so we've steadily got poorer and poorer and taken on more and more.

Last year we were getting just under £120,000 a year, and organisations like Apples & Snakes [England's leading

performance poetry organization] were getting £400,000. I'm not comparing what we do, but I do think that there is some feeling that page poetry is a bit boring, and where it's all at is performance poetry and working with kids and that kind of thing. I love the stuff that Apples & Snakes do, but the important thing to remember is that most people still access poetry through books.

The PBS is focused on the new poetry. We've taken on in our mission to get to a much wider audience. That's the point in these websites. One is for membership with free student membership. Then there's our big bookshop site, and we also run an online reading group.

One of the few good things to emerge from this situation has been to discover the depth of support we have from poets themselves. It's something that really matters to them hugely, and they have supported us with awareness raising benefits. If you're a poet you want to be published. If you're a publisher you want to sell books, and if you're a reader you want to know what to read. Our reviews are done by very good, often well known, poets who choose a selection.

We also run the TS Eliot prize for best new collection. That was set up 18 years ago and prize money is donated by Valerie Eliot [TS Eliot's widow]. There is a shadowing scheme for schools, a writing competition run in conjunction with the main competition.

There's been a lot of talk of business backing and philanthropy, but I see nothing wrong with state funding of the arts. Some of the coverage has been, “Oh poetry shouldn't be funded anyway, because anybody can sit down and write a poem”, which I think is naïve. Why does it deserve any less funding than opera or theatre?

The amounts of money involved in cutting the arts is so tiny, it makes such a small contribution to cutting the total. And I think that in difficult times, people do turn to the arts, and they matter more and more. It's not the time when you should be economising on them.



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