



Highlands & Islands Audience Development CONFERENCE NOTES

BRYAN BEATTIE:

“AN UPDATE ON THE WORK OF THE CULTURAL COMMISSION”

**AUDIENCE DEVELOPMENT CONFERENCE
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“We should make the development of our creative drive the next major enterprise for our society. Arts for all can be a reality, a democratic right and an achievement of the 21st century”

What a fantastic ambition, what a great statement. Our First Minister promised it 18 months ago.

That statement is the cornerstone of the Executive's thinking on cultural policy. For all the hype and misinformation in the media, for all the cynical talk round the cultural water-cooler – at the end of the day we should, I believe, have hope if that statement is our country's vision, its clear aspiration.

However, there is clear - and usually deep – water between aspiration and delivery, but the latter can't happen without the former. And the First Minister made it clear in that same speech that he expects us – the cultural sector – to put the practical flesh on the bones of policy – to make it real, and he initiated the Cultural Commission as the conduit through which we can make it happen

We don't have equity of opportunity in Scotland to participate in, or witness, cultural activity. We should have. “Arts for all can be a reality, a democratic right”. How?

The starting premise is each person in this country should have rights of access to cultural activity, regardless of age, geography, or ability.

Again the First Minister invited us – the cultural sector – to define what these rights might be and how they might be implemented in a meaningful, and fair way.

The Executive's intention is clear – it is to raise the level of opportunity, not to standardise an experience or homogenise artforms. It is to create a fairer, more equitable society – a society that acknowledges and embraces cultural activity as an integral and integrated part of how it operates.

These are maybe not poetic ways of expressing an ambition to see more people enjoy themselves through dance, learn through drama, express themselves through writing, or emote through music – but let's not confuse the genuineness of motivation behind the government vocabulary. That

flowering of activity is what the Executive is aiming for – and it has given the Cultural Commission the remit to recommend how it happens.

The Commission's remit is extensive and genuinely challenging in the most euphemistic sense – it is looking across the arts, heritage, archives, libraries, screen and creative industries, and architecture.

It has been asked to acknowledge the diverse matrix of culture in Scotland – the voluntary, the commercial, the academic, and the public sector led – at local, regional, national and international levels.

It's been asked to consider many aspects of current provision, amongst them a re-definition of the notion of 'national', the role of emerging technologies, the built infrastructure and the need for a cultural think tank.

However, the two key specific elements of the remit are –

“to explore the notion of cultural rights for the Scottish citizen and those of its creative community and define how these might be translated into a scheme of entitlements” and

“to redefine the institutional infrastructure and governance of the Scottish cultural sector to enable it to deliver the entitlements that spring from rights”

So, shouldn't take too long then.

Where do arts providers – organisations, companies and local authorities – fit into the process?

Firstly you're being challenged to think of your organisations second and your audience or customers first. Which I'm sure is what all good audience development is about anyway. Actually it's an argument the role of audience development should come centre stage.

In the chain of events that leads from the punter-citizen finding out about an event to actually attending the hardest hurdle to cross is the first one – and that is, is the person inclined to look in the direction of arts activity in the first place? If they don't consider it an option, an acceptable part of their everyday life in the first place, then all the beautifully-contrived and executed marketing techniques count for nothing.

This is the lost 50% I spoke of earlier. Stuart then said ignore the 50%. That's a very practical short-term suggestion if you're a local promoter with limited resources. But it's the duty of government to try and address reducing that 50% figure.

That first leap – having the inclination – is a much broader societal, cultural (with a small c) issue. It's as much about changing attitudes through education, through family and peer-group learning, as it is about effective marketing solutions.

That's why the Executive and Commission's focus is on establishing clear cultural rights and entitlements - as a means of addressing these issues long-term.

So, in this respect, where does the audience development remit begin and end? Perhaps in a much broader advocacy and illustrative role than at present, perhaps with greater emphasis on the participative project than the poster? Perhaps with a focus shifting onto the non-attender rather than the attender? You tell me.

One thing is clear, it's an issue that pervades the whole organisation, from the programmer to the front-of-house to the bar staff, to marketing. It's an ethos – it's a focus – it's not a discreet responsibility of one person or part of the organisation.

The principle of rights and entitlements is one that has been determined by the Executive. The hard part is turning it into something that helps us achieve what we want to. And that's up to all of us to make a reality.

Last year the Saltire Society invited Wolfgang Scheider of Hildesheim University to Edinburgh. He described how the German political institutions at constitutional, legislative and administrative levels were defining responsibilities for cultural and educational provision, but the vital *quid pro quo* was the commitment to work together with cultural organisations to work together to make the government's desire for access meaningful. In all these regards Scotland's Cultural Commission, far from being some eccentric aberration as depicted by some of our parochial broadsheets, is in the mainstream of the European debate.

Wolfgang's contribution reminded us that you can have all the rights, entitlements and policies you want, but they don't mean anything if artists and arts organisations are not involved in the process – not just of delivering but in deciding what is delivered and how.

Scheider elaborated the German situation where national government takes broad brush policy statements of intent, regional government develop these into more specific instruments of policy, and locally these are turned into solutions that can be implemented in a way that is appropriate for the area and community.

That, for me, summarises very well how the Scottish equivalent of rights and entitlements was initially envisaged and intended. I'll give a brief illustration using one of the recent Commission discussions.

The Executive would introduce some broad rights as a national aspiration – let's say “Each citizen should have the right to fulfil their creative potential”.

This would then be translated by the arts sector, libraries sector and so on at national level into guidelines of good practice – standards, let's say, “Every child should have the chance to see live performance once a year”.

The implementation of this at local level would then be for arts organisations and local authorities and other providers to make real and would, by necessity, forge stronger partnerships between them. Perhaps through the creation of a Cultural Pledge here in Highland, or Backpack, as they have in Norway and east Ayrshire – literally a menu of practical, locally-oriented commitments – or entitlements.

I'm aware that taking such a brief illustration can raise as many questions as it might try to answer – and there is still time to shape the Commission's thinking on this – saying ‘look, that won't work, this is the way to do it’, and shaping these rights, standards and entitlements into something useful and valid.

Remember the two primary purposes are to increase the opportunities for people to get involved, and to make the provision of activity more equitable. That has got to create opportunities for your organisations, companies and authorities.

You want more bums on seats, the Executive wants more bums on seats. You want more folk attending workshops and classes – so does the Executive. We are singing from the same hymn sheet – so hopefully we might get a bit of divine intervention.

What stage is the Commission at? It's entering its last few months. It needs to deliver its final report to Ministers on 31st May. They'll consider it, and its implications, and decide how to proceed. About the only sure thing is that it won't happen as quickly as we like. But in the arts sector we're nothing if not patient.

Change does happen. When I moved to the Highlands in 1988 there were no local authority arts personnel. There was one professional arts company based here. There were no arts centres or galleries in Lochmaddy, Tobermory, Bunhoga, Portree, and An Lanntair was two years old. There were only two fèisean. There was no HI Arts. Ho highland Festival or HebCelt. One record label.

No Gaelic Broadcasting agency. Malky MacLean had only been invented a year previously. There were few promoters and certainly no PAN. The idea of Eden Court receiving an £18m building development would have been unbelievable and the notion of the First Minister declaring there would be a national year to celebrate Highland culture let alone the incredible public sector funding released to do so would have been the stuff of wild fantasy.

Like many people in this room I've lived through all of that and for me the pace of change has seemed glacial compared with the urgency I have felt to encourage that change. And we're not nearly there yet. And yes, the cultural ecosystem in the highlands is still extremely delicate. But substantial change can, does and has taken place.

Has that change developed a new audience in the Highlands? I think it has, very successfully – to a certain extent. To be honest I think it has primed an audience for development. It has raised the profile and esteem of the arts so that they are now more likely to be an option people will consider.

What's my point? There's two – one is that genuine, rooted audience development takes time. Things will not change overnight after the Cultural Commission. But they will change, I believe in a substantive way, and that we, Scotland, the highlands will reap the benefit of that.

And the second is that it can't be done alone. Government can't do it unless they're doing it with the sector, the sector can't do it without some support from the government. It's a partnership that neither usually felt comfortable with – it's a marriage that needs to be worked at. And one of the partners has begun to whisper sweet nothings...

I want to finish as I started, with the same quote, as I think it's useful to keep reminding ourselves of what the big picture is, what we're all working towards,

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