The courage of funders: risk and innovation in the age of artistic excellence

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Good evening. Thank you so much for coming and thank you to the RSA for hosting this event. This evening, I want to share with you my emerging thoughts on the arts and where I think we are going in the next three, five, ten years.

My starting point tonight is a belief that if we get it right we can enter a new era in which artistic excellence, risk and innovation are at the heart of what we do in the arts in England. This will be linked to a new sense of ambition as to how we engage audiences and deepen their understanding and ability to respond to the work produced.

But at the same time I also believe that achieving this change will require **courage** – from the Arts Council, from those artists and arts organisations we fund and from those who fund us.

The Arts Council must make difficult, contested decisions, and stick with the decisions it makes – really supporting risk and innovation.

Those funded must develop a new honesty and frankness about what they do - some may find this uncomfortable.

And **government** must hold its nerve and continue to invest even in the most straitened of financial climates.

All of us must start from the recognition that what we are doing is at the service of something worth fighting for - the arts themselves, and for audiences for whom the arts can give pleasure, succour, challenge and insight, and a way to live their lives.

Tennessee Williams never got round to writing a play about someone working in the arts in Liverpool, Manchester, Leeds, or Middlesbrough or Birmingham. But if he had, one of his characters could have said: [I won't risk a deep south accent] 'I have always relied on the courage of funders'. Because artists depend on the courage, authenticity and integrity of funders: Local Government, RDAs, private individuals and the Arts Council. They rely on them to take a risk, support a hunch or help them follow through a brilliant idea. In turn, their audiences depend on artists to challenge, surprise, enrage or delight.

Central to my argument tonight is that the **Arts Council**, as a major funder of the arts in this country, needs to get beyond a series of false dichotomies – between excellence and engagement, between centralism and regional distinctiveness, between local and global, in a way that it has not managed to do in the past. It needs to say firmly that we reject the notion of there being a contradiction between these points. It needs to create the conditions for great art, to fund arts that are the best they can be and that are really world class, enjoyed by the many.

To begin to illustrate how hard is the task ahead for us, let's consider briefly what was happening at the turn of the year.

A historian may indeed look back on that period and note that the Arts Council did indeed display 'the courage of funders'. We did so in a way that provoked considerable criticism. We thought we were taking decisions that supported excellence and increased the reach of the arts in this country. We were criticised for the way we did it. As Jenny McIntosh set out in her report, and as I acknowledged in my response, we did so in a way that didn't bring others along with us in the overall approach of our thinking. We made some initial proposals that we changed for sound reasons.

We learned lessons from what we did, as I set out in July in my response to the McIntosh report, and have moved on. The lessons go beyond process and have at their heart how we go about things and what lies behind what we do.

At the same time as we were being criticised, the McMaster report, *Supporting Excellence in the Arts: From Measurement to Judgement* was published. When it was published, it was contrasted to the Arts Council's funding decisions. And yet, if we take McMaster seriously (as I believe we should), the Arts Council and other funders in the arts will need to continue to make difficult, controversial and contested decisions.

I am a recipient of someone - I've no idea who - taking a risk. Someone decided in 1970s Stockton-on-tees to set up an arts centre in a building owned by the YMCA. Someone decided that Stockton had enough people who knew or cared to support an arts centre and what it did. A management consultant might have said that it was a risk too far, small town, no other arts provision, small audience – but brave people ignored that kind of advice and as a result I had the chance as a child to see Shared Experience, Hull Truck and others at the Dovecot Arts Centre. So long before I thought about what I would do when I grew up, I intuited that some risks are worth taking.

And I'm glad also that, 30 years on, some far-sighted people took a risk on Middlesbrough Institute of Modern Art. When I went there to observe an Arts Council meeting before I became Chief Executive – 12 months ago in fact – a local newspaper reporter asked me if such a place was too good for Middlesbrough. This attitude that good enough will do is the death of everything that's good about the arts. The arts are about striving for the unreachable.

That, I suggest, requires courage and insight from those charged with funding them. The safe and sound is really quite unsound as far as the arts are concerned.

But in order to do this we, as funders, have got to be clear sighted as our to mission. In the Arts Council we need to get over the historically unresolved tension that is in our DNA.

The first chairman of the Arts Council was John Maynard Keynes. It would make him smile to see how as an economist he has become so wildly fashionable again. As well as his economic theory and his suggestions for how we behave in recessions (which I will come back to) we should also look to the other side of his work and life – the belief that the arts are so core to the life of a nation that they have to be first class. His interest was to stimulate the high arts to offer an alternative to American popular culture. 'Death to Hollywood' he declared in a radio talk at the time.

The Arts Council was formed from the wartime organisation CEMA (Committee for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts). The man who helped shape the policy of that organisation, Dr Thomas Jones, believed that what we'd now call audience engagement held an equal or greater importance to artistic excellence.

So you can see in the Arts Council, at its inception, tensions between supporting the best – the Keynes approach - and encouraging greater engagement with the arts - the Jones approach - both set out the Royal Charter. You also see a tension between a centralised approach controlled from London and a regionalised one. Keynes was clear that London would control everything.

The Arts Council has waxed and waned throughout its 62-year history. It emphasised excellence at the beginning, becoming more populist and concerning

itself with spreading itself at other times. It became overtly centralised and abolished regions in the fifties. It explicitly empowered the regions in the eighties. It became a single organisation in recent years, although one in which - in the words of Jenny McIntosh - appeared to be pursuing ten different processes in its recent investment strategy.

Over the next three years and beyond, I want Arts Council England to strip away unnecessary varnish, and to rediscover the true vision of the Royal Charter. It will be a body that gives courage, confidence and opportunity to artists and their audiences.

It will be a body that is unapologetic about the need to help create world-class art, and then give it the widest audience.

It will do so with a clear national vision and ambition delivered with proper regional distinctiveness, imbued with the creative diversity and cultural curiosity that reflects who we are as a nation.

We should say loud and clear that there are no contradictions in our DNA. It's a proposition that is false. Great Art for Everyone, as our recently published Plan sets out, is what we are about, and we're proud of it. The two elements of our DNA come together every time an audience encounters art. That experience of the significant moment, when it works, is what it's all about.

Sir Brian's report on excellence is vital. It puts the word 'excellence' firmly on the table. It says that more people should be able to benefit from the experience of excellent art, and we should be doing more to deepen the quality of the experience of the arts for more people, with the art itself better reflecting the diversity of the country we are. It has a view of excellence – that which transforms the individual

who experiences it and gives them a new understanding – that many have argued about, and it gives us something real to debate. It explicitly urges the Arts Council to introduce (or rather to re-introduce) peer review and self assessment as being at the heart of how it judges and makes decisions on the bodies it funds.

The report can't be reduced to gant charts and nor should it. It's about a change in attitude. We want to take what's in the report and go beyond it, to use it not so much as a recipe book to follow in a passive way, but more a springboard to quite fundamental action.

What I take from the report is clear: that all of us involved in the arts will need courage, boldness and ambition.

To do that we'll need knowledge, not just within the Arts Council: we'll need the help of practitioners and indeed of audiences. And we will need to be clear that, as funders, we support artistic risk and will stick with artists as they take those risks. It's a kind of new deal: we'll back you to take the arts to new places, but we want to see you do it. We'll not run away from backing you but you've got to mean it too.

Today the Arts Council is launching its consultation on **self-assessment and peer review.** We're proposing a range of approaches, including ongoing artistic assessment, sectoral reviews, and one-off appraisals of individual organisations.

I want our consultation document to stimulate debate and discussion about how, together, we establish a community of constructive criticism among the arts, that recognises where things don't work, that exposes lack of authenticity and ambition, that encourages the striving for what the arts can uniquely do. How organisations ensure the voices of other practitioners, and indeed audiences, are

heard in their own self-assessments. And how, as a funder, the Arts Council makes sure that artistic judgement is at the heart of its decision-making.

We need a new economy of criticism and debate that characterises strong creative organisations: a debate that is between creative organisations and generated by those organisations themselves. And we must have the courage: we as funders, you as artists, to say when something isn't working, to say when something has had its time. Local Government is included in this consultation, because it is no good if the Arts Council moves from Gradgrind to Mr Chips if Local Government is asking for something completely different. We're keen to hear your views by 23 January, so please do go to our website, download our consultation document, and let us know what you think.

I want the arts to be where they should be: at the heart of what civil society is, as something that matters on politicians' agendas so that they give us the best chance to succeed they can. And the Arts Council – with its core mission of great art for everyone – should be the resourceful, dynamic, innovative and authoritative organisation that leads debate and action in this area.

It should be the champion of artists – established and emerging – who say that the extraordinary is possible, and the ambition of talent is unlimited.

It should champion audiences, who deserve the best and deserve not to be patronised by making assumptions about low ambitions for themselves. I repeat: 'great art for everyone' – no-one excluded from opportunity. An explicit limit of good enough is not good enough.

The arts are about extending what's possible into the impossible, the known into the unknown. Before I sound like Donald Rumsfeld, the point I'm making is that the

arts never stand still, and don't respect boundaries. We need to encourage, allow, help realise ambition, and give audiences the means to be able to benefit from it. If we take the Arts Council Plan, *Great art for everyone*, and realise it, what will things be like in ten years time for the arts?

I want the arts in England to be doing things that are the most exciting and excellent in the world. I want excellence to be made and seen and experienced all over the country – why couldn't a new Robert LePage or Pina Bausch be established in a facility in a region of this country? How do we know they are not there already and what are we doing to support it? How will we enable talented directors and choreographers achieve something on a world scale? How will we build on audiences' curiosity about the visual arts and improve provision throughout the country, building on the *Turning Point* report? Why shouldn't talent be out wherever it is? What does the Arts Council have to do to make that happen?

I want ambition to thrive, for us to be the people who help broker the extraordinary. Because we must make sure that we are never complacent. That we are not the ones saying British theatre or British dance is the best in world and just sitting back and continuing in that happy assumption. We need to compare the work of British artists internationally, and see what might be possible in an international context. We are working towards a new understanding of joint effort with the British Council – seeing if we can do more together. We should fund work rooted in its community and reaching out to the world. See the connection between local and global and make the most of it.

And what it must do is to reflect the diversity of the culture of Britain today. One of the most important - but sadly less commented on - insights in the McMaster report was that diversity is absolutely central to any notion of artistic and cultural

excellence and so must be central to organisations which aspire to excellence. I agree. Culture reflects our identity and reflects who we are.

If you look at the import/ export nature of cultural expression in the UK, you can chart the kind of cultural syncretism that has produced great art through the ages. From the Arab, Jewish and Hebrew poets of Al Andalus to the work of Akram Khan, great art where it emerges in societies takes many diverse influences, and does so with an openness and a confidence that knows no national boundaries. We need to make sure this vibrant diversity continues to flourish, so that we can continue to encounter British music from Vaughan Williams and John Foulds to Nitin Sawhney. Or indeed the music and choreography of the Hofesh Shechter company, pictured here, who we fund and we will nurture from our south east office for the world, and whose work really does make us question what it is to be human beings in the world we live in.

In speaking to those who work in the Arts Council, I've discovered an organisation hungry for that kind of ambition. I've found dedicated, talented people, many practising artists, who have a great deal of knowledge and passion for what they do.

I've found an organisation at a recognisable stage of development – a great deal of work has been done on structure, and more will be needed. But what is more important at this stage is getting the culture right throughout the organisation. It's a similar thing that some of you may recognise from our big National Lottery capital projects: you do a great job getting the thing done and open, and then you need to concentrate on something much harder to define, and harder to grip – the way in which we work, moving from the culture of transaction to the culture of possibility. There's a management blah book that calls it moving 'from good to great'. But one thing I don't want us to do is to hide behind management blah – I want us to

develop a clear language that describes what we ourselves are about and what we bring.

Clearly we'll be looking at how we work.

First, we are looking at how we find 15% savings from our administration. We'll do so and we'll plough what we save into the arts. It's already in our budgets and so we have to do it. It won't be tinkering - it will be transformational. We'll have a stronger national narrative with more effective connection between this and how we work in the regions, with less duplication and fewer possibilities for confusion and inconsistency - between our national office and the regions, and between the regions themselves. This will be a body with a new culture throughout and with an organisation that matches that culture. I'm proud that the organisation itself grasps the need for change and is working to realise it in the best way.

A good example of the Arts Council working in the right way is how we have developed the Creative Partnerships programme.

Creative Partnerships was an audacious idea, which has become a phenomenal success. We nurtured a new programme that, years later, is a highly successful beacon of creativity across the school curriculum, placing artists and other creative practitioners in over 2000 schools across England. This nurturing of a project through its growing pains to confident adulthood is the right thing to do. I'm announcing today that the Arts Council has established a new company, **Creativity, Culture and Education** (CCE) to take over responsibility for our Creative Partnerships programme from next April 2009. It will also deliver the ten *Find Your Talent* pilots on behalf of the Arts Council.

This new organisation will become our largest funded organisation. That our largest funded organisation is dedicated to working with children and young people and making sure that they can benefit from engagement with culture and creativity is a signal of our commitment in this area.

It will be based in Newcastle – a practical demonstration of something else central to our thinking: that national leadership does not have to be based in London, that a truly national organisation can be led from a region. This is something we have also shown in our own operation, by moving a number of national functions of the Arts Council to Manchester.

We will be looking at how we spread the work that we fund throughout the country – through touring and by other means – and getting that right, but also in the context of the opportunities of digital technology. This is both in terms of creative opportunities – new forms of art – but also in using digital technology better to connect with the work produced by those organisations we fund, connecting the individual to a collective experience.

We want to work with the BBC and other public service broadcasters better to realise the public value of the content we are funding through our regularly funded organisations.

It's not for the Arts Council to prescribe how public service content is funded. But pragmatically both we and the public service broadcasters need to work better together in the future. I want us to build the notion of a public service economy where broadcasters bring their expertise as an investment and we bring the insight and practice of artists and arts organisations. A new, more cooperative approach is needed; one that is based on a common sense of the public value we can create for audiences.

For us this is about improving the reach of the arts, and helping the organisations we fund to work with the BBC, Channel 4 and others to deepen the audience's experience and understanding. It should be about working with the BBC as a major cultural sponsor, whether it be of music, new writing or technical skills. Keynes saw the connection between the mission of the Arts Council and the then mission of the BBC. We need to rediscover that connection with them and other public service broadcasters.

And we need to unthink the way we think about our portfolio of regularly funded organisations. I want us to look at loosening the uniform three-year cycle, and examine instead a range of funding possibilities, with some bodies on longer term arrangements than now, and some on more flexible, shorter term arrangements. I've mentioned peer review and self assessment – that's important – but there are a whole set of aspects to the relationship I want to be revisited and revitalised, from the funding agreements to the whole tone of the relationship. We are not a regulator, we are not a parent. We're there to enable things to happen.

As a first step, over the next few weeks and months we will complete discussions with all our regularly funded organisations about their funding agreements for 2009/10 and 2010/11. We've developed a new approach to our funding agreements for these two years – an approach characterised by adult-to-adult relationships where we trust organisations to take responsibility for the work they will produce with our regular funding, but where at the same time we want organisations to engage with us on how their work contributes to great art for everyone.

Details about our new style funding agreements will be available on our website next week.

We'll need to seize the opportunities offered by the Olympics. They offer a period of insight into and aspiration for the best side of human endeavour, the honing of skills and expression, often in a beautiful way, of the best human beings can aspire to. It's what we are after in the arts. We can show the nation and the world that this is what the arts are about, and while I'm not sure we can get £9m per world class artist on the basis of the price of a gold medal, perhaps we can get more of an ambitious public discourse on the arts and what they are about, and what talent, ambition and artistic expression means.

And we'll produce art. It won't be produced because it is Olympic – it will produced because it has authenticity and integrity and it is good and worth doing in itself. Some of it may probe and question the Olympic ideal in interesting ways that may not be comfortable - it's what artists do. We intend to invest at least £10.5m in a series of commissions in each region and an international festival in the capital in Olympic year itself. We have put £5m to the Legacy Trust. Grants for the arts will fund projects up and down the country. That makes us a major partner.

But one thing: we are already, in the arts, through National Lottery diversion, contributing enough to the cost of the games. Not a penny more can we give. To do so would damage our chances of producing a Cultural Olympiad with artistic integrity. In fact, we could do with more to realise fully what the possibilities for the arts are, and to capitalise on some of the great things that happened at the launch weekend. But we have what we have.

The Culture Secretary, Andy Burnham, has promised that we'll not be asked to contribute more – and I trust him on that. But I know how it works in Government, and the pressure that will be brought to bear. Secretary of State, you will have to show courage, leadership and principle, and fight for what we do in the arts.

Because in the times we are living in, the arts matter more than ever. There'll be pressure to cut but I'd argue now is the time to expand.

As I said earlier, Keynesian economics are back; the Keynesian means of funding the arts still lives. The mixed economy in which we live, with public and private funding and for many the box office, may be under pressure in the next months and even years. This is a time to be bold and not to retreat. We've got to keep public spending strong as a base to attract private funding, and as a base from which to put on compelling work that makes us understand what it is to be human in what may be difficult times.

We are looking at trends in the Arts Council and will need to be able to act to help organisations through troubles if they emerge. We'll need to maintain the confidence of audiences and of private sector funders. The way to do this is to be bold and ambitious, to surprise even more, and not retreat into the 'safe'. Not spread 'equal misery for all' when times are tough. We know from previous hard times that if standards of aspiration and ambition fall, audiences don't engage and organisations fall into a spiral of decline, it is then very expensive to escape. We will look to see how, within what we have, we can fund extra ambition.

My message to politicians is: keep up the spending on the arts, and do so with confidence and a purpose. Include us in any schemes to expand or bring forward public expenditure or to help those engaged in cultural enterprise. Be imaginative, engage with us. We are part of the fabric of civil society, and if you neglect us then you shortchange the citizens of the nation. Have courage, and trust us. Apply your enthusiasm for Keynes in its fullest sense, and understand why he and others who have been involved in reconstructing societies in times of hardship have seen the importance of the arts.

I just want to dwell on this for a moment. Spending on the arts, or on culture more widely, is a risky business, and government ministries – whoever the political freeholders are – don't like uncertainty, and don't like a loss of control (the Treasury more than most). But the DCMS system – of a large number of arms-length bodies who are trusted to get on with the job, and deliver a creative, mixed economy solution which is the very antithesis of a command and control machine – is the future. There's something here that really works. We should all have the courage to be bold and to celebrate what should be the biggest small department in Whitehall.

So, here's the summary. I've been talking tonight about the Arts Council, but I need to be clear: I'm doing so because we serve artists, and allow them to make great work, and we serve audiences, we enable them to experience great art, to engage with it, for excellence and engagement to come together in an incredible significant moment. *Great art for everyone* - its all about artists and audiences, not about us.

We need to back innovation, risk and excellence and to mean it when we say it. It's no good if we talk the language of risk and walk away the first time a risk doesn't come off or times get hard. And the arts themselves must mean it too. That's the deal.

For the Arts Council, it isn't about us being popular. God forbid. In fact, I will have failed if in three years' time, the Arts Council is seen as simply venerable. As Jenny said in her report: 'the Arts Council probably cannot avoid being the arts sector's Aunt Sally – that has been part of its destiny for 60 years'. She goes on to say we need the Arts Council to thrive, not survive.

Whether you agree with everything we do or not, I want the Arts Council to be respected, and I'll accept grudgingly respected. I want us to be argued over in a good way.

Real art enrages and challenges us more often that it soothes. So world-class Arts Council should be in the same position, but should do so from a position of a centred inner confidence, and a firmness that a limit of 'good enough' is not enough.

Keynes' words about the new Arts Council offering courage, confidence and opportunity to artists and audiences still ring true. As we enter troubled times, this is true now more than ever.

As JFK said of Robert Frost:
'…because he knew the midnight as well as the high noon, because he understood the ordeal as well as the triumph of the human spirit, he gave his age strength with which to overcome despair.'

That describes the role of the arts in the times we are in.

Our mission as an Arts Council is 'Great art for everyone'.

The banner under which all of us engaged in the arts should move forward together should be **TAKE COURAGE.**

Thank you.