



Paying for a freer culture

Tim Mak

The burgeoning Sun News Network stirred controversy this summer when anchor Krista Erickson savagely criticized Canadian interpretive dancer Margie Gillis on the issue of arts funding. During a prolonged and contentious debate, the two went head to head on the merits of public arts funding. In particular, Erickson questioned Gillis on why her foundation had received \$1.2 million from the government over 13 years.

The segment led to an outcry from viewers outraged at the tone Erickson took with Gillis, although many undoubtedly also shared Gillis' support for arts funding. The Canadian Broadcast Standards Council received so many complaints that it asked the public to stop sending messages because of how overwhelmed they were by the response (Canadian Broadcast Standards Council , 2011).

Public funding of the arts seems quite popular, at least judging from the reaction of viewers angry about the

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television segment. Even so, the issue of taxpayer-funded arts grants is a topic that deserves examination, especially in this time of economic uncertainty and distress.

Government funding for the arts has come under renewed scrutiny in the wake of a global economic downturn. With politicians at all levels seeking to trim their budgets—anywhere, even by small amounts—playwrights, dancers, poets, and all other types of artists are seeing their grants reevaluated.

In the United States, where the recession is hitting particularly hard, 31 states cut their arts budgets for the 2012 fiscal year, part of a trend that has seen arts funding drop 42% over the last decade (Pogrebin, 2011). In Britain, the publicly-funded Arts Council of England announced earlier this year that it would be cutting off grants worth £19.1 million (around CA\$30 million) to 206 organizations (Arts Council, 2011).

In contrast, Canada's federal Conservative government has been less willing to take on



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the issue of arts funding. The Canada Council for the Arts, a publicly-funded agency, had total expenditures of nearly \$200 million in their 2009/2010 cycle, with the vast majority of money going to grants, awards, and prizes (Canada Council, 2011). "Canada is the only country in the G8 that made a decision—not to cut, not to maintain—but to increase funding for culture during the recession," noted

Heritage Minister James Moore in an interview with CBC radio (Q Blog, 2011).

But why should the government reduce funding to arts and culture? For starters, many of the projects currently funded by the government could be done privately, meaning less cost to taxpayers—many of whom will not be able to take advantage of the grants.



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For example, take a look at the controversy stirred up recently by the government's decision not to award a \$45,000 grant to the SummerWorks theatre festival in Toronto this year. In 2010, the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) expressed its disappointment that the festival had chosen to present a controversial play about a Canadian terrorist. This year, the government announced that the five-year relationship that they had maintained with the festival would not be continuing.

Threatened by the loss of the grant, which represented about 22% of its operating budget, SummerWorks made an effort to bridge the gap through fundraising. By appealing for help, the festival managed to raise \$34,000 in just two weeks (Salerno, 2011). The fundraising drive, along with a \$5 surcharge on tickets, put the festival on solid financial footing (Salerno, 2011). This shows us two things: that publicly funded projects can often be funded privately, and that people are willing to pay for culture.

Since this is the case, why should a taxpayer in Kamloops, British Columbia, be responsible for the burden of paying for a theatre festival in Toronto? Or vice-versa? The costs of public funding

weigh even heavier still when one considers that Canadian debt is projected to exceed \$600 billion by the 2012/2013 fiscal year (Government of Canada, 2011).

In addition, some have suggested that the Prime Minister's Office influenced the Heritage Ministry's decision not to award the grant, citing the PMO's objections to the controversial play that it had held last year. This has not been conclusively determined, but whether or not this is the case, the possibility alone suggests that public arts projects are more easily censored.

A more clear-cut case of public arts funding leading to censorship is one involving the National Portrait Gallery in the United States. When the gallery, administered by the Smithsonian Institution (which receives federal funding), sought to present an exhibit with a video of ants crawling over a crucifix, a public outcry ensued. Amid criticism from House Speaker John Boehner, the gallery pulled the item from the exhibition (Starr, 2011).

This illustrates how public arts projects are more easily censored than privately funded ones. When everyone—every taxpayer—is responsible for funding an art project, everyone is a stakeholder, which means that anyone could have a legitimate grievance about how their money is being used inappropriately.

Indeed, government funding has a chilling effect on the recipients of grants—in hopes of avoiding widespread outcry and the loss of funds, recipients may feel pressured to produce less controversial work. Of course, this is bad for the arts—plays, paintings, and pictures should be able to offend, and even inspire undesirable reflection on the part of the audience.

A common criticism to this point is the government should simply ignore public objections to controversial, publicly-funded art, that putting constraints on the nature of public art projects is tantamount to challenging the freedom of speech. Nothing could be further from the truth. One may have the right to put on whatever play they choose, but one does not have the right to use other people's money to do it. If an artist wants to engage in controversial social commentary, he or she can do so with funding from those who actually support the cause—and without dragging everyone else along for the ride.

To be sure, private funding for the arts sidesteps this problem. If you find something deserving of attention, then you can purchase

Controversial art can be vulnerable to censorship through government funding cuts



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that book, or pay a visit to that museum, or pick up tickets to that play. If you find images of ants crawling all over a crucifix objectionable, then you can skip that exhibit entirely.

In addition, one final point: why should the government—or publicly funded bodies, in any case—choose what art projects should be elevated, and which should be rejected? There is no evidence that federal bureaucrats are better able than proprietors of the arts to determine what makes for “good” art, especially since cultural tastes vary by individual and region. Canadian culture and the arts would be

better served by letting those who enjoy the arts and are willing to pay for those enjoyments choose the projects that are worthy.

Private funding for the arts encourages those who enjoy the arts to pay their full and fair share, while freeing taxpayers from the burden of supporting projects that they neither need nor can enjoy. Further, shifting the responsibility for funding culture from the public sector to the private sector removes the chilling effect that government grants can have on creativity. Finally, proprietors of the arts know better than the federal government what constitutes good art and should be allowed to decide which projects are supported. In a time of economic uncertainty and a rising debt, Canada needs to seriously rethink the amount of public funds that are going to support art projects.

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