

Winter 2015, Volume 3

SPECIAL ISSUE: *Mapping an Altered Landscape: Cultural Policy and Management in Ireland*

Postscript: Reflections on the Cultural Policy Conference, Belfield, UCD, June 2014

RUARÍ QUINN

Where do we begin, in the second decade of this century? Do we start to look for renewed directions for an Irish cultural policy that fits the contours of Ireland today? The answer must be yes.

It is clear that the State is the main – but not the only – patron of culture and the arts in Ireland today. This we easily take for granted in our modern state, but it wasn't always so, and perhaps we should reflect on that.

In 1897 the Parliament of the Grand Duchy of Finland (then within the Russian Empire) voted Jean Sibelius, the father of Finnish classical music and an icon of Finnish national identity, a life pension at the age of thirty so that he could devote himself to composition and performance. The Free State government also decided to use public money to make a significant cultural statement about Irish national identity when it granted the Abbey Theatre an annual grant in 1925 – making it the first theatre in the world to receive financial support from the state.

Since the foundation of the Irish State, culture and the arts have received both attention and support from the government. From the establishment of the Arts Council by the first inter-party coalition government in 1951 to the recent Arts in Education Charter launched in 2013 by Minister Jimmy Deenihan and myself, successive governments have continued to take an interest in culture as an integral component of our identity and self-expression as a people.

When I was elected to Dublin City Council in June 1974, I was not aware that the Corporation, as it was then known, had a cultural committee, answerable to the monthly city council meetings and responsible for the administration of the public libraries, the Hugh Lane Modern Art Gallery and other related matters as well.

Since his election as President of the Republic in autumn 2011, Michael D. Higgins could be seen as the very embodiment of culture in Ireland. This is similar in a way to the role played by Vaclav Havel as the democratically elected President of the Czech Republic, following the collapse of Soviet communism in Europe.

The 1994 Labour/Fianna Fáil government established the first full cabinet government department with Michael D. as Ireland's first Minister for the Arts, Culture & the Gaeltacht. His legacy and that government's achievements, continued by the Rainbow government up to 1997, saw a dramatic transformation and improvement in the provision for the Arts in all their manifestations.

The economic collapse of the country, which started in 2008/9 and led to the loss of our economic sovereignty with the arrival of the Troika in 2010, has understandably obscured many people's memory of what had been put in place before the crisis, going back to Michael D. and his unique vision, enthusiastically supported by myself and other cabinet colleagues.

Postscript: Reflections
on the Cultural Policy
Conference, Belfield, UCD,
June 2014

Ruairí Quinn

We saw the roll-out of a new cultural infrastructure within which the Arts could flourish. The combination of newly built public libraries and arts centres in our growing urban areas is one example. The Museum of Country Life outside Castlebar became the long sought-for home of much of the work of the Folklore Commission in the early decades after independence. The proposed sell-off of Collins Barracks was abandoned and is now a major addition to our national institutions. TG4 and the relaunch of the Irish Film industry through creative tax incentives brought innovation and considerable cultural activity which otherwise would simply not have happened.

There are many other examples to which I could refer. All of them have come from successive Irish governments, ably helped in most cases by supportive and enthusiastic public servants. These observations need to be restated now because the impact of the economic crisis upon cultural funding has been so severe and so recent that too many people are still suffering. It is therefore understandable that people are highly critical of things at present.

There is frustration among some, and anger from others who, while passionate about their role in cultural activity within the country, fail to see or recognise the financial transformation that the collapse and crisis has brought about. In that regard, Clare Duignan's insightful contribution to the conference deserves careful reading.

I share her view that the previous levels of public funding are most unlikely to return. Yet there remains a considerable amount of public funding for a wide variety of cultural resources: the arts, heritage, broadcasting etc. The recovering economy will see some increase in commercial advertising revenue. But the media world is also changing. Online communication and selective access to visual entertainment on other platforms than traditional television will reduce the volume of commercial advertising revenue.

Private philanthropy was identified as an alternative source of financial support for cultural activities. The US is often cited as an example that Ireland could follow, but this is far too naïve, if not highly simplistic. There is a long and extensive culture of philanthropy in the US but it is underpinned by an elaborately supportive taxation system for both individuals and business. The tax incentive donation schemes that I introduced as Minister for Finance (1996) have been severely squeezed and tightened to the point that most of their effectiveness has been blunted.

Any review of funding must include concern for the earnings of artists and performers. Traditionally this has been a poorly-paid sector where the high profile, well-paid performers are the exception. Here again, the role of the public broadcaster is the mainstay of so many of our artists and performers and that should never be ignored.

Interfering with levels of public funding is politically fraught and we have seen so many examples of that in recent times. Public awareness, amplified by the media and radio in particular, distorts perception and also the political room for discretion of any government. Let me give an example: the total cost of funding Special Needs Education in our schools system is the same as it costs to run the Garda Síochána, or is similar to the amount that the State contributes to fund third-level education in Ireland. The competition for public funds is intense, particularly at times of economic difficulty, from which we are slowly emerging at last. That competition is complicated by the compelling and emotional demands from some sectors.

Yet despite this pressing debate about cultural funding for the arts, which was heard clearly at the conference, a lot of money does go directly from Irish citizens into many well placed and well attended events across the country. The challenge facing us now is how we can develop that spending of money into a wider variety of events and type of artistic ideas. If smaller pub-

Postscript: Reflections
on the Cultural Policy
Conference, Belfield, UCD,
June 2014

Ruairí Quinn

lic grants could be distributed to different cultural activities, a wider and artistically curious and experienced public would be prepared to pay to participate.

Most people, in my experience, acquire an appetite for the arts either at home or in school. In many cases it is a combination of both. But the role of our schools, in developing and sustaining an interest in and involvement in the arts, is critical.

The curriculum of the primary school system is creative, interactive and open to exposure and immersion in arts and culture. Until I was Minister for Education and Skills, I did not realise just how creative and arts-rich our primary schools were, even though I have children and grandchildren throughout the system. This is not accidental. Our primary school teachers, who now take a four year degree in education before they are qualified to teach, are well educated specifically in the arts and aspects of culture. This is not the norm in many other European or OECD countries.

The State primary certificate examination was abolished in 1967. While our primary school pupils are frequently tested and continuously assessed by their teachers to measure learning, they no longer face, at twelve years of age, a formal State exam. At post primary level, the picture and the practice is different. The present junior cycle curriculum requires a young student to sit the State Junior Certificate Examination at the end of the year when typically the student would be fifteen years-old. For many schools and parents that low stakes exam is a rehearsal for the Leaving Certificate exam three years later. This is certainly a high stakes situation because the third-level college entry points are based upon the results obtained in the Leaving.

This education examination penetration right through from the Junior Certificate to the Leaving Certificate means that activities that are not measured and tested by the State Examinations are simply not counted as being equally important as the classroom-taught activities. For example, the school show or musical is ignored. Group work of any kind, such as Formula One modelling or competitive debating is excluded.¹ Major educational events such as the Texaco Art Competition or the Young Scientist Exhibition do not feature in the exams and so are left to the enthusiasm of students, teachers and parents. In addition, the whole world of sport is equally ignored.

The educational and cultural impact of this distortion stunts the potential growth and participation in culture and the arts in our post-primary schools. I am confident that the new Junior Cycle Student Awards which will replace the state Junior Certificate Examination will have a positive impact upon the cultural development of our young people. In addition, the proposed changes in the points system by the state examination commission for the Leaving Certificate will create a positive space for culture and the arts in our Post Primary Schools. The implementation of the charter will help to consolidate this development.

Education has the capacity to attract and sustain young people's interest in culture and the arts. This should lead to a lifelong participation as adults. Growing the strength and the depth of a young adult audience for culture and the arts of all kinds is a way of sustaining and increasing support, and thus viability for a wide variety of artistic activities. The reform of the Junior Cycle, recently negotiated by Minister Jan O'Sullivan, is therefore good news for culture and the arts in our post primary schools.

The other good news for cultural developments in our education system is the progress being made in the implementation of the Arts in Education Charter. Prior to its signing in 2013, there had been little or no structured cooperation between the day-to-day operation of the Department of Education and Skills (DES), including its 3200 primary schools and 730 post

Postscript: Reflections
on the Cultural Policy
Conference, Belfield, UCD,
June 2014

Ruairí Quinn

primary schools with their nearly 900,000 pupils and 100,000 teachers, and the national cultural institutions.

Of course there was, and still is, a lot of informal student activity led by enthusiastic school principals, teachers and parents. But all that has been given a real structural framework that will transform the relationship between education, culture and the arts. The November 2014 newsletter of the work of the Charter Implementation Group, chaired by Professor John Coolahan, outlines a wide and impressive array of activities. Their very existence demonstrated the widespread demand for, and active participation across, the country.

Finally, one good example of a philanthropic initiative which now has been embraced by the DES is Music Generation. Launched and funded in part by U2, it will be fully funded by the State by 2016. This is a county based programme and so far it has been rolled out progressively to eleven counties. It is intended to extend to the entire country when completed.

I believe that a culturally informed population, exposed to and participating in all kinds of artistic activity in the schools environment from an early age until they reach young adulthood, is the best foundation for a vibrant and well supported cultural sector in our country.

With more than a million of our people currently involved in full-time education, there exists a real opportunity to establish a cultural environment and potential adult audience that will sustain and develop our world of artistic creation, endeavour and participation. The brave and visionary decision of the State to invest in the Abbey Theatre, less than a hundred years ago, led inexorably to the development of Irish dramatic writing and ultimately towards such cinema classics as *The Field*.

The Ireland of that time was insular, impoverished, isolated and driven by a narrow nationalism. The Catholic Church controlled much of our education and set social and behaviour standards for nearly all our people.

We were not alone. Across Europe, many countries, both big and small, had similar structures, particularly if industry was weak, as in Ireland. Yet that same Ireland, for all of its inconsistencies and prohibitions, nurtured our cultural activities in such a way that we have emerged to the point we are at today. The same constraints were clearly not present when the Irish Republic became the first nation state in the world, to vote by Referendum for Marriage Equality.

Today a very different Ireland faces the future. Ten percent of our population are newcomers. Public Citizenship Welcoming Ceremonies introduced by former Minister for Justice Alan Shatter, are very moving events. Irish citizenship is formally granted to people from all over the world who have lived and worked in this country for many years. Our schools now are multinational communities where as many as thirty different languages are spoken at home by young people born in Ireland. Today just over twenty percent of people living in Ireland were not born on this island. This is a new and potentially rich resource, both economically and culturally.

Finally, the word culture has been central to this debate and even in this essay. For clarity and consistency, I am strongly of the view that we should have a 'Minister for Cultural Affairs', and a 'Department of Cultural Affairs', with no additional words or suggested responsibilities.

In many respects, Michael D. Higgins's five years as Minister for Arts, Culture and the Gaeltacht (1993-97) did something very similar. In this task he had the help of Colm O'Briain as his programme manager. O'Briain was one of the founders of the Project Arts Centre, before he became director of the Arts Council. The energy and creative dynamism of those five years were lost when Bertie Ahern became Taoiseach. The role of the Department seemed to drift,

Postscript: Reflections
on the Cultural Policy
Conference, Belfield, UCD,
June 2014

Ruairí Quinn

and it became, in my view, a second division player.

France was the first country in the world to have a Department for Cultural Affairs when President Charles de Gaulle appointed Andre Malraux, the internationally renowned French writer, as Minister for Culture in 1958. During Malraux's ten years in office he transformed and reinforced many aspects of the French cultural landscape.

The next government should, I think, reconfigure the existing Department. The Minister, whoever he or she is, should have the title 'Minister for Cultural Affairs'. The Department should be named simply, 'Cultural Affairs'. This wording would implicitly bring together all the existing activities of the existing Department.

I would also seek to have structural agreements with other Departments, such as Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation on the one hand and Agriculture, Food and the Marine on the other, to give just two examples.

The creative arts from an Irish perspective have the potential to be jobs rich and strongly rooted on this island. For example, the one area of industry in the United State of America that will never be relocated to Asia is Hollywood! In the United Kingdom, every major film/ TV production studio is booked up for the next five years. Belfast's Titanic Film/TV studio production facilities are another example we should follow. I hope that the Limerick announcement of a similar new use for the former Dell factory is successful.

The future of agribusiness in Ireland has profound cultural implications for the Irish landscape. Environmental planning expert, Conor Skehan, has suggested that the changes in the European Common Agricultural policy will transform the physical appearance of rural Ireland over time. Our farmers are not only food producers but they are also the nation's gardeners. According to Skehan, north of a line drawn approximately from Clare to Monaghan, modern commercial farming as we know it will disappear. Marginal land in particular, will revert to a more wild and uncultivated landscape.²

A 'Department of Cultural Affairs' in Ireland would have a central role to play across every government department if we want to develop and maintain a sustainable economy and a well-functioning society. This will require each department to engage with the DCA and establish areas of mutual concern and legitimate interest. For example, if the EU changes in agricultural policy have a major impact on the appearance of the Irish landscape, then some assessment of that impact must be shared by both departments. Conservation and preservation principles, which apply to some parts of urban Ireland should or may be applied to large sections of rural Ireland as a result if we want to maintain certain images of rural Ireland.

The other major cultural dynamic which confronts us is the changing nature and composition of the people now living in our State. The conscious migration of so many people from so many other countries into Ireland is a phenomenon that we have never had before. They are making very positive contributions to our society but we must be careful to observe the experiences of other Northern European countries. The previously tolerant cultures of the Netherlands and Denmark have been challenged with some very unpleasant outcomes.

Today, twenty-percent of our population is Irish born but to parents who were born elsewhere. Our schools, both primary and secondary are full of them. In some schools, as many as forty different languages are spoken in the homes of these young students. While this is a potential great economic resource for Ireland, it does pose a range of profound cultural challenges.

'When do the 'non-national' become more Irish than the Irish themselves?' That question alone demands the establishment of a Department of Cultural Affairs.

Postscript: Reflections
on the Cultural Policy
Conference, Belfield, UCD,
June 2014

Ruairí Quinn

Ruairí Quinn, T.D., was appointed Minister for Education and Skills in March 2011 and served until July 2014. He has been a public representative since 1974 and a T.D. representing the people of Dublin South-East since 1977. Ruairí Quinn has broad political experience, having served as a Minister in six different Departments, including as Minister for Finance from 1993-1997. He has also held several positions within the EU. His political memoir, Straight Left - A Journey in Politics, was published in 2005. Before entering public life, Ruairí Quinn was an architect and town planner.

NOTES

1. The F1 in Schools competition was founded fifteen years ago to promote interest in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) subjects, by encouraging students to use their knowledge to create 1/20th scale Formula One cars.

2. Skehan, Conor (2008, 1 July). *The Future of the Irish Landscape*. Presentation at the Sixth World Archaeological Congress, University College, Dublin (29th June- 4th July, 2008), Ireland.