

When Artists Carry the Torch

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IBEGAN THIS RESPONSE ON THE DAY (19 November 2008) we learned that the Conservatives never did intend to replace the arts funding programs they cut last summer. At that time, Canadian Heritage Minister Josée Verner had hinted that more “efficient” arts programs would be put in place to replace the cancelled \$45 million originally destined for traveling arts companies. Several months and an election later, the Conservative government finally made their decision clear. They let it be known that the money taken away from so-called inefficient programs would go to the promotion of sports, including the 2010 Vancouver Olympics, and specifically to the torch relay. Instead of a “handful of artists travelling around the world, this will have the eyes of over three billion people around the planet looking at Canada” (Chase).

The switch is a useful illustration of the Conservative approach to culture. The Olympic torch relay is to become a spectacular form of national theatre to be witnessed by billions across the planet. Why promote the travel of professional theatre companies abroad when you can have the whole world watching Canadians on their own national stage? Indeed, the logic of the transfer in funding is justified according to the Conservatives by the fact that money for arts programs has not been taken out of the

Heritage Ministry but recycled within it. It's all culture; what's the problem? And so Harper can play the populist card (badmouthing the "people, you know, at a rich gala all subsidized by taxpayers claiming their subsidies aren't high enough when they know those subsidies have actually gone up" [Benzie]) and still claim that he is supporting culture.

The funding cuts are old news now, especially after the pre-Christmas political crisis in Ottawa. But the issue was crucial in the elections, showing that "culture" is a blunt instrument that conservative politicians use for gain. Culture is invoked by conservatives (both in Canada and in U.S., for example, Sarah Palin and Joe Sixpack) to divide the country, to win populist favour, and to try to connect with "ordinary" people, even though in every other way they ignore the concerns of those same constituencies. That Harper should set himself up as a populist is ludicrous and hypocritical. (Speaking of galas, his wife chaired a National Arts Centre gala just last year.)

Still, Conservatives haven't given up entirely on the prestige of high culture. To prove that the new Heritage Minister James Moore is not an entirely uncultivated person, a *Globe and Mail* article had made a point of emphasizing his arts connections. These come in the form of the pieces of Baroque music that he includes among the thousands of songs on his iPod. "I can't sit down and read for more than half an hour unless I am listening to baroque music," says Moore when pressed for examples of what sorts of culture Canada's latest arts minister likes to consume. "Baroque's best for listening to when you study because it's layered music; it's intense; it's all about rhythms. You'll have a percussion section going and you'll have a string section ... and so what it does is it actually gets your brain going and thinking in ways that promote rhythm," he says. "When you have rhythm—that's what you're looking for when you're studying" (Chase). This is rather an unusual understanding of Baroque music, generally perceived by the general public as formulaic and stilted. What is Moore referring to? Monteverdi's *Orfeo*? Vivaldi's *Four Seasons*? Efficient background music. But what really gains Moore's favour is the recently released Canadian war film *Passchendaele*. "These are the kinds of things we ought to be doing and the kind of things we ought to support," he said of the ambitious production, which has received mixed reviews across North America (Chase).

The Conservatives thought political gain was to be had by making disparaging remarks about the arts and the (supposedly) privileged artist class. And so Harper pressed on the familiar and still operative divide between "us" and the fancy arts folk, in a manner which should be unacceptable for the leader of a national political party running for office. If

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he is allowed, and with the support of a mere one-third of the Canadian population, he will continue to make such attacks and destroy institutions like the CBC. (The CBC has already changed its operating definition of culture: consider the replacement of Eleanor Wachtel's "The Arts Tonight" with Jian Gomeshi's "Q"—a broad-ranging review of the arts replaced by a program almost exclusively devoted to pop culture and music.)

On the Quebec side, artists were quick to interpret the insult of the arts cuts as directed especially against Quebec. The connection was made almost immediately. I was present at the rally held in Montreal in early September, which demonstrated the extraordinary ability of the entire arts community to mobilize in a short time. Everyone was there, from publishers and singers to television actors and poets. The speech by theatre director Lorraine Pintal used terms that quickly became accepted as standard discourse throughout the campaign: to be against culture is to be against Quebec. If arts cuts in English Canada are an insult to artists, arts cuts in Quebec are an insult to the Quebec people. The cuts were interpreted as "Une attaque au coeur de notre identité." It is important to emphasize that the arts in Quebec today have very little to do with folklore or with attributes of national identity. The protestors are not folksingers but in many cases practitioners of the most avant-garde and technologically sophisticated arts.

Le Devoir has not let the issue go. On 18 November 2009, it published a poll revealing that the cuts had resulted in the cancellation of more than six hundred performances abroad and a loss of \$5 million. The Quebec liberals, understanding where their bread is buttered, tried to get mileage out of their opposition to the cuts, joining the Parti Quebecois in demanding that money for culture be controlled by the province. The issue is far from being forgotten. And during the leaders' debate for the Quebec provincial election, all the participants, including the right-wing Mario Dumont, fell over themselves proclaiming the importance of culture. Marois promised to replace Harper's lost millions if elected: culture is our identity; it is who we are ... etc., etc. This is another "lieu commun" or commonplace of Quebec politics. It conflates culture as identity with culture as artistic creation. Nevertheless, this particular confusion seems to serve the province well, and it had the particularly beneficial effect of setting Quebec against Harper and saving the country from a Harper majority government.

The paradox of Harper's attack on the arts is that it comes at a time when the arts are ever more present in everyday public life. Our cities rival one another as cultural capitals, with emphasis on the arts. Cultural

industries are increasingly important in a knowledge-based economy. Museums shape their exhibitions for a broad public and are rewarded with huge numbers of visitors, opera is coming to the movies, and tourism is increasingly focused on cultural activities. This doesn't mean that we are getting a watered-down version of culture; it means that there are ways in which art is increasing its audience. Public funding helps. Why did Harper think that this was the moment to turn against professional artists?

Works Cited

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