Chapter 1: The Conceptual ambivalence of art and culture

Governments have traditionally worked with a ‘limited palette’ when framing options or designing programs aimed at supporting arts and culture. Historically and internationally, four models of cultural policy have predominated irrespective of either the cast or predisposition of government. These are: the patron model; the architect model; the engineer model; and the facilitator model (see Appendix C).  

States can act as patron, offering direct support to artistic and cultural forms favoured by the regime and tastemakers. This has the effect of nurturing and endorsing forms of art and culture deemed to epitomise cultural excellence. A variant of the patron model involves distributing funds indirectly, largely through ‘arm’s length’ mechanisms such as through a niche, or specialist, arts council that relies on peer evaluations of cultural practitioners’ excellence or worthiness. The UK, Canada, Australia and New Zealand as well as the Nordic countries have favoured this model for their national cultural policy mix.

For governments that choose to be more directive in shaping the development of culture, an architect model might be employed where culture becomes the responsibility of a dedicated ministry. This is a more interventionist approach in which the rhetoric and aims of arts and cultural policy might be broadly aligned with social welfare and national culture objectives. This enables direct government funding of culture and relieves creators from dependence on ‘box office’ mechanisms to survive. France and many other Western European countries epitomised this approach until the 1990s.

The engineer model is a more extreme, and politicised, form of cultural funding in which culture is prioritised as an objective of political education and allied with the ideological cast of the regime. In this case, government owns the artistic means of production and creators are employees whose creations are required to reflect positively on the political agenda of the state. Inevitably, culture produced under this model is overtly political and consistent with national priorities. Examples of the engineer model of cultural support include the former Soviet Union and other Eastern Bloc countries, Cuba, North and South Korea and China under Mao.

Alternatively, using a facilitator model, governments can opt for a ‘hands off’ approach in which the aim is to create the conditions that favour cultural production. In this model, cultural diversity is encouraged by indirectly supporting cultural patronage by a range of individuals and organisations, effectively subsidising cultural activities so they can survive commercially. A
facilitation approach augments philanthropic approaches, largely by appropriating tax expenditures to provide tax relief or other benefits for those who give cultural support.

Although this model encourages diversity, it does not always ensure excellence since cultural philanthropy is often shaped by idiosyncratic tastes and judgments. The facilitator model can provide generous funding to cultural producers and operate more in tune with public taste and box office appeal, yet it is a model over which government has little control. The USA epitomised the facilitator model throughout the twentieth century.

In addition to the four models described above, we should add the elite nurturer model (Craik 1996). In this model, governments select a small number of elite cultural organisations to receive a one-line budget and/or other generous subsidies, thus placing them in a coveted position by guaranteeing recurrent funding that insulates them from having to compete with ‘outsider’ cultural organisations. On the other hand, as the nurtured organisations swallow up the majority of the cultural budget, there is little opportunity to fund new or experimental cultural forms, thus risking conservatism, or stasis, of cultural development.

Each of these models has strengths and weaknesses. Moreover, a number of changes have occurred over the last 20 years or so as previous models proved ineffective and new modes of governance have re-written the appropriate role of government in supporting culture. To some degree, a ‘mix-and-match’ approach has seen governments select aspects from different models to apply to different sub-sectors of the cultural domain (e.g. the sector development planning proposal by Arts Queensland, 2006). So, while the Arts Council in the UK remains the major cultural funding agency using an arms length mechanism, public lotteries established under the Blair Labour government provide significant amounts of cultural funding for other projects using a facilitator model, and still other monies are made available through architect-style cultural planning and community revitalisation strategies (Gray 2004, 2006; Lee 2006).

The precise mixture of policy models tends to reflect two particular features. On the one hand, cultural policy is predicated on social and economic arguments, that is, culture is posited as having ‘positive effects on the economy, on social integration, on health, on criminal statistics, etc.’ (Vestheim 2006: 10) while, on the other hand, cultural benefits have to be measurable or audited ‘with evidence-based hard facts like number of tickets sold, box-office income, number of performances produced, actions to increase administrative efficiency, etc.’ (Vestheim 2006: 10; cf. Belfiore 2004). Hence, there is now an emerging convergence on mixed policy approaches in most developed industrialised countries. For example, many European countries are:
… singing the same song. Some voices are stronger than others but even the weaker voices are singing to the same tune and the lyrics of the song are almost identical from country to country. Participation and access to culture for everybody is a good thing – especially if the supervision of the accounts can register a break even or better: profit. (Vestheim 2006: 10)

There is evidence of a growing belief that cultural institutions need to be re-invented to maintain their roles of collection and conservation and at the same time appeal to new audiences (cf. Obuljen 2006). The new audience for culture often lacks much cultural capital (knowledge of or interest in the cultural form on display). To engage with such audiences, cultural organisations emphasise entertainment and engagement above serious or detailed presentation.

One cultural institution that is currently going through a major re-invention is Amsterdam’s Rijksmuseum, which is in the process of integrating its displays and material as ‘an experiment in capturing the imagination of information-overloaded people with a low boredom threshold, but it won’t be oversimplification’ (Ronald de Leeuw quoted by Cosic 2006: 16). According to de Leeuw, museums have a new relevance for people in a multicultural society, tourists with short attention spans and school children on compulsory outings:

> People do need what I call a holy place,’ he explains. ‘Reading about something may give you a warm feeling or whet your interest, but you also like to test what you have read, to feel its existence in a place.’ Churches, he says, are losing that sense of common ground; the town hall has become a glorified post office. But the museum can fill the vacuum. (Cosic 2006: 16)

Not all share this view. When the new director of the Louvre museum in Paris, Henri Loyrette, instigated policies designed to commercialise and popularise the activities of the museum, he attracted widespread condemnation for ‘prostituting France’s cultural patrimony for cash’ (Cosic 2006a, 2007). By contrast, the architecturally unique Guggenheim museum in Bilbao, Spain, with its innovative and outreach cultural programs has generally been regarded as a major success. So, we can see that significant differences of opinion about how to manage culture in the contemporary world have underpinned and fuelled recent debates.

To fulfil these diverse expectations and experiences, cultural policy has developed a patchwork quilt approach to deliver multiple outcomes. For example, in Australia an arm’s length *patronage* strategy (through the Australia Council) exists alongside an increasingly important *architect* strategy (through the federal Department of Communications, Information, Technology and the Arts (DCITA)). Furthermore, the interplay between patronage and the architect strategies can be complex as evidenced by the patronage role played by the Major
Organisational Facilities Board (now the Major Performing Arts Board) within the Australia Council but mandated by DCITA. A different mix characterises cultural policy in New Zealand where a creative industries model of cultural support vies with architect and facilitator models to disperse funds (Volkerling 2000, 2001).

In North America, Canada has pursued multiple strategies: the arm’s length Canada Council, departmental architect/facilitator cultural development and local/provincial government cultural planning. Where philanthropic models of cultural support once reigned supreme, namely in the USA, diverse forms of cultural support have emerged with local government picking up a growing share of responsibility for cultural funding (Schuster 2002; McCarthy, Ondaatje, Zakaras and Brooks 2004).

By contrast, in Europe, where the government’s role as a generous patron has been long established, changing economic circumstances are forcing cultural organisations to seek alternate sources of funding via sponsorship and partnership arrangements to make up for a declining share of government funding.

In sum, as Vestheim (2006) has noted, the ‘advanced’ (developed industrialised) nations are experimenting with mix-and-match models with varying degrees of success and all are immersed in the quest for an appropriate model for new times. There are many reasons why alternative models and sources of cultural support have not met expectations:

• potential patrons are often wary of experimental and controversial cultural forms while being willing to support more traditional forms thus further entrenching the status quo;
• philanthropic donors are more likely to sponsor defined products or events (e.g. exhibitions, festivals, commemorative events) rather than corporate costs associated with the activity;
• corporate donations and sponsorship are related to economic cycles and drop-off in straitened times;
• the potential for artistic interference from patrons underpins the dynamics of corporate support;
• tax expenditures cannot easily be targeted; and
• tax expenditure arrangements for culture are less attractive than for sport, festivals and community projects.

New notions of good governance have challenged assumptions that these are necessarily the best options for directing public resources to the support of the arts and culture. It is, therefore, useful to ask what differentiates the arts and culture from other policy domains? Does this sector require specific and distinctive policy solutions?
Although arts advocates often claim that government support for arts and culture is declining, available data suggest the reverse. In fact, it seems that governments are finding new ways to inject money into the sector (see Appendix F). How do we account for this paradox? The following chapter explores the ways in which policy trends for the sector have been affected by a broader operational definition of the arts and culture. We also examine the interplay between policy formulation and the increased availability of statistics and qualitative research about cultural participation. The conjunction of these phenomena has helped to frame debates about the implications for government of observed trends in the production and consumption of arts and culture. Also explored are shifts in policy responsibility for arts and culture within and between different levels of government.

ENDNOTES

1 Using a more extensive taxonomy, John Pick (1986, 1988) characterized seven European models: Glory Model, Placebo Model, Educational Model, Reward Model, Service Model, Compensatory Model and Commercial Model.