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IPPR EVENT

Britishness, Heritage and the Arts:

Should cultural institutions promote shared values and a common national identity?

Tuesday 4th March 2008, 8.00am for 8:30am - 10.30am

Venue: National Portrait Gallery (Ondaatje Theatre)

Introduction

1. I am really delighted to be able to join you this morning to discuss what I think has become one of the truly critical issues of the moment.
2. At a time when globalization, migration and terrorism are challenging traditional concepts of identity and nationhood, how can we develop shared values and common purposes? And what is the role of our cultural institutions in that endeavour?
3. I come to this discussion from three different perspectives.

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4. Firstly, as someone who is themselves an immigrant. My family came to this country via Egypt when I was five. As a descendant of German, Austrian and Jewish heritage I know a little of what it means to be an outsider and how a family approaches that delicate and anxious process of finding their feet in a new country and becoming citizens.

5. And I experienced the 'cultural test' as a young girl of 10 when my father set about seeking British citizenship. An inspector came to our house for tea to interrogate me and my 7 year old sister and assess our 'Britishness!' Tea usually consisted of a boiled egg and fingers of toast. But on that occasion we were made to eat cucumber sandwiches and fruit cake under strict instructions to say that that was what we always had - and I absolutely hated fruit cake!

6. So I know some of the thoughts that go through people's minds on that journey to

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citizenship and integration - what to take and what to leave behind.

7. Secondly, as Minister for Culture. In this role I champion the people and the work of those who in a thousand different ways explore what we share in common and what makes us different. Culture is vital in this debate. It is the public expression of the constant and unyielding conversation between our values, rules and behaviour. And those themes of values, rules and behaviour must be absolutely at the heart of any discussion about the practicalities of integration.

8. And lastly, I come to this as the MP for Barking in East London, where the pace of demographic change is as swift and as challenging as anywhere in the country. Barking is a place which has moved from being a predominantly white working class community to a typically multi-racial part of Greater London. It's moved in the 14 years since I've been the MP, from a place where I had never met so many great grandmothers who lived within 10 minutes' walk of their great

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grandchildren to an area where typically in one primary school, the cohort of children from BME communities rose from 26% to 40% in just one year.

Values vacuum

9. And I've seen what happens when mainstream national and local politicians don't acknowledge and respond to the challenge to identity that such changes bring; when they are seen not to be on the side of local people; when they are seen as being out of touch with the day to day concerns of pressure on housing, schools and GP surgeries. When they are seen to be afraid to engage in an open debate about these issues.

10. I've seen it over and over again. The cracks in the community turn to gaps. And those gaps, those voids, are always exploited mercilessly and cruelly by the extreme right.

11. And indeed I worry that all the mainstream parties, in their determination to capture and maintain power, have perhaps allowed a blurring of their ideological value

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base as they seek to attract the all important centre ground in politics. In doing this they can inadvertently create a value vacuum which is then filled by the fundamentalists in religion and the extremists in politics.

12. And that is when diversity becomes divisive.

13. When the reaction is what Amartya Sen has called in his book *Identity and Violence* 'miniaturization' - a retrenchment into exclusive forms of identity. A retreat to the old narrow bonds of kinship and 'tribe' - the identification of 'us' and 'them'. The result of that miniaturization is always negative. And all too often violently so.

14. And let's be honest - we know it's in the poorest communities where these challenges are greatest. For that is where new migrant communities can afford to settle and that's where the already established communities, because of their relative poverty enjoy the fewest choices. So that's

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where people can be left with the feeling of imposed change or of being subject to forces beyond their control.

Living out values at local level

15. Those are themes that are concerning many of us at the moment. And so into this field comes the current debate about the importance of nurturing our sense of Britishness, of finding common identity and creating a common sense of belonging.

16. I know that across the political spectrum there are powerful advocates for the creation of a renewed and re-invigorated sense of Britishness. Actually it's not that new. Enabling people and communities to form positive personal and common identities across the traditional boundaries of class or faith has always been central to progressive thought.

17. But we know that simply talking about the concept of values that may embody Britishness on its own, means nothing to the good burghers of Barking. Those values need

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to be lived out in ways that mean something for real people in real places.

18. And they have to be articulated in a way which doesn't reflect the imperialist traditions of our past where we sought to impose our values on conquered territories. They need to embrace the diversity of the present with all the richness and added value that our mixed communities can bring to a renewed sense of common purpose.

19. Of course there are difficult circles to square in this endeavour. How do we reconcile commitment to common nationhood whilst celebrating difference and diversity? How do we nurture both interdependence and individuality? How do we take forward the debate initiated by you at IPPR on reconciling the emerging strength of Englishness with our desire for British cohesion?

20. The Government is grappling with these really tricky issues. Last week saw the Home Office's publication which touched on

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citizenship in the context of immigration. The Prime Minister talked about these issues in his speech to Labour's Spring Conference at the week-end.

21. And I think our sectors can also make a powerful and unique contribution in this difficult terrain - whether it's through building understanding through our history and heritage or whether it's using the relatively safe space that culture provides to explore how people see themselves and others, - how they interpret difference and find common meaning.

22. I am continually impressed by the power of our sectors to touch and move people across the barriers of race, religion and class.

Complex cultural identity

23. But in any discussion on these issues, we have to start by acknowledging the perhaps obvious fact - that we each have a multiplicity of different identities

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depending on the immediate context - and that these change and evolve over time.

24. There doesn't have to be a single entry point to what it means to belong. We just need to agree on the things that are shared before we begin to shout and disagree about the things that aren't.

25. W. B. Yeats had this right when he said *'We make out of the quarrel with others rhetoric, but of the quarrel with ourselves, poetry'*. The key to this whole area is broadening the definition of what we mean by *'ourselves'*.

26. And I see that, when I bring very different people in my constituency together. It never takes long to find that there are more things that unite us than separate us - people start out just seeing those they arrive with as like them, and more often than not they leave seeing everyone else as like them too.

Importers and exporters

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27. Furthermore, we have to understand that the essence of our cultural identity is not fixed or immutable - we have always been an open society, traditional importers and exporters of talent and ideas. We have always taken from others. The cross-fertilisation of ideas between this country and others, and between different communities and cultures in this country has always resulted in fantastic levels of creativity and innovation.
28. Take the original British Mini - that icon of Britishness in the 1960s - yet it was the brainchild of Alec Issigonis, a man born in Turkey to Greek and German parents who came to the United Kingdom as a refugee.
29. And the new Mini is produced by a German company, designed by a Briton who now heads up Fiat's own design team in Turin.
30. And now the work of the internationally known choreographer Akram Khan - mixing classic western dance styles and Indian forms - into something that is new, and yet uniquely British.

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31. And Nitin Sawney - a British musician, producer and composer, combining Asian and worldwide influences with cutting edge electronica to produce critically acclaimed - and extremely popular - new work.
32. Or Anish Kapoor, who moved to Britain in the early 1970s and whose early pieces with powder pigment were inspired by the mounds of brightly coloured pigment in the temples of India.
33. Or look at the work of Bawren Tavaziva, born in Zimbabwe, who leads the field in the UK of dance companies who combine African dance traditions with Western contemporary choreography. Making something that is new, and yet no less uniquely British.

No single approach

34. But I want to be clear about a number of caveats. The first is that the formation of cultural identity is an organic process and one that should not be prescribed in detail from above by Government, even if we could.

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There is a key difference between enabling people to find and share the reasons to love their country, or their community or their neighbours, and requiring or specifying the form of that love.

35. Secondly, this is not a zero-sum game. There isn't a fixed quantity of 'national identity' that is at risk of being spread too thinly - as butter scraped over a piece of bread. I firmly believe that developing a better sense of shared cultural identity and purpose will be positive, but that it needn't come by creating a narrow or exclusive form of identity.

Social, not social work

36. And whilst culture is inherently social, that doesn't mean confusing it with social work. There are many positive things that we can legitimately expect from the concept of shared identity, but we must never make the mistake of thinking that it can bear the weight of cohesion alone.

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37. And let me drop in a further caveat. National mottos and statements of shared values have to be lived and made real if they are to fulfil their purpose. Equal economic and educational life chances must match the grander statements in order for people to invest their confidence and their trust. Without them, exhortations about identity, belonging and cohesion will not succeed.

38. You only have to look at the riots in the suburbs of France to see what happens if you only invest in the grand icons of a common culture without investing in those services which are essential to secure more equal life chances for every individual to realize their potential. And in truth, some of our cities have been no stranger to the experiences of the Parisian suburbs.

The role for Government

39. So in this complex maze, how else can we use the areas for which I have ministerial responsibility to enhance a sense of shared identity and values.

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40. At their best, the cultural sectors do offer the chance to create the kinds of safe public spaces where we can explore difference, ask the awkward questions, test the boundaries or simply satisfy that healthy curiosity about those who don't look like us.
41. And Government's role is to provide those places, to ensure that people have access to them and to defend them when they are under threat or when they take risks.
42. I think this expresses itself in four key ways.
43. Firstly, it is about harnessing the power of place. Our identity, our sense of community is strongly linked to the place where we live. And we demonstrate that in a range of ways,
44. One of the examples that come to mind is the way that the local community can come together to protect the heritage assets in their midst. For example the Iron Age hill fort in *Barwick in Elmet* in West Yorkshire,

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where quite small grants from the HLF and others have enabled the local community to become involved in the protection and management of the site - in the process really coming together as a community. Or Castleford, where a campaign to save a disused, listed library building and an old market hall has catalyzed community cohesion and activity as people work together to plan contemporary uses and find the money to rehabilitate the building in their town centre.

45. And it's not just in the more obvious forms of heritage that the power of place asserts itself. Local football teams are a good example - from the intense local pride and sense of achievement generated in seeing once great clubs like Accrington Stanley re-born and back in business, through to the community work of clubs such as Charlton Athletic in helping to build belonging and break down barriers between communities.

46. Secondly, it is about celebrating our shared heritage wherever and whenever we can.

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With the *Bicentenary of the Abolition of the Slave Trade* last year we collectively took the opportunity to look closely at what are some of the most uncomfortable and sensitive issues, with respect and dignity. In the process building a shared understanding of the past and linking it to the current issues of discrimination and then to our values for the future.

47. Thirdly, it is about providing the safe, shared spaces in which assumptions can be challenged, where difficult issues can be addressed, where we can test the boundaries, but in the process move towards a better sense of ourselves. Exhibitions such as the fantastic '*Sacred*' exhibition at the British Library, which showed the common links between Muslims, Jews and Christians is a key example.

48. Now I hope that I would not be so glib as to ignore the fact that all this - wonderful though it undoubtedly is - does also have the potential for discomfort too.

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49. The role of culture is often to be disruptive and oppositional, to challenge traditional presumptions and put forward new ways of looking at the world. As artists and rebels throughout the ages have shown, their best work has often been produced in resistance to the dominant culture. And yet as the play *Behzti* in Wolverhampton or *Jerry Springer the Opera* have demonstrated, culture can often be a source of intense difficulty and conflict. Just as culture which pushes the boundaries can make some people proud to belong, it can make others feel isolated and deeply offended.

50. And fourthly and finally I think there is a key role for the cultural and heritage sectors in creating the icons of a common culture that everybody can feel a part of and feel a collective sense of ownership in. And we're good at doing that - the Angel of the North, the British Museum, Wembley Stadium, the Royal Festival Hall, the Eden Project, the Sage. And it's important not to forget the everyday forms of our cultural life - the television and radio programmes we enjoy,

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from Coronation Street to the Archers, the festivals and public holidays we share and the everyday architecture of our daily lives.

Conclusion

51. I'll finish with a brief reflection. There is no doubt that talking about Britishness and about the role of culture in integration has traditionally meant different things for each end of the political spectrum.
52. For the right, it has often been about identifying a set form of history or cultural expression that people must sign-up to in order to truly belong. What some people will recognise as the infamous 'cricket test'. For the left, it has often been about allowing individual communities to express their own cultural identity, without striving for a sense of collective cultural belonging.
53. But both of those approaches have left too many people behind.

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54. If we believe as we do that integration (not assimilation) and community cohesion (not separatism) - are vital to forming nations and neighbourhoods that are at ease with themselves, then we have to ask ourselves what are we expecting people to integrate into or express cohesion with? Finding a shared sense of common cultural identity is a key part of answering that question and it is right that we think about the Government's role in helping people to shape that identity.

55. In order to do that some of the old ways of doing things might just have to give way. But traditions are only experiments that once worked. Perhaps it is time for some new experiments...

56. As a Government we have talked about a possible British Statement of Values. Our sectors have a critical role in shaping any such Statement. I will make sure that we are at the heart of the process and I will ensure that the voice and experience of our sectors is heard loudly and clearly.

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57. And we are already better at making more of ceremonies for new British citizens, making use of town halls and other civic buildings. But I want to see our cultural institutions playing a fuller part. We have some of the best and most impressive spaces in the country - museums, galleries, theatres, libraries, historic houses and castles. Being made a British citizen in those kind of surroundings allows people to associate their new citizenship with key cultural icons, and then offers the chance to build a longer term engagement.

58. The Bicentenary of the Abolition of the Slave Trade showed what could be done to bring people together around key historic events. I want see what more we can do to celebrate the key events that made us who we are. For example the Sir Charles Darwin celebrations next year. Yes, it is an opportunity to celebrate one of the greatest ideas of the modern age, but I also want to see if we can use the occasion to build an

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even bolder sense of our shared past and common future.

59. Next year will also see the anniversary of Henry VIII's accession to the throne. Given some of the less savoury parts of his reign, it's not an obviously straightforward event to commemorate. But understanding his reign is essential to understanding England. He is an iconic figure, a well-known personality in our history. And whether in separating state and religion, or in instituting English as the common language, or in being the first to clearly define and map our boundaries, a deeper understanding of his reign may help the important debate on England which is emerging.

60. Beyond that we have the 800th anniversary of the Magna Carta in 2015, when we have the opportunity to acknowledge the beginning of the process that led to the rights and responsibilities that we take for granted today. I know that the British Library will have Magna Carta at the heart of the 'Taking Liberties' exhibition this autumn and I hope

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this will be a chance to judge people's appetite for more.

61. But I also want to challenge our sectors square on. I will champion their contribution to building a sense of belonging whenever and wherever I can. But all too often our sectors aren't at their best when embodying common belongings themselves. The audiences for many of our greatest cultural events - I'm thinking in particular of the Proms, but it is true of - is still a long way from demonstrating that people from different backgrounds feel at ease in being part of this. I know that this isn't about making every audience completely representative, but if we claim great things for our sectors in terms of their power to bring people together, then we have a right to expect that they will do that wherever they can. I know that many organisations have made great strides, but there is much further to go.

62. I want to leave you with something that Ian McEwen said shortly after the terrible events of September 2001. He said *'Imagining*

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what it is like to be someone other than yourself is at the core of our humanity. It is the essence of compassion, and it is the beginning of morality.' The cultural sectors hold the key to making that imaging real.

63. I look forward to hearing what you think and continuing this discussion with you.

ENDS