

AGAINST ARTS SUBSIDIES

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From time to time debate rages about whether, and if so how and how much, the government should spend on "The Arts". Libertarians oppose all state spending on The Arts as on other things. But when we criticise state spending on The Arts we tend to concentrate on the immorality of it, and to forget the harm done by such spending to art itself.

Not that the moral argument is a bad one. It is indeed an outrage for people — especially rich people — to have their hobbies paid for by others. Yachtsmen get no government grants. Why should opera lovers?

Champions of The Arts reply that arts subsidies enable non-rich people also to attend grand operas.

True, but the non-rich mostly fail to turn up. Thus more money must be spent badgering them to turn up, for example by getting at their children via "arts education". Once again it is the richer-than-most Champions of The Arts whose satisfaction (in this case in the form of biddable crowds of non-rich opera attenders) is being paid for. Similar criticisms apply to schemes for persuading the non-rich to paint pictures, do pottery etc., which they can well afford to do anyway.

If the happiness of the non-rich was the real aim, the non-rich would be allowed to keep their money and spend it as they pleased. (See the Libertarian Alliance pamphlet *Taxation Is Theft* by Chris R. Tame.)

"HATERS OF THE ARTS"

Because opponents of subsidies for The Arts prefer to discuss the immorality of thieving, rather than the artisticness of art, we

are labelled Enemies of The Arts. Prominent Champion of The Arts Lord Goodman does this in an article in *The Observer* of March 25th 1984, entitled: "The Case Against Arts Cuts". Right at the end, like a politician debating on television, he slips in the phrase "hater of the arts", to mean anyone who favours cuts in government spending on The Arts. We "haters of the arts" often reply by listing a few of the arts we happen not to hate.

Other Arts-Against-The-Cuts clichés include: that Art is Essential, that The Arts should be Kept Out Of Politics, that The Arts Cannot be Abandoned to the Anarchy of the Market (see also: Sponsorship Is Not Enough), and sometimes even such claims as (to quote Lord Goodman again) the following:

"The Arts Council of Great Britain is a unique institution which has earned praise throughout the world as being as effective and impartial a method of subsidising culture as has yet been devised in any country anywhere."

You can be praised throughout the world and still not be praised very much, so this is not actually a very forceful argument.

THE ESSENTIALNESS OF ART

A favorite trick used by Champions of The Arts is to claim that since The Arts (in general) are "essential", it follows that the Ballet Rambert (in particular) cannot be closed without mass Art starvation. But I've not eaten melon for months, and never once during this period did I starve. That's point one.

Point two: is art "essential"? Press your Champion of The Arts and you generally find that by "essential" he means: essential for "civilisation" or for "the real fabric of civilisation", as Lord Goodman puts it.

But what is "civilisation"? Press further.

It emerges that no country is "civilised" unless it, has "Arts"! The essentialness of The Arts is a mere definition, of The Arts and civilisation in terms of each other.

But suppose that The Arts really were "essential". Suppose people really did shrivel up and die if forced to pass three entire days without once looking at an oil painting. This is no argument for government spending on oil paintings. Food really is rather important, but for that very reason the more completely the government keeps out of the food business the better for all concerned.

THE ARTS AND THE ECONOMY

It is said that subsidies to The Arts help The Economy, and in particular the Balance of Payments.

The French nineteenth century economist Bastiat, and his latter day disciple Henry Hazlitt, are good people to read about claims like this. The error is to see only the obvious results of an act, but to miss the less obvious but even more important results of an opposite kind.

The government gives money to the Royal Shakespeare Company. Tourists flock to London. Maybe so, but what of the countless enterprises that have been *fractionally* impeded by that same subsidy, because together they paid it? Might not they, between them, have done even better? The evidence from comparing places where taxes and subsidies are high to those where they are low or non-existent says that scrapping arts subsidies would be *good* for the economy generally, *and* for tourism in particular.

Even if subsidies only ever encouraged arts businesses to do more business (rather than less, as often happens) that still wouldn't mean that arts subsidies are, economically speaking, helpful. If hoteliers disagree, let them pay the arts bills.



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FOR LIFE, LIBERTY AND PROPERTY

WHAT ART IS

Oddly, the claim that The Arts (i.e. subsidies for The Arts) are good for The Economy often goes hand in hand with the claim that The Arts and The Economy are mortal enemies, The Arts being The Arts, and The Economy being an orgy of vulgar philistinism. (If that's so, why are subsidies for The Arts, which supposedly help The Economy, good?)

It has been said that noble families are those that made their money long enough ago for it to have been forgotten how. Similarly, all "serious" art forms of the type now kept alive by the Arts Council were once upon a time big business. Why did Haydn write over a hundred symphonies? Because music publishers paid him handsomely to write symphonies. Much fuss surrounds the (I trust) imminent demise of the Arts Council's "Literature Panel". Did the Golden Age of the English Novel need a Literature Panel?

The big new art forms now are films, pop music, and more recently such things as pop videos and TV shows. These art forms needed no government grants to get started, even if governments have, for their own governmental reasons, chosen to pay for broadcasting in order to keep control of it.

ART WILL SURVIVE EVERYTHING, EVEN THE ARTS COUNCIL

Believing that The Arts and The Economy are either unconnected with or hostile to one another, Champions of The Arts speak of The Arts as if they were an endangered species of butterfly. Lord Goodman uses a similar metaphor when he writes of the "volunteers who work ceaselessly and tirelessly to keep the arts afloat". Afloat. The Arts, you see, are a sinking ship, and only a band of selfless volunteers with cans are fending off disaster. Without them The Arts will sink, and we will all drown.

Art is in fact virtually indestructable.

Suppose that the Arts Council was (like a Fire Brigade) for preventing art rather than encouraging it. It wouldn't stand a chance! Art is like ground elder, ants, the flu!

Were I the Minister for The Arts charged with the futile task of finishing off Art once and for all, the Arts Council would get a much increased budget. The idea would be to corrupt all artists, good and bad, by giving them huge piles of money in exchange for nothing. They'd either loll about in idleness, or thrash out rubbish as never before. The good, uncorrupted artists would despair and die.

In other words the ruination of art would require the Arts Council to do just what it does now, only more so.

Arts subsidies are like foreign aid. They are supposed to help, but in fact they only feed the people who make the biggest difficulties for real artists. Just as with the foreign aid racket, the closer you get to the Arts racket the more it stinks. (I met some of the creatures who work for the Arts Council when doing drama at University.)

THE WORD ITSELF

The greatest harm done by arts subsidies is that they encourage the ubiquitous use of the lethal little word itself, "art". This has been one of the great idols of the twentieth century. As a rule, the quality of a twentieth century man-made object is inversely proportional to the frequency with which the word "art" was slung around during its creation.

Films, videos, pop music and so forth illustrate this process well. The less "artistic" the manner in which they were made, the better they turn out. And is an Audi Quattro, or a Sinclair ZX81 any less "artistic" for being made by car and computer

makers, rather than by "artists"? When archeologists dig us up, what will be "art" then?

Near the bookshop where I work, in Covent Garden, there are many "art" galleries. Only rarely do these places contain objects that would ever have been made if the word "art" had not existed. Most of these objects are beneath contempt, so crude and ugly are they. If a Philistine is someone who despises a square of canvas painted to look like the bottom of a rubbish skip, then I glory in the title.

But the fact that the Arts Council queues up alongside the idiot children of the rich to pay for this kind of nonsense is the least of its misdeeds. The money given to less obviously decadent art forms like ballet and grand opera does far more damage. Just think what an infinitely tedious country — artistically speaking — the USA would have been in the twentieth century, if the American arts had been dominated by the likes of Lord Goodman, instead of by people like D. W. Griffith, Walt Disney, George Gershwin, Sam Goldwyn, Charlie Chaplin, Greta Garbo, Fred Astaire, Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, Charlie Parker, Mickey Spillane, Robert Heinlein, James Wong Howe, Elvis Presley, Steven Spielberg, Phil Spector, Steven Sondheim, Barbra Streisand, The Beatles, The Marx Brothers, The Andrews Sisters, and the creators of Tamla Motown and Marvel Comics.

Champions of The Arts bemoan the unpopularity of — for example — British subsidised theatre, and hint that a few more million quid would do the trick where all previous millions have failed. But if you take all the poshest actors, directors, writers, audiences and critics off to state funded palaces and drown them in free lunches, what do you expect? More arts subsidies would only make the situation still worse. Far better to let people like RSC boss Trevor Nunn fend for themselves in the big bad West End, as Nunn is now doing to great effect, directing for musical theatre wizard Andrew Lloyd Webber. The "National Theatre" should be sold to whoever will pay the most for it. Maybe Andrew Lloyd Webber will buy it, and turn all that empty space that surrounds it into a fruit market.

It's no exaggeration to say that lavish arts subsidies of the type desired by Champions of The Arts would have made Shakespeare's career impossible. They'd have separated the dress circle from the groundlings, whose joyous collision was the essence of the Elizabethan theatrical achievement.

(By the way, anyone who imagines that the Arts Council is essential for Shakespeare to go on being performed now, and hence to attract all those tourists, knows *absolutely nothing* about the theatre.)

As for the British film industry, it is notable how obviously it is divided into busy and talented film makers and film makers whose only talent seems to be for getting begging letters printed in *The Times*. Lots of government money has already been spent on British films, now that film making is an "art", and as with cars, ships and aeroplanes, it went on the wrong ones. If the government really wants to help the British film industry it should *get out of television*, which now supplies a very similar type of entertainment at almost zero cost. If the British film industry has picked up recently this is because television has been getting worse, not because of film subsidies.

ART AND POLITICS

You may not consider this a particularly outstanding piece of writing (although it would have been far worse if I had styled myself an "artist" while writing it). I end by asking you to ponder also what opinions I might have expressed — instead — had I been on the government's Arts payroll. Then tell me that The Arts are — now — "kept out of politics".