

BOOK REVIEW

Review of *the Museum Hustings Held at the Imperial War Museum*

Museum Hustings Held at the Imperial War Museum, London
30 April 2015

Nadia Marks*

In anticipation of the 2015 UK general election, the Museums Association (MA) and the National Museum Directors Conference (NMDC) hosted a hustings on the topic of museums on 30 April 2015. They invited a spokesperson for Labour, the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats, and the event was intended to give them the opportunity to present their party's museum policies. This paper presents an overview of the proceedings, but given the outcome of the election focuses on the contribution of the Conservative Party.

Panel introductions

The event began with an introduction from each panel member. Ed Vaizey, Minister of State for Culture and the Digital Economy, went first on behalf of the Conservative Party. He focused on the record of the coalition government, claiming that they had done their best to protect the organisations funded by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) by making as many savings in-house as possible. He described how his party had supported the national museums by giving them more control over staffing decisions and private fundraising. Vaizey asserted that there would be tough decisions to be made

after the election but that there could be 'constructive dialogue'.

Following Vaizey's introduction, Baroness Jane Bonham-Carter, the Liberal Democrat Lords spokesperson for Culture, claimed that if the Liberal Democrats were to be involved in the new government, their aims for museums would include increasing efficiency and philanthropic giving to mitigate the effects of public funding cuts, and that this would be achieved through granting the national museums greater autonomy.

Last to speak was Wilf Stevenson, representing the Labour Party. Stevenson, a Shadow Business Minister in the House of Lords, was standing in for Shadow Culture Minister, Chris Bryant, who was unable to attend due to a scheduling conflict. Stevenson criticised the Conservatives for cutting funding to both the national museums and bodies such as Arts Council for England (ACE), as this meant that the museums were left with limited support during the period of change. He suggested that if Labour were to win the next election they would cut less than the Conservatives would, due to their willingness to raise taxes.

Question and answer session

Policy defence

Following these introductions, a question and answer session began. Firstly the chair, journalist Simon Tait, asked each panel

* UCL Institute of Archaeology, GB
nadia.glassup.10@ucl.ac.uk

member a question in turn where they had to defend their party's policies or actions. For example, Vaizey was called on to defend the increase of lottery money going to the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF). It was suggested that this was done to cover the coalition government's cuts to DCMS, therefore negating the 'additionality' principle of the lottery act¹. Vaizey claimed that the Conservatives had made the decision to increase this funding before they came into power and suggested that this showed that they didn't see it as a replacement for DCMS funding.

Stevenson was asked to explain Labour's proposal to create a Prime Minister's Committee on the Arts, as it appeared to overlap with the work of DCMS. As a stand-in, Stevenson conceded that he didn't know much about it, but said that Labour thought that DCMS needed to be built up as it was a 'weak' department. The committee, he continued, was designed to spread the importance of the Arts to all departments. This led to discussion about the potential for cross-departmental working to bring support to museums. All panel members agreed that museums could benefit from collaboration, with them having potential roles in education, healthcare and criminal justice. However, they also agreed that cross-departmental working was difficult and that DCMS was not well respected by other departments.

Potential for government support for the museum sector

Many questions from the audience were about different ways in which the government could potentially support museums in dealing with reduced public funding. The audience appeared keen to express that they were struggling to cope with public funding cuts, with national museums, local authority museums and independent museums all represented. Conservative representative, Vaizey, was dominant in responding to questions and the common theme he presented was that, in his view, museums should collaborate to help themselves. For example,

one audience member aired their concern that museum collections were increasingly being seen as financial assets by stakeholders such as local authorities. In response Vaizey asserted that some regional museums were comparable to national museums and that they could support smaller regional museums, but that DCMS should not intervene as this was the role of ACE. He suggested that the museum sector could collaborate in areas such as storage in order to save money. One assumes that he meant that through making savings museums would be more financially secure and therefore stakeholders would be less inclined to have an interest in the potential financial value of collections.

There were other questions in this vein. When asked how each party would support Local Authority Museums, Vaizey stated that in his view Local Authorities could do what they wanted to and it was not within his remit to intervene. He suggested that local authority museums should look for funding from other sectors, such as healthcare and education. An audience member raised the dispute at the National Gallery over the privatisation of staff and Vaizey reported that he would not get involved. Another suggested that there were VAT deals that could be pursued to support the museums sector, but Vaizey simply said that VAT was not his remit.

Supporting diversity in the museum sector

Vaizey continued his hands-off strategy in other areas. Fiona Talbott, Head of Museums at HLF, asked how the parties would help the museum sector to increase the diversity of their audiences. Vaizey felt that this was the responsibility of the sector and not the government. Similarly, when asked about diversity in the museums workforce by Sara Wajid, Senior Manager of Public Engagement at the National Maritime Museum, Vaizey said that it was up to the museums sector to encourage minorities to pursue museums as a career and was not under the remit of

DCMS. It can be noted that the Government Equalities Office is part of DCMS.

Expectations of the next government

In terms of what changes to public funding the national museums could expect from the next government, Vaizey remained non-committal. He neither confirmed nor denied a claim from Labour representative Stevenson that national museums should expect another 20% cut from the Conservatives, but repeated an earlier statement about the 'tough decisions' that would be faced in the future, alluding to the likelihood of further cuts. He deflected a question of whether free admission to national museums would be maintained, saying instead that there was an 'opportunity' to review funding and make it more transparent. He did say, however, that the Conservatives may consider longer term funding agreements with the national museums than the current 3 year rounds, which would give them more stability with which to make long term plans and implement changes.

Asked whether there should be a national plan for museums, Vaizey did not think that the government had a role in developing a strategy for museums and suggested that the Museums Association should develop one. A representative of the Museums Association pointed out that Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland all have museums strategies from their devolved parliaments, leaving only England. Vaizey maintained that a top-down strategy wasn't the answer. Finally, when the recent report on the regional imbalance of cultural funding was raised (Stark et al. 2013), Vaizey disregarded it, stating that he doesn't believe that there is an imbalance and that the report is misleading. His example was a touring theatre company based in London: while their funding would be reported as going to London, the company's operations would benefit the whole of the UK.

Conclusions

Following the Conservative win of the UK election on 7 May 2015, Ed Vaizey was re-appointed Minister of State for Culture and

the Digital Economy, while John Whittingdale became Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport. Vaizey's responses during the hustings, then, give us insight into what we might expect from the new government in terms of policy for the museum sector.

Hands-off approach where museums must help themselves

The hustings showed that the new Conservative majority government is unlikely to produce policy and legislation to support the museums sector, whether directly or indirectly. Though the audience suggested areas in which support could be beneficial, such as through VAT relief, Vaizey declared that they were outside of the influence of DCMS. Further, Vaizey alluded to further cuts in funding. With little assistance from the government to aid in the adaptation of the sector to current and future economic pressures, it is difficult to say if museums currently have the capacity to do what Vaizey repeatedly said they must: help themselves. Challenges to overcome for small and regional museums, include lack of expertise in areas such as marketing and fundraising, lack of staff time to devote on areas away from core museum activities and the low proportion of donations that go to small, rural organisations in comparison to the main London museums (e.g Bussell and Bicknall 2010; Stanziola 2011; Woodward 2012).

Potentially greater autonomy for national museums

For the national museums, which are funded directly by DCMS, there are signs that they may receive greater autonomy, intended to enable them to develop alternative funding streams and increase operational efficiencies. What this will mean in practice is not yet known, but we might expect greater commercialisation, changes in the activities that museums perform towards greater emphasis on those that corporate partners prefer to fund, and more short term contracts for museums professionals

due to funding being allocated to projects rather than ongoing operations (e.g. Davies 2011; Lindquist 2012, 10). Given the recent scandal at the Science Museum regarding the potential influence that Shell had over exhibition content, one can raise concern about what greater commercialisation in the national museums may lead to (Brown 2015). Vaizey also suggested longer funding rounds, which would enable the national museums to plan for the longer term in more detail and provide more stability for core operations. Again, it will be interesting to see what transpires.

Retention of arms-length policy

For non-national museums, it is clear that the arms-length principle will remain, with ACE providing investment, support and accreditation. Museums outside of London, may be pleased to see that Darren Henley, the new Chief Executive of ACE, pledged commitment to reducing regional inequality of funding, despite Vaizey's assertion that the imbalance is not real (Henley 2015).

Partnerships in other sectors advised

Finally, all panel members were keen on the idea that museums could find partners in other sectors, such as in healthcare and education, in order to secure alternative funding. Indeed, there is widening recognition that museums can have a positive impact on physical and mental well-being (e.g. The Happy Museum 2013; Museums Association 2012), with ACE recently having awarded a number of research grants to projects looking at this topic (ACE 2015). There are two main questions, then: do museums have the capacity to make the connections necessary to develop work in new areas and secure funding? What does it mean for the conceptual idea of what a museum is?

Competing Interests

The author declares that they have no competing interests.

Note

¹ While the original National Lottery white paper stipulated that the proceeds of the National Lottery should not enable reduction in conventional government expenditure, this principle was not clearly defined in the National Lottery Act etc 1993 (Home Office 1992, 8; *National Lottery Act etc 1993*). The National Lottery Act 2006 does state that the bodies distributing the funds should describe in their annual reports their policies and practice in relation to the additionality principle, but still does not legislate any responsibility for the government in this area (*National Lottery Act 2006*).

References

- Arts Council for England** 2015 Research Grants Programme 2015–2018: Round one successful applications. Available at <http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/funding/apply-funding/funding-programmes/research-grants-programme-2015-18/round-1-successful-applicants> [last accessed 24 June 2015].
- Brown, A** 2015 Public trust. Museums Association. Available at <http://www.museumsassociation.org/comment/policy-blog/02062015-public-trust-how-close-is-too-close-when-it-comes-to-sponsorship> [last accessed 24 June 2015].
- Bussell, J, Bicknell, S and Thompson, J** 2010 An opportunity for change: Exploring the trust option for museum services. Lawrence Graham LLP, BUnlimited, Renaissance Yorkshire. Available at <http://www.lgyh.gov.uk/dnlds/4%20Renaissance%20Yorkshire%20Exploring%20trust%20option%20museum%20services.pdf> [last accessed 24 June 2015].
- Davies, M** 2011 New horizons. *Museums Journal*, 111(12): 28–33.
- Happy Museum** 2013 The 2013 Re-imagining museums for a changing world: Learning and evaluation. Available at <http://www.happymuseumproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/>

- HM_LearningEvaluation_Summary Report2-1.pdf [last accessed 24 June 2015].
- Henley, D** 2015 Inaugural speech as Chief Executive of Arts Council England. Ferens Art Gallery, Hull 28 May 2015. Available at http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/media/uploads/SPEECH_Darren-Henley_Ferens-Art-Gallery-Hull_28-May-2015.pdf [last accessed 24 June 2015].
- Home Office** 1992 *A National Lottery raising money for good causes*. Command 1861. London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office.
- Lindqvist, K** 2012 Museum finances: Challenges beyond economic crises. *Museum Management and Curatorship*, 27(1): 1–15. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09647775.2012.644693>
- Museums Association** 2012 Museums 2020 Discussion Paper. Available online <http://www.museumsassociation.org/download?id=806530> [last accessed 24 June 2015].
- National Lottery Act** 2006 Available at http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2006/23/pdfs/ukpga_20060023_en.pdf [last accessed 24 June 2015].
- National Lottery etc. Act** 1993 Available at http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1993/39/pdfs/ukpga_19930039_en.pdf [last accessed 24 June 2015].
- Stanziola, J** 2011 Some more unequal than others: Alternative financing for museums, libraries and archives in England. *Cultural Trends*, 20(2): 113–140. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09548963.2011.563905>
- Stark, P, Gordon, C and Powell, D** 2013 *Rebalancing Our Cultural Capital: A contribution to the debate on national policy for the arts and culture in England*. Available at http://www.gpsculture.co.uk/downloads/rocc/Rebalancing_FINAL_3mb.pdf [last accessed 24 June 2015].
- Woodward, S** 2012 Funding Museum Agendas: Challenges and Opportunities. *Managing Leisure*, 17(1): 14–28. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13606719.2011.638202>

How to cite this article: Marks, N 2015 Review of *the Museum Hustings Held at the Imperial War Museum*. *Papers from the Institute of Archaeology*, 25(2): 9, pp. 1–5, DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5334/pia.484>

Published: 22 October 2015

Copyright: © 2015 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 Unported License (CC-BY 3.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/>.

]u[*Papers from the Institute of Archaeology* is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by Ubiquity Press.

OPEN ACCESS 