MSL 2340, University of Toronto

Final Paper

BURIED:

Cultural Policy in Newfoundland and Labrador

by

Grant Patten

April 7, 2011

Buried: Cultural Policy in Newfoundland and Labrador, MSL 2340

One can learn a lot about cultural policy by studying the Canadian province of Newfoundland and Labrador (NL). Although the youngest province, joining Canada in 1949, it has already been subject to the three major forms of cultural policy discourse that scholar Jim McGuigan identifies: state, market and civil/communicative. (2004, p. 35) Rather than arguing that one particular form of cultural policy is better for NL than any other, however, I will attempt to reveal in this paper what is gained and lost in the adoption of any one form. This will ultimately be a more useful approach than writing an ideological paper, because I think the primary problem with cultural policy right now is that citizens do not understand it. They often treat it frivolously, arguing that public money should be spend on more important things than art. They fail to realize that cultural policy could actually be used to strengthen their position, no matter what that may be. It is truly a shame and a loss when citizens of a province vote in support of a particular form of cultural policy without fully understanding its implications. In gaining a better understanding of the different powers that each major form of discourse holds, Newfoundland and Labradorians will be better placed to make informed voting decisions and, thus, create a truly democratic cultural policy for their province.

Newfoundland's first Premier was Joey Smallwood, who served from 1949 – 1972. (Bill, 2009, p. 92) This period can be described as primarily exhibiting a “high culture” approach to cultural policy. Smallwood became very concerned with modernizing and industrializing the province, which was admittedly an important objective. But this focus came at the expense of local, outport culture, *(ibid.)* which was

not fostered at all by Smallwood's administration. In all fairness, there is no denying that Joey Smallwood had a passion for NL and its people. He was a very patriotic politician, as evidenced by his legendary work on the *Barrelman* radio show. (Rompkey, 1998, p. 269) But Smallwood's burning desire to make NL into a globally respected province sometimes overshadowed his love of NL for what it really was. A prime example of this is Smallwood's advocacy for the creation of the Memorial University of Newfoundland. (MUN) Smallwood felt that in order to properly foster and promote NL culture, the province would have to have a large, renowned university. A smaller collegiate more inwardly focused on the NL community itself would not be an option. Smallwood needed something high scale and bold. This notion of enhancing culture “not by encouraging art but by founding a university” *(ibid.)* can be somewhat problematic in that what is ultimately accomplished is not necessarily artistic at all. Instead, a massive institution has been founded that might or might not have cultural value.

In 1967, Smallwood appointed John Perlin as the province's Director of Cultural Affairs. A key part of Perlin's job was overseeing the St. John's Arts and Culture Centre. (Bill, p. 91) Perlin became a controversial figure because of his programming decisions, which were primarily international in scope and made no attempt to foster a local theatre scene. (Bill, p. 95) It is in this sense that Smallwood and Perlin propagated what McGuigan would refer to as state discourse. (2004, p. 36) Both men had an ambition to deliver a kind of Arnoldian high culture to Newfoundland and Labradorians, presumably in order to help them to “cultivate appropriate selves.” *(ibid.)*

As a result, many of the NL artists at the time began to feel quite alienated and disenchanted. MUN visual arts professor Edythe Goodridge said, “[Perlin's] idea of culture perpetuated the worst of colonialization.” *(ibid.)* It is clear, then, that what is often lost with a high culture approach to cultural policy is the encouragement of local artistic activity. But what is gained? It might seem that this high culture approach to cultural policy would be impossible for a reasonable person to defend, but the notion of colonialism that Goodridge mentions is perhaps exactly how it could be defended. There were many Newfoundlanders who felt that NL should never have joined Confederation in the first place. They felt that NL should remain a British colony. And, admittedly, NL has not exactly thrived as a province since joining Canada. It has always struggled both culturally and economically and was for many decades unofficially considered by the federal government to be a “have-not” province.

Although it is difficult to say that NL would have definitely been better off had it remained a colony, this position is not at all unreasonable. Indeed, many of the well-informed delegates who voted in the second National Convention referendum of 1948 that ultimately decolonized NL from the UK still supported colonization. The referendum only had a 52.3% majority for Confederation, with 47.7% voting to retain Dominion status. (“Newfoundland National”, n.d.) Belfiore and Bennett write, “the rhetoric of the civilising powers of the arts was systematically employed, in nineteenth-century Europe, to provide a moral justification for the colonial enterprise.” (2007, p. 139) A high culture approach to cultural policy in NL, then, could have helped to provide a moral justification

for keeping NL a colony. Had a strong cultural policy of this nature already been in place during the time of the National Convention, perhaps the voting would have gone another way. Nowadays, the high culture approach could instead be used as a powerful argumentative tool in support of the position that NL should become recolonized. The examples that are provided around this approach are usually quite damning, as they often give rise to images of ignorant, “torch-bearing” Europeans who arrive to oppress and civilize the native peoples. *(ibid.)* But these are extreme examples that are of little help and perhaps even somewhat unfair. Rational arguments for the benefits of colonialism can certainly be made, and cultural policy can be used as a powerful tool for articulating these positions in a clear and effective manner.

By the time Frank Moores became Premier in 1972, however, artists in NL had already been using civil/communicative discourse to counteract the high culture approach to cultural policy. Habermas writes that “the public sphere cannot be conceived of as an institution and certainly not as an organization. It is not even a framework of norms... the public sphere can best be described as a network for communicating information and points of view.” (McGuigan, p. 53) A social and artistic movement against the dominant state discourse of the Smallwood government had been in the works for a few years. These artists in the public sphere had not received any support from the state in their development and were not necessarily commercially viable, either, but they definitely had an audience. Local bands such as Figgy Duff and the Wonderful Grand Band were quickly becoming popular across the province because

they embodied a certain kind of authenticity, a “folk tradition” (Rompkey, p. 273) that was all but absent under the Smallwood government. The comedy troupe CODCO, which would become nationally popular, also began to emerge during this period.

Although Moores did not actively push the high culture approach like Smallwood did, he did not spend much time developing an alternative approach to cultural policy in NL, either. It was not until Brian Peckford became Premier in 1979 that the discourse in the public sphere would become fully acknowledged by government. Rompkey writes, “Peckford was the first to openly embrace the arts as an expression of provincial culture.” (p. 272) Peckford no doubt saw the political promise in embracing the Newfoundland Renaissance that had been emerging in the public sphere. In 1980, his government established the Newfoundland and Labrador Arts Council in order to fund not only “the visual, performing and literary arts but the folk arts and crafts” as well. (Rompkey, p. 273) Peckford also established an annual Publishers' Assistance Program “to assist provincial writers and publishers” and an Art Procurement Program to fund the creation of local art for public buildings. *(ibid.)* The approach to cultural policy that embraces the civil/communicative discourse of the public sphere thus far seems entirely positive, then. So what could possibly be lost in adopting such an approach? Perhaps the most prominent danger in fully embracing this discourse is that it will ultimately lead to parochial and flawed decision-making. Fostering the development of the local artistic community is of course an admirable endeavor, but not when it leads to naval-gazing. Peckford's excessively inward-looking government was clearly guilty of this when it

completely missed the opportunity to develop a provincial television station in the early 80s. Rompkey writes, “Peckford deflected a proposal for a cultural and educational broadcasting authority on the model of Radio-Quebec and TVOntario in 1983 when cabinet rejected a draft for a white paper on communications.” (p. 274) Fully embracing this globally popular medium would have no doubt required a certain relinquishing of the centrality of the unique folk tradition in NL cultural policy. But instead of rejecting television altogether as an aspect of NL cultural policy, Peckford might have accepted the reality of the medium's popularity and attempted to work within its confines. Admittedly, practically every television station must broadcast mainstream material in order to stay afloat. But, surely, a provincial television station that occasionally broadcasts culturally relevant material amidst the mainstream material is better than the alternative. Instead, Peckford chose to ignore these new realities and, thus, left NL cultural policy on the margins of society.

McGuigan writes, “the civilizing force of rational-critical debate – what the public sphere is about – has contributed historically to a liberalization of the economy that may eventually threaten civil society itself as the space between state power and exclusively market relations.” (p. 53) Another problem with the civil-communicative discourse, then, is its amorphousness. Once adopted by a government, it risks losing the character and sense of purpose that it had developed in the public sphere. The notion of the public sphere itself then becomes somewhat cheapened, as it implies that these artists must remain in relative obscurity if they are to retain their authenticity. This problem of the

civil-communicative discourse losing its authentic character is evident in the history of NL, as leadership transferred from Brian Peckford to Clyde Wells in 1989.

The Wells government was the first to outwardly prioritize market discourse (McGuigan, p. 47) in the development of a NL cultural policy. Explicit economic justifications became integral to any and all arts funding in the province. This market-based approach to cultural policy essentially continued with the Tobin administration from 1996-2000 and the Williams administration from 2003-2010. (Bill, p. 101) The market form of cultural policy discourse tends to encourage the development of major, high profile festivals and events that are meant to pull dollars into the local economy and hopefully attract tourists. The positive side of this discourse is obvious in that if the festivals become popular, then a lot of money is indeed brought into the local economy. A quintessential example of this type of economic success is Toronto's Luminato Festival. (Levin & Solga, 2009, p. 41) Of course, one can be justifiably skeptical about how these profits are allocated, especially when the festival's main sponsor is the corporate cosmetics giant L'Oréal. *(ibid.)* Nevertheless, it must be admitted that these popular festivals are often quite beneficial for the provincial economy. But this type of market discourse can also lead to a managerialization (McGuigan, p. 46) of cultural policy in which public agencies begin to function like private businesses. This can be seen in the case of Cabot 500, which was a major event envisioned by the Wells government and ultimately staged in 1997 to celebrate the 500th anniversary of John Cabot's discovery of NL. The Wells government “established a free-standing corporation

to manage an ambitious range of public events" (Rompkey, p. 276) called the John Cabot 500th Anniversary Corporation. While some might look upon this positively as the arrival of private sector efficiency in the public sector, it did not work out particularly well. The corporation was "marginalized in response to suggestions of mismanagement and political cronyism, to be replaced by a new structure formed within the public service." *(ibid.)* When public sector agencies start forming private sector entities, there is reason to worry that government might be losing sight of its mandate. The profit motive is not meant to be the main driver of government activity – that is what the private sector is for. In forming the Cabot 500 corporation, the Wells government was declaring that its cultural policy decisions will be made purely with the financial bottom line in mind.

To be fair, as a news release from the NL Tourism, Culture and Recreation department dated November 13, 1997 notes, Cabot 500 was an economic success. "The goal of 60,000 extra non-resident tourists is on target," the document notes. But it also goes on to note that "benefits [of Cabot 500] were not evenly distributed to all regions of the province. It was acknowledged that while St. John's and parts of other regions did well, some regions reported disappointing results." ("Tourism Summit", 1997) Garcia warns that these ephemeral cultural events are often "not framed in an assessment of long term cultural legacies or coherent strategies that seeks to secure a balanced spatial and social distribution of benefits." (2004, p. 313) The Wells government's hasty excitement about developing the Cabot 500 project ultimately caused it to overlook many neglected areas of the province that could have benefited

from a more holistic cultural policy. Garcia notes that Glasgow made some of the same mistakes in the 1990s by failing to "establish partnerships and workforce structures that could survive the year and be applied, on a smaller scale, outside a major event hosting process." (p. 319) It seems that the Wells government failed to think beyond the 1997 event itself – what would it lead to? How could the Cabot 500 infrastructure be used in the future? Ephemerality was clearly privileged over sustainability in the Wells cultural policy. As a result, just like Glasgow, "decisions were often made on the basis of potential business returns, media coverage and tourist appeal rather than community development and self-expression." *(ibid.)*

This point about neglected self-expression is an important one because it is entirely possible that many Newfoundland and Labradorians were not necessarily all that interested in celebrating John Cabot in the first place. Perhaps they were interested in alternate imaginings and different ways of remembering their province. People would have valid reasons for not being overly enthusiastic about exalting the figure of John Cabot. After all, when he discovered NL, his expedition was being financed by the notoriously greedy and corrupt Henry VII. The king's orders to Cabot were to discover "whatsoever islands, countries, regions or provinces of heathens and infidels, in whatsoever part of the world placed, which before this time were unknown to all Christians." ("John Cabot", 2010) Many current residents of NL might not be so enthusiastic about celebrating Cabot's discovery of the province if they were made aware of this patronizing discourse and Cabot's questionable motives. And these

residents could hardly be blamed for their skepticism. Nevertheless, the Wells government made no room for asking tough questions and exploring this messy history. Instead, Cabot's discovery was merely exalted as a wonderful moment in NL history. Market-based cultural policy discourse might bring in money, then, but often at the cost of denying sustainability and silencing critical viewpoints.

The arrival of Brian Tobin as Premier of NL in 1996 ensured the continuation of a market-based cultural policy discourse. Tobin was bent on the “commodification of the nostalgic and the picturesque with proposals for new buildings and spectacles, not for artists and arts organizations.” (Rompkey, p. 278) No doubt, Tobin's policies produced some positive developments for NL, namely The Rooms, a beautiful cultural facility in St. John's that houses the province's museum, art gallery and archives. (Bill, p. 104) Much controversy surrounded the construction of The Rooms once it was announced that it would be built on the site of Fort Townshend. Fort Townshend was constructed by the British military in the 18th century in order to protect St. John's from attack by sea and land. (Latta, 2005, p. 19) As Fort Townshend began to deteriorate, it was buried underground for preservation. Archaeologists began to worry that the construction of The Rooms would destroy the historic remains beneath it. (Latta, p. 30) But Tobin's officials insisted that The Rooms would leave Fort Townshend unscathed and intact for future investigation. The archaeologists ultimately lost their battle and The Rooms was constructed atop the Fort Townshend burial ground. In light of this development, a quote from a paper by Malcolm Miles is particularly appropriate: “the wish locally to bury the

facts of a past which had become inconvenient and to superimpose a new, sanitised, marketable image of the city required not a critical social history... but a bland, self-congratulatory hype." (2005, p. 902) It seems to me that whether or not Fort Townshend has remained unscathed, the fact that The Rooms was literally constructed on top of a buried artifact of cultural significance is devastatingly symbolic. Setting the practical considerations about preservation aside, how could the Tobin administration have remained ignorant to the symbolic gesture that it was making by building The Rooms on top of Fort Townshend? Surely, a government should never want to appear as if it is burying the facts of its province's past. Admittedly, this history of British colonialism is not exactly rosy and delightful. But it is history nonetheless and it should no doubt be openly incorporated by government into its cultural policy rather than stifled and, literally, buried.

Amidst all of the success of The Rooms, one must also consider: who is being excluded? The museum's newest exhibit, Fantastic Sea Monsters, is fairly typical of its programming. ("The Rooms", n.d.) The exhibit looks impressive and clearly has high production values, but it is also not exactly probing NL's cultural heritage in any kind of deep, critical manner. Granted, most visitors would likely say that they do not go to a museum to encounter a deep and critical examination of anything. On the contrary, they would much rather encounter the kind of fluff entertainment that Fantastic Sea Monsters so effectively provides. But perhaps this is largely because of an unfortunate consensus that critical art must necessarily be unentertaining. If an institution is not actively working

on the cultivation and refinement of critical art, then of course this negative stereotype will be forever allowed to perpetuate. Levin and Solga write that this move away from the critical and toward a generalization of the arts often results in “a coercive, if often unintentional, censorship of those individuals and practices that could not easily be integrated into the community’s sense of itself and its public goals.” (2009, p. 44) But this lack of intentionality is often the biggest problem in that the fact that certain artistic voices are being silenced is never brought to the attention of the NL community. The culturally inclusive facade provided by The Rooms persists and people fail to protest. And, thus, the talented but frustrated artists of NL more often than not leave home. A good example is the critically acclaimed Toronto-based conceptual artist Don Simmons, originally from St. John's. Simmons' work “addresses problematic concepts encouraging debate, discussion and discourse” and has been exhibited at galleries in major cities all across Canada. (“Info”, n.d.) But it seems that critically interrogative work such as Simmons' could never be exhibited at The Rooms. Worse, it seems that such a creative and boundary-pushing artist cannot thrive in the NL cultural environment at all and must move elsewhere to find acceptance.

The *Creative Newfoundland and Labrador* policy document released in 2006 under premier Danny Williams again demonstrates the risks of taking a market-based approach to cultural policy discourse. The document at first attempts to conceal its overt economic agenda by talking about the intrinsic benefits of the arts, e.g. cognitive growth, pleasure, social bonds. The instrumental benefits of the arts are then

mentioned, with improved test scores, health and well-being and learning skills being given as examples. The reason why Belfiore and Bennett call this distinction between the intrinsic and instrumental value of the arts a “false and sterile dichotomy” (2007, p. 148) becomes quite clear while reading through the policy document's examples. For instance, if cognitive growth is an intrinsic benefit, then it must also be an instrumental benefit because it is essential for improved test scores. But there is nothing particularly objectionable about this construction – at least the government is talking about the value of the arts. The objectionable part comes in when the document starts making statements like “government recognizes that a very important consideration in the full spread of elements making up the complex cultural sector is the contribution of our cultural *industries* and creative *enterprises*.” (emphasis added, p. 36) and “[it is the] government’s belief that investment in culture makes sound business sense.” (p. 37) Sound business sense is all well and good, but what about sound cultural sense?

> One price to be paid for a creative economy... is the downgrading of efforts to develop the cultural and creative industry sectors themselves, however half-hearted this attempt has sometimes appeared, in favour of seeing them primarily as an input into other economic activities. (Oakley, 2009, p. 407)

This problematic “spill-over” approach to cultural policy is evident in the 2006 Williams government policy document. On page 38, a graphic is presented that groups culture together with tourism, manufacturing, fisheries, agrifoods and IT. There is nothing wrong with attempting to gain economic value from cultural policy initiatives, but when culture is grouped in with industries that are so exclusively instrumental, the very notion of culture itself becomes lost. Under this model, the objective of cultural policy is

merely to facilitate a kind of “creativity spill-over” into the “real economy.” (Oakley, p. 407) With the economic objectives foregrounded so exclusively, the potentially artistic, creative components of a government's cultural policy initiatives will likely never reveal themselves. Perpetuating this market-based discourse that justifies investment in culture because it makes “sound business sense” is absolutely appropriate for someone who wants to use the arts merely as a means to make money. But for those who feel that the arts should be supported for reasons other than financial gain, market-based cultural policy discourse might be somewhat objectionable.

Newfoundland and Labrador, for better or worse, has experienced the three major forms of cultural policy discourse that McGuigan identifies: state, market and civil/communicative. Although my personal opinions with regard to each form of cultural policy were perhaps not entirely well-disguised, I have attempted to deliver an objective assessment of the pros and cons of each approach. But what seems clear is that cultural policy can be used in a malleable way to support many different positions. Perhaps a money-loving, arts-hating citizen who is made aware of the economic success of Cabot 500 would suddenly find market-based cultural policy discourse quite appealing. Likewise, it would behoove an arts-loving citizen to be made aware of the limitations of unchecked civil/communicative discourse. But an understanding of the history is necessary for any of these nuanced realizations. Fort Townshend was buried. Newfoundland and Labrador's cultural policy history should not be allowed to suffer the same fate.

REFERENCES

Belfiore, E. and Bennett, O. (2006). Rethinking the Social Impacts of the Arts, *International Journal of Cultural Policy 13*(2), 135-151.

Bill, R. (2009). Culture vs. Policy vs. Culture: The Evolution of Cultural Policy in Newfoundland and Labrador, 1967-2007. *Newfoundland and Labrador Studies, 24*(1), 91-109.

Creative Newfoundland and Labrador: The Blueprint for Development and Investment in Culture. (2006). 1-55. PDF file.

Garcia, B. (2004). Cultural Policy and Urban Regeneration in Western European Cities: Lessons from Experience, Prospects for the Future, *Local Economy, 19*(4), 312-326.

Info. (n.d.). Retrieved on April 1, 2011, from http://www.donsimmons.net/info.html

John Cabot. (2010). Retrieved on April 1, 2011, from http://www.heritage.nf.ca/exploration/cabot.html

Latta, P. (2005). Contested Space: A Place on the Way to Collaborative Government? *Ethnologies, 27*(2), 17-42.

Levin, L. and Solga, K. (2009). Building Utopia: Performance and the Fantasy of Urban Renewal in Contemporary Toronto, *TDR: The Drama Review, 53*(3), 37-53.

McGuigan, J. (2004). Discourses of Cultural Policy, in Rethinking Cultural Policy, Maidenhead: Open University Press, 33-60.

Miles, M. (2005). Interruptions: Testing the Rhetoric of Culturally Led Urban Development, *Urban Studies 42*(5/6), 889-911.

Newfoundland National Convention. (n.d.). In *Wikipedia*. Retrieved on April 1, 2011, from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Newfoundland_National_Convention

Oakley, K. (2009). The Disappearing Arts: Creativity and Innovation After the Creative Industries, *International Journal of Cultural Policy, 15*(4): 403-413.

Rompkey, R. (1998). The Idea of Newfoundland and Arts Policy Since Confederation. *Newfoundland Studies, 14*(2), 266-281.

The Rooms Provincial Museum. (n.d.). Retrieved on April 1, 2011, from http://www.therooms.ca/museum/

Tourism Summit focuses on Cabot 500 Year. (1997). Retrieved on April 1, 2011, from http://www.releases.gov.nl.ca/releases/1997/tcr/1113n05.htm