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“DEFENDING THE UNDEFENDABLE”!

Chair, members of the Council for College and University English –

When Helen Small asked me to give this talk, she invited me to tackle the question of how you, as teachers of English, give a “better account of the values of what you do first to the government, second to the public.” (Having given the subject some thought, I would say that there is a third group that needs addressing, and that is your fellow academics! But more of that later!)

She added that the task of explanation was made more acute by the demands of RAE that future research work must demonstrate impact or social benefit. (“Ah Mr Shelley, feeling a bit down it seems to me. You can’t expect anyone else to be interested in this stuff can we?”)

Now this is a tall order for you as an intellectual and professional grouping, and still more for me as an outsider. That is why I choose the title “Defending the Undefendable!” What do I mean by this? I take it to mean that the terms of the proposition that you face – “show us that your values are worthwhile? Show us that what you do has an impact!” – are so rigged, so biased, so prejudiced, that they are intended to make a reasoned defence impossible. (Never forget that politics is at play here.)What you do, in these terms, cannot be defended.

But it is imperative that your values, practices and disciplines should be defended . They may be hard to defend – “undefendable” – but they can be defended for they are, must be , “defensible”. That is what I shall try to set out this morning.

Let me do so first by taking you along the path, a very similar path, that the arts world traced during the 13 years of New Labour. May 1997 was a moment of Wordsworthian ecstasy. “Bliss was it in that morning to be alive, but to be New Labour was very heaven!” And as the clearly etched outlines of the New Labour project made themselves clear, what picture of society was drawn? It was of “Cool Britannia”, where the now and the new trampled over the then and the old; where the barely understood structures of “Creative Britain” were held up as the next wave of economic success. It was a nation where the public and social values of the incoming government were signalled by the guest lists of the opening parties at Downing Street. New Labour’s new establishment consisted of celebrities from the world of showbiz, rock and pop.

Did it matter who basked in New Labour’s favour and glory in those days? Yes and for this reason. There was no one from the arts world. None, it seemed was either recognised or approved of. They had no place in New Labour’s Britain. Which was at least consistent, for the very notions of “Cool Britannia “ – rooted in the modish and fashionable - or “Creative Britain – rooted in activities such as film tv, games, fashion design and video - either positively excluded the arts or ignored their contribution. Where were the arts in New Labour’s world view? At best pushed off into the dusty

corner cupboard labelled “heritage”, sellable to gullible foreigners. Absorbed, valued, respected - no, dismissed as “elitist”.

Just how huge was the barrier of acceptability that the arts had to surmount with New Labour became clear in May 1998 with the publication of “Creative Britain”, speeches and essays by the Secretary of State for Culture, Chris Smith. Why were culture and creativity good? Because they made a healthy society. Why is the English language valuable? Because it gives us influence abroad? Why are creative industries valuable? Because they make money. Are the arts creative? No answer. Can everyone be creative or are only artists entitled to that description? Yes, everyone is creative. Is artistic creation – supposing it is recognised - somehow distinctive and worthy of special attention? No answer. Is there a distinction between so-called high and low art? The Secretary of State declined to make value judgements. As a collection of thoughts from the Trade and Industry Secretary these were unimpeachable. As a credo from the Culture Secretary, they read as lacking conviction and evasive. And they were avoiding something – any engagement with the arts world as such.

There was worse to come. In October 1998, the new Chairman of the Arts Council, Gerry Robinson, gave his inaugural lecture as chair. Inevitably, as Chairman of the Granada Group with a strong background in hospitality, Robinson was expected to put his managerial beliefs on the line. He wasted no time in doing just that. “We will no longer tolerate an assumption too widely held across the arts in the past that artistic excellence is somehow a substitute for proper management or that sound financing is somehow too vulgar to be a concern!” Robinson was sick to death of what he called “an assembly of wish lists from every part of the arts constituency. We’ve seen that before and what a waste of effort it was”. What was the new Chairman of the Arts Council calling for from the arts organisations under his wing? It was very clear - “A limited number of deliverable priorities!” Forget the dreams, forget the visions, forget the ideas - they are not measurable. Just give me “deliverable priorities”.

To be fair, Gerry Robinson recognised that the arts did have a role in supporting the spiritual and physical well being of society. If you wanted urban regeneration – call in the arts. If you needed jobs created – call in the arts. If you were looking for healthier patients, more imaginative children, greater care for the distressed old – call in the arts. So in the New Labour view, the arts were indeed very useful. But only for what they could do, not for what they were. In short instrumentalism and managerialism were the nostrums for an arts world which was regarded as being badly run, self-indulgent, exclusive, elitist and more concerned with keeping people out than getting audiences in. A year into New Labour, the outlook for the arts, the understanding of them, the inclination to attempt to understand them, was at a very low ebb.

What followed was a thirteen year long struggle to reverse that flow, to challenge entrenched positions, to counter prejudices, to expose instrumentalism, to adapt and change managerialism. The arts would took head on its critics and set out to expose their inaccuracies, their false assumptions, their admitted or sometimes unadmitted prejudices. It would be a struggle- it was..

Now at this point in the narrative, I must make a disclaimer and introduce a parenthesis. First, the disclaimer. Many people in the arts world were involved in the intellectual and ideological campaign – certainly all the leaders of the major arts organisations. It would not have succeeded – for succeed it did – had the debate about the limitations of the instrumentalist and managerialist agenda not

been conducted in many forums, many ministers' offices, many trustee board rooms the length and breadth of the land. But for the purposes of this narrative, I illustrate the argument with words that I used from articles I wrote at the time. In using my own words rather than those of others, I claim no more than that they are my own and were said and used at the time. In other words I can vouch for their place in the narrative. They are not better or more valuable than anyone else's but they are mine.

Now the parenthesis. Ever since I have been an administrator or manager in the fields of journalism and the arts I have always insisted on sound financial practice as a necessary condition of receiving public funding. Arts bodies must be business-like in their practices; this does not make them like businesses, for they are not and cannot be. But they must learn and use the skills of management to make the best art out of the funding available. "Managerialism" is a bogus ideology that affects the belief that if only strict management rules are applied, regardless of the nature of the organisation, success will be guaranteed. But management skills – and they are skills - are tools to use as appropriate not a punitive instrument on the supposedly reluctant.

Similar reservations surround the notion of "instrumentalism", the idea that the arts are valuable because they are beneficial socially and economically. Of course, the arts do, in practice, provide huge observable social and environmental benefits. But they do so only if they are excellent in their own terms first. "Instrumentalism" - to use management talk - is an "outcome" - it cannot be a "driver".

So back to the narrative. During the following months, as I prepared a collection of essays called "Art Matters", I decided that I could hardly shy away from my own definition of what the arts are about. This is what I wrote in mid 1999.

"The arts matter because they are universal; because they are non-material; because they deal with daily experience in a transforming way; because they question the way we look at the world; because they offer different explanations of that world; because they link us to our past and open the door to the future; because they work beyond and outside routine categories; because they take us out of ourselves; because they make order out of disorder and stir up the stagnant; because they offer a shared experience rather than an isolated one; because they encourage the imagination and attempt the pointless; because they offer beauty and confront us with the fact of ugliness; because they suggest explanations but no solutions; because they present a vision of integration rather than disintegration; because they force us to think of the difference between the good and the bad, the false and the true. The arts matter because they embrace, express and define the soul of a civilisation. A nation without arts would be a nation that had stopped talking to itself, stopped dreaming, had lost interest in the past and lacked curiosity about the future".

You will see that I deliberately pushed the argument as far as I could in the direction diametrically opposite to the instrumentalists and managerialists. My words, ideas, phrases, notions, images would neither be recognised nor accepted by them. Indeed they would reject them as "typical arty talk". But that is the point. You cannot win the argument if the terms, the concepts, the vocabulary are determined by your opponents, for make no mistake, opponents they are. To try to conduct the argument in the vocabulary chosen by someone else from an alien discipline is to surrender the battleground and the best weapons to the other side before you begin. To win you must use your own weapons, your own terms and your own vocabulary. And you should be ready for a scrap.

Gratifyingly, many colleagues in the arts said they found my attempt at a definition not only accurate and recognisable but it heartened and encouraged them in their individual campaigns to get funders to talk about the arts in terms that were relevant to the activity.

Not long after “Art Matters” was published, a local authority leader observed in friendly terms that my definition was no doubt all very well but it was quite irrelevant to him and what he had to do. In a spirit of accommodation, I then attempted another answer to the question of why arts matter with the politician in mind. It went like this:

“The arts matter because they are local and relevant to the needs and wishes of local people. They help citizens to express their needs and to clothe them in memorable forms. They offer a way of expressing ideas and wishes that ordinary politics do not allow. The arts are immediate, intense and owned by the people who create them. The arts regenerate the rundown and rehabilitate the neglected. Arts buildings lift the spirits, create symbols that people identify with and give identity to places that may not have one. The arts teach the young how to create, inspire the imagination and believe in their own potential. Where the arts start jobs follow, jobs which are individualistic, independent and forward looking. Anywhere that neglects the arts short changes the people.”

In writing that statement in that way I was ready to flirt with instrumentalism but only on the basis of a prior belief in the absolute quality of the arts activity themselves. Once again there was no compromise with language and terms that belonged to others and which could be manipulated and used against us.

The debate raged for the better part of the decade that New Labour was in power. For most of that time, Labour Culture Secretaries stuck to their instrumentalist agenda – “we will fund the arts so long as you can show how useful to society you are!” This was supported by the solid drum beat from the Treasury “prove to us that the arts are useful!”.

The response of the arts world was two fold - it cascaded government with evidence that the arts were instrumentally effective in schools, hospitals, societies, communities, the environment and so on. If they wanted instrumental proof they could have it., Even as we collected and collated the numbers we knew they would never be enough - the Treasury’s default mechanism is always to say, “Not enough! Give us more!” At the same time the arts world invariably added that these benefits only existed if the arts underling them were of absolute quality and valuable in their own terms, in their own way. It was because the artistic activity was excellent and useless that it had – ultimately - any utility at all.

For much of the time there seemed to be a dialogue of the deaf; each side fired its assumptions past the other with a mighty whooshing sound of indifference. Then something cracked. The politicians did. Word got around that the Secretary of State for Culture Media and Sport, Tessa Jowell, was writing a pamphlet about her arts credo. Interesting. Then, the word was that it would be a “personal” pamphlet not one officially representing government policy. Very interesting.

It was published in May 2004. There was a huge change of tone from anything previously uttered by a New Labour minister. “The argument for public subsidy rests above all on the desire that all, not just a minority, should have access to the thrill of engagement with great art.” Ministers had had to

spend too much time justifying spending on the arts in instrumental terms, “explaining it or in some instances almost apologising for our investment in culture in terms of something else.” This was well put even if it overlooked the fact that ministers spoke in instrumentalist terms not because they were forced to but because that was what they had chosen to do. In truth, she declared, “culture for what it does in itself...culture that is of the highest standard it can be at the heart of the government’s core agenda, not as a piece of top down social engineering but a bottom up realisation of possibility and potential” - is a key weapon in “slaying the sixth dragon,” which she had defined as poverty of aspiration. And finally “excellence has to be at the heart of cultural subsidy”. There, she had said it. “Culture for what it does in itself” is essential – “art for art’s sake” in other words, the very concept that New Labour had kept at bay for almost a decade. Of course such a ministerial recantation had to be couched in a “personal statement”. The Treasury would never have allowed such thoughts to appear under HMG’s imprimatur.

There was one more political recantation to come, from the Prime Minister himself, Tony Blair, who had kept his distance from the arts very public and very clear. (At the famous Number Ten Culture Summit in June 1998, Tony Blair promised to “write the arts into Labour’s core script” but never did!) Now on March 6, 2007, it was time to rewrite history, time to claim a legacy of supporting the arts that was at best questionable . If no one else would credit him with creating Britain’s burgeoning arts scene, he would have to do it himself. In the presence of most of Britain’s top arts supremos at Tate Modern, , the Prime Minister hailed Britain’s cultural scene as “spectacular”. Arts and culture in the United Kingdom were, he said, “more confident, more assertive, more creative and alive than a decade ago”. Government funding of the arts, he pointed out, had doubled in the decade; it was now on a stable three year basis, and where new investment had been made – as over free admission to museums, or investment in regional theatre - the results in increased attendances had been inspiring. In almost every area of the arts and culture, attendance, usage, visitors, ticket sales had increased. Over a decade, said Tony Blair, the arts had become an important part of what Britain had become. “You, the arts,” he said, “were going to be of fundamental importance to the country”.

Tony Blair thanked the nation’s “architects, dancers, actors and directors, artists, musicians, the curators, the custodians of heritage” for their creativity. He praised the model of cultural support developed in Britain where – as he put it - “public subsidy permits risk taking. A new breed of entrepreneurial leaders in the arts world has shown that art of the highest quality is compatible with sound financial discipline. Public subsidy produces a return!”

This was heady stuff, or should have been. The heavily praised arts supremos murmured as they left, “very nice but a bit late!” Valuing the arts for their own sake was not seen as a government priority at the beginning of their term, rather the reverse. If it was a part of the Blair legacy, then it had been achieved and acquired through the efforts and beliefs of others.

Like the Thirty Years War, a final truce in this culture war was called on January 2008. In his report commissioned by the Department for Culture , Media and Sport, the former Director of the Edinburgh Festival , Sir Brian McMaster, stated that the purpose of arts subsidy should be “Supporting Excellence in the Arts”. The Report was sub titled: “From Measurement to Judgement”. The very first section of the Report was given over to the notion of “Excellence”; the

second to “Innovation and risk taking”. In his conclusion, McMaster started that “a greater sense of what excellence is within public discourse is required”.

In writing as he did, McMaster was in the great English tradition of the practical. In David Gilmour’s wonderful biography of Guiseppe di Lampedusa, author of “The Leopard”, he notes that Lampedusa loved Dr Johnson, and his embodiment of “the country least governed by logic”. “In any other country” – wrote Lampedusa – “Johnson’s learning would have forced him to espouse a philosophy. In England he could do without; he was a pure empiricist”.

With three mighty strokes of empiricism, McMaster despatched the ideological demons of instrumentalism, numerical objectives and relativism to the back of the class. It has been a battle, a long battle but it had been won.

I have set out this chronology at some length because I think it useful for you to judge your own campaign – whatever it turns out to be -against the experience of the arts world in its long running engagement with bureaucratic evasion and political cowardice.

My own conclusions from this engagement are as follows. First, do not speak in a language that is not your own. The language of management is fine - just about - for the world of management. It cannot be suitable for the world of the humanities. Any attempt to justify or explain the practice of the humanities through the formulations of business school are doomed to failure. Second, make your case in your own terms and in your own language even or especially when your funders or stakeholders say they do not understand you. It is your duty to explain, their duty to understand, but you must make the demand of them. Third, be ready for an argument. Explain why the notion of “impact” in justifying research is fatally flawed ; explain that telling lies – sorry, stretching the case! - about the “impact” of your research when you know there will be none in the terms desired yields poor research and delivers no impact. But you must say it again and again. Fourth, turn the argument back on your interlocutors. Demand that they paint a picture of the humanities research scene were they to abide strictly by notions of “impact” and ignore other creative research activity. Just what are the consequences of taking such a position. Demonstrate those pieces of research which have changed the way we think but whose potential “impact” could never have been imagined. Fifth, this is an intellectual war. Compromising your own principles, beliefs and positions involves surrender. Sixthly, I think you should call yourselves the “Useless Disciplines” as a badge of pride and as a direct challenge to those who act as if they think you are useless but dare not say so in so many words. Well, let them take up the challenge. What would they do with a sector that openly prides itself in “being useless”. Finally, you can win but only if you want to. You must believe in what you do and stand for; realise that the other side do not.

Since I started thinking about this address, university funding has become the issue of the moment. For everyone in this room, perhaps the most crucial element of the whole university funding package is the total removal of the teaching grant for the arts humanities and social sciences. More and more I find myself asking how such a revolutionary change had taken place? Who debated it? Where was it debated? Where was the decision taken and by whom?

To be fair when Sir Adam Roberts spoke at the AGM of the British Association in July 2010, he called for a share in the debate about cuts to “ensure that the humanities and social sciences are properly recognised in the life of this country”. All the right things were said. Vince Cable told Vice Chancellors on July 15 that “what my father used to describe as ‘arty-farty’ subjects feed into the rapidly growing and successful industries such as creative design, publishing and music. Many employers simply want people to who can think clearly which is why study of philosophy or history or classics is a lot more than an interesting diversion”.

Then he ended, rather defensively you might think, “An essentially utilitarian take on universities doesn’t necessarily mean philistinism!” Equally defensively, David Willetts said, “There is absolutely no desire on the part of government to pick on arts, humanities and the social sciences as somehow of less value than other disciplines; we have not fallen prey to the belief in that kind of reductionism.”

So where and how was the decision reached to remove teaching funding for Price Groups C and D? Where did the debate Adam Roberts called for about according the arts and humanities a far lower priority than the STEM subjects take place? In the Browne report, Section 6.2 addresses the targeting of public investment on the teaching of priority subjects. There is no reference to the ending of the teaching grant for the arts and humanities and therefore no explanation - except on the general grounds of public priority – of why this is a sensible step to take.

Perhaps inevitably, this question is even more remote in the Comprehensive Spending Review which notes only that it will “prioritise current spending which helps deliver outcomes that support growth”.

It was only on October 26, facing a Commons Committee, that David Willetts, confirmed that the teaching grant for Bands C and D would be “all but wiped out”. This left the hapless spokesman for Universities UK protesting that the arts and humanities support the nation’s creative industries and that these contribute almost £60 billion to the economy”. But by then the game was up. It was too late. Which left me searching for the great debate about the place for teaching arts humanities and social sciences that somehow I had missed. Surely, there must have been one?

I have asked this question of many in the HE sector in recent weeks. I pass on two replies. The first observed: “The decision to down grade us was inevitable from the moment that higher education went to the Department for Business Innovation and Skills. Business priorities and values were bound to call the shots!”

The second –from within the HEFCE leadership – mused: “I suppose it was a departmental decision taken during the comprehensive spending review.” So was that where the great debate took place for surely it should have? But what, I pressed, did the Vice-Chancellors say about all this? He pulled a wry face.

Just how far behind the curve of the debate English universities are was made painfully clear only this week. In an otherwise admirable report on the relationship between universities and the creative industries, Universities UK regretted that the funding implications of the Browne Review

and the CSR “are in danger of damaging one of the few economic areas – creative industries – in which this country is an established world leader.” And they called for a “broader view of the subjects that deliver significant social returns as well as contributing significantly to the UK’s economic growth”. It recommended that disciplines that support the creative economy should be identified as priority subjects and attract public investment for teaching. The report notes that in the government’s decisions on teaching funding, the arts humanities and social sciences are “excluded by implication!” But excluded nevertheless.

Now what should we make of that? The substance of the report as I indicated, is excellent. However the timing is rubbish leaving the leaders and VCs of UUK wringing their hands as the express train bearing the STEM subjects vanishes over the horizon. The Report understands the arguments they need to be made to restore at least the social sciences and some arts inside the well-funded tent of social utility. The question is how will the VCs deploy these arguments in the pitched battles of Whitehall and Westminster that are still to be fought?

And of course the pure humanities such as yourselves are still out of the frame. Though UUK feels its way towards a tentative understanding of absolute value when they speak of “knowledge that is created and subsequently disseminated for exploitation and use by others, even if not codified!”

Clearly, the downgrading of the value of arts, humanities and social sciences in the new pattern of university financing leaves you a still greater challenge. You must take on the debate within your own institutions as well as with government, business, industry, and your future students. This changes nothing of what I believe you will need to do and say if you are to keep your place in the intellectual, artistic, creative part of society and the country. The task is bigger, the environment you face slightly worse. But it is your task, your battle. Only you can fight it, only you can win it. But you will have to fight.

End 4,613 words