



Arts & Humanities
Research Council

Cultural Value Project Launch Event, March 21st 2013

Audio Transcript

David Willetts

I'm sure you've all read my long, moody Cumbrian novels, haven't you?

[laughter]

Well, thank you very much Rick, for that introduction and it's great to be here and it's great to be here to celebrate the launch of this project, which I do think is of great significance. And it's going to, I hope, help us break free from a rather sterile debate, in which I personally have felt trapped and there may be other people in this room who've felt trapped as well.

On the one hand, we're told that our cultural activities are inherently worthwhile. They have a value in their own right, without any need for further qualification or investigation and in a sense that's true. I think that you *can* argue that proposition. It lasts about 90 seconds in the Treasury but you can certainly argue it and I think all of us here believe that there *is* something of fundamental value in the arts, which doesn't need to be reduced to any other form of calculation, certainly not economic calculation.

Then on the other hand, we have these attempts at calculating some economic return from artistic activity and you end up measuring the number of tourists spending money in London as they come to the Southbank or whatever. And I myself have got caught up in this because there is an anxiety in the arts and humanities community, in particular, that somehow in what we're doing on research or universities, we don't value the humanities.

Now I think that fear is misplaced and I tend to address it by saying, 'Look, if you look at the funding across the different research councils, the Arts and Humanities Research Council, we're maintaining its cash funding in the same way as we're maintaining the other research councils. In the case of this research council, about £100 million a year. And when you look at our university reforms, actually the students in Band D, the students in the subjects that don't require expensive labs and equipment, for them we

are, if anything, increasing the resource behind each student. So there's more resource for teaching them than there was before.

But I do feel when I set out these arguments, that I'm supposed to be describing the architecture and I end up talking about the plumbing. And people think that those direct financial calculations of the commitment we show through our spending decisions don't capture the value and are rather mundane. So you've got on the one hand, these grandiose and sincere statements of fundamental value and on the other hand, these sometimes rather banal attempts at capturing specific economic returns and showing specific evidence of economic commitment.

What I hope that we're going to achieve, as a result of this project, is something that breaks free from those two stereotypes and does indeed and it requires all of us to shift our positions and open our minds and recognise that it is worth trying to measure value. We can't simply say it's completely inherent and worthwhile in its own right, but the ways we have been trying to measure it, so far, have lacked imagination and that's why they've in turn, I think, lacked purchase and bite and failed to communicate a sense of commitment - a commitment that I believe we genuinely possess.

So it's a really worthwhile project. I have to say, it does remind me: there is one parallel and I hope this isn't too crude a parallel but we've had a very interesting debate within government in the last year or two about the natural world and whether that should be valued. And I remember sitting in meetings with Caroline Spelman, who launched the programme, and Oliver Letwin and we were discussing the question: whether the value of the natural world was so fundamental we should just say that it's worthwhile in its own right. A meadow, a newt, whatever: these are things whose value is fundamental and can't be reduced to some economic calculation. And the view they took in DEFRA, increasingly, was that they *did* need to try to offer some way of measuring the value that we attach to it. We couldn't just say, 'All these things are fundamentally worthwhile in their own right' and indeed we've seen the product of that in a quite interesting document on valuing the natural world that came out only in the last couple of weeks.

So I hope this really is a productive way forward. And knowing that Geoffrey Crossick is going to be running the project gives me confidence it's going to be a productive way forward. I think it's a really interesting project. The number of people who've come here this evening to celebrate its launch tells us how interesting and important it's going to be and I really do look forward to its findings and hope that they provide a way in which the

arts, humanities, the cultural life of this country, can be celebrated in a way that economists can recognise without reducing it simply to economic calculation.

Thank you very much indeed.