



**CANADIAN CONFERENCE
OF THE ARTS**

**CONFÉRENCE CANADIENNE
DES ARTS**

**Towards a National Cultural
Advocacy Strategy:**

If There's a Will, There's a Way

REPORT ON THE 2008 CCA REGIONAL FORUMS

February 25, 2009

REPORT ON THE 2008 CCA REGIONAL FORUMS

1. Introduction
2. Context for the consultations
3. Areas of consensus:
 - a) The current state of affairs
 - b) Immediate priorities
 - c) The sector's needs
 - d) Expectations towards the CCA
 - e) The instruments for success
4. Conclusion

1. Introduction

In March 2008, the Board of Governors of the Canadian Conference of the Arts (CCA) decided to invite its members and stakeholders to participate in a collective reflection on the current capacity of the arts. The hope was to incite the culture and heritage sector to participate fully in the development of federal policies favouring its health and growth. The challenge was to engage in an active reflection of the sector in its current state, leading to a consensus building workshop in March 2009. Backed by original research, the process was to include a series of regional forums throughout the country, leading to a cultural strategy conference in the spring 2009 as one of the Chalmers Events.

In preparation for the Regional Forums, the CCA published two research reports. The first one, entitled *Making a Single Case for the Arts: An International Perspective*¹, investigates how other countries have addressed the status of their arts and culture sector. It analyzes those who have succeeded in developing a collaborative modus operandi among arts organizations in order to make a single case for the arts.

The second report, *The effects of Administrative Reforms on the Activities of Advocacy Groups*², looks at administrative reforms over the past 20 years, the impact of these reforms on the Canadian voluntary sector in general and the significance of these reforms for the arts and culture sector in particular. The report also examines how three other sectors of civil society are operating within this Canadian environment and what lessons the arts and culture sector could draw from differing sectors.

These documents, which are available free of charge on the CCA website³, were meant to provide a background for the discussions in the forums.

Between October and December 2008, the National Director of the Canadian Conference of the Arts invited its members and various stakeholders in arts and culture to a series of public forums. Forums took place between the October 17 and December 5 in the following cities: Ottawa, Vancouver, Edmonton, Calgary, Regina, Montréal, Toronto, Winnipeg, Saskatoon, Halifax, St. John's, Moncton, Charlottetown, and Fredericton.

To start a public discussion about the arts and culture sector, the following questions were asked:

¹ *Making a Single Case for the Arts: An International Perspective*, Research by Alexandra Slaby, Asst. Professor, Université de Caen.

² *The effects of Administrative Reforms on the Activities of Advocacy Groups*, Research by Pierre-André Hudon, in cooperation with the University of Ottawa's Centre on Governance.

³ <http://www.ccarts.ca/culturalstrategyworkshop.htm>

- What is the current climate within which the arts and cultural sector exists? How can we better work together, within and beyond the boundaries of the cultural sector, to position arts and culture on the public agenda?
- What should be our top priorities for the next two to three years?
- What instruments can we identify and develop to achieve those priorities?

2. Context of the consultation

The Regional Forums took place after a series of events, including a federal election, which nobody could have foreseen six months before and which made the theme of the CCA consultations very timely.

The announcement over the month of August of important budget cuts affecting the cultural sector; the way these cuts were made public, the mobilization they provoked, the public debate that ensued; the persistence of these issues during the federal election campaign and the impact they likely had over the results of the election, all this gave a particular relevance to the debate launched by the CCA. .

Finally, the emergence over the fall of a severe international economic crisis also heightened a sense of urgency that it is more important than ever for the sector as a whole to try to address long-standing challenges if it wants to improve its position on the public agenda, both in the short term and long term.

3. The areas of consensus

Over 430 people participated in the Regional Forums. Each group had a different composition, allowing conversations between artists, culture professionals, art service organization leaders and many more, in all major disciplines and in all regions except the Territories. While each conversation varied somewhat depending on the group's main interests, there were broad areas of consensus to be found across the whole spectrum.

Some may say that there is nothing new in these findings, the sector being apparently condemned, like Sisyphus, to eternally push the same rock up the hill. This may be so, but behind the areas of agreement, one can sense a real desire to seize the opportunity of current circumstances and to work together to change the situation in the long run. *If this will really exists*, the main question remains how this can be accomplished.

By discussing the current state of affairs throughout the Forums, the sector provided feedback outlining priorities which must be tackled. These priorities will be discussed below, followed by a short description of the needs of the sector, expectations towards the CCA and an outline of the tools which can be used to address the priorities and challenges we face. The following analysis outlines the findings from the Tour within this framework.

a) The current state of affairs

- i. Economy: The current economic environment presents unusual challenges and opportunities for the whole arts and culture sector in Canada. It is now more opportune than ever to invest in the creative economy as governments try to smoothen out the transition to the post-industrial economy. The arts and cultural sector is at the heart of the creative economy and can muster convincing arguments. How can it be more efficient in presenting them to decision-makers?
- ii. Image: There is general agreement that the recent federal election has shown the deep division that exists within Canadian society concerning the arts and culture sector. The most worrisome lesson of the last federal campaign is that a large number of citizens view arts and culture as a luxury and an urban elite's concern. Many perceive artists as parasites never satisfied with government handouts. This explains why, in difficult budgetary situations, whether at the school board, at City Hall or at higher levels of governments, budgets for arts and culture are the first targets for cuts and the last ones to benefit from the return of better days.

There are deep-rooted image problems for the whole sector which need to be addressed, some as quickly as possible, some requiring the development and implementation of long-term strategies. As short term solutions to this image problem, participants in the forums raised the necessity for a public relations campaign and mentioned that we should be particularly careful in the ways we intervene in public debates. There is no doubt that few people are conscious of the impact of artistic creation on their daily lives, from the music they listen to, to the shape of their favourite coffee mug.

Fewer still are aware of the contribution artists and cultural workers make to our society, not only in economic terms but also in sectors like health, education, social integration, rehabilitation, personal self-esteem, etc. Systematic PR campaigns may help in the short run to correct the image of artists, but the root of the problem goes deeper.

- iii. Education: Everyone agrees that repositioning arts and culture in our society must include a long-term strategy which involves the education systems. Arts training and appreciation in school curriculums is particularly important if the perception of culture in everyday life is to be changed. But it is not enough to include those activities in curriculums of all primary and secondary schools in the thirteen jurisdictions involved (no easy feat in itself!). It is just as essential to make the delivery of such programs economically viable through the development of a recruitment and training strategies which provide school boards with the means to offer such services to Canadian children.

It's well known that important issues are rarely urgent, but if we ever want to change the perception of arts and culture for the better within our society, there is a certain urgency to think long-term!

- iv. Unity: The arts and culture sector is rich and diversified and quite vigorous despite the many challenges facing it. Over the years, a large number of arts service organizations have been created to satisfy an ever increasing number of needs. At the local, provincial and national levels, one can identify dozens of organizations of all kinds, in every discipline, each one having its own umbrella organization according to language, province, etc.

This being said, few organizations have the wherewithal to push their interests effectively and most operate in a reactive fashion. In this scattering of efforts, with the multiplicity of specific interests and the fragmentation of messages, it becomes difficult to identify areas of common interest and to pursue them efficiently. Forum participants were unanimous on the need for greater unity of purpose if the sector as a whole wants to flourish.

- v. Coordination at all levels: There is general agreement on the lessons to be drawn from the review of the four foreign cases prepared as background material for the forums. It is not exclusively on Parliament Hill that the sector must focus its energy. Repositioning arts and culture starts in the local community and it must percolate through all levels of government. One finds a handful of multi-disciplinary organizations operating at the municipal level, alongside organizations like The Creative City Network and Les Arts et la Ville in Québec. At the provincial level, the cultural sector in Saskatchewan and Québec are the best tooled to identify areas of common interest and to develop strategies and actions in a coordinated fashion. In other jurisdictions, the situation varies considerably.

At the national level, the sector does not seem to have the proper means for consensus building around long-term objectives. Coalitions appear here and there, according to the needs of the moment. Some are active at the sub-sector level around interests that are more permanent but rarely

global. At the federal level, the CCA is the only multidisciplinary organization preoccupied with the totality of the sector but it does not have the means to deliver on the various expectations people have.

And while all agree with the idea that proper representation must be made at all levels of governments, starting at the grass-roots, there are neither permanent mechanisms to coordinate efforts to provide interveners with a coherent strategy nor the appropriate tools to make their case properly and more efficiently.

The challenges facing the Canadian arts and culture sector in this respect are complicated by geography, language, multiplicity of jurisdictions, regionalisms, turf wars and sometimes, personalities.

- vi. Information: Everywhere, people agreed that there is a need for more data and analysis concerning the arts and culture sector. There is currently a certain quantity of research done by various government agencies, administrative tribunals, universities and by some arts service organizations. Most of the time this work is done to satisfy punctual requirements. However, hardly any of this research is done in a coordinated fashion and it is almost impossible to know what is available. Even more importantly, years of successive budget cuts at Statistics Canada have meant that less and less fundamental data is made available to the sector to present fact-based arguments in its attempts to make its case to the various levels of government.

b) Immediate Priorities

The second question raised at the Forums asked what the short term priorities should be for the sector in general and for the CCA in particular. These are priorities which can be tackled by the CCA as part of its mandate, but should also act as guiding areas to direct the sector as a whole. It was clear in their breadth and scope that these priorities are not for one organization alone to address; instead, a coordinated effort on the part of the entire sector is required to promote priorities built on consensus.

- i. Creative Economy: Immediate preoccupations are obvious, the first one being how arts and culture will fare during the current economic crisis. Can decision-makers be convinced that arts and culture is a good area for investment, or will governments' support for the sector culture be cut further to give support to failing industries or to minimize budget deficits? How can we position arts and culture as we transit towards the creative economy?

In this regard, forum participants across the country expressed deep concerns about the recent cuts to federal budgets, particularly with regards

to supporting the development of markets abroad for our cultural expressions and the growth of new media Canadian cultural content. Funding and investment in arts and culture are therefore identified again as top priorities. In this regard, stakeholders are supportive of the “creative economy” approach taken by the CCA in its advocacy work over the past two years.

Other priorities identified more often concern the socio-economic situation of artists and creators as well as copyright.

- ii. The role of the Federal Government: In keeping with the economic health of the sector, participants to the discussions stated that amongst the current CCA priorities, reaffirming the role of the federal government in the arts and culture sector should be close to the top of the list. Given the silence of the Constitution on arts and culture, many are concerned about the possibility that Ottawa take the stance that this area of Canadian activity is not one of its responsibilities and is better devolved to the provinces.

c) The sector's needs

As mentioned before, in the wake of the events of the past six months, the first need identified by participants is to explore how the sector can work better together to influence decisions which impact it directly, whether at the federal or at other levels of government. The corollary to that objective is to improve the image of artists and cultural workers within Canadian society.

- i. Identify common objectives: All hope that we can break the current silos, rise above tunnel vision and establish the necessary mechanisms to identify areas of common interests.
- ii. Fact-based arguments: There is a recognized need for facts, statistics and research to argue both from a fact-based and a principled position to support the sector's policy issues.
- iii. Appropriate strategies: Everywhere, people recognized the need for coordinated strategies around a common message and common objectives. But speaking with one voice does not mean having only one organization attempting to represent everyone. What is suggested is better illustrated by a metaphor of a choir with many related melodic lines and registers. Another point mentioned often: be careful of whom we choose to carry the message, it being understood however that it will never be possible to control everybody!
- iv. Allies: Another point to bear in mind is the importance of seeking the support of other sectors of civil society. It is integral to develop better relationships with the business sector, education, trade, health services and

all other areas of activity where arts and artists make a meaningful contribution. The support from a spokesperson from one of these sectors has generally more impact with decision makers and the population at large than if the message originates from one of us.

- v. Training: The need for tools and training in advocacy were highlighted in almost every meeting. It was noted that during the election the CCA provided materials so that its members could advocate on their own behalf. The CCA was identified as a natural player in this endeavour and asked to provide the tools and, if possible, the training to help turn as many people as possible into efficient advocates for the arts within their communities and with decision-makers at all levels.

A priority for the sector also includes establishing a strong infrastructure to train future arts professionals, cultural leaders, creative producers, and artists. There is a sector-wide concern for succession planning as emerging professionals gain increased responsibility while a large portion of Canada's population ages out of the workforce.

d) Expectations of the CCA

- i. Advocacy: People have expressed an appreciation for the tools that the CCA provided during the last election but there is a call for more advocacy, communication material, and training.

The distinction the CCA makes between "lobby" and "advocacy" creates a certain ambiguity for those who rely on it to defend their interests in Ottawa. There is recognition of the fact that the CCA is limited by its current status as a government-supported charity and that, as such, it cannot act as a full-time lobbyist, even if it had the means to do so. Some believe that it could act as the national lobbyist for arts and culture and that it should seek to free itself from all public support. Others believe that the CCA's current status is preferable and that the responsibility for organizing lobby activities should be done some other way.

Concerning the sector's image problem, participants in a number of forums invited the CCA to put this item on its list of priorities and be at the centre of such a reflection to craft a message and a strategy. The goal is to show, not what artists and cultural workers demand from society, but rather what contributions they make to various aspects of Canadian life beyond the economic impacts highlighted during the federal campaign.

There are frequent clarifications asked about the respective roles of the CCA and of the Canadian Coalition for the Arts when it comes to providing the sector with the leadership. As a member of the Coalition, the CCA has

participated fully during recent months in a parallel reflection on the future and the specific role of the Coalition.

In any case, there is a general desire for more coordination with other components of the arts and culture sector and people expect that as a minimum, the CCA will play its traditional role as a catalyst to help identify the means and the process leading to greater unity of purpose in the identification and successful pursuit of common objectives.

- ii. National forum: There was an emphasis voiced for communication, dialogue, and debate as central to the CCA's mission. There is much appreciation of the fact that the CCA is the one organization which can bring all disciplines and walks of life together. This convener's role should be delivered through a variety of means, from national policy conferences and regional meetings, to teleconferences, and the new communication tools offered by the Internet.
- iii. Information and research: People turn naturally to the CCA for information and research on the representation of policy issues to decision makers. There is broad approval of the CCA developing partnerships with universities and appreciation of the CCA participating in Statistics Canada's advisory committees on culture and service industries.
- iv. Members' involvement: An important challenge facing the CCA is reconnecting with its constituencies in a meaningful way and engaging members and stakeholders in its broad activities. There is agreement that while CCA's mission is focused on the federal level of policy making, it should explore ways to connect with provincial and local level organizations in order to foster a sustained relationship. Expanding to the sector, in such a geographically diverse nation, it is deemed important that the sector connect across territory in order to present a unified whole to the public and government.

e) The instruments for success

- i. Mapping: A first step towards better coordination would be a preliminary mapping of the arts and culture sector. This would establish who does what in the areas of advocacy and policy development. The exercise of creating an inventory of resources would identify gaps and explore possible ways of filling them. It would ensure a better coordination of efforts. This would establish a visual framework through which to allocate a coordinated sector-wide effort.
- ii. Inclusion: One other strategic consideration which is the object of a broad consensus is that it is important to use an inclusive rather than an

exclusive definition of arts and culture (including heritage). Conversely, the sector must not fall into the trap of defining culture in so broad a way that it would become irrelevant to the issues facing the sector.

- iii. Unity and Partnerships: In terms of strategies to consider, there is a perceived need for the cultural sector to get its act together first and improve its internal cohesiveness and sense of purpose. Only then will it be possible to develop partnerships with other sectors of society (education, health, business, trade, labour, environment, civil society, etc.) who, as stakeholders of arts and culture, can help better position those issues on the public agenda.
- iv. Reconcile short and long-term objectives: The first challenge facing the sector is to keep preoccupied with the immediate priorities while at the same time initiating the processes to address neglected long-term issues. Does the sector have the resources to do both? What is the most efficient way of achieving this within the resources currently available?

4. Conclusion

Given the CCA's unique nature and mission, it seems natural that it should continue to pursue the broad-based discussions initiated in the Regional Forums. The expectation is for the CCA to take advantage of the momentum created over the past several months and to move forward in phases to enable nation-wide discussions, address fundamental questions, and take advantage of opportunities.

There is an obvious need for coordinated leadership in the arts and culture sector. The CCA will host these necessary discussions as the sector meets to develop consensus and long term strategies.