

## A Delicate Rebalance

[‘Rebalancing Our Cultural Capital’](#) by Peter Stark, Christopher Gordon and David Powell subtitled itself as ‘A contribution to the debate on national policy for the arts and culture in England’. This indicates the essentially optimistic and constructive tone of the self-funded and initiated project. I’ve certainly wondered when such a debate would really *start* in England, let alone get to the good stuff. It gives a robustly and very specifically researched perspective on the disparities between funding for the arts and culture in London and the rest of England, links that back to the defining moment in cultural policy in Jennie Lee’s White Paper of 1965, and makes a modest proposal of a time-limited lottery fund for regional production as a way of beginning a rebalancing.

‘Rebalancing’, as I shall call it, is an important piece of work that deserves serious consideration and inventive responses. It’s far from a ‘regions vs. London’ argument, and it’s vital the debate rejects win/lose scenarios and arts world infighting. If it kick-starts a discussion which enables us to move on fairly quickly from the maths to how and why policy works at a systemic level it will be a huge achievement.

That London receives a numerically disproportionate amount of funding per capita compared to the rest of England is hardly ‘breaking news’. We know it, and it’s long been tacitly accepted. The report leaves us in no doubt as to how deep-seated and large the disparity is, and how different from some other countries. It runs on the same tracks as other ‘data’ on the economy and power in this country, of course, which is why it’s so deeply ‘embedded’ that lottery funding has, more or less, followed treasury funding.

Though some might occasionally moan, groan or simply sigh, we rarely, fundamentally, think it can be rebalanced. But local and national government and their (our?) delegated funders should, as this report does, consider what they *could* control as well as what they *can’t*.

There’s so much to say about this paper and the discussion this blog could have been (was!) even longer, so I have concentrated my points under seven headings, each aimed to move out from the points made by the report. I’m not trying, here, to suggest specific solutions to the issue raised by the paper so will conclude with some questions.

- **Centralisation of decision-making and fund-holding.**

As we all know, ‘it ain’t what you do, it’s the way that you do it.’ England has decisively centralized decision-making power. ACE has over the last 10 years moved away from what Gerry Robinson described in 2002 as one of the intentions of creating a single organisation subsuming the Regional Arts Boards into ACE: ‘greater decision-making at regional level’. In this it currently reflects government policy that has abolished ‘regions’ at the same time as crippling local authorities. DCMS direct funding is absolutely centralized. (So much so, rumour has it the Secretary of State rings personally to tell you your funding is safe.)

Equal per capita spend is neither the end nor the means of arts funding, given the unequal distribution of audiences and philanthropic funders to name but two factors.

It will not necessarily mean equal per capita benefit. That is not to say the current imbalance is tenable, or properly productive. Without stronger localist and regionalist voices and powers, it is hard to see the overall pattern of funding, including local authorities, shifting. (Put crudely, more money for Manchester organisations decided in Teesside is unlikely to be as well spent as if people in or near Manchester decided it.)

Slightly more even patterns of decisions should not be the endgame, but more equitable creation and devolution of funds and of decision-making powers to local and regional levels. This would also create a productive dialogue with the centre and its proper roles, powers and overview. Centralised power reduces the tensions but also the products of the *creative* tensions.

- **Concentration of funding: money follows money**

This country also suffers horribly from what you might call ‘them that’s got shall get’ syndrome, and that’s as true in the cultural sector as elsewhere. The imbalance arises from the magnetic attraction of money to money proving impossible for willing people to overcome, more than ‘bias’ per se. Arts funding has become more concentrated, with those in receipt of funds asked to play wider roles than simply be themselves. A contrasting, though potentially riskier, approach would see funding spread to a more diverse range of organisations and places. More regionally situated organisations could also be asked to play national roles. Whatever the detail, the answer lies in determined will.

This winner takes all syndrome is particularly dangerous currently because the policy to require philanthropy to play a role universally doesn’t seem to fit with the reality of where philanthropists put their money. (90% in London, where the winners are.) It is already obvious to many that sooner or later something in that policy is going to have to give, although it may be at the cost of lots of organisations outside London.

- **The difficulty of rebalancing**

Rebalancing in anything other than a crudely mathematical way without engaging with those other systems is a devil of a thing to do, and has proved beyond the cultural sector’s means except, from time to time, in certain localities. Given the constraints of both Westminster and London Arts Village politics, the need for a national overview of artforms, the current concentration of artists and organisations in London (including not just the ‘nationals’, but smaller organisations and local infrastructure too) and a reluctance on the part of many artists/companies to run the perceived risk of basing themselves elsewhere.

It has, at times, been a deliberate policy of Arts Council to gradually shift the balance of its treasury investment to create a better balance between organisations based in London and other regions, but it has proved impossible. That was one of the drivers, for instance, around the attempts in 2007/2008 to rebalance the RFO portfolio, identifying ‘priority places’ outside of London, which ended with some shifts made, but a whole lot of egg on perhaps overly-determined ACE faces. (Including, I should note, my own as a member of the Executive Board at that time.) It will be interesting to see how the desire expressed yesterday to see some shift is, pun intended, balanced with the other imperatives of the upcoming NPO process.

(Is inertia, the 'a property of matter by which it continues in its existing state of rest or uniform motion in a straight line, unless that state is changed by an external force', more the issue here than 'bias? I recall, as a naïve Director of Arts in the North East, suggesting, during a national discussion of the introduction of a minimum grant threshold for RFOs, that a maximum of, say £10 or £15M should be introduced to help shift resources out of London. The national office artform directors present appeared to be on the verge of having me sectioned...)

This report is at pains to neither blame nor exonerate past or current governments or ACE leaderships. These are deep seated cultural issues in the broadest sense, far beyond the arts, and common sense dictates there will always be a major gap when looked at £ per capita, or if considered by, say, density of artists and funded infrastructure.

But whilst lack of progress has not been for the want of trying, the gap shown here is simply too large to be shrugged off unless we accept the underlying notion of [London as a City State](#) with the rest of England as almost literally 'another country'.

- **A City State + The Provinces or a Country of City Regions?**

England, to visitors and to those who live here, is defined by its capital, to a far greater degree than many other countries. Our economy is seen to revolve around the City of London, and to a very large extent does. Despite the BBC's determination to shift some things to Salford, our media, and much of their concerns, are London-centric. House prices in London exist in an insane microclimate of their own. What happens in regional economies is considered peripheral. We all allegedly benefit from the trickle down.

I find the lack of attention to place in the Arts Council's 'refreshed' 10 year strategy disappointing, some good initiatives notwithstanding. In keeping with the overarching 'political economy', England is now essentially seen as one space, with one centre, not many. The development of what Tony Butler described on Twitter yesterday as 'local self sufficient ecologies' seems a long way off. It would be a little unkind to sum the approach up as 'let them eat touring with digital dessert', but maybe only a little.

Matthew Arnold, and his descendants, suggested the provinces lacked a sufficiently 'trained' relationship to what he called 'the natural centres of mental improvement and sources of lucidity'. He would, perhaps, have used the word 'capacity' today, as indeed did the chair and [the statement of Arts Council in response to this paper](#). It suggests the mental frame, common across England, that work outside London should be informed by the capital's advanced skills, seen in relation to it, even delivered from it, and that places which are 'under-resourced' are so due to their own deficiencies, their own lack of capacity, not due to the difficulty in moving long-standing pillars of decision-making and other powers.

Thinking about the complex interactions between cities, towns and rural areas right across England may be one way forward.

If you examine most ACE regional grant giving patterns, you'd see concentrations in the 'core cities' such as Newcastle in the North East, which some might feel unfair in

a parallel way to the London/Rest of England picture. Again from experience, I know these patterns can be hard to shift.

The most promising way to redress the regional balance of lottery and grant funding to something more equitable on the numbers, whilst also building key infrastructure for arts participation and making might be to focus on the [Core Cities](#), which cover most parts of the country, and are generally supportive of culture. Although this might create other, more local inequities that could have knock on effects, on balance I'd say this was worth further attention, in the context of an imagined England of city regions.

- **Protecting and Using Assets**

It is vital this paper is not used to inadvertently or deliberately underplay the capacity in the regions that has been created by capital funding, and deliberate strategic development of funded organisations over several decades. (The kind of 'regeneration reverse beauty competition' some places could be said to favour.) This might mean a vital part of the logic of rebalancing investment is missed out – there are great, nationally important things to support right across England, that could be doing even more if protected from current and present danger and helped to flourish.

I believe the paper to be driven by a desire to make the most of assets and potential assets across the country: we need to make more of this in the discussion. Both the paper and the Arts Council response run the risk of suggesting things in London can be 'national' in a way which things based elsewhere are not. (Some of the first responses argued that things in London are not just for Londoners – absolutely true, but also true of many organisations based right across the country – people based in Newcastle, say, but working internationally.)

Isn't the more interesting question for artists and audiences in, say, Northern England, what role Live Theatre or West Yorkshire Playhouse or Liverpool Everyman and Playhouse play and could play beyond their localities, right across the country? What could happen if we really treated every local asset as a national asset, not just those in London?

- **Opportunity matters more than geography or £ per capita**

I would say that funding per capita geographically is only one way of thinking about inequality. Putting more money into regional production would address some of that, but not necessarily get a better spread across class or ethnic background. Giving Yorkshire more money wouldn't necessarily equal more money for brass bands to look at it another way. This kind of 'uneven distribution within the arts' needs to be fed into the discussion, I think.

Similarly, the most significant inequality in our country, I would suggest, is between the richest and the poorest, not some set of averages. This gap is arguably at its most extreme in London – although it is clear that the disparity in funding is not as a result of trying to address that issue.

In the end, therefore, I find – with no disrespect to Messrs.’ Stark, Gordon and Powell whose sterling efforts should be welcomed and applauded, and who might, I hope, agree – the most powerful words in this report those of Jennie Lee, quoted as saying

***“If a sane balance of population between north and south, east and west, is to be achieved, this kind of development [regional and local facilities] is just as essential as any movement of industry or provision of public utility service. If the eager and gifted, to whom we must look for leadership in every field, are to feel as much at home in the north and west as in and near London, each region will require highpoints of artistic excellence.”***

The question then becomes not one of funding per capita, or of subsidy per attendance as rather disappointingly suggested by ACE in their response. (That way lies a winner takes all bums on seats never mind the excellence or experience competition, *please* let’s not go there.) The key question becomes how do we best invest in the current and future artists, organisations and audience right across the country, in a way that can be seen to be fair and equitable. That must, surely, involve neither simply ‘*strengthening capacity outside London*’ nor ‘*weakening investment in the capital*’ to use the false polarities that end ACE’s response.

### **Concluding questions:**

I started what has turned out to be an unavoidably long piece by hoping this would be the beginning of a debate about arts policy. Actually what I hope is it swiftly moves through the debate phase of correcting stats and perspectives, through this initial discussion, to questioning of underlying frameworks and assumptions and then to productive dialogue, where we all start to find – together, right across England, funders, funded, audiences/the public, artists, Uncle Tom Cobley and all – possible solutions for some essential issues. I’ll end with some questions; answers can wait for other times.

- How do we rebalance the economy and the politics with (or possibly within) which the culture economy lives, without damaging what we have got, right across England?
- How do we start to change the culture within Culture that consciously or unconsciously sometimes equates London with the best, and allows more people to think they can base themselves outside the M25 without maiming their careers and/or creativity? How do we start to change a culture that can patronise the local at the same as occasionally fetishising it?
- What funding mechanisms alongside lottery grants, with all their limitations, to build resilient and ‘excellent’ regional cultural ecosystems or economies? (Eg start up grants, creative industries-style investment schemes, ring-fenced regional capital schemes, core cities cultural grants, investment in audience development etc.) And how do we design them devolved, not centralised? (Underlying this is my sense that it will take more than the fund suggested in ‘Rebalancing...’, more money and more ingenuity.)
- How do we use funding to support a great London cultural centre *and* fantastic cities across the rest of England *and* arts in rural areas *and* everywhere *and* nowhere but the digital realm in a way that makes every tax payer and lottery ticket buyer proud of arts funding, without damaging the best of what we have

now? (I suggest acknowledging that it's motherhood and apple pie to say you can magic up extra money purely for the regions without any disagreements with folk based in London. Even if totally new money comes ring-fenced, wouldn't some people in London make the case they need their share, work outside the capital, etc?)

- Should we concentrate on building a patchwork of Core Cultural Cities and connecting partners right across England, including London, each playing to their strengths locally, regionally and nationally?

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