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A 21st Century Settlement for Arts and Culture

Keynote Speaker: **Rt Hon Ben Bradshaw MP**, Secretary of State for Culture,
Media and Sports

Date: 14th January 2010

Venue: Park Plaza Riverbank, SE1 7TL

NB

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Ben Bradshaw:

Can I start by thanking you, Matthew, at the RSA, and the Arts Council through you, Liz, for organising this event. It's great, and I think somewhat overdue, to have an annual arts event along the lines of the annual RCS event for broadcasting and television and I hope it becomes a regular feature of our cultural and political life.

Some of you may have read in the papers that we had what's called a political cabinet this week that lasted three and a half hours. These are interesting and actually usually fairly useful affairs where everybody is asked or expected to make some sort of contribution, so one always has to be quite thoughtful and careful about how one uses up the one or two points that one wants to make and the messages that one wants to get across to ones cabinet colleagues. And we started as usual with some quite detailed polling, not just party political polling but polling on general public attitudes. And one of the interesting findings I thought to come out of it was that at this stage in the global downturn, or as we now hope, the recovery, people are still very uncertain about where the jobs of the future are going to come from. And they're particularly uncertain and anxious about where their children's jobs are going to come from. And then Peter Mandelson gave a presentation of the importance of an active industrial strategy for the future of our economy and said that he thought that we all needed cheering up. Now, I sensed an opportunity here, which I then grabbed with both hands and informed my cabinet colleagues that in the creative sectors in general, but in arts and culture in particular we've just seen the most successful year that we've ever had in this country at the end of the most successful decade. And I hope it's not too limiting, I hope it's not a career limiting thing to you, Richard Brooks, if you're still here from the *Sunday Times* to quote one of your recent columns when you said that culture had never had it so good as in the last decade.

I went on to try to continue with the cheery theme with my cabinet colleagues with the news that the phenomenal growth that we have seen in the last ten years means that the size of Britain's creative economy as a proportion of our overall economy is now the biggest in the world at around 10% of GDP. It's grown at twice the rate of the economy as a whole in the last ten years, it's continued to grow through the worst economic crisis since the 1930s and is projected to continue to grow at at least twice the rate of the economy in future. So, if cabinet colleagues were looking for a very good area to help create the jobs of the future and to help cheer people up, they didn't need to look very much further than the creative sectors and the cultural and artistic sectors in particular.

But of course when it comes to cheering people up it's not just about the bottom line. And I'm sorry, Richard, to name you again, but you wrote in another of your columns about me - and I think, kindly - that you would miss me because I turned up to lots of things and I looked as if I was enjoying myself. Well, firstly, don't write us off politically quite yet, and secondly, if I have looked as if I've been enjoying myself I'm afraid that that's because in spite of my best efforts it's been impossible not to. How can you not look as if you're enjoying yourself when you are experiencing the best theatre, the best music, the best exhibitions, the best festivals, the best architecture, the best of everything that art and culture offers anywhere in the world here in Britain today?

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So, I hope we can all agree it's been a wonderful decade for the arts, but I always want to tell you that I'm confident that the next decade, whatever we're going to call them, can be better still. But I think to make sure that that happens we need to be clear about what has been behind our success. And I think there are four fundamental central things that have been behind it. First of all the natural creativity of the British people. Secondly, significantly increased and sustained investment. Thirdly, creating the right cultural and political climate for the arts to flourish, and that includes a strict adherence to the arm's length principle. Fourthly, ending at long last the stale and outdated debate between access on the one hand and excellence on the other and accepting that in fact you need to have both.

It was Jennie Lee who was Britain's first ever arts minister back in the 1963 Wilson government who put it very succinctly in a couple of sentences when she said, "The best should be available to all and the job of government is to find the money and then step back and let you get on with it". But we would be kidding ourselves if we thought the next decade was going to feature similarly large increases in real terms government spending on the arts. But I also think we would be depressing ourselves unnecessarily if we assumed savage cuts, or what some people have termed an age of austerity, is now inevitable. As I've already indicated, I believe that there is a strong case, and if I'm still here I'll be making it very strongly, to protect investment in culture and the arts. Firstly, as I've already said, they are critical to our country's future prosperity. Secondly, they offer incredible value in terms of return; every pound invested in arts and culture generates £5 in the economy as a whole. And thirdly, they represent such a tiny proportion of overall spending, less than 1% of what the NHS spends every year, that to attack culture spending would I believe have a wholly disproportionate impact in relation to the contribution it would make to reducing the deficit.

It's worth pondering I think just for a moment that even a flat cash or a standstill budget for our sectors over the next comprehensive spending review period would still leave spending on culture 83% higher in real terms than it was in 1997.

Now, before ending and opening this up to a conversation I'd like to offer one apology and one thank you. I'm sorry you've had three culture secretaries in three years, but these things are sometimes hard to avoid. But I want to assure you that I hope and expect to be here in the same capacity at your second conference next year, but if for any reason that can't be, I want to thank you, I want to thank you for the best of times for me personally, but also the best of times for the country. The best of times to be alive in Britain and to experience the richness, the diversity and the brilliance of what you and our creative talent have to offer. Thank you.

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