

DOES ARTS FUNDRAISING NEED TO IMPROVE? ARE WE IN DANGER OF BEING COMPLACENT?

By John Nickson. 7th March 2014.

If my life depended on it, I would have to say “yes”. Why?

When Maria Miller was appointed Culture Secretary, she irritated many by saying that arts need to get better at asking. I was irritated but I now believe she has a point.

Surely, the arts have led the field, with corporate fundraising following the founding of The Association for Business Sponsorship of The Arts in the seventies and with major donor fundraising in more recent decades?

Time marches on and times change. In the 25 years since my becoming Head of Fundraising at The British Council and my retirement from Tate in 2011, public funding has declined as a percentage of budget from an average 80% to as low as 25% for some arts organisations. Many have done an outstanding job at generating new income from the private sector and by developing their own enterprises. However, the state is in retreat and public spending will continue to decline whoever wins the general election. As public funding decreases, there will be increasing demands on donors and increasing competition for funding from all sources, public and private.

The arts are now in direct competition with welfare charities. “We” instinctively feel at a disadvantage. How can we possibly compete with cancer research and kidney machines? I believe the arts have adopted an unnecessarily defensive posture. The competition is absurd. Of course, the welfare charities will always raise more money on the street and by social media. We have, however, failed to make the case for culture being an essential part of life. Cancer research and kidney machines are essential for saving lives but can anyone imagine what life would be like without culture?

The arts must develop a stronger case for support. We should look to our colleagues in Higher Education who in the midst of recession reported an overall rise in funds raised of 35% from 54% more donors in the five years up to 2011. Higher education now accounts for more one million pound gifts than any other sector. According to Chris Cox on Manchester University: “We talk about the University as an agent for change and progress. Our case for support is much more about the future than the university”.

I wrote GIVING IS GOOD FOR YOU to promote more philanthropy by persuading the majority of the wealthy that does not give to follow the example of the generous minority that does. My book has another purpose: to reveal what motivates those who give, what would encourage them to give more and their attitude to those who ask for money. I interviewed over 50 donors in various parts of the country and their stories are revelatory and inspiring. They all say

giving has transformed their lives for the better but many were critical of both government and charities, saying that too many don't understand people who give, and how to motivate and nurture them. Here is a comment from a donor who attended a recent museum and galleries conference:

“Despite honourable exceptions, the arts need to make a much better case, both individually and collectively, they are too defeatist and defensive, their trustees don't have a clue, they are not willing to invest and they don't take a long term view about developing relationships”.

John Nickson will be speaking at the IOF Funding Creativity conference in London on 20 March. John was head of fundraising for The British Council, English National Opera, The Royal Academy of Arts and Tate. He is also a donor, advisor and charity trustee. He is currently a trustee of The Royal College of Music, London Music Master and Opera Rara. John is the author of GIVING IS GOOD FOR YOU, www.bitebackpublishing.com.

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