Cultural policy and changing governments: A New Zealand perspective

Pearl Panickar
University of South Australia

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Abstract This piece is an interview conducted by Pearl Panickar when she visited Wellington earlier this year with a view to gathering research on cultural policy in the region. One of her interviewees was Michael Volkerling who has held positions as Director of the Centre for Creative Industries at Wellington Institute of Technology; Director of the Leisure and Heritage Studies Programme at Victoria University; Acting Chief Executive of the Museum of New Zealand; Executive Director of the National Art Gallery and Museum; and Director of the Queen Elizabeth II Arts Council.

Biography Pearl Panickar is a PhD candidate in the Arts & Cultural Management Program and attached to the Hawke Research Institute for Sustainable Societies at the University of South Australia. Her research considers cultural policy, creative work and commodification in Australia and New Zealand.

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The Interview

P: Thank you Michael for agreeing to this interview. Can you tell me about your role in arts and culture in New Zealand?

M: I’ve done maybe four or five things. I originally worked for Reeds in educational publishing. I then went on to do a PhD in NZ literature. I finished that in about 1974 and I got a job in what was then known as QEII (Queen Elizabeth the second) Arts Council as a project officer. At the end of 1976, much to everybody’s surprise including mine, I became acting director of the Council because the then elderly director had a heart attack and he had to retire. And in June of the following year, 1977, I became director. And I remained in that job until 1988. That appointment coincided with a new piece of enabling legislation being introduced, which required the Arts Council to set up a new structure.

P: This was in the eighties?

M: No, this was back in the seventies. I think it was passed in ’75 and came into effect in ’76 and involved setting up three regional arts councils; a council for Maori Arts; a council for Pacific Arts and a hundred and five, as it turned out, community arts councils. A very different structure from anything else around. So I presided over that development phase. The organisation got bigger and a little bit better off in that period. I went from there in 1988 to a job which was newly created as Executive Director of the old National Art Gallery and Museum. My job was to combine those...
two organisations and set up independent management because they were managed by the Department of Internal Affairs. And I was combining them because the government had agreed to create this thing called the Museum of New Zealand. Te Papa as it is now known. And so I was there for five years doing that change management work. Then I went to the University where I taught Recreation and Leisure Studies.

P: Do you know of an equivalent of Creative New Zealand in Australia?

M: Yes. The Australia Council. The QEII Arts Council and the Australia Council had much in common for a period of time. And then they developed in slightly different ways but they both have their origins in the example of the Arts Council of Great Britain.

P: Michael could you outline your role in cultural policy over the years? Has your hand been on the tiller?

M: Yes absolutely.

P: Would you describe your involvement?

M: Well let’s start with the Arts Council. I mean the Chief Executive’s job in my view anyway, is a policy job. Obviously, the Board members and the Chair have a role but formulating the policy options for the Council Members to consider is really for the staff to do, in my view. We inherited one version of an Arts Council which had been very much based on the British Model. It had not been a terribly well resourced organisation and it had bought itself into the usual range of activities that colonial institutions do.

P: Could you give our readers a quick précis of the British Model?

M: Well the British Model is one which is based on traditional art forms – music, dance, opera (which is usually separate from music) and theatre. Hardly any money for individual artists and very much oriented to the traditional performing arts and traditional Eurocentric interpretations of what the performing arts are. So here we spent, I don’t know, 60% of the money before my time on opera and ballet. No New Zealand repertoire was performed by the orchestras, dance and theatre companies.

P: So they were feeding off a traditional funding source?

M: Yes. When professional theatre started in Auckland in 1968 or ‘69 it was run by somebody from the British repertory theatre tradition. The first production was The Admirable Crichton. It was disappointing. And then there was and still is a National Symphony Orchestra, which was at that time maintained by the Broadcasting Corporation but the Arts Council was responsible for regional orchestras. About 90% of the Council’s money would have gone on the performing arts. There was also a system of grants to individual artists, mainly to study abroad. Grants which were specifically earmarked for traditional things that artists wanted to do like become opera singers. So they got sent off to London to become properly trained. And when I got there in 1974, there was no money for creative projects by individual artists. This, in my mind, privileged the traditional performing artists. So I guess when I became the director, a couple of things happened which opened up new possibilities. One was the new legislation which tried to open up the Arts Council to a much wider range of potential clients. That was the intention of the community arts councils and the regional arts councils.

P: What was the shift that led to the new legislation?

M: Ideological. The new legislation was introduced by a labour government which came into power after many years of a national, conservative government being in power. It was led by a younger man, a reforming politician - and they were cultural nationalists in
a way that previous governments had not been. They wanted the Arts Council to reflect what they considered to be New Zealand culture as it was developing rather than to reflect an inherited culture derived from the colonising culture. So cultural nationalism was big in the arts in New Zealand from the 1960’s onwards. Initially in the visual arts and in literature – the poets and the painters – so you finished up with a voice that was recognisably a New Zealand voice. And this was followed by others like the playwrights, choreographers and the composers – mainly during the 1970’s. So there were two opportunities. One was to try and address the cultural needs of a large portion of New Zealanders, outside the main centres and in small communities, people from different ethnic backgrounds. A less monocoloural perspective of what constituted cultural expression. And there was the commitment to developing a distinctive New Zealand voice beyond the visual arts and literature. And we borrowed a number of mechanisms for achieving that from other countries including Australia.

P: What other opportunities were there besides the creation of a New Zealand voice?

M: Well I think a move away from the perspective that identified value exclusively with high culture. The community arts councils were our version of community arts. Arts in the community embraced a whole lot of community expressions of culture which didn’t depend on professional training, professional opportunities. And I think also we tended to move away from the model of an arts council which had initially seen itself only as a funding body. We tended to think of ourselves as having funding as one of our policy tools but that there were other ways in which you could produce change or encourage activity. One of them was to encourage other public sector agencies to use the arts for policy purposes (non-arts allies we called them like Education, Justice and Health). Another idea which we pinched from the National Gallery of Australia was to set up a unit within the Arts Council which was focused on brokering private sector sponsorship. Setting up links between arts organisations and corporations.

P: Is that philanthropy or is that arts business?

M: It’s really arts business. And we did two other things. We thought that because the cultural infrastructure here was relatively thin – that maybe there were gaps to be filled of one sort or another. We should therefore take on a project management role to do things that artists wanted to happen. So rather than sending a few artists to Europe who might see contemporary British art, we organised contemporary British art exhibitions over here so a larger range of practising artists could benefit from contact with this work and we did those projects in association with the National Art Gallery.

P: How did you finance these operations?

M: We did the dance projects on a break-even process. We also got involved in exporting New Zealand arts on a scale that hadn’t been done before. So a big breakthrough here culturally was Te Maori, the exhibition of traditional Maori art that went to the States and was exhibited at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. That was a project that was taken over by an international management committee eventually but that was originally our project. And it changed the way in which Maori art has been regarded ever since. And the other thing that we put emphasis on was cultural research. Nobody else was doing it.

P: What did you do?

M: Well nothing had been done. We did the sort of stuff that you needed to know about the sector to understand how it works. We did work on the income of artists: how did artists make a living? Was it through their art? Did they teach? Was it the same for all types of artists? We did some quite extensive work on local authority involvement in the arts. Nobody had thought about how city governments contributed to cultural activity. There had been a consistent pattern of local arts development across the country since earliest settlement that was led by local government. . We chose 28 of the largest local
authorities – we tracked their expenditure over time. We also did basic market research. It had never been done. What do New Zealanders do in their leisure time? Do they rate cultural activities as a high priority or low priority? And we did – this is pre-internet days – but we compiled an inventory of arts venues throughout the country to encourage people to tour. We did this through the regional arts councils. So we produced a paper based inventory for as many venues as we could and also published a touring guide. Eventually updating the inventory got on top of us.

P: So it sounds like it was an exciting and innovative time?

M: Yeah. Yeah.

M: The reason we could do this was because we were about the only game in town. It wasn’t as it is now, a cultural unit within the Department of Internal Affairs. There wasn’t really a central government presence in cultural policy. The Ministry has existed only since 1990. And its first ten years were very tentative. Under the present government the Prime Minister is the Minister for Arts and Culture. Although she’s not a radical reformer, she’s invested new resources in the sector. And now the Ministry’s more of a presence.

P: It is worth noting when the Prime Minister in a government takes on the arts portfolio. In South Australia we have the Premier, Mike Rann, who is also the Minister for the Arts.

M: And there is a precedent from the seventies, isn’t there? I’m thinking of a South Australian.

P: Yes. Don Dunstan.

M: That’s right. It does change things.

P: So what is happening in cultural policy today in NZ? (I note that Michael takes a deep sigh)

M: (he laughs). Well I wish I could give you a comprehensive answer. I wish I could tell you for instance that there is a cultural policy that is an official cultural policy. The fourth labour government in the mid-eighties was pretty much a reforming government. It is reforming government of an odd sort, because they advocated the new right economic agenda. Not what you would expect to come out of the NZ labour movement. Much more of a new right agenda than previous administrations. But they were also a bit younger than the conservatives and again more attuned culturally. The big thing they did was to decide to support Te Papa as the new national museum which had originally been conceived of as a Pacific Cultural Centre. It was intended to display our new Pacific identity to the world. It got ‘museumized’ during the planning phase, but that was the original impulse. But they also eventually agreed to establish a new Cultural Ministry. At the very last cabinet meeting before they went out of power, after six years in power, they formally agreed to establish this new ministry which was intended as a policy ministry, a ministry with a strong policy role. And quite an extensive perspective over all forms of culture from sport and heritage and archives through to the arts and leisure. That sort of thing. And then they lost the election. And the incoming government, as incoming governments do, had opposed the idea of this new ministry and when they got into power, they got landed with it. So they had to accept it and it had to be given some sort of life but it was a very limited life. A cultural unit within the Department of Internal Affairs. They were a mini-Ministry of 11.5 people. And their principal role over that period of time was performance monitoring not policy development. And largely monitoring the expenditure of the agencies that they funded: the Film Commission, the Film Archive, the Arts Council (which became Creative New Zealand) and Te Papa.
P: What were the items that underlined policy at that time?

M: Well they basically said...that is the incoming National government said, “Okay we’re obliged to have a new ministry, so let’s have it but let’s not change anything.” So just as the old cultural unit in the Department of Internal Affairs had been responsible for a limited set of things, the new ministry remained responsible for those same things. In ten years they didn’t produce one policy document and when they did, it was because the Minister was interested in some aspects of policy.

P: Who was the Minister?

M: That particular one was called Simon Upton. And he had a few policies which could be summarised on one page. And were. I think he wrote it himself. Cultural policy was largely about patronage. A word that had not been used in policy discourse anywhere for the previous decade or even two decades. Patronage, heritage and education. That’s it.

P: Very post-colonial..

M: Yes. (laughs). He himself left government and works for the OECD. That’s what he does now. And he was the youngest member of parliament in New Zealand history. But he was deeply into English culture, not just British or European, but English culture. Cathedral choirs and white ballet. Anyway that was the first ten years of the ministry. Then Helen Clark led the present labour government into power in 1999 promising reform in the cultural sector and plenty of resources. There were a whole lot of pledges made in the manifesto. One of them was to have an arts recovery package.

P: What’s the manifesto?

M: The manifesto is just the platform of the government, what they promise to do.

P: And how often do they put one out?

M: Well (laughs) whenever there’s an election and they keep very quiet in between. So they were going to spend money on a recovery package but they also had this pledge to have a big report on a cultural strategy. And the two things went on in parallel – the rescue package on the one hand and the ‘Heart of the Nation Report’ (a title from the Scots I believe) on the other. They were reluctant once they got into power, to do anything about the ‘Heart of the Nation Report’, but they were eventually persuaded to set up a committee of experts led by someone called Hamish Keith who had been a long term chair of the Arts Council when I was director. And he hired me and a couple of other people to produce the report and do the research. We were given an extremely tight deadline of six weeks.

P: (shocked laughter)

M: (more laughter). Yes well really we were pretty aghast, I can tell you. Helen later extended the deadline by two weeks.

P: (more laughter)

M: So I mean it was a bit of panic. But anyway we pulled together this report with very little input from Helen Clark or her associate minister, Judith Tizard. I think on a Friday night Hamish would go back to Auckland and have a drink with Judith and say where we were up to and “What do you think?” And Judith would say, “Well that sounds fine but don’t forget to talk to X, Y and Z.” So finally the report was produced and it pulled together some really good data about culture in New Zealand. It was supposed to support the emphasis in the Labour Party Manifesto on cultural industries as well as supporting the arts. So it did that. But subsequently we were advised once we had published the report that we’d rather overstepped our brief.
P: How do you mean?

M: Because we had recommended a variety of structural changes. It was the structural changes that went a bit too far. We weren’t to know at that stage that this was not a reforming government. Indeed it was a government that wanted to forget about the fact that the previous labour government had been a radically reforming government. They had restructured the public sector. They’d sold off the state assets. They’d done all that and Helen didn’t want to be associated with that sort of process. And up until yesterday I don’t think they’ve made any changes to the public sector at all.

P: How would you articulate their approach? What is the approach of the Helen Clark government in terms of cultural policy?

M: I read a public policy theorist called Nikolaos Zahariadis who questioned the conventional view that governments get into power because they convince the electorate of their ability to solve problems. Well his theory is that is not the case. Instead they effectively compile an inventory of solutions and once they are in power, they have to find problems to match them. Okay?

P: So it’s not problem-solving, it’s solution mongering.

M: Exactly. They’ve predetermined a set of solutions. So where are the problems that match these solutions? The government has to find them. So I think there’s been a bit of this going on. But at the same time there has been policy growth. There has been a widening of the policy responsibility of the Ministry and they’ve integrated…

P: Are you still talking about the Ministry of Culture and Heritage?

M: Yes. They’ve integrated bits that were left out which were always intended to be there in the first place. So public broadcasting is now part of the Ministry of Culture and Heritage. Heritage conservation like buildings and historical places which used to be under the Department of Conservation, are now under the Ministry of Culture and Heritage. I think archives policy is now in there. And sport even is in there, somewhat loosely, but it is in there. So they’ve got a much more broadly based machinery of government. And they work mainly incrementally. So that they are not policy innovators really and the area in which the policy innovation is going on is NZ Trade and Enterprise. When Helen Clark threw up her hands at the ‘Heart of the Nation Report’ she nevertheless agreed to give it to the regional development minister who was at that time the Deputy Prime Minister.

P: I’m getting a picture of the shift in cultural policy since the sixties and seventies where you are dealing with the tension between a post-colonial model and a nationalist model and moving the focus on to New Zealand culture. And then in the last twenty years, more of a tension between economic output or growth and arts practice. I’m wondering how these ideas are playing out in cultural policy?

M: I think there are three clear phases. Clearish. They more or less correspond with changes in larger state policies. Basically in the early period that I was describing, what you deal with is culture under state welfarism until 1985. 1985 through to 1999 you’re dealing with state cultural policy under a sort of new right regime. And to the extent that Helen Clark sits anywhere on the political spectrum, she’s more akin to the Third Way. You know, the Clinton/Blair position where you keep a reasonably dry economic policy but you have an egalitarian social policy. You believe in social inclusion and you also believe in national identity. So that’s it in terms of broad brush strokes. Those are the changes that have occurred. And there are many changes within each of those eras, some of which are a consequence of those differences in state policy and some of which are consequences of other changes. You know the whole cultural nationalist thing. I’m sure is generational. I’m sure it’s the baby boomers. Finding themselves here rather than thinking that they come from somewhere else. It’s influential from the mid-
sixties onwards. From the late seventies onwards you also get, what you might call ‘Maori nationalism’ which promotes new forms of expression for those communities but also sets up various interactions (mostly positive) with the pakeha cultural nationalists. You now get works which cross cultural boundaries increasingly. In the late nineties probably up to the present, you get playwrights, you get musicians, you get forms of popular music which are from those communities which were previously submerged. So culture feels very much different in 2006 compared with that in 1976. In terms of the recent emphasis on the economic side of things, I think it's created opportunities.

P: What is a quick definition of cultural industries as opposed to creative industries?

M: My definition is that there is some industrial process involved in the creative industry and it's probably digital. The cultural industry is probably analogue or live. So that's how I see it. The cultural side is old, it's live with pre-gathered audiences. Creative industry product is not necessarily live at all and it's distributed through a variety of mechanisms.

P: Is the export growth targeted at the creative industries?

M: I don't think it should be solely. You really need to have a copy of the ‘Heart of the Nation Report’. Basically we started with a model of cultural dynamics that underlie the ‘Heart of the Nation Report’. It's a set of dynamics that begins with heritage which in my view feeds into identity. And it's from a coherent sense of identity that creativity arises. And that creativity takes place in specific arenas – let's say they're regionally based that produce various goods and services. Various benefits feed out from them. One set of benefits is cultural which actually informs, extends and even reinvents what heritage might be. And the other set is one is economic. So there are economic benefits in the system and there are social/cultural benefits also. From my point of view, a cultural policy model has to be holistic. It has to try to achieve reconciliation between these apparent opposites and it has to produce a flow of benefits which are not solely economic but a balance of social, cultural and economic. And it has to be an iterative process.

P: Who is monitoring the checks and balances there?

M: I don’t think it’s being done. It would be quite interesting to do some research of that sort.

P: I'll keep my eye on your work in New Zealand. Thanks so much for you time Michael.