



Russell Willis Taylor
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The culture secretary's recent drive to encourage private philanthropy is a laudable one, and like many good ideas it is a recurring theme rather than a radically new notion. In 1983 I was recruited by the English National Opera with the full support of Margaret Thatcher's government to come to England and establish an "American style fundraising" department for the ENO. I spent five of the most rewarding years of my working life raising money for the ENO, and when I returned to the ENO 10 years later as executive director I continued to think of fundraising as an enjoyable and valuable activity rather than an aspect of the leadership job that many people seem to dread. I liked offering donors the opportunity to be part of an extraordinary company, and found it gratifying to seek support for something as joyful as the Arts. (I have no doubt that this says more about my eccentricities than my abilities as a leader.)

All of the plans recently announced are to be encouraged, but any sense that British cultural institutions have a lot to learn from American fundraising techniques belies what has been happening here in the UK for the past 30 years. In the early 80s we were able to increase the fundraising income for the ENO from £60,000 per year to £2m annually. That was then, and this is now. Any company still open has already made these gains.

Jeremy Hunt has taken pains to say that he doesn't believe that a wholesale export of American ideas in this area is the answer, but I would suggest an even stronger note of caution.

Most of the American fundraising activities that would be culturally appropriate for this environment are already in place, and the strongest motivation for the (now declining) tradition of wealthy individuals' support of the Arts in the United States is not a technique, but a tax law.

Individuals benefit directly and to a greater degree from giving to not-for-profit cultural institutions in the US than they do here, and it is this longstanding (two generations) tax incentive that results in increased giving.

A matching fund of any size is a good idea, but nothing motivates like enlightened self-interest and tax benefits in the US have consistently motivated people to be enlightened.

In any event, I am not confident that the scoreboard would be very much 'advantage America' if a detailed analysis of the total amount of support given in both subsidy and tax concessions in the UK were compared to the sums of private philanthropy and tax foregone in the US – in my experience Britain has funding as "plural" as any to be found.

What doesn't get mentioned quite as often as the benefits of major gifts is the dangerous gravitational pull that an overreliance on major donors can exert on American institutions.

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While the United States has a vast pool of genuine philanthropists who give for the good of the institution and its mission, it is also much easier for an individual whose giving determines the viability of the organisation in the short term to make demands that are not in the public interest, and to have those demands met.

Organisations can lose sight of their mission to serve the many as they seek to attract the few. The fundamental belief that cultural institutions are essential to society as a whole and to each individual is manifested by public funding in the UK, and it is the envy of many organisations and artists across the pond who long to create work in an environment where the arm’s length principal is at work, however short that arm may be.

Encouraging increased philanthropy is admirable. Mr. Hunt is right to say that more can and should be done to encourage private giving, but this should not blind us to what is already being done by so many outstanding leaders here. I believe that organisations benefit in many ways when they have to articulate their value to external supporters, given that the biggest issue facing cultural institutions worldwide today is defining what unique value they create for communities and society. By all means let us encourage these organisations to continue to “sing for their supper” but please consider that the best tune for them may not be the *Star Spangled Banner*, lovely though it is.

Russell Willis Taylor is president and CEO of National Arts Strategies, the leading provider of leadership education for cultural institutions in the United States, has been working in the Arts and not-for-profit sector for over 25 years, in strategic business planning, financial analysis, and all areas of operational management.

Educated in England and America, she started her career in the Arts as director of development for the Chicago Museum of Contemporary Art before returning to England in 1984 to work with the English National Opera. In 1997 she rejoined the ENO as managing director. She is a fellow of the Royal Society of the Arts as well as the recipient of the first Garrett award in Britain, an annual recognition of an individual’s outstanding contribution to the Arts. Taylor returned to the United States in 2001 to take up the post of President and CEO of National Arts Strategies. Taylor is on the advisory boards of The University Music Society, University of Michigan; The Salzburg Global Seminar; The 21st Century Trust; and the Center for Nonprofit Excellence.

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