

Heather Menzies: Culture is essential to democracy

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I don't think Canadians just want to be addressed as taxpayers or the middle class. During an election at least, people want to be addressed as citizens with a stake in the common good of this country, and even a say in policies that will articulate it. For that they need a vibrant, open culture and policies to support it.

It's culture, through the media image of a drowned Syrian boy, Alan Kurdi, that shifted the campaign discussion. It's culture too that offers a roadmap through the swamp of managed messaging; culture that serves as a compass pointing to what's important in a democratic society founded on the principles of mutual respect and accommodation.

I became a writer at a time when the grand narratives of nation building were being challenged by voices in the margins. What's replaced it is not just a babble of competing vested interests. It's a diversity of stories telling the truth about how complex and often contradictory history can be, and the enduring need for compassion, reconciliation and a sense of identity. I think of Lisa Moore's novel about an off-shore oil disaster, of Roy Miki and Joy Kogawa's books about Japanese Canadians during the Second World War, Dionne Brand and Rawi Hage tracing the often dark path of the immigrant experience, Richard Wagamese and others evoking the residential school tragedy, plus stories about the toll massive resource developments is taking on the environment.

But for culture to do its job of holding up the choices that need to be made, or are being made for us, it must be fed and watered well. Right now, it's not, on two levels: first, policies to support the free flow of information and, second, funding for the programs and institutions that let Canadians hear each other, that help us tell and share stories.

On the first, the past 10 years has seen the closure of [200 scientific research institutions](#) and at least 16 government libraries, the elimination of some important public-interest government websites and the loss of some vital research by Statistics Canada. The cancellation of the mandatory long-form census effectively turned 20 per cent of Canadian communities into statistical blanks because the data now being gathered aren't reliable, and prompted the [Canadian Medical Association Journal](#) to worry about a federal government "impos(ing) an uninformed approach to public policy." The gagging of government and government-funded scientists is another dangerous development, as is the [21-per-cent full success rate](#) of Access to Information requests. As well, cuts to the National Library and Archives Canada resulted in half the staff that help the public access archived print and other analog material losing their jobs. These people held the keys to the trunks in our collective attic, helping writers like me to research our books, and bringing relevant historical Canadian content to the classrooms of our country.

But access to relevant public-interest information is only part of having a healthy democratic culture. Public funding is equally important, not just to interpret information and frame memory into stories that tell us who we are, but also to bring all this to a diverse audience across a myriad delivery platforms, and in a way that nurtures a sense of being implicated in the common good together. Yet either funding is not keeping up (as with the Canada Council), or it's been cut (as with the CBC, the most important distribution channel for Canadian culture).

Writers, the foundation of cultural creativity, are earning 27 per cent less from their writing today than they did in 1998, according to a survey by the 2,000-member Writers Union of Canada.

If Canadians want to be affirmed in their role as citizens sharing responsibility for the common good, cultural policy and funding need to be election issues too.

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