The plutocrats aren't so patronising now

Do you want to see good leadership in Britain? Well, look to the arts, not business or politics

In a recent speech, Ed Vaizey, shadow minister for the arts, extolled our cultural leadership, mentioning a number of key figures, including Neil MacGregor, director of the British Museum, Nicholas Serota, director of the Tate and Nick Hytner, director of the National Theatre. It was intended to reassure the cultural community that an incoming Conservative government would protect the international prestige of British culture.

What Vaizey did not say, and what is a much harder question to answer, is why, at a time when business and political leadership is being questioned, we have been pretty successful at breeding effective cultural leaders. What is it that cultural leaders have in common? And what is being done to foster it?

These questions preoccupied me when I was director of the National Gallery: why had some directors been successful? Was it to do with the time in which they lived or attributes of personality? Or the quality of support they receive from their boards of trustees?

What is clear is the extent to which the history of any institution is describable in terms of the taste and temperament of the people who have been in charge of it. If one looks at the history of the National Gallery, as of any cultural institution, there are many people besides its director involved in its management, including politicians , the board of trustees (not always to good effect), the staff and not least the public who visit in enormous numbers and whose expectations shape the way the collection is displayed.

But none of these people individually or collectively has anything like as much influence as the director on the way a museum or gallery looks, on the policy for exhibitions, on what is collected and on the way a cultural institution is perceived. It is the director who gets both the credit and the blame in any institution involving public taste.

In terms of the history of the National Gallery, there are three people whose personality and attributes particularly stand out. The first was painter and public servant, Charles Eastlake. He was keeper from 1843 to 1847 and had a hard time of it, attacked in the press for buying a picture that turned out not to be by Holbein. In 1847, he resigned to concentrate on his writing, but, by 1855, he was back as the first proper director with a good budget to buy art internationally. The extraordinary quality of the National Gallery's collection of Italian paintings is most of all owing to him.

The second director who was indisputably great was Kenneth Clark, much better remembered for the BBC's Civilisation. He was appointed when only 31 and embarked on an ambitious policy of waking the National Gallery up, rehanging the collection in a more modern way, whitewashing the Victorian entrance hall, appointing a professional conservator and introducing electric light.

The third director who will go down in history as having been a remarkable cultural figure is Neil MacGregor, who was appointed in 1987 as a young man and left in 2002 to become director of the British Museum. He has been a brilliant populariser of works of art on television, opened the new Sainsbury Wing and was responsible for the refurbishment of nearly the whole of the main floor galleries. More than anybody, he is capable of articulating with total confidence the moral and intellectual purposes of museums and the ways in which a broad public can be encouraged to engage with them.

Although every airport bookshop is piled high with self-important autobiographies of successful businessmen and women, there is very much less analysis of what makes a cultural leader. It is not as if the world does not need them. I was recently invited to a conference in Hong Kong to discuss a new cultural quarter in West Kowloon. The government has invested about £2.5bn in cultural facilities. What became clear is how little knowledge there is as to how to make best use of this gigantic public investment and how much will depend on the person appointed to be in charge.

The same issue is evident in Abu Dhabi, where a new island of cultural institutions is being created out of what is currently a mud flat. There will be a new branch of the Louvre. There will be a new version of New York's Guggenheim Museum, but approximately three times as large. The question is being asked:

who is going to run these institutions? What is going to be put in them? How are they going to be displayed?

The characteristics of cultural leadership and what makes it different is important. Especially at a time when it appears that there is a moral vacuum in political leadership, an absence of intellectual confidence, which is undermined by revelations about lack of probity and the pursuit of small-minded, financial self-interest. Especially when one can no longer, if one ever could, look to the City for exemplars of moral virtue.

Take Nicholas Serota at the Tate, a figure of single-minded, dedicated artistic authority, who has arguably had more influence on public taste over the last two decades than anyone else. What, then, are the personal attributes that have enabled him to create this position?

Some of it is about luck and timing and the availability of funding. But some of it is also about issues of character and intellectual and artistic self-confidence, sometimes also of visual and aesthetic judgment, a match between drive, intellectual confidence and artistic expertise. There is probably an advantage that cultural leaders can seldom be accused of financial self-interest. There is definitely a benefit that cultural leaders are seldom subject to the same level of public gaze as their political equivalents.

But at a time when boards of trustees both in this country and, even more, in America, too often think that a director is incompetent and should bow down before the altar of superior business management, it is worth paying more attention to the characteristics of cultural leadership, and valuing them.

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