



**Independent
Media Arts Alliance**
**Alliance des arts
médiatiques indépendants**

Arts Day on the Hill 2014

Video Interview conducted by the Independent Media Arts Alliance

October 21, 2014

The IMAA interviewed Members of Parliament as part of Arts Day on the Hill 2014. Arts supporters from across Canada gathered in Ottawa on Tuesday October 21st to meet with Members of Parliament for the Arts Day on the Hill, organized by The Canadian Arts Coalition: <http://www.canadianartscoalition.com>. The key discussions focused on the role that federal arts investment plays in the economic and social health of Canada. Arts Day on the Hill 2014 saw more than 100 art supporters take part in scheduled meetings with Members of Parliament, senators and senior officials from all parties.

Nathan Cullen

MP for Skeena-Bulkley Valley (NDP)

Transcript

Can you talk about a memorable art experience that's affected your life?

I had one just recently. I have four year-old twin boys and I watched one the other day depict a person for the first time. You may think that's not much a big deal, right? But he described that he was running.

One of my boys was really into this and just watching the whole world, it's like a language, like another language that opens up and just watching him to see this other world of possibilities and representational art that you can draw something that looks like something else and he was so excited that I got excited by this little sketchy stick figure drawn in crayon, that was pretty cool.

First time I really felt that just watching somebody express themselves so perfectly and seamlessly in another way for the first time.

It was really neat.

As a Member of Parliament, what actions do you intend to take in support of Canadian artists and arts institutions?

Paying more than lip service, seeing it as a foundational thing. Talking about it as seriously as we talk about things like the economy, international affairs, war, and whatnot. Art occupies a second or third tier of importance in most politicians' minds.

It's an add-on, it's a nice thing but it's not essential, it's not foundational.

And that's hard for a lot of MPs to come to and the approach that I sometimes take is... because most of us we don't consider ourselves artistically anything.

Maybe we can appreciate music or nice piece of art but most politicians are not artistically inclined.

Although some of us are able to speak, and tell stories, and I think art for me, broadly, is generally about telling our story as a country, as a people, as people within a country, and so when talking about the importance of the arts to my colleagues, I ask them how important is to be able to tell our stories, how important is it for them to tell the stories of their communities, where they come from, their family.

That's one access into a sometimes inaccessible conversation, because again if it's seen as something as an Other, as something other people do, it's an add-on, it's a pat on the head, then it would never get the attention that it deserves, it will never get the focus, it will be derided at worst and paid lip service at best.

With this government it's tough. My answer wants to go to the political and say the thing that is most consuming this government is power and the pursuit of power, and that's not only them, that's typical of governments.

The backlash they had for cutting funding for the arts in Quebec, a couple of elections ago, at least in Quebec taught the Prime Minister that was not a good political move for what is a relatively small amount of money in the grand scheme of things.

This government is contemplating a five billion dollar tax cut for rich people right now.

The arts is not asking for five billion dollars, not even close.

I hate to bring it down to politics and currency of votes but right now I'm not sure that an intellectual or moral appeal to say this is the right thing to do, this is what great governments do, is help Canadian artists tell their story to ourselves and to the world.

I think that argument might fall for Conservatives right now.

They don't see it as their so-called base, they do care about politics, they do care about winning, and I don't even know if that can appeal at this point.

So I'm a hopeful guy generally. **When it comes to appeal to Mister Harper about the arts, you have to be very very creative.**

If I can put it that way because it appeals to this point haven't generally worked although he seems to be fascinated by some stories, some parts of the Canadian story, more the history of war, the history of Franklin and this type of things.

More the colonial side of Canada's story.

It's fine to look to the past, it's great to remember your history, but I want to know what Canada's going to be, and often you want to look to the artist to find that out. And the inventors, and the innovators, not to where a ship is sitting at the bottom of the ocean.

Canadian artists are recognized as leaders on the world stage, and the arts play a fundamental role in cultural diplomacy. How would you support showcasing Canadian arts internationally, notably during Canada's upcoming 150th anniversary celebrations?

Inherently it's a patriotic event, it's celebrating the nation and the birth of the nation. I think part of patriotism is challenge, to challenging the stories.

The place I represent, forty per cent, so First Nations, which are often hilled up when Canada showcases ourselves to the world at large museums or at Olympics and those types of things.

We bring first nations to the front.

And say look at that, look at that art, the culture, dance, and then the Olympics are over, the showcase event is over and we are back to not caring much about first nations people. We need to see the whole continuum of not just first nations art and culture but artists that we don't only celebrate at times when we were explicitly describing an event for Canada

but seen as part of something that weaves through our policymaking... a lens through which we see ourselves and how we manifest government.

So that's sounds a bit philosophical.

I'm looking over your shoulder, there's Jack's flag there, there was a fellow who took the Canadian flag and then added to it and add people add to it after Jack died.

I thought that was a beautiful addition to the Canadian story. This building where we are in Parliament is an unfinished building.

There's all sort of pieces of this building still being built and carved and chipped away by artists.

And I love that metaphor simply because Canada's is an unfinished story. This building is unfinished and it will never been finished. Canada's conversation that goes on and on an when I'm in other countries, in imperial type of countries, the US and Britain and whatnot, they have this very fixed idea of themselves, as powerful and strong and you see it represented in their art.

A fixed permanent thing.

I think there is a fluidity to Canada's story.

That only artists can really get at.

Cause it sounds counterintuitive.

Isn't a country supposed to be a fixed, solid, permanent thing as opposed to a movable feast?

Canada I think just by its nature for the inherent aboriginal impact, the massive amounts of immigration that comes to this country like my family, we are a moving thing, we are a growing thing, and artists can reflect that back to us beautifully.

Politicians not so much, generally.

Canada has unveiled a new digital strategy, Digital Canada 150, and Canadian consumers will benefit from the improved Internet infrastructure that's being rolled out. How can Parliament work to stimulate similar investments into Canadian cultural production online? What's your vision for a Canadian Cultural Digital Strategy?

I don't know if I have a lot of answers personally, I see this as an incredible challenge, and a real crossroads, as this technology puts this challenge upon us, the great benefit of the digital world is open access to the world that shooting a

video here or there, putting a piece of art online, it exposes the artist to far more people potentially than ever thought possible.

The reverse is also true the world wants access in here. So for something like Canadian content where we seek to have a certain amount of what we view being Canadian.

It's a real challenge, I don't know if I have an easy answer myself.

To not address the problem or the challenge is an issue if the government simply says the market will take care of this and handle it.

Well this is one point that a role of government may be called in simply because this is what we did with radio, this is what we did with television, this is how we fostered many great talents who have both been commercially successful and artistically successful.

I don't have a simple answer for you, I don't have one that I could package up and say if we want to do this then Canada's digital online influence would be magnified.

I don't have an answer for that.

4% of Canada's workforce is employed in the cultural sector. This sector is growing all the time, and every dollar invested generates large returns into the Canadian economy. Yet levels of public investment have remained stagnant for over a decade. Do you support an increase to the Canada Council's operating budget to the level of \$300 million annually?

I don't believe we've had that on the current proposal but past history would be that we are very supportive.

Because broadly speaking New Democrats have been supportive to the arts and sees the connection between government and the artistic community. That being said...

To the question of how to make this an obvious and supportable idea of increasing this fund to allow artist to access, more Canadians to tour, to do all this things, I think there might need to be a better job in connecting back what the money does to Canadians more broadly, not just parliamentarians, so that when I see an exhibit to a small town, or I see a band going out on tour, there is an understanding of how that was enabled with public support, simply to have that positive affiliation to it and then bind all the parties not just New Democratic but people of all political persuasions to this being a really good investment.

Because you're right on the broad scheme: of a 280 billion budget, 300 million isn't a lot, but 300 million is still a lot of money.

To anybody on the street, if I say 300 million doesn't sound like much, they'll say woaah, it's being able to translate it into what it enables.

And what it can then represent, and what it has enabled in the past.

Remember that great thing you saw, remember that great piece that was eventually featured around Canada.

It's community by community, I really do feel like when I think of what you're talking about, I think of a particular artist, particular shows, things that have gone and helped tell a story that wouldn't have been told otherwise.

Having that better connection back to Canadians will make them more broadly supportive and the idea I suppose is that politicians will then see this is a no-brainer.

And then you'd be pushing an open door when you got to the Finance Committee.

Because right now, you're not. Right now, you're going to see a government that, again, doesn't see a lot of votes in this maybe, or I'm not sure what application they are making but it's going to be an uphill battle to get this even into the Committee's report and get it recommended to the Minister of finance.

QUESTIONS OVER

The place that I represent from Northern BC where story telling is a huge part of what we do and the best stories are the ones that get repeated.

It's a very much a first nation tradition to repeat the same stories again and again so they deepen.

They become part of a collective understanding of some place and people.

I had the privilege of being around the country and talked to a lot of Canadians.

We love our stories, we love them, we like to repeat them.

Where ever you go they've got their stories and that's great and being able to connect that it's an essential part of our DNA.

That we are all storytellers, we are all stories ourselves and what artists seek to do is represent those stories in a lot of different ways.

And I think that's, then, an essential thing.

That's not just seen as an afterthought, that's just seen as breathing. And if we get to that place where we consider the arts then

you don't have to go cap in hand, it's just something that we just automatically do.

As much as we think about funding the police or making sure our airports are safe, make sure our kids get to school.

We also see the arts as something that's core essential, not the first thing that's tossed off the ship when things get tight.

.....
The Independent Media Arts Alliance (IMAA) is a member-driven non-profit national organization working to advance and strengthen the media arts community in Canada. Representing over 90 independent film, video, audio, and new media production, distribution, and exhibition organizations in all parts of the country, the IMAA serves over 16,000 independent media artists and cultural workers.

Media art is understood to apply to all forms of time-related art works which are created by recording sound or visual images. Time-related art works include works in the fields of sound, video and computer art, both installations and internet projects, and single channel works.

