

Dr Martin Smith¹—supplementary written evidence (CRF0061)

House of Lords Communications and Digital Select Committee inquiry 'A creative future'

Supplementary note of evidence on the role of the British Council

1. The purpose of this note is to flag my concern about the future resourcing of the British Council's creative economy work and its capacity to continue in a global leadership role.
2. Many of the foundational ideas which underpin the concepts of the 'cultural and creative industries' (CCIs), the 'creative industries' and the 'creative economy' were developed in the UK at the end of the 1990s under the leadership of then Culture Secretary, Chris Smith. Specifically the 'mapping' methodologies pioneered in the UK by the DCMS in 1998 and 2001 and subsequently adapted, with variations, by international agencies like UNESCO and UNCTAD, were substantially invented, and later developed, by NESTA and others, in the UK.
3. This intellectual leadership is acknowledged throughout the world, not only within the 'Anglosphere' but also throughout Asia, Latin America the European Union. It may itself be viewed as a form of successful cultural export.
4. The main vector of this leadership for more than 20 years has been the British Council. A summary indication of the recent activities of the Council can be viewed online here [Creative Economy | British Council](#).
5. One example of the Council's historic work is a widely read text entitled an [Introduction to the Creative Economy | Resources | Creative Economy | British Council](#), by John Newbigin OBE, first published in 2010, which has been translated into Arabic, Polish, Portuguese, Russian and Spanish. Mr Newbigin was for many years chair of the Council's advisory board on the creative industries and is currently chair of the international council of the Policy and Evidence Centre (PEC) [Creative Industries Policy & Evidence Centre | Researchers \(pec.ac.uk\)](#).
6. The Council's work on the creative economy and the creativity industries continues, for example through the 'Creative Spark' programme in central and eastern Europe and Central Asia. The Council is also a valued partner of the World Conference on Creative Economy (WCCE), a broad coalition of largely developing states led by Indonesia. The WCCE has met in full session twice within the last 12 months: 23 countries were represented at ministerial level in Dubai in December 2021 and 27

¹ Declaration of interest: I have worked, largely *pro bono*, on numerous British Council assignments relating to the creative industries since 2007, including assignments in India, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Nigeria, Poland, Ukraine and the Czech Republic. From 2017-19 I chaired the advisory board of Creative Central Asia, a capacity building and knowledge transfer project funded by the UK government and managed by the British Council in Kazakhstan.

countries in Bali in October 2022.² The UK government was not represented at either event but the Council was a key formal partner at both.

7. Everywhere the talk in the field, however, is of cuts, reduced budgets and diminished intervention capability. The financial challenges facing the Council are without doubt immense: they were greatly exacerbated by Covid and are documented in its annual report.³ For an organisation that generates much the greater part of its income from commercial education work around the globe the impact of the pandemic has undeniably been immense. Any corporate body that has sustained losses on this scale will of course have difficult choices to make. What is less clear is how, against that background, competing priorities are assessed and how a commitment to carry out creative economy work computes in these calculations. It is also unclear how many changes to work programmes and priorities have been forced on the Council by government.
8. Creative economy work is formally a subset of one of the Council's 'core offers' (Arts and Culture). Long before Covid I had noted the cuts in resource being committed to this work, including what was once a dedicated in-house creative economy unit: senior people were not replaced, or not replaced at the same level, and a great website designed to chronicle its far-flung activities and connect its associated network of advisers was taken down for staffing and financial reasons – there was no-one left to manage it.
9. From my perspective the Council's ability to act as a 'think-do tank' and clearinghouse of global policy work on the creative economy and creative industries has been progressively eroded over a number of years. My working hypothesis is that the Council will not be equipped to maintain its remaining leadership position in the future and is at risk of losing its corporate memory of what has been achieved over the last two decades. It may also cease to be able to partner with governments and international bodies in key global forums other perhaps than as a 'sleeping' partner – one unable to make a financial contribution to collaborative work.
10. To maintain its position in a rapidly changing world where growth is increasingly to be found in the Global South the Council needs, amongst other things, to be able to recruit qualified specialists, manage bespoke knowledge systems and maintain efficient transnational networks. I see no evidence that it will be able to do so in the coming years given known resource allocation.
11. There is a savage irony here. Many other countries are in the process of ramping up their cultural relations and 'soft power' capabilities, often in explicit emulation of the Council. This is a domain of undisputed UK eminence. The presiding UK political narrative is that of a new era, post

² [3rd World Conference on Creative Economy | UNCTAD](#)
³ [annualreport_2020-21.pdf \(britishcouncil.org\)](#)

Brexit, of 'Global Britain'. It would surely be irrational, and an act of national self-harm, to allow the Council's capacity in respect of creative economy and creative industries work to wither on the vine.

12. I would therefore welcome any assurances that the Committee might be able to obtain in respect of the Council's future commitment to this celebrated dimension of UK global leadership.

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