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## ART AND THE ELECTIONS

At some point between now and 3 June a general election will be held. It's probable, though not certain, that the Conservative Party will win, ending Labour's 13-year reign and in the process giving this generation of emerging artists its first taste of the extent to which politics and culture are interlinked.

With the Conservatives' official election manifesto still unpublished it's impossible to make specific predictions about arts policy under a David Cameron government, but many people in the British arts world are concerned about what the future would hold should the Tories come to power.

Michael Attenborough, artistic director of the Almeida Theatre, believes times are going to be tough for the arts no matter who wins the election.

"The Conservatives have never been friends of the arts and I think they're open to the accusation that they favour elitist arts organisations. But I don't think one should be smug or complacent about the situation were a Labour government to get in. Whatever colour party gets in, they're going to be facing a recession."

As far as Attenborough is concerned, any subsidy cuts would be a mere "gesture". "The cuts benefit virtually nobody. We [the arts] are a little pimple in terms of the overall body of government expenditure. They're saying equal suffering for all."

For Attenborough the consequences of such cuts will be widespread, with those organisations that rely on individual project grants suffering the most. "My hunch is that there'll be very few cuts on regularly funded organisations. I think it'll be project funding [that's cut] because as much as anything it's easier. Out of sight out of mind."

Buildings like the Almeida won't escape unharmed either, despite continuing to receive regular annual funding. The Almeida is "absolutely cut to the bone; everything goes on the work. Which means of course that if you cut us, that's where it will be felt. We spend nearly £200,000 every year - which we've carved out of our own budget - on our work with young people. That's something that could be immediately vulnerable. I'm not saying that's the decision we would make, but it could be."

Attenborough's fear of arts policy decisions impacting on creative choices is echoed by Jenny Topper, former artistic director of Hampstead Theatre and one of the UK's top independent theatre producers. Looking at the situation from her point of view as a commercial producer, she observes that it will not be the subsidised sector alone that is affected if the arts are further squeezed under a new government.

"There's a symbiotic relationship between the commercial world and the not-for-profit world. If I have a play that is rather wonderful, but it's going to be costly to set up, then I can find a collaborator in the subsidised sector who can have immense kudos and if that production is successful, I can then take it into the West End or on tour."

But if subsidised theatres are suffering, she explains, they "become enormously cautious in their choices, in terms of scale and in terms of how radical a piece is". The result is that the commercial sector loses a source of ambitious and exciting work and "everybody suffers."

The message is that whatever the result of this spring's general election, the years to come will bring further pressure on the arts as the UK struggles to recover from a recession and more and more money is diverted into funding the 2012 Olympics.

But that doesn't mean it's time to despair. Looking back on his 37 years in the business Attenborough says, "we've been around a long time and we've battled for the arts. We've battled for them every bloody year".

- *Jo Caird*

**READ THE GUARDIAN THEATRE BLOG** for an update on the arts policies from both the Labour and Conservative parties.

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