

## Scene-setter | Social Cohesion and the role of Cultural Policy

Prepared by the Cultural Policy Hub at OCAD University

*The Cultural Policy Hub at OCAD University is a national, bilingual platform that builds communities of practice among researchers, policymakers, artists, and creators from across Canada’s academic, government, non-profit and private spheres. It supports cultural policy decision-making from the local to the national levels and seeks to be a partner in public policy issues to which the cultural sector contributes—and those by which the sector is affected.*

*This document provides background on our upcoming Policy Roundtable event*  
**Social Cohesion and the role of Cultural Policy.**

*Details for the event, which takes place at the 2024 DemocracyXChange on April 13, 2024 at 2:30PM (EST), can be [found here](#).*

*Interested in learning more about the Hub?  
[Visit our website](#), [subscribe to our monthly newsletter](#) or [follow us on LinkedIn](#).*

In Canada, historically, one of the main rationales for public investment in arts and culture has been their ability to contribute to social cohesion, representing Canadian identity to Canadians so we can know each another better across our different identities and cultures, and over a massive geographic land.

But what happens when the idea of “Canadian identity” is contested, social cohesion is challenged and political polarization encourages division? Can arts and culture play a role in bringing about social cohesion in this current time of division, and if so, how? How is arts and culture being politicized for division in different parts of the world, and what can Canada learn from it?

### **Partisanship, Populism and the Politization of Cultural Policy In Europe and the USA**

A cohesive society is one that “works towards the well-being of all its members, fights exclusion and marginalization, creates a sense of belonging, promotes trust, and offers its members the opportunity of upward social mobility.”<sup>1</sup> This commonly-cited definition of social cohesion—drawn from an Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) report on global economic development—aligns with the public policy objectives of liberal democracies around the world, including for cultural policy.

---

<sup>1</sup> [https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/docserver/persp\\_glob\\_dev-2012-sum-en.pdf?expires=1711901830&id=id&accname=guest&checksum=BCC817902EBFFB215FDD7A1ABD1A90B0](https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/docserver/persp_glob_dev-2012-sum-en.pdf?expires=1711901830&id=id&accname=guest&checksum=BCC817902EBFFB215FDD7A1ABD1A90B0)

For political progressives, this idea of cohesion—and, specifically, the fight against exclusion and marginalization—is carried out in policies that promote equity, diversity and inclusion of a broad range of identities in the context of changing demographics and needs.<sup>2</sup>

For many on the political right, social cohesion can have a different meaning. In growing populist movements in North America and Europe, the value of culture is often rooted in the idea of a unified, historical national identity, a nostalgic embrace of more “traditional” or nationalistic cultural systems that can go as far as reinforcing “mass allegiance, an originary identity or authentic expression of the nation state, the general public or a holistic social inclusiveness.”<sup>3</sup>

Recent developments in Europe demonstrate some emerging trends in how contemporary populist governments approach cultural policy.

- In Sweden, the right-wing populist Sweden Democrats party is on the rise, calling for a cultural policy approach that prioritizes Swedish identity and includes “demands for stopping all support for (other) explicitly political culture.”<sup>4</sup>
- The cultural policy proposed by Italy’s governing Brothers of Italy party, led by Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni, is centered on the promotion of nativism and nationalism, the protection of Christian values, and safeguarding Italian heritage; in doing so, it aims to combat what it views as “anti-Western ideology” by criminalizing “cancel culture and iconoclasm,” with critics noting the clear undercurrents of Islamophobia in these and other policy directions.<sup>5</sup>
- A recent report by the Artistic Freedom Initiative revealed the specifics of how Viktor Orbán’s right-wing populist FIDESZ party in Hungary used “mechanisms of oppression” to transform cultural policy to serve anti-democratic and nationalist aims:
  1. Constitutional and legislative changes aimed at restricting free expression and expanding government regulatory authority over the arts;
  2. Bureaucratic encroachment into and control over arts institutions;
  3. Government consolidation and manipulation of the media to curate nationalist cultural narratives and suppress alternative voices.<sup>6</sup>

Meanwhile, in the United States, research has been undertaken to explore just how divided Americans are when it comes to cultural production and consumption. These studies respond to the commonly held view that the arts have become a partisan issue—one more thing contributing to greater polarization between the political left and right. But opinion polls, academic research, and political action by Congress reveal that the divide between people’s views on the arts and culture may not be as divisive as we might think. One study found that there was “no significant relationship between conservatives and attitudes to arts spending,”

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, the Department of Canadian Heritage Departmental Plan 2024-25 Message from the Ministers: <https://www.canada.ca/en/canadian-heritage/corporate/publications/plans-reports/departmental-plan-2024-2025.html#a1>

<sup>3</sup> [https://www.academia.edu/44182110/Cultural\\_Policy\\_and\\_Populism\\_The\\_Rise\\_of\\_Populism\\_and\\_the\\_Crisis\\_of\\_Political\\_Pragmatism\\_Introduction](https://www.academia.edu/44182110/Cultural_Policy_and_Populism_The_Rise_of_Populism_and_the_Crisis_of_Political_Pragmatism_Introduction)

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.zu.de/lehrstuehle/wuerth/assets/pdf/ACPT-Public-Programme.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> <https://camd.org.au/brothers-of-italy-cultural-policy/>

<sup>6</sup> [https://artisticfreedominitiative.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Artistic-Freedom-Monitor\\_Hungary\\_Systematic-Suppression.pdf](https://artisticfreedominitiative.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Artistic-Freedom-Monitor_Hungary_Systematic-Suppression.pdf)

except that conservatives supported arts funding more when it was “moderated by political trust.”<sup>7</sup> Speaking to the coding of cultural products across partisan lines, another report found that “cultural objects may become ‘liberal’ or ‘conservative’ because of their emergence and spread within groups, rather than because of anything particular about their encoded contents.”<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, when then-President Donald Trump tried to eliminate all funding for the National Arts Endowment in 2021, a bipartisan response from Congress thwarted the attempt, and actually secured a small increase to the NEA’s funding in the federal budget.

## **Social Cohesion and Polarization in Canada**

In its 2011 Canadian Framework for Culture Statistics (CFCS), Statistics Canada drew a link between creative consumption and civic participation. It defined the result of that engagement, social cohesion, as the “process of developing a community of shared values, shared challenges and equal opportunity as well as the outcome of investment in social and culture programs and in social capital.”<sup>9</sup> Social cohesion is just one barometer for measuring a functioning society, but it’s one that has assumed a growing importance in the context of increased political polarization in Canada.

A decade after the CFCS was published, in his opening remarks at the 2022 National Arts Summit, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau identified the arts and culture sector as uniquely positioned to “pierce through in a time of so much cynicism, of skepticism, of polarization in some ways, to reach out and grab that common humanity.”<sup>10</sup> The PM’s remarks framed arts and culture as an antidote to increased political polarization and a decline in social cohesion in Canada.

These trends are investigated in a recent Public Policy Forum (PPF) report on young Canadians’ attitudes about polarization. Drawn from roundtables and surveys of over 1,600 young adults, the report outlines how Canadians aged 18-35 view polarization and how, despite its potential to contribute to social progress, the type of polarization we are seeing in Canada of late is dividing people and eroding trust in public and social institutions.<sup>11</sup>

Increased partisanship has led to growing misconceptions of one another and a rise in “affective” polarization. According to the report, perceptions of difference between individuals, groups, and political parties are widening, threatening political and civic engagement, and cancel culture is causing as much pain and anxiety to those it is meant to serve as it is bringing justice and accountability. Of particular salience to this conversation is growing economic injustice, which is increasing both resentment politics broadly and contributing to the disconnection that young people are feeling toward traditional ways of engaging with democracy. For example, young people reported frustration with lack of access to public

---

<sup>7</sup> <https://jps.scholasticahq.com/article/21506-the-arts-as-a-polarized-issue-and-the-role-of-political-trust-in-promoting-the-arts-evidence-from-the-united-states>

<sup>8</sup> <https://academic.oup.com/sf/advance-article-abstract/doi/10.1093/sf/soad150/7502686?redirectedFrom=fulltext&login=false>

<sup>9</sup> [https://publications.gc.ca/collections/collection\\_2018/pch/CH4-187-2016-eng.pdf](https://publications.gc.ca/collections/collection_2018/pch/CH4-187-2016-eng.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.canada.ca/en/canadian-heritage/campaigns/national-culture-summit/final-report.html>

<sup>11</sup> <https://ppforum.ca/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/TheRiseOfPolarizationInCanada-PPF-AUG2023-EN2.pdf>



- Participating in arts activities builds a shared sense of community identity—87% strongly/somewhat agree
- Arts experiences help bring people from diverse backgrounds together as a community—86% strongly/somewhat agree
- If my community lost its arts activities, people living there would lose something of value—85% strongly/somewhat agree<sup>16</sup>

That sense of interconnectedness that the arts can bring is at the core of the social cohesion we hear about in Canadian cultural policy. A department of Canadian Heritage literature review on the sector’s social impacts in 2016 included a comprehensive scan of social cohesion and culture. It considered social cohesion as one the drivers of connectedness that cultural policy could be developed to deliver on. The report identified a number of questions around how exactly to design cultural policy to do this, including:

- What key indicators provide evidence of these results, and across what range and capacity?
- What are the distinctions between cultural indicators and social indicators?
- How are social impacts of cultural participation and exposure to the arts defined?
- What data is collected, how, and why?
- Why are social impacts important, compared to the economic impacts?
- Can they be compared at international levels?

Arts and cultural organizations in Canada are exploring these questions in new and rigorous ways. *Research in Residence: Arts’ Civic Impact* is an ambitious partnership led by MassCulture through its national networks of practitioners and researchers.<sup>17</sup> The initiative is a multi-year project to “develop and test qualitative frameworks that will greatly assist the arts sector in demonstrating its civic impact.” The frameworks provide ways to understand the contribution of the arts to diversity and inclusion as well as climate and sustainability.

### **The Limits of Social Cohesion**

Looking beyond the questions around social impact and cohesion, cultural policy also needs to address another problem: in Canada, the ideological systems and structures of power that define a national cultural identity were largely borne from the 1951 Massey Report. That report and what followed from it was, as cultural critic Zainub Verjee reminds us, “an outcome of ideological polarity of the Cold War period.”<sup>18</sup> At the report’s core was a desire to “authenticate” Canadian culture and wield it to ensure a sense of national unity. Absent from the report was any mention or consideration of the Indigenous peoples of this land who experienced cultural genocide as a result of colonization.

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.arts.on.ca/oac/media/oac/Publications/Research%20Reports%20EN-FR/Social%20Impacts%20of%20the%20Arts/Nanos-The-Arts-and-the-Quality-of-Life-2023.pdf>

<sup>17</sup> <https://massculture.ca/research-in-residence/>. Partners in the project include the Canada Council for the Arts, the Culture Statistics Working Group of the Federal-Provincial-Territorial Culture and Heritage Table, the Ontario Trillium Foundation and Toronto Arts Foundation.

<sup>18</sup> <https://canadianart.ca/essays/massey-report-the-great-canadian-amnesia>

As a colonial construct, the project of social cohesion through cultural expression has largely excluded Indigenous peoples. Cultural policy has contributed to violence against Indigenous peoples across Canada, playing its part in systematically denying Indigenous communities creative, cultural, and political sovereignty. Conversely, the exclusion of Indigenous peoples and cultural practices from cultural policy in Canada to this day signals a failure (or unwillingness) on the part of policymakers to understand how Indigenous peoples can contribute to this project. The question thus becomes: why has social cohesion been our goal, and is it one that's still worth pursuing?

The framework through which Canadian culture is defined—and the institutional infrastructure that has been developed to support that framework—has been slow to adapt to the changing context of life in Canada. This has led artists and researchers like Sarah Garton Stanley to view “social cohesion” as a myth, or something that has become increasingly difficult to believe in. She brings her research on the Massey Commission to this conversation to help us think through the limitations and barriers that have arisen in Canada’s cultural sector, and to question the very foundations of our conceptions of a national cultural identity. As she states in her project *Massey and Me: Conversations at the End of Theatre*: “I’m not sure there was ever a ‘we’ in the sense that history tells us there was in 1867 and 1951.”

If social cohesion continues to decline and political polarization continues to widen, cultural policy will play a critical role in establishing the direction for connectedness in the Canadian context. Indigenous creative sovereignty, trust in politicians and policymakers, and the ways we engage online and with the media all need to factor into a cultural policy response.

### **About the Panelists**

**Tanya Talaga** (she/her) is a member of Fort William First Nation. She is an author, journalist and founder of Makwa Creative. Inc., an Indigenous focused media company producing documentary films, TV, and podcasts such as *Seven Truths* on Audible, and, *Auntie Up!* a podcast for Indigenous women, produced by Indigenous women. Talaga has written two national best-sellers: *Seven Fallen Feathers* and *All Our Relations*. Her third book, *The Knowing*, will be out in August and a corresponding, four-part CBC documentary series will be out in the Fall. She is a freelance columnist at The Globe and Mail. In 2021, she was part of the Globe team that won the Michener Award for coverage of the Catholic Church's efforts to avoid responsibility for abuses at Indian Residential Schools.

**Victoria Kuketz** (she/her) is an established public policy and engagement professional focused on social impact. Her mission is to accelerate growth and momentum on innovation, inclusion and the protection of democracy. She is currently the Director of Corporate Engagement at Catalyst Canada, a fellow of the Public Policy Forum focused on Digital Democracy, and host of the Democracy Dialogues at TMU's Democratic Engagement Exchange. Victoria was a Civic Action Diverse City fellow from 2021-2022, volunteers for Mila in their AI for Humanity work, and sits on the Selection Committee for MLSE's Community Connection Grants.

**Sarah Garton Stanley/SGS, PhD** (she/her/they) is Vice President of Programming at Arts Commons in Calgary. Prior to this, she was Artistic Producer for the National Creation Fund at Canada's National Arts Centre. SGS centred her doctoral work on the genealogical, political, and administrative structures that house professional theatre in Canada, with a particular focus on the 1951 Massey Commission. SGS co-authors Manifesto for Now with Owais Lightwala and

co-stewards the historic and beautiful Birchdale with Tracey Erin Smith. SGS sits on the steering committee for the 2024 Canadian Arts Summit and is a proud board member of Theatre Alberta and the Canadian Theatre Museum and is also part of the Buddies in Bad Times Leadership Advisory Pilot and the National Advisory for the Creation Fund. SGS has had an extensive career in the performing arts as a director, dramaturg and facilitator. She was the creator and co-facilitator of the Cycles a 7-year project whose goal was to gather practitioners around big ideas, and in theatrical terms engage with the concerns of our contemporary society. The areas of focus: Indigenous Performance (2014-2015); Deaf, disability, Mad arts and Inclusion (2016-2017); and Climate Change (2019-2020). SGS is a two-time recipient of an Arne Bengt Johansson Fellowship from the Banff Forum, and co-editor of *Materials for Creation*.

**Kelly Wilhelm** (she/her) will moderate the panel. Kelly is a bilingual independent strategist with more than 25 years' experience leading policy and innovation in government, the arts, media, creative industries, and the not-for-profit sector. She is Head of the Cultural Policy Hub at OCAD University, a new partnership to build a national network to build informed, inclusive and integrated cultural policy at all levels in Canada. Kelly's past senior executive roles include Chief of Staff to the federal Minister of Sport and Minister responsible for the Economic Development Agency for the regions of Quebec, Chief Strategy Officer at the Canada Media Fund, Senior Policy Advisor to the Minister of Canadian Heritage, and Director of Policy, Planning and Strategic Foresight at the Canada Council for the Arts, where she spent 10 years in progressively more senior roles. In each role, Kelly's leadership and commitment to change and policy renewal transformed the organization and brought significant new resources to its work. She is an equity ally and champion with a track record of deep community engagement and oversight of action-oriented, data-driven equity and inclusion strategies. Kelly is a graduate of Queen's University in English literature and art history, and has a Master's degree in Museum Studies from the University of Toronto.

## **Further Reading & Listening**

[The 2018 CBC Massey Lectures: All Our Relations: Finding the Path Forward](#). Tanya Talaga, CBC, August 2019.

[Far and Widening: The Rise of Polarization in Canada](#). Justin Ling, Public Policy Form, August 2023.

[Manifesto for Now](#). Owais Lightwala and Sarah Garton Stanley

[Systematic Suppression: Hungary's Arts & Culture in Crisis](#). Artistic Freedom Initiative, 2022.

["The Arts as a Polarized Issue and the Role of Political Trust in Promoting the Arts: Evidence From the United States"](#) Jae Young Lim, Harin Woo. *JPS*. Vol. 36, Issue 1, March 31, 2021.

[Social Impacts and Benefits of Art and Culture: A Literature Review](#). Department of Canadian Heritage, February 2016.

[Social Cohesion in the Pandemic Age: A Global Perspective](#). Ipsos, October 2020.

[Final Report on National Arts Summit](#). Department of Canadian Heritage, May 2022.

[Combatting polarization by transforming anger into action](#). By Abdul Nakua. *The Philanthropist Journal*. January 27, 2023.

[Public perceptions of the benefits of the arts and cultures](#). Hills Strategies, June 22 2022.

[Ontario Arts Council Survey](#), March 2023.

[Research In Residence: Arts' Civic Impact](#), Mass Culture.

[The Great Canadian Amnesia](#). Zainub Verjee, *Canadian Art*, June 20, 2018.