

Présentation faite par / Presentation by Louise Lemieux présidente de l'AAAPNB / President of AAAPNB

Lors du colloque / During the summit
How do we speak for the arts in Canada today?

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Panel 2: Who has a relevant voice for the arts and why? (What's next?)

Who is speaking for the arts in Canada today and how well are they doing? We have organizations at the municipal, provincial and national levels that bring artists together by discipline and industry. In some cases, multiple organizations represent the various approaches and interests within those disciplines and industries.

Is this approach working for us? How have the Internet, social media, and emerging networks affected who speaks for the arts and their effectiveness?

Is there a particular role for cities or large urban centres in speaking for the arts?

How important is the balance between advocacy (having others speak for us and speaking for others) and lobbying (speaking for ourselves directly on specific issues)?

We have the media. We have audiences. And children. And teachers. And politicians. Are we all speaking for the arts? Should we all be speaking for the arts?

I am Louise Lemieux, president of AAAPNB, Association acadienne des artistes professionnel.le.s du Nouveau-Brunswick. The Association regroups professional artists of all disciplines, and it works in French, as its name implies. Members can belong to any culture, but we will communicate with them in French. There is now an English speaking association in New Brunswick, Artslink, that includes professional artists along with patrons, non-professional artists and various arts organisations. They are five years old; we are twenty-two years old.

Our mission is to promote professional arts activity in New Brunswick, and to defend the characteristics of the profession: innovation, widespread presentation and distribution of our work, dedication to excellence and perpetual professional development.

Between 2005 and 2007, we have conducted a very large social consultation about the arts and the cultural sector in Acadie, its place, its future, its role in Acadian society, and how we could improve the way we work and relate to our environment. In French, that is called États généraux, in memory of the momentous forum of 1789, in Paris, that decided that the royalty was superfluous. Our members described the process as a gigantic reset button for arts and culture.

One of the first decisions about the organisation of that forum was that we did not want to discuss amongst ourselves only, because that sounded too much like having a good collective cry and then going on with our lives. We therefore needed to speak with everybody who thought the arts mattered, and we needed to listen to them. We asked people and organisations to participate in a two-year discussion, uncertain that anyone would answer, and the telephone started ringing. Municipal governments, parent, student and teacher associations, schools and universities, civil servants from the cultural, the education and the wellness sectors, members of the economic council, of citizen organisations, artists, young and old, Acadian, immigrant, English speaking and first nation artists, cultural workers, people who wanted a better collective life, people who had projects, people who headed organisations that felt threatened by too much questioning, altogether more than 1000 persons participated in discussions, some for one or two days, some for two years.

What we learned most clearly was that we needed to listen well and to question anything as long as the purpose was to improve arts and culture.

As a result of the discussions, in 2009, we published a strategy for the integration of arts and culture in Acadian society, and the members of Artslink NB translated it in 2011. You can find it on our website, www.aaapnb.ca. It is a ten-year plan that the Minister of Culture described as a plan to keep citizens in New Brunswick and to empower them to develop the province.

So my first statement is that advocacy is extremely important and that it starts by understanding why other people will speak for the arts. What do they expect to gain from a more exciting cultural life? More tourists? Better students? Better visibility on the international stage? A more vibrant life for themselves? A chance to state what activities would be good in their territory? A stronger economy? We want them to speak for the arts, and to defend their own interests. We are all at our best when we defend our interests; we are not as good when we speak out of the goodness of our hearts.

In that process, we also learned how to speak for our partners, to be advocates for other causes. That part is crucial. We cannot expect the advocacy to be working in a single direction if we want it to be a partnership. People recognise the skill of artists in making themselves heard and they expect us to help make our world, which is the same as theirs,

a better place. We defend our interests through the causes that we speak for just as our partners defend their interests when they speak for the arts.

And what else do artists and cultural entrepreneurs get from that activity? We get a better world, we get a chance to make ourselves heard, to be recognised as productive citizens. We get to be recognised as professionals not just within the cultural world, but also in the world at large, where art is still often viewed as a personal spiritual pursuit or as a hobby. I think that that recognition comes from the fact that we start acting socially like professionals. People expect professionals to foster valid causes and they tend to discount people who call themselves professionals but act as recipients of charity.

When we have strong advocates talking about the arts, we can speak of the arts in our own name, as in lobbying, in a different way. We can talk more freely about specific issues and devote less energy to the defence of our entire sector. There has been a recent example of that strategy. In their first round of deficit reduction and spending cuts, the Provincial government cut what amounted to the entire movie industry by cutting the tax incentive for new films. The protests were loud and came from the arts world of course but they came as well as well as from the tourism industry, from other media representatives and from citizen organisations. People wanted the business, they wanted the image, and they wanted the access to federal money that the program permitted. People turned to the AAAPNB to organise the protests, largely because of its credibility and its reputation for defending larger interests and not solely the interests of its members. The government listened and cancelled the cut but reorganised the way that the money would be allocated and managed. In the discussions that followed, they included representatives of the artists as well as representatives of the industry, which is not necessarily the case in the film sector, where industry representatives are usually the sole lobbyists. So I think that what you gain from a judicious use of advocacy and a real social partnership is also a more efficient lobbying activity.

I will add that as far as the social media are concerned, our strategy is to let our members do the talking, and to try to give them clear and focussed information to increase their efficiency. I say try because we do not always succeed, and that conversation with our members is ongoing. Our only certainty is that the social media are best at presenting individual opinions, and that direct intervention from organisations is usually not very efficient.

In conclusion, and to try and link to the reading list and the thinking about a new era in the arts, maybe after talking about the right to be heard and seen for a long time, we need to exercise that role more fully, and to talk and to listen to a wider variety of people and to take a stronger part in fostering their causes as well as asking them to speak on our behalf.

