



# THE HILL TIMES

## ‘The cultural world after COVID will be different’: arts industry calls for more supports to rebuild, transform

‘We must not wait,’ says Independent Senator René Cormier of post-COVID support for the arts. ‘Competition is there and the world is changing and artists are leaving ... there’s a sense of urgency here.’

BY ALICE CHEN

The arts and culture sector, like many industries, has been struggling since the onset of COVID-19, and industry experts say that along with a need for clear reopening plans, more government supports, including potential creation of a universal basic income, could not only help the sector’s recovery, it could help bring “transformative change.”

According to an emailed statement from David Larose, media relations at the department of Canadian Heritage, between the first and second quarters of 2020, the total number of jobs in the sector fell by 19 per cent. As of March of this year, jobs remain down nine per cent, with the sector’s GDP five per cent lower than pre-pandemic figures from the same time last year.

The situation is even more dire for the live performance domain; research by the Canadian Association for the Performance Arts indicates its real GDP is still 62.9 per cent away from full recovery as of the first quarter of 2021.

“Those organizations that rely heavily on earned revenues for ticket sales, concessions, merchandise, things like that, those have been hit the hardest,” Aubrey Reeves, president and CEO of Business/Arts said.

In response to these circumstances, in his emailed statement Mr. Larose said the federal government has made “a number of funding announcements since the start of the pandemic to help support the arts and culture sectors.”

These include a \$500-million emergency support fund for cultural, heritage, and sports organizations, \$181.5-million of investments rolled out in collaboration with the Canada Council for the Arts for arts and live event workers, and most recently in June, \$500-million split across a recovery fund and a reopening fund for the sector. This last announcement builds on \$1.4-billion from the most recent budget and another \$200-million in major festivals and events support initiatives.



Senator Patricia Bovey, right, and Senator René Cormier, have both worked in the arts and culture sector and weighed in on how the industry can recover after being hit by financial and employment woes during the COVID-19 pandemic. Photograph courtesy of René Cormier’s office and The Hill Times photograph by Andrew Meade



“Our sector overall has been incredibly grateful for the federal government’s emergency supports and wage subsidies and rent subsidies ... but it hasn’t filled the gap of the total amount of revenues lost,” Ms. Reeves said.

What the industry needs, then, according to advocates and those involved, extends beyond these support funds, touching on perennial issues that have plagued the sector and its workers even before the virus outbreak.

One thing that Tricia Baldwin, director of the Isabel Bader Centre for the Performing Arts at Queen’s University, pointed out in an email statement is the fact that COVID-19 “highlighted the cracks in the arts ecosystem, including the questioning of affordability, prevalence, and appropriateness



David Maggs, an innovation fellow at the Metcalf Foundation, says reaction to the disruption of COVID-19 raises questions about the inclusivity and relevancy of the arts. Photograph courtesy of David Maggs

of the institutional model as the primary method of bringing the arts to the stage.” She further questioned whether there were other ways to support artists, like through legislated fair payments for online products or even something as dramatic as a universal basic income.

She wasn’t the only one who pushed for these sorts of financial supports. President and CEO of Calgary Arts Development, Patti Pon, called this type of income support a potential “transformative change” for artists. She also said

there could be policy conversations around the rules governing charities to help encourage further philanthropy and investment from the private sector into the arts, pointing specifically to recommendations made in a 2019 report by the Senate Special Committee on the Charitable Sector.

“The bulk of people that work in this sector work in such ways because they’re independent entrepreneurs ... or they’re freelancers, or they’re contract workers. Their lives are pretty precarious,” said Andrew Cash, a former NDP MP for the Davenport, Ont., from 2011 to 2015, a singer-songwriter, and now president and CEO of the Canadian Independent Music Association.

He said, in many ways, COVID-19 raised the profile of the



Those in the arts industry live precarious lives, says former NDP MP Andrew Cash. Photograph courtesy of Andrew Cash

sector, highlighting specifically its importance economically.

David Maggs, innovation fellow at the Metcalf Foundation, an organization that invests in various sectors, said that for a recent report, when he asked various arts leaders if they would press a button that would make “the pandemic of 2020 suddenly not occur,” absolutely “no one said, ‘I would press that button.’”

Shocked by this feedback, he said he thinks that what people are saying is that there’s a reason for the moment we’re in, and this level of disruption is “not such a

bad thing, if we don’t squander it.” This could mean asking tough questions about the relevancy of the arts to the public imagination, he said, and whether the space is truly inclusive and an “engine of Canada’s imaginative horizon.”

One potential avenue for improvement, said Janelle Rainville, director of production and theatre operations at the University of Waterloo, is more consultation with the arts sector from the government, as well as more clarity in terms of direction during the pandemic, as currently information is in short, conflicting supply.

“There needs to be definitely clear communication and consultation ... they probably need at least a couple people there who know how live performance works across the country to help them make decisions,” she said.

Mr. Larose emphasized that the Heritage department has been engaging stakeholders, with a series of 15 roundtables and six town halls conducted last fall.

Capacity building is another important aspect of pandemic recovery, Ms. Reeves said.

“The thing about the art sector is it’s mostly made up of very small arts companies,” she said. “The sector as a whole does need support in terms of professional development, skills and knowledge to help them rebuild.”

It also needs, she said, the support to build collaborations and partnerships, paired with a reopening plan in which provid-



More consultation and open communications are needed from the government, says Janelle Rainville. Photograph courtesy of Janelle Rainville

ers clarify what is and isn’t going to be allowed. This collaboration might involve tax incentives for donors and grants that require partnership across organizations, encouraging efforts like the sharing of Toronto’s High Park amphitheatre across multiple smaller groups.

Building on this, Progressive Senator Patricia Bovey (Manitoba), a former art gallery director, said there should be government subsidies to make up the difference for lowered ticket prices to get people back through doors, as well as tax breaks for artists, matching donation programs with

the private sector, and more bills like Bill C-10 to support artists and artist productions.

“There’s always more that needs to be done and always more needs to be heard,” she said. “When you think that I’m the first art historian or museum director ever to be in the Senate, maybe that helps tell a story right?”

In Independent Senator René Cormier’s view (New Brunswick), there should also be a focus on funding new media like the web and the internet. The government, he said, should help promote work digitally to make sure it’s known and accessible. Funding should also be made available to artists in rural sectors who don’t typically have as much access to cash inflow.

“I have a lot of artist friends that are still artists, but they don’t practice anymore ... the cultural world after COVID will be different than the one before, and fund injection is a very important component of that, but also strategic actions,” said Sen. Cormier, who has also been involved extensively in arts and culture.

And this is important, given that the sector is, as Mr. Larose wrote, a “defining” element of trading relationships, tourism, and diplomatic activity.

“The arts, culture, heritage and sports sectors ... contribute to our individual and collective well-being, and to nation building and fostering Canadian identity,” said Mr. Larose.

In many ways, Mr. Cash said, the sector “punches above its weight” on the global stage in an economic sense, creating middle-class jobs that develop Canadian intellectual properties which are exploitable and exportable across international markets.

There are even benefits, Sen. Bovey suggested, around crime prevention and lowered recidivism rates, as well as on general well-being. Despite this contribution to the economy and the fabric of life, artists still struggle with pay and living standards, she said.

“[It’s] a very strong contribution on one hand, and a very real need on the other,” she said.

“We must not wait,” Sen. Cormier said. “Competition is there and the world is changing and artists are leaving ... there’s a sense of urgency here.”

“The only reason live performance was created to begin with, was it fulfilled the need for human connection, of sharing ideas and exploring,” John Karastamatis, director of sales and marketing at Mirvish Productions said, pointing towards the historic significance of theatre in ancient Greece and its role then as a civic duty to attend, and through it, understand society.

Brenda Leadlay, former executive director of the BC Alliance for Arts and Culture, meanwhile, looked at art more democratically, not so much as a vehicle for the elites, but instead as something fundamental to the “very heart of who we are as human beings.”

“Creative expression is absolutely necessary.”

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