

The Arts and Regional economies

(Remarks by Saul Eslake, Chair, Ten Days on the Island, at "The Place of Art in the Art of Place", Burnie Theatre, Monday 22nd October 2018).

Although I am (as you've just been reminded) an economist, I *don't* believe that the benchmark by which every idea, or every proposal, should be assessed is whether it produces a net economic benefit – that something is only worth supporting if its purported economic benefits outweigh its costs; and that if the reverse is shown to be the case, then it should be opposed.

Perhaps it's precisely because I *am* an economist that I recognize that there are often benefits – and costs – which are difficult, or even sometimes impossible, to put a dollar figure on, but which are nonetheless important, should be recognized, and should be taken into account.

Indeed, the most famous and influential economist of the 20th century, John Maynard Keynes, once bemoaned the fact that

"We have persuaded ourselves that it is positively wicked for the state to spend a halfpenny on non-economic purposes. Even education and public health only creep in under an economic alias on the ground that they 'pay' ... One form alone of uncalculated expenditure survives from the heroic age – war. And even that must sometimes pretend to be economic¹."

Just before he died, Keynes said:

"... the civilizing arts ... in fact use up an infinitesimal quantity of materials in relation to their importance in the national life and the comfort they can give to the individual spirit²."

And Keynes was also a great supporter of arts festivals. Writing about the ways in which governments should support the arts, he said:

"Even more important [than permanent monuments] are the ephemeral ceremonies, shows and entertainments in which the common man (sic) can take his delight and recreation after his work is done, and which can make him feel, as nothing else can, that he is one with, and part of, a community finer, more gifted, more splendid, more care-free than he can be by himself³."

So if this is good enough for Maynard Keynes, it's certainly good enough for me.

But in order to fulfil my allotted task this evening, I need to be less whimsical, and more prosaic.

¹ JM Keynes, 'Art and the State', originally published in *The Listener*, 26 August 1936; reprinted in *The Collected Writings of John Maynard Keynes*, Volume 28 (London, Macmillan, 1982), p. 342.

² JM Keynes, Foreword to the catalogue for *An Exhibition of French Book Illustration*, 1895-1945; *Collected Writings*, p. 365-66.

³ JM Keynes, 'Art and the State', p. 344.

So I want to assert, and demonstrate, that the arts *do* bring economic benefits to regional communities. They directly create employment. They attract visitors – including visitors who might not otherwise come. They contribute to regional diversity and resilience. And they help to create communities.

Every year there are around 3,000 music or arts festivals held across regional Australia. According to a study undertaken nearly 10 years ago⁴, they generate around \$10 billion worth of economic activity in the communities in which they are held. They *directly* create 176,560 full- or part-time jobs – an average of 4.1 full time jobs per festival. And they indirectly create around 77,000 jobs in the wider community.

Ten Days on the Island has directly created 9 full-time equivalent jobs in Burnie since we moved our 'base' here about a year ago. In the lead-up to, and during, next year's Festival, we will create a further 8 temporary positions here in Burnie.

Second, regional festivals attract visitors to regional communities – from other regional communities, and from big cities – and these visitors spend money in restaurants and cafes, hotels and motels, shops and petrol stations in regional towns. That's a bit part of the 'economic activity' which festivals create.

The study I referred to earlier found that rural and regional arts festivals attract an average attendance of 7,020.

Over half of these are typically *first-time* visitors to the region – in other words, they are people who wouldn't have come if it wasn't for the arts festival. Arts festivals and events encourage visitors to stay longer and spend more within a regional area.

The arts provide an opportunity for regional areas to market their uniqueness and create a sense of place.

Queenstown's population is reported to have doubled over this past weekend as people flocked there from other parts of Tasmania to attend the *Uncomformity* festival. Many of those will be either first-time visitors to the West Coast, or people who haven't been there for a long time.

The program we are devising for next year's Ten Days on the Island Festival is being deliberately structured to give people more opportunities – and more reasons – to move around the state, including to come to the north-west coast.

Third, regional arts festivals help to sustain the livelihoods of artists living and working in regional communities. They provide opportunities for local artists and arts groups to exhibit their work, or put on performances, in their own communities or in other regions, opportunities which might otherwise not be available.

Because festivals are by their very nature experimental, regional arts festivals provide artists in regional communities with opportunities to try something different, or to expand their practice, in ways that might not be possible otherwise.

⁴ Christopher Gibson and Anna Stewart, *Reinventing rural places: The extent and impact of festivals in rural and regional Australia*, University of Wollongong, 2009.

They also, of course, provide audiences in regional communities access to arts experiences that they might very well not otherwise have.

A significant part of the investment which the State Government makes in Ten Days on the Island is directed towards creating opportunities for Tasmanian artists to exhibit their works, or put on performances.

In that respect, we're consciously and deliberately different from other festivals which bring interstate or international acts to Tasmania.

That's not intended as a criticism of those festivals, or to suggest that they're not also worthy of support from Government and others. Rather, it is simply to say that a key part of what Ten Days on the Island seeks to do is to create opportunities for Tasmanian artists and arts companies. In last year's festival, we provided 173 Tasmanian artists with opportunities to showcase their work. And since last year we have deliberately set out to create more opportunities for artists and arts companies living and working in regional Tasmania.

Fourth, arts and culture can contribute to strengthening regional diversity and resilience.

Many regional communities have historically had a narrow economic base. They have often been heavily reliant on one or two industries, and when those industries encounter serious challenges, the communities which rely on them, particularly for employment, can experience hard times, often for prolonged periods. Arts and culture can provide "another string to the bow" for regional communities – in some cases changing (for the better) the way in which they are perceived by people living in larger cities.

By allowing local people to tell their stories in a variety of ways, the arts can facilitate opportunities for people to use skills and abilities that might otherwise never be recognized. And this can also be a source of civic pride.

Most arts organisations in regional areas rely on volunteers. Volunteering in turn builds networks, skills and professional experience, and provides opportunities for people to engage and connect with others in their community, with positive effects on their physical and mental well-being. Last year, 117 Tasmanians volunteered their services to Ten Days events – and we are hopeful of a similar, or even greater, number at next year's Festival.

To conclude where I began, the main reason why anyone – an individual, a business or a government – should want to support the arts is for the sheer joy that they provide, not because there's a dollar in it. But it should, perhaps, provide an additional rationale for that support, that there *are* dollars – lots of them – in regional arts festivals.