

DEAR MINISTERS,

Paris based Irish music producer Gareth Murphy writes an open letter to Martin Cullen and Martin Mansergh.

Following Brian Cowen's cabinet shake up in early May, an Irish Times editorial called for a resolution to the "ambiguities" of two ministers now running the Department of Arts, Sport and Tourism. But before we could even debate anything, the Lisbon Treaty erupted and eclipsed all other questions.

Curiously enough, in the subsequent Lisbon fever that seemed to revolve around excessively political perceptions of freedom and national identity, the all important question of "Culture" was totally overlooked. Amongst no-voters throughout society, we heard countless variations of the same general feeling; that EU integration is the root cause of a faceless, dehumanising brave new world that's eating into our very soul and *Irishness*. Nobody however thought to ask whether this ever homogenising wasteland that so many are feeling in modern Ireland, might in fact be a cultural emptiness deep within Irish society alone, the result of negligence and populism that's been steadily trickling down from the summit of the Irish state for decades.

The fact is this whole debate about culture and the mechanisms of Ireland's cultural institutions should have begun years ago. To begin, may I suggest that we look at Ireland not only from afar, but comparatively from a country that has succeeded at the very things that Ireland now needs to address. France is not only the world's *exception culturelle*, it is also the republican model that, in theory, independent Ireland was based on.

I have lived in France for 13 years working in various areas of the music business. In regular contact with the music, arts and media worlds in Paris and Dublin, I have long contemplated the many profound differences in both systems. Tired of hearing racially tinged preconceptions about the French being naturally cultural and Irish being philistines, I have tried to identify the real reasons why Ireland is so far behind France in these matters.

The contrast begins with vocabulary. While a relatively small branch of Ireland's Arts, Sports & Tourism ministry oversees "the arts" and another small ministry handles "community, rural and Gaeltacht affairs", France has for centuries been concerned with the all embracing notion of "Culture".

In 1959, France was the first country in the world to create a Ministry of Culture. Its first minister, André Malraux, laid out the idea of citizens' "right to culture". The idea of democratising access to culture had already been incorporated in the French constitution and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948.

But France always had strong state intervention in the domain of the arts. Following in the Medici tradition, it began with royal patronage, the creation of the *dépot légal* (origins of copyright) by François the 1st, then the Comedie-Française and Académies under Louis XIV. The chaos of the Revolution bore concern to protect the new Republic's cultural patrimony, resulting in Alexander Lenoir's museums of French monuments, the first art museums and later the creation of the Louvre. The Third Republic developed the idea of education and diffusion with libraries, museums and created the first Fine Arts authority as part of the Ministry of Public Works. The Front Populaire was responsible for introducing cultural and

artistic education. During the Fourth Republic, Jeanne Laurent, vice-director of theatre and music in the Ministry of education introduced the idea of decentralisation with the Theatre National Populaire, the Avignon Festival and the national drama centres.

The French Ministry of Culture was originally based on conservative, Gaullist ideas of high-brow culture. But following the 1968 student riots, the idea of “cultural development” was established to meet a rapidly changing society. Later, culture was further democratised by the left-wing minister Jack Lang who during the Mitterrand years, incorporated street art, contemporary music, ethnic minority arts and created the summer solstice street-festival of music.

Culture, as French people understand it today, carries all kinds of historical, social and national meanings. Culture is without exaggeration, one of the core pillars of the modern French Republic. In Ireland I do not believe that the official term of the "the arts" represents anything quite like this to Irish minds. Culture as a philosophical concept, has been debated for centuries but all agree on its inherent social and educational significance. Some equate culture with civilisation or “the best that has been thought and said in the world”. Other theories are keen to incorporate a more ethnic perspective of culture as customs, traditions, beliefs, language and ways of life.

Although hard to define and open to interpretation, the French understand culture in a variety of ways. Educationally, it is personally enriching. Thanks to the principles of the Republic, the patrimony of kings and nobles has been democratised as a human right for all citizens. In other nationalist ways, the Gaullist tradition of resisting American influence via cultural protectionism has continued since the 1950s. The *Frenchness* of France is actively protected. In short, France’s cultural value system is a successful mix of humanist ideals and cultural nationalism. People and political parties support this tradition. When “culture” is placed in a value system, people respond to it differently.

Irish people will attribute France's superior cultural services to their bigger budgets. The French Ministry of Culture in 2007 spent 2.9 billion, an equivalent of about 50 euro per Frenchman. In 2007, the Irish government announced 245 million would be spent on arts. Although this figure is a long term pledge, the budgetary disparities alone do not explain the full depth of the cultural chasm.

If we look at Ireland from a French perspective, the institutional thinking is curious to say the least. Our Arts department has been lumped in with the Sport and Tourism ministry. This ministry states as its mission: "To enrich Irish society by supporting the growth of a competitive and sustainable tourism industry and increasing access to, and participation in, sport, the arts and culture". Compare this to the French Ministry of Culture's stated mission: "to make the most amount of major works of humanity, and above all France, accessible to the greatest possible number of French people, and to assure the vastest audience of our cultural patrimony, to favour the creation of works of art and the spirit which enriches them".

The irony here is that thanks to its ambitions, French Culture has become a highly successful industry. France is the world’s biggest tourist destination with a record 80 million tourists in 2007, generating about 8 billion euro per year. Although France’s infrastructure, regional diversity, climate and pivotal geographical location in Europe are all partly responsible for such success, culture is a key ingredient in France’s attractiveness to tourists. Not surprisingly, real culture, as opposed to biscuit tin folklore is what gets the big numbers.

In the domain of museums, galleries and monuments, the impressive public attendance figures for open days see millions of French people flocking to sites of cultural interest. The supply of culture to citizens does generate greater demand, which in turn raises cultural expectations and standards delivered. To quote Jack Lang: "The economy and culture: same battle!"

French cinema is an outstanding example of how ambitious principles of *exception culturelle* can create worldwide commercial success. France makes the most films and has the highest rate of cinema goers in Europe. About 40% of films seen in French cinemas are French made. The Cannes film festival has become the industry reference in cinematic innovation.

The Centre National de Cinématographie (CNC) invests 530 million euro annually into film production for both cinema and television. Unlike its equivalent, the Irish Film Board, which redistributes a meagre 17 million, the CNC's budget does not come from the state purse. It instead raises this investment from special taxes within the audio-visual industry (TV advertising, box office receipts, cable subscription, etc.) The genius of this mechanism is that those who carry the burden of the tax include the main commercial entities that need brilliant films for their own future survival. By recycling audio-visual capital via the CNC, industry interdependence becomes the key motor to success. It might be interesting for the Irish arts authorities to study such methods in greater detail and compare their effectiveness with the state hand out mentality in Irish arts.

The crucial difference between France and Ireland however is in public broadcasting. Unlike France whose national radio and TV networks are overseen by the Culture & Communication Ministry, RTE answers to the Dept. of Communications, Energy & Natural Resources. Neither the ministry nor RTE's stated missions contain any cultural aims. Only RTE's Gaelic language services and Lyric FM follow a clearly defined cultural agenda, though it is debatable how much influence these stations really have on Irish society. If compared to France's public broadcasting or the BBC, it is fair to conclude that RTE's main stations reveal an undeniably populist identity.

In French radio, the biggest public stations are given entirely to culture, notably the brilliant France Inter and France Culture. A number of excellent cultural TV programmes such as *Ce Soir Ou Jamais* and *Esprits Libres* address mainstream primetime audiences on the public channels. In particular, the Franco-German public TV station Arte, is surely the world's reference in television culture. The difference is that in France cultural programming is better, more abundant and given proper airtime.

The glaring contrast between public broadcasting in France and Ireland raises a whole range of questions about ideology and institutional identity. Having dominated the state's government since Independence, what for example has been the influence of Fianna Fail's populist values on the corporate culture of RTE? And more globally, do we the Irish even understand the concept of a republic in the same way that the French associate it with the humanist ideals of the Enlightenment?

Ireland's cultural shortcomings as a whole probably cannot be improved without a fundamental reform at state level. Policy should be working towards an Irish Culture & Communications ministry using the French success as a template.

To conclude, the French are not exceptional people. Like Ireland, France is still a largely rural society. If you go to any small town in deep France, "culture" will still mean the local

customs of that particular region. But in that town you can tune into national radio or television and experience world-reference culture and debate broadcasted from Paris. Culturally, the French Republic feeds its citizens better than the Irish state does.

France's cultural exception is no accident of nature. It has been built and protected. Their system certainly has its faults but the underlying recipe works.

Although we don't like to admit it, Ireland, in cultural ways, has been sliding into a cultural dark age probably since Independence. The Irish Republic inherited a rich cultural patrimony but has failed to adequately protect and build upon this foundation. Within our lifetime, Ireland has been gradually losing its cultural reputation in the world. Only foreigners above a certain age consider Ireland as an island of poets and romantics. In this cultural vacuum, a historical caricature of Irish folklore has been created to attract tourists and foreign investors. This has eaten into our national identity and it should come as no surprise that people are now turning to political nationalism to fill the cultural void.

Irish arts are lacking in ambition because Irish arts are marginalised and appear irrelevant to Irish society as a whole. Our media is strikingly populist; feeding the nation with programming that can only be described as low in nutritional value. Ireland now urgently needs ministerial vision to set a new cultural enlightenment in progress. It can only begin at the very top of the pyramid.