



Cultured Conversations is a digital series that delves into the value of the arts and importance of visionary leadership in this time of global uncertainty. In each edition, Gallery Director Kirsten Paisley is joined by a guest whose thoughtful conversation offers listeners motivation, resolution and solace.

In this episode, Kirsten talks to Helen Clark ONZ, former Prime Minister of New Zealand.

Kirsten Paisley:

Kia ora, and welcome to Cultured Conversations. My name's Kirsten Paisley, and I'm the director of the Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki, here in Aotearoa New Zealand. Today we have a special podcast for you because, for the first time, we're joined by a studio audience, and I'd like to extend a very warm welcome to everyone who's watching the conversation today. We've created this podcast series because we want to get a conversation going in public about the impact and the role of arts and culture at this particular moment – a moment which is increasingly being understood as an extended crisis due to COVID-19 and the pandemic. Today's conversation is also special because of my guest today, Helen Clark, a woman who needs very little introduction across the world. She was, of course, the Prime Minister of New Zealand for three consecutive terms, during which she held the Ministry for the Arts, Culture and Heritage. Since then, she went on to be the administrator for the United Nations Development Programme. Last year, she launched the Helen Clark Foundation, a public policy think-tank, which will no doubt champion many of the issues which have been very dear to Helen throughout her career: gender equity and sustainable development. Just two weeks ago, Helen was appointed as the co-chair of a review into the World Health Organization's response to the pandemic, a review that will take into its remit an analysis of how governments globally have risen to the challenge of this particular massive and crippling issue. Two days ago, Helen joined the Auckland Art Gallery's Advisory Committee, so this is a woman who's making time for important things that matter – clearly, it's a gift. Please join with me in welcoming Helen Clark.

[Applause]

Helen, when you were Prime Minister in 2000, you said a nation can be rich in every material sense, but if it fails to provide for and nurture creative expression it is impoverished in immeasurable ways. 20 years on, what might you add to that sentiment?

Helen Clark:

Well it's still true, isn't it? Because it's another way of using that old phrase, and it's a sexist phrase, so we'll say, 'men and women don't live by bread alone'. There has to be another dimension, another sphere of life, and so if we're feeling comfortable in our society, we've got the income that we need, and not everybody

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does, of course, which is an issue, but we need to look for things outside ourselves and our particular material needs, and that's where the arts come in, and I think most certainly should have a role of challenging and being conscious and critic of society. And I personally always enjoy going to exhibitions that are a bit in your face, if you like, that raise questions and get you thinking about things in in different ways. I think, for a small country like New Zealand, with its very diverse range of cultures – Indigenous cultures, settler culture, newer communities, there's a lot going on that needs to be expressed through storytelling and the visual and the performing arts, and I think we should be very enthusiastic about what the arts can contribute, and do contribute, to our country and the responsibility we have to nurture that.

KP:

Tell me a little bit about how you've perceived New Zealand's culture when you've been engaging internationally. What has it meant? How has it been envisaged or received?

HC:

Well, I spent the eight years living in New York, and often in New York people can't pick the accent from New Zealand. It's not British, it's not this, it's not that, so they'd always say, 'Where are you from?', and you'd say, 'New Zealand'. 'I've always wanted to go there!' So, I'll say, 'What's stopping you?' 'It's so far away!' But they had quite an idealised view of New Zealand, and a lot of it was around landscape and the incredible scenery that we have, assisted of course by the Lord of the Rings movies taking it to the world. I think the other thing that clearly is picked up internationally is Māori culture, unquestionably. Now, maybe it's the rugby and the haka, but in the New York arts audience there will be those who remember Te Maori, which was land-breaking as an exhibition, from '84 to '86, touring in New York at The Met, [which also] went to St Louis in the south. It went to the Field Museum in Chicago which has a very large Māori taonga collection and to San Francisco, so that resonated. I recall a delegation that I took to South America when I was Prime Minister, late in 2001, and we had me, we had government officials, we had a business delegation, [and] we also had a Māori delegation with us, including performing artists, and this made a very, very big impression. I'll give you two examples of it: one when we went to Brasilia and I met with the President, Fernando Henrique Cardoso, our accompanying Māori delegation approached him and did the hongi. That photo was on the front page of every paper in Brazil – they'd never seen anything like it, and, as you can imagine, in Brazil Indigenous people have really had to fight, and are fighting now, for this space, so this this was incredible acknowledgement of New Zealand Indigenous culture playing a role in the cultural diplomacy and outreach of New Zealand. There was another stunning encounter, and this is a way, I think, where, you know, the unique culture of Maoridom builds bridges we might not even envisage.

We had an event in Chile where there was a New Zealand Chilean foundation with its own premise being established, and again the Māori delegation with me was doing a welcome to the guests in the

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auditorium, and, out in the audience, there was a challenge, and the challenge came in a language that sounded familiar but wasn't quite, and then a man from Rapa Nui advanced towards our party, and it was such an emotional moment because would you have expected this in downtown Santiago? No. So, I've had these kinds of experiences which have been incredibly meaningful, including with some of the visits around the war sites where New Zealanders were involved in major battles. The commemoration at Cassino, which was such a tragedy for the Māori Battalion; there's so many stories I could tell. So that has really registered, I think, internationally – the unique culture and place of Māori.

KP:

Given there's such an appetite internationally for New Zealand, and Māori and cultural stories to be shared, '84/'86 – it's a long time ago, right? The time is nigh, and we're so blessed to have the opportunity to present *Toi Tū Toi Ora* at the Auckland Art Gallery and then take it to the world in the years that proceed – borders being reopened of course. Last night, directors around the world met for a webinar hosted by ICCROM and UNESCO, where the results were shared of a reporting to the impact of COVID-19 on art museums globally. It was indicated then that a large number of museums – 10 per cent is the average, in some cities bigger than that – won't reopen after the pandemic passes. One of the big take-outs also, though, was the increasing visibility of a massive digital divide between nations' circumstances. In the context of that, how might we get intentional about a vision for New Zealand's culture, for our creative nation recognising that we have a potential leadership position?

HC:

Well, I saw a report from New York that said one-third of the museums may not survive this.

KP:

Wow.

HC:

So that's horrific, obviously, but in this pandemic, you know, crisis is the mother of invention, and so we've discovered in our lives that we can do a lot more digitally, and that very much applies to the art space, I think. I think it's going to be years, if ever, before international tourism resumes to the extent that tourists will be populating the museums and galleries of the world, but we can take them to the world through digital means. So the digitisation strategies are absolutely critical in this, to give people, still, the experience of the holdings and all the artworks from video, kinetic, and onwards that are held in New Zealand, and I think that would be worth investing in quite a lot because otherwise we're going to find

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that we sit here in our bubble, and if we don't try to break out of that bubble through these sorts of means, what we have to say to the world about our stories is not going to get out there. So, I think that's going to be critical.

KP:

Yeah, I mean, you've just reminded me we're about to launch at the Gallery the first ever te reo Māori tour of an Edo-period Japanese painting exhibition, which is, again, you say this moment's been the mother of invention, would never have taken place in a different environment.

Thinking about government then, and policy making, what are the policies we should be advocating for now, that can significantly impact that growth and help artists and audiences contribute fully to civic life, and economic resilience in the years ahead?

HC:

Well, I think the first thing is that investing in the arts and the whole creative sector shouldn't be seen as an optional extra. You know, if you want the full human potential to be developed, the full human expression to be developed, you have to invest in it, and so there's a whole lot of layers in that. I've no idea what state the arts and cultural curricula are in in our schools today, but I'd be looking at that. You know, what are we doing to stimulate that? Both for those who have talent in the visual and performing arts, but also in growing the audience of the future. I think back to my school days at Epsom Girls Grammar, and you came out of that school wanting to queue for the proms outside the Town Hall, you know, that was just something you wanted to do. You had classmates who were in the . . . I think it was called the Junior Training Orchestra, which was a route to the Junior Symphony Orchestra. I played piano myself for many, many, many years, but you have to build that audience appreciation. And then, a scheme I was very proud of that ran when I was PM, with enormous support from my Associate Minister Judith Tizard, was the PACE scheme, which provided income support – a small remuneration for people to be able to see if they could start up a career in the arts. That worked quite well.

KP:

Sounds like it could be time to revisit it.

HC:

Definitely. PACE was a great scheme, and I still get letters from people, or emails and social media messages from people who say they got their start from it, so that's kind of at the individual level,

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providing the opportunities for people to grow their talent. Obviously, you need infrastructural investment, and, again, what's happened to the regional museums and galleries fund which I set up, which did help fund the refurbishment of the Auckland Art Gallery. A third, a third, a third, right? A third from the city, a third from the government, a third from the patrons and stakeholders – a very, very important partnership. But that, again, is important because what I found out very, very quickly was that you couldn't really get the infrastructure you needed unless the Crown itself was a partner. It often went beyond what the local authorities and the community could fundraise, and then there's the operating issues, and those will be particularly critical at the moment with the reduced international visitor flow and therefore the spend and so on. So, again, you know, what ongoing support should there be from the public purse for that, and I just hope that as the money moves around with the COVID-19 response that this particular area of life isn't overlooked, because there's no point having a great building if nothing can ever happen in it, you know, you have to support operations.

KP:

Well, I guess that's a challenge for the Ministry to demonstrate, really, that there isn't a Wellington-centric skew to the distribution of support, with respect to the world of galleries. I mean, our Gallery's budget was cut a few years ago by several million, and the Minister for the Arts at the time was asked for comment on that, and there was no comment coming from the Ministry. Is that good enough? I mean, given we have here local councils bearing the great responsibility of the majority of New Zealand's cultural collections and art collections, the Auckland Art Gallery, you know, arguably the most significant institution, specifically when it comes to the ongoing active commitment to growing our international, Māori, and New Zealand collections, all borne by a city under great pressure. How can we attune the relationship or affect the relationship between local government and central government to better reflect the opportunities and needs in our sector?

HC:

Well, I think the Ministry has to be the advocate within the system of government for the sector. If it's not going to advocate, who will, you know? So, it has to be an advocate. Again, you know, what its capacity is these days, I wouldn't like to say. I felt, as Minister for the Arts, incredibly well supported by that Ministry. I had wonderful people like Jane Kominik, for example, who just, you know, had been around for a long time and knew the sector and knew the vibes, and I always felt confident that I'd get good advice, and that they would encourage me to be an advocate as well. So, I think that's really important, and it can't just be Wellington-centric. I mean, there's always been the toss-up here between how you balance the support the government gives to the nationwide institutions, like the Symphony Orchestra, vis-a-vis what can be done to the Philharmonia and others. Like Te Papa, which was an amalgamation of the old Dominion Museum and Gallery, which has its issues, frankly. And, over the decades, and we're going back long before Te Papa, there was, as far as I could see, no consistent collection strategy, so there were huge

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gaps in in what Te Papa had, whereas Auckland had managed to keep, you know, collection momentum going and has very significant collections, as we know. So, there must be an advocate from the Ministry, and the Minister needs to ensure that the national institutions can survive, because I think we would be the poorer for not having the Royal New Zealand Ballet, and the Symphony Orchestra and Te Papa. Nonetheless, there is, you know, the rest of New Zealand as well, which needs consideration.

KP:

You touched on the incredible power of leverage of the central, local and private support for major projects. It would strike me that one missing piece in tax policy that could make a huge impact in this century, with respect to our artistic heritage [and] our cultural heritage here, would, in fact, be a cultural gift scheme to provide encouragement to the philanthropic community, and those New Zealanders abroad or collectors abroad that have carriage and ownership of very significant parts of our artistic heritage in their private collections to give to institutions like us. Of course, we love our simple straightforward tax system – how do we move the conversation forward to see something like this brought to bear?

HC:

Well, I mean, the tax system has been very pure, you're right. With, you know, traditionally the Government's advisors and the sphere not wanting tax write-offs and concessions and so on, but you can get chinks in it. I remember getting a chink in it for tax deductibility for research and innovation in business, for example. And, I guess my view is that the state can't have it both ways. You can't both keep the arts short of money but then refuse these sorts of things that might release quite considerable resources. You know, as a country, we are by OECD standards relatively lowly taxed, but we have champagne tastes. For our low tax we expect to have a, you know, first-class health system, education on the rest of it and the money actually struggles to fund what it should. So, it's probably the time to have a fresh look at something like this. There are incredible private holdings out there in New Zealand, and New Zealanders offshore who have amazing holdings, and, you know, far dwarfing, far outreaching what the public person could ever pay to bring works into galleries. So, I think it would be good for some creative thinking about that. I remember, you know, the huge thrill of seeing John Money's collection come back from Baltimore, Maryland. I don't know how many in this Auckland audience ever go to Gore, but the Eastern Southland Art Gallery was the beneficiary of this extraordinary bequest by John Money, who was Janet Frame's psychiatrist, and one of the things my little regional galleries and museums fund funded quite early on was a little bit of the extension to the gallery, to house the Money collection. He brought back Rita Angus's, Theo Schoons and the most incredible collection of artifacts from Africa. He did it very late in life and he didn't have, I think, heirs and successors, so it was more straightforward, but there are those collections out there, and it'd be wonderful to see more of them back.

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KP:

And, in the Gallery's life, Julian Robertson has gifted, I think, quite possibly the most significant gift to any institution in Australasia, and when you consider that it's done to a country without a cultural gift programme you really are seeing pure philanthropy here, aren't you? Another major issue in our sector, in terms of missing pieces of infrastructure in the policy space, is around indemnification. We have an indemnification scheme – it's been with us for a long time – which enables galleries like Auckland to ensure major collections coming into the country. I'm of the opinion it's not fit for purpose. It lacks aspiration, and I'll give you a little example of this: you know, my story here, coming as the Director of the Gallery – I've been here a year – we launched a programme, two months prior to the pandemic being declared, of five major international exhibitions, two of which required indemnification support from the Government. The response I received was that there was a perception that the New Zealand public didn't have an appetite big enough for two major exhibitions. Now, the exhibitions I'm referring to were coming respectively from the Picasso Museum in Paris and the Monet Marmottan in Paris, and had the most generous checklist of works a gallery director could ever dream to have, in presenting an almost monographic survey on each artist. How do we create momentum for effective policy in the Government from a position of local government?

HC:

Well, the point, I think, that could be made right now, is that because in effect New Zealanders are constrained from travelling to see works in situ – in Paris, Madrid – whatever, it makes it even more important that the art can come to us. So, I think I'd be using that niche opportunity we have at the moment, and, you know, I've spent about five months doing nothing much but looking at the COVID-19 pandemic – at impacts. I think this is going to be with us for a while. I don't think many of us are going to be comfortable about travelling for quite a while, so use this opportunity, I think, to say that the indemnification policy needs to be dusted off and made fit for purpose. Of course, the Auckland audience can sustain two international shows a year, and because New Zealanders aren't able to travel much offshore, and the trans-Tasman bubble looks like an ever-distant shimmer, isn't it? The Kiwis are going to come to Auckland to see big exhibitions, as they always have, so time to lift aspiration, as you say.

KP:

And it makes you reflect, I guess, on expertise as well. You talked about the expertise you had in your cabinet when you were Prime Minister – what's the impact, I guess, if we don't have the leadership in place to really drive these public conversations about reform and investment? How do we find a better language to advocate for the arts and ensure that arts expertise is within central government as well?

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HC:

Well, I think the arts advocacy community has to, you know, be banging on doors, and, let's face it, we're coming into an election campaign. There will be public meetings. People need to be using the social media. Ask what the arts policy is: what are you going to do for the sector? Everybody else is asking and has their hand out, so the arts sector needs to be in there. It's a call to action!

So, yeah, I think you know the old saying, 'squeaky wheel gets the oil', and if arts people are too polite, they'll get run over. I mean, an example I might say, was the outrage, including from me, on the Concert programme proposal. We would have lost that if there hadn't been just a groundswell of people saying, 'For heaven's sake!' You know, this is something really special here. I mean, offshore there's been a lot of admiration for the fact that we have the kind of concert programme that we have – which isn't an automated feeds system. That has real people discussing issues and, of course, bringing a variety of music through the Concert programme as well. So, I think, that, really, to me, was a call for arms. Don't sit and take it, you have to say, 'this is important to New Zealand', and I'd also make the point that, you know, arts and culture are for everyone. When I was Prime Minister, with Judith as my able assistant, we took a very broad view. And the things that I personally liked weren't everybody's taste. There were other tastes that I didn't personally like, but, hey, you supported it because it was New Zealanders expressing things in ways that were meaningful, you know, to the whole range of sectors and audiences. There's room for everyone in this, and we're a richer society if we create that space in which everyone's cultural contribution can feel acknowledged.

KP:

Yes, and there was an inference, I think, in what you said about agency and artistic agency. Can we, just for a moment, talk about governance, because you have a role now in the Auckland Art Gallery on our newly formed Advisory Aommittee. From time to time, directors and executives of institutions find themselves wrestling with the relationship between our ever-increasing privatisation through philanthropic support and grant making and other kinds of revenue streams, and the public debate on political issues. And perhaps the most evident example in our part of the world is when, in 2014, the Biennale of Sydney chose to sever ties with Transfield because of that company's relationship to the building of offshore detention camps. And that was a campaign led by the voices of artists, some of whom I went to art school with, and it really raises a question for us. It can be a treacherous territory. Is there a line to be drawn, and where is it and how do we use it?

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HC:

Look, there is a line to be drawn for reputational reasons, and when I was at the UN, at UNDP, we dusted off the private sector engagement strategy, in line with the World Health Organization guidelines because you could never, never, never accept money from tobacco, right? I mean, so you just had sectors – arms industry, another – and increasingly, frankly, sugar, which is like the new tobacco in terms of the threat to public health. So, you do have to look at reputational risk, but I thought with your governance question you might have gone down another track, which is governance versus management and artistic integrity.

KP:

I'd love to hear your thoughts on that.

HC:

Well, I do have some thoughts on that, because I think governance has to stand back and give the artistic leadership its head, and as a governor you might from time to time, feel, 'Hmmm, I don't know about that.' I remember the et al. installation, which created a lot of chatter for the Biennale, but, hey, you know, it got people talking about the arts. I mean, it might not have been everybody's cup of tea, colloquially speaking, but it got a conversation. Think back to when the Auckland Gallery, over the protests of the burghers of the city, bought the Hepworth sculpture, and it was considered a scandal.

KP:

It was absolutely scandalous.

HC:

Well, what's it worth now, I mean, to have a priceless piece of work like that? I went to the Hepworth Gallery in Wakefield, Yorkshire, about a year ago, and I think it's actually documented the scandal at the Auckland Art Gallery when the Hepworth was bought. But, you know, you look back at it now and think, what on earth was the fuss about? The Gallery had vision and was enlightened and so did the governors. You know, be bold enough to stand back and let the artistic integrity lead.

KP:

We've got some quite great questions that people have been putting to me over the course of the week once news got out that we'd be spending some time together, Helen. I wonder if we might open things up in a minute, but, just before we do, is there any last take-out you'd like to leave us with before we open the floor to questions?

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HC:

Well really, I guess, on the sort of 'arts are for everyone' theme, I think that enabling expression across the genre is incredibly important. I mean, I feel so proud of the New Zealand filmmakers. Again, another of my little projects was that film fund – *Whale Rider* was the first film out of the stable on that, and it succeeded because it told a story. It was an indigenous story, it had a gender dimension to it with the young girl, but you just felt so proud to see these films do well. There's some beautiful films out of that. *In My Father's Den*, I think, is one of the most exquisite films I've seen out of New Zealand, too. So film is important, performing arts are important, the range of visual arts are important, the cultural diversity and the arts is important because it reflects who we are, and we don't come in one shape or size or one demographic, you know. We are very diverse, so encouraging that diversity of expression, I think, is very important.

KP:

What do the arts mean to you, Helen Clark, the person?

HC:

To me? Well, nothing is more sublime to me than to go to the opera or turn on the opera CDs. I haven't actually got into Spotify really, except for the car, but I still get out the CDs – as long as they keep making the players. For me, music and theatre and the great galleries have been among the highlights of my life.

[Q&A]

KP:

Thank you so much, Helen, for joining us today for this conversation. You've been listening to Cultured Conversations. My name's Kirsten Paisley – Director, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki. Use the hashtag #culturedconversations in all your engagement online and everywhere you take this important conversation about arts and culture today.