

Arts groups buoyed by Conservative support

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Just when the issue of arts funding seemed to have become a lost cause as an election issue, the Canada Council has received a surprise boost on the eve of its 50th birthday. It happened on Thursday evening, when Bev Oda, heritage critic for the Conservative Party for the past 18 months, was interviewed on an arts news radio program on the CBC's French-language network.

"We will respect the promise of \$306 million for the Canada Council, which will double the budget of the organization, because we believe in the importance of the council for the Canadian arts community," Oda said on *Info-Culture*.

"I am just delighted that all parties have come out in support of the Canada Council," said Karen Kain, who is chair of the council and artistic director of the National Ballet of Canada. "It's a sign that people on all sides can agree when it comes to recognizing just how much this institution has done for our country over the last 50 years."

In fact, Oda's remarks seemed to allay a creeping sense of dread among many who feared the commitment of Paul Martin's Liberal government in November would vanish if the Conservatives won the election.

That was not just because arts people exhibit an unusually high level of paranoia. Oda gave the cultural world plenty of reason to worry in mid-December when in an interview with this columnist she refused to say whether a government led by Stephen Harper would protect the funding increase.

"I wouldn't put any credibility in what the Liberals did at the last minute," she said at the time. But in a phone interview yesterday while campaigning in Durham riding, where she is the incumbent, Oda was accentuating the positive.

Nevertheless, her comments included a few buts, ifs and subjunctive clauses. "We'll honour it once we see the plan," she explains. "We have to see how much money is needed and how it will be spent. And we have no indication where the Liberals intended to get that money, because it was not in their economic update (mini-budget), and there is no trace of it in any Liberal fiscal plan we have seen so far."

What seems to be beyond debate is that the funding increase is desperately needed, especially with some of the country's largest and most prestigious organizations on virtual life-support after more than a decade of inadequate subsidy.

Kevin Garland, executive director of the National Ballet, said: "It is wonderful that all parties are in favour of more money for the Canada Council, and especially important for us because, as we move into the Four Seasons Centre for the Performing Arts, we need more support."

While the November announcement may have seemed at the time like a last-minute election gambit, outgoing Heritage Minister Liza Frulla had been working toward it for months — with the help of a successful lobbying effort by the Canadian Coalition for the Arts. Indeed, during a Toronto arts community lunch last September, Frulla told me that her top priority for the next year was to secure more money for the Canada Council on its anniversary.

Oda's more positive spin can partly be explained by mounting pressure from the half million Canadians who work in the country's cultural industries, which contribute \$39 billion to the GDP. But it may also be a sign that the Conservatives are focusing now on Quebec, where they have made astonishing gains. Quebec voters see culture as a more crucial issue than those in the rest of Canada.

"While the arts are only now gaining momentum as an issue in this election campaign, this commitment to increased resources for artists and arts organizations is highly significant," says Anne-Marie Jean, of Culture Montreal. "We are pleased that the major political parties have heard and understood our arguments for more arts funding. All Canadians will be richer for this investment."

Another factor was Votearts2006.ca, a website devoted to making the arts an election issue. It offers facts and figures on the subject, and gives voters a direct way to reach candidates with their views.

"That's terrific news," said Richard Bradshaw, general director of the Canadian Opera Company, "but the question is how fast the money will flow."

According to Frulla's announcement in November, the first increase was supposed to take effect starting April 1. But cultural bureaucrats caution that in cases like this, there is almost always a delay before the cheques come through.

Nevertheless, you can be sure arts people from one end of Canada to the other will be popping corks and drinking toasts this weekend.

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