

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Bill Richardson: Creative People Must Engage the Political Process

Adam Leipzig · Thursday, August 16th, 2012

*I caught up with **Bill Richardson** – the former two-term governor of New Mexico, now Special Envoy for the Organization of American States (OAS), among a host of other involvements, public and private – in Cape Cod, having a brief moment of R&R after a speaking tour in Europe. We discussed the arts and the creative economy.*

I've got to start by asking you about Paul Ryan...

I do believe it shows that the conservative base has totally captured Mitt Romney, and that it enhances the prospects of President Obama's re-election, especially with some of the cuts that Ryan symbolizes in the areas of Medicare and Social Security. While he seems to be an attractive candidate, once his ideology is examined I think the American people will see a very extremist point-of-view that is not within the center of American politics.

The American people govern in the center. They want bipartisanship, centrist policies, middle class initiatives, and I believe this pick is very much heading in the other direction.

When you were New Mexico's governor, you launched breakthrough film incentive initiatives that made your state a destination for filmmaking, and drove economic growth. Today's state budgets are so strained and lawmakers have to balance between media incentives and real basic needs. On a policy level, how does one do that?

You need to assess the film incentives on their own.

The most important positive coming out of film incentives nationally is that they create jobs, revenue and income. It should not be a choice between human needs and film incentives. That's how I governed in New Mexico. The film incentives we created brought new digital media and technologies into the state, and trained thousands of people. We went from a crew base of about 200 to about 9,000.

I don't accept that argument that it's a question of food for the poor or welfare, versus film incentives. I believe when you incentivize the private sector, you're creating new jobs, new technology. Plus you're also providing young kids with opportunities for the future in a clean industry that is only going to expand.

Let's move from the film industry to the creative community in general. Artists think of themselves as a giant transnational global community. Since 9/11, I and many of my producer colleagues have found it increasingly difficult to get cultural exchange visas.

I believe in general the US government has had a shortsighted policy in limiting visas based on our relationships with other countries. A potential opening for improving relationships with countries like Cuba and North Korea is to expand the artistic and cultural exchanges. They would promote understanding among our peoples – and perhaps, like ping-pong diplomacy, open the doors to

better relationships. The new technological wave is healthy, and has resulted in important political strides, such as the Arab Spring, but I regret that it's affected appreciation for artists, for art in schools, for symphonies, for cultural exchanges.

I'd like to see the US government focus more on cultural exchanges, give it a healthier budget. I know these are tight times, but these are experiments that often come back in valuable, unexpected ways. When you expand the perspective of individuals in the arts, you're expanding the inner creativity of individual people which will make them more productive, more a part of society, and more a part of the American mainstream.

Government has to be the catalyst, in the small towns of America, enhancing the capability of communities to have arts centers, theatres, all kinds of artistic endeavors, which also bring jobs and economic development.

I agree – the creative economy really has the potential to bring America back. Creativity can't be outsourced and it creates jobs. But I've found there is a knowledge gap, a training gap, between the artists and the marketplace. Many creative people don't know how to engage in the market economy.

Yes, and I believe the creative community must be more engaged in the political process, too. They have to be more engaged with mainstream small businesses, to show you're not just creating artistic freedom and excellence; you're also creating revenues for the economy and jobs.

So what you're seeing is an education gap that goes both ways. The creative community can't just say, "Here we are, we're great, we promote jobs." The creative community has to engage in a viable political process with the nation. I'd like to see more artists, not just celebrities, involved in lobbying the Congress, their communities, and local chambers of commerce, about the viability of the jobs they create.

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