

# [An open letter to Prime Minister Harper]

Monsieur le premier ministre,

We are neighbours. We work across the street from one another. You are Prime Minister of the Parliament of Canada and I, across the way, am a writer, theatre director and Artistic Director of the French Theatre at the National Arts Centre (NAC). So, like you, I am an employee of the state, working for the Federal Government; in other words, we are colleagues.

Let me take advantage of this unique position, as one functionary to another, to chat with you about the elimination of some federal grants in the field of culture, something that your government recently undertook.

Indeed, having followed this matter closely, I have arrived at a few conclusions that I would like to publicly share with you since, as I'm sure you will agree, this debate has become one of public interest.

## **The Symbolism**

Firstly, it seems that you might benefit by surrounding yourself with counsellors who will be attentive to the symbolic aspects of your Government's actions. I am sure you know this but there is no harm in reminding ourselves that every public action denotes not only what it is but what it symbolises.

For example, a Prime Minister who chooses not attend the opening ceremonies of the Olympics, claiming his schedule does not permit it, in no way reduces the symbolism which says that his absence might signify something else. This might signify that he wishes to denote that Canada supports the claims of Tibet. Or it might serve as a sign of protest over the way in which Beijing deals with human rights. If the Prime Minister insists that his absence is really just a matter of timing, whether he likes it or not, this will take on symbolic meaning that commits the entire country. The symbolism of a public gesture will always outweigh the technical explanations.

## **Declaration of war**

Last week, your government reaffirmed its manner of governing unilaterally, this time on a domestic issue, in bringing about reductions in granting programs destined for the cultural sector. A mere matter of budgeting, you say, but one which sends shock waves throughout the cultural milieu—rightly or wrongly, as we shall see—for being seen as an expression of your contempt for that sector. The confusion with which your Ministers tried to justify those reductions and their refusal to make public the reports on the eliminated programs, only served to confirm the symbolic significance of that contempt. You have just declared war on the artists.

Now, as one functionary to another, this is the second thing that I wanted to tell you: no government, in showing contempt for artists, has ever been able to survive. Not one. One can, of course, ignore them, corrupt them, seduce them, buy them, censor them, kill them, send them to camps, spy on them, but hold them in contempt, no. That is akin to rupturing the strange pact, made millennia ago, between art and politics.

## **Contempt**

Art and politics both hate and envy one another; since time immemorial, they detest each other and they are mutually attracted, and it's through this dynamic that many a political idea has been born; it is in this dynamic that sometimes, great works of art see the light of day. Your cultural politics, it must be said, provoke only a profound consternation. Neither hate nor detestation, not envy nor attraction, nothing but numbness before the oppressive vacuum that drives your policies.

This vacuum which lies between you and the artists of Canada, from a symbolic point of view, signifies that your government, for however long it lasts, will not witness either the birth of a political idea or a masterpiece, so firm is your apparent belief in the unworthiness of that for which you show contempt. Contempt is a subterranean sentiment, being a mix of unassimilated jealousy and fear towards that which we despise.

Such governments have existed, but not lasted because even the most detestable of governments cannot endure if it hasn't the courage to affirm what it actually is.

## Why is this?

What are the reasons behind these reductions, which are cut from the same cloth as those made last year on the majority of Canadian embassies, who saw their cultural programming reduced, if not eliminated? The economies that you have made are ridiculously small and the votes you might win with them have already been won. For what reason, then, are you so bent on hurting the artists by denying them some of their tools? What are you seeking to extinguish and to gain?

Your silence and your actions make one fear the worst for, in the end, we are quite struck by the belief that this contempt, made eloquent by your budget cuts, is very real and that you feel nothing but disgust for these people, these artists, who spend their time by wasting it and in spending the good taxpayers money, he who, rather than doing uplifting work, can only toil.

And yet, I still cannot fathom your reasoning. Plenty of politicians, for the past fifty years, have done all they could to depoliticise art, to strip it of its symbolic import. They try the impossible, to untie that knot which binds art to politics. And they almost succeed! Whereas you, in the space of one week, have undone this work of chloroforming, by awakening the cultural milieu, Francophone and Anglophone, and from coast to coast. Even if politically speaking they are marginal and negligible, one must never underestimate intellectuals, never underestimate artists; don't underestimate their ability to do you harm.

## A grain of sand is all-powerful.

I believe, my dear colleague, that you yourself have just planted the grain of sand that could derail the entire machine of your electoral campaign. Culture is, in fact, nothing but a grain of sand, but therein lays its power, in its silent front. It operates in the dark. That is its legitimate strength.

It is full of people who are incomprehensible but very adept with words. They have voices. They know how to write, to paint, to dance, to sculpt, to sing, and they won't let up on you. Democratically speaking, they seek to annihilate your policies. They will not give up. How could they?

You must understand them: they have not had a clear and common purpose for a very long time, for such a long time that they have no common cause to defend. In one week, by not controlling the symbolic importance of your actions, you have just given them passion, anger, rage.

## In the dark

The resistance that will begin today, and to which my letter is added, is but a first manifestation of a movement that you yourself have set in motion: an incalculable number of texts, speeches, acts, assemblies, marches, will now be making themselves heard. They will not be exhausted.

Some of these will, perhaps, following my letter, be weakened but within each word, there will be a spark of rage, relit, and it is precisely the addition of these tiny instances of fire that will shape the grain of sand that you will never be able to shake. This will not settle down, the pressure will not be diminished.

Monsieur le premier ministre, we are neighbours. We work across the street from one another. There is nothing but the Cenotaph between our offices, and this is as it should be because politics and art have always mirrored one another, each on its own shore, each seeing itself in the other, separated by that river where life and death are weighed at every moment.

We have many things in common, but an artist, contrary to a politician, has nothing to lose, because he or she does not make laws; and if it is prime ministers who change the world, it's the artist who will show this to the world. So do not attempt, through your policies, to blind us, Monsieur le premier ministre; do not ignore that reflection on the opposite shore, do not plunge us further into the dark. Do not diminish us.

*Wajdi Mouawad*

[from Wajdi Mouawad]