The recent events regarding Comar and its alleged cultural services to Mull and Iona are absolutely central to your questionnaire on the spending decisions and outcomes of Creative Scotland for discussion on 15 September 2015.

You will have to excuse me, however, for being unable to adhere strictly to your five questions. The primary reason for this is that, as with almost everything to do with Comar, its relationship to Creative Scotland is wholly opaque. The secondary reason, is that your five points all imply a degree of progress and success in Creative Scotland’s evolving relationship with the sector. Comar seems to represent the negation of all such aspirations.

I am, of course, prepared to consider that Comar’s recent activities regarding its tripartite (theatre/music/visual arts) role with the communities of Mull and Iona are atypical of Creative Scotland’s activities in other areas. Even if Comar’s conduct is an isolated phenomenon, I consider that its performance of its duty to so infringe proper procedures, to be so improper, perhaps illegal, in its conduct towards some of its key staff and to have so alienated and enraged its audience, that it should be exposed to the keenest scrutiny by the appropriate parliamentary committee.

Before I turn to my own specific questions about Comar’s conduct, I would like to briefly note a few of the comments and criticisms regarding Comar which have appeared in the national and provincial press, TV News (Alba), the internet and Facebook. No doubt Creative Scotland’s public relations department can supply a more extensive list for parliamentary scrutiny.

- Creative Scotland forced “a shotgun wedding” on An Tobar and Mull Theatre with disastrous results. (letter to Oban Times)
- Comar, uniquely, has no AGM nor maintains a policy of ordinary membership. (Out and About)
- Comar has some serious constitutional issues of governance to explain – the CEO is allegedly a full voting director – a quite extraordinary situation. (Argyll Newsroom, online)
- Equity enlisted over redundancy case (The Herald)
- While all the original Mull board members have resigned in protest over Comar’s redundancy policy, the off island board members, at best complicit with this policy, have stayed on. These members seem to have evolved from a process of self-selection. (Out and About)

With regard to my own questions, I would wish the parliamentary committee to seek explanations as to:
1. What is the relationship between Creative Scotland and Comar? Is Creative Scotland along with HIE merely a funder who has had no participation in the (advertised? competitive?) selection of personnel for Comar, or in the policies these individuals have subsequently pursued?

2. To what extent have Creative Scotland monitored the development of Comar? Do they have any representation on Comar’s board?

3. As reported in the Oban Times, Kerrien Grant, HIE’s Head of Strengthening Communities at the meeting in the Aros Hall, stated that:

   “We are looking to find something that is a growth-builder for more than just Mull. We are having to look at what we are able to fund.”

   Is such covert growth-building, with Mull as some sort of test bed, a joint HIE/Creative Scotland policy? It might, I suppose, be acceptable if it was clarified as to what this aesthetic innovation consisted of. Even more importantly, is it that the traditional, successful theatrical and musical elements were to be sacrificed to achieve still to be revealed new innovation?

4. Crucially, at the time when the grant was cut, did Creative Scotland have any input into the policy of making two of the three creative directors redundant? Surely this policy should not have been implemented without, at the very least, considering administrative rather than creative cuts? What, for example, is the proportion now spent on administration to that of the pre-Comar regimes? What has been the level of fabric spending for administrative purposes? In particular, is it true that for some months this year the use of the theatre was affected by restructuring of administrative space? Is it not the case that, instead of what has proved to be a disastrous, peremptory redundancy policy, it was Creative Scotland’s duty, not just to make a cut in the grant, but to ensure that, in relation to the original Business Plan, a thorough fiscal analysis of Comar was carried out with regard to alternative possibilities?

A final word of caution is that the outrage Comar has caused on Mull and Iona is not a transient phenomenon. The islanders’ present relationship to Comar and their willingness to participate in its cultural activities is non-existent. An unprecedented two thousand plus online signatories is indisputable evidence of this. Unless the redundancy notices are withdrawn and proper democratic control is evolved, Comar can only have a nominal, but extremely expensive for the tax payer, existence in the area it is alleged to be servicing. As a letter in a local journal wrote:

   “What is the future for a rural Arts organisation which has broken with its local community and dumped its greatest assets in this way?”

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