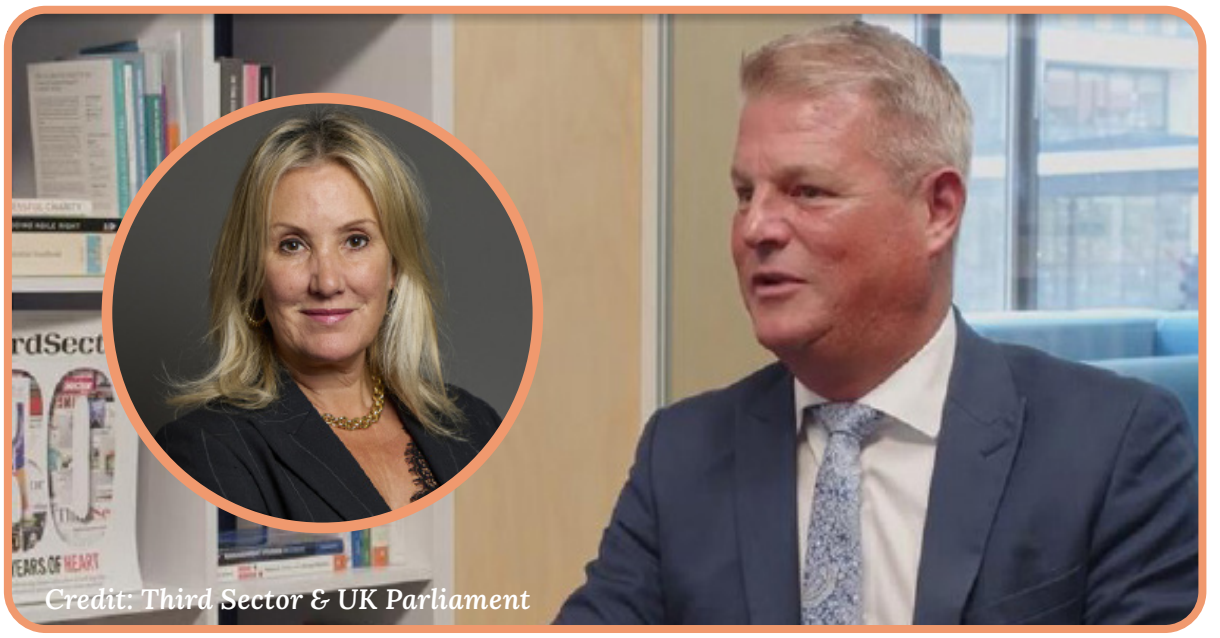

Credit: Third Sector & UK Parliament

Turning to the issues of the day, I then wanted to ask what the Shadow Culture Secretary's thoughts were on the current Government's approach to Culture, Media & Sport so far, and whether the Culture Secretary Lisa Nandy (Labour, Wigan) in particular was living up to the brief. "I get on extremely well, actually, with Lisa Nandy and with [DCMS Minister] Stephanie Peacock (Labour, Barnsley South), and actually I worked quite constructively with them when I was in Government, and to be fair, they're doing the same thing with me. I will though challenge where I don't think they're going far enough'.

"For example, the National Insurance thing, I don't think that they've fully understood the impact, across all the sectors within DCMS, and the amount of money that is going to need to be found [...] they reckon £50-60 million worth will be taken from frontline services". But Andrew is also prepared to praise Government work, "where I think that they're doing a good job or where I think they've made an announcement that has potential, we will welcome that. So the Youth Strategy for example that they've announced is good, but even since announcement to where we are today, my understanding is that the scope is narrowing, so I want to understand why".

But given Andrew's service in various governmental roles since 2018, I wanted to challenge him on a point made in our recent interview with the Chair of the Culture, Media & Sport Select Committee, the Rt. Hon. Dame Caroline Dinenage MP (Conservative, Gosport), who told us "on every criteria that matters, the Culture, Media & Sport sectors have something vital to offer our nation [...] but successive leaders have undervalued their importance" – what was the new Shadow Culture Secretary's view?

"I think she makes a really valid point. But I do understand, lets be honest, that if you're Prime Minister, and you're dealing with international events like Ukraine and Israel, you've got migration issues to sort out, I can understand how sometimes, it's not that it's forgotten, but it may not seem it gets the same attention, but from that perspective I sort of understand how it happens. However, I think Caroline is right that actually, it is probably the one department that has a reach to the entire population".

"It is a small department but its reach is enormous, and so I do think that it needs to play a pivotal role because there are so many opportunities [...] Our arts and our theatres, particularly, since Covid have recovered incredibly well, still major challenges but have recovered really well compared to, say, Broadway, who are still struggling. And I know the theatre world want theatre to succeed all over the world, of course, but if there is an opportunity for this country, then it will help us long-term economically as well".

Having suggested a better understanding of how payments from DCMS to other bodies such as Arts Council England are structured, I pushed further on what Andrew hopes to achieve in his role and the Shadow Cabinet before the next election, to which there was only one place to begin: "So I think it's a number of stages. The reality is, look, as a party we have to rebuild trust, we have to show that we've listened to what the electorate have said, acknowledge where we made mistakes, but also defend where we did things right", describing the measures taken to protect and restore access to theatres and sporting facilities.


Credit: ABC News

"I think at the moment, for me, this period is about engaging with each of those sectors, listening to what are the difficulties that they're facing, and then for us to take our time to come up with solutions to some of those challenges that we know we can deliver. It's not about making rash promises, people are sick of that [...] I want to make sure that every sector within DCMS knows that at the next election, we have taken our time to first of all listen to what their concerns are, and then to say which one of those we're going to try to address".

Andrew will always have a place in British history, being the minister charged with organising the Coronation of King Charles III in May 2023, appointed to the 'Ceremonials' brief on the same day the Late Queen Elizabeth II passed away. "That was one of the big challenges because I was also the minister for the Eurovision Song Contest, because we'd committed to hosting that on behalf of Ukraine who sadly couldn't. So I suddenly realised: 'I've got six months to be a part of two of the biggest events that this country was going to host that year, the Coronation being something that clearly hadn't been done for 70 years!"

"I can remember walking round the Abbey with all of the people who were involved, the organisers and Westminster Abbey staff, and saying "there's all this space up here", and them saying "yeah, but they won't be able to see anything". I said "it doesn't matter, people will just love the fact that they were at the Coronation [...] But it was also what did the Palace want, what did the King want, it is a different era. He wanted, obviously, to make sure that the traditions of a Coronation remained, but actually that it reflected, culturally, the U.K. as it is today, and a lot of this was the decision of the Palace".

But Andrew also acknowledges the immense work by teams across the country that brought the ceremony together: "Thanks to an enormous amount of work by so many people, and particularly the team at DCMS – they worked their socks off, they really did – it was a great partnership between all the different levels of authority, and the Palace, that brought about a very special event that this nation's not seen for well over half a century". Having gone immediately from the Coronation to managing Eurovision, Andrew "often joked that I'd spent one weekend surrounded by diamonds and the following weekend surrounded by sequins!"

I ended our discussion with one final question, asking the Shadow Secretary what his advice is to anyone seeking a career in Parliament or in culture and the arts, to which he was clear: "My first advice is follow your dream. Honestly. Sometimes you think, "I'd love to do that, but I haven't got a hope in hell". I used to think that. I loved politics, I don't know why, I don't know where it came from, my parents aren't particularly political, but I just had this real interest in politics, and I thought "one day, I'd love to be an MP". But I grew up on a council estate, I didn't go to university, I'd come from a very working-class family, and I thought I'd never be able to do it. But through the encouragement of family, friends and loved ones, I kept going, and here I am. I've been able to sit in this amazing building for the last 14 years, I've loved every minute of it".

"I see Labour MPs, Liberal MPs, Scots Nationalist MPs, Plaid Cymru MPs everyday trying to do the best for them and their constituents and for the whole country, and we do need people to do that. So if you're interested in being an MP, then go for it. If you're interested in doing some work within any of the sectors in DCMS, then do it because if that's your passion, you work a lot of years in your life, if every morning you get up and you're actually excited about going to work, then that's a much better life than thinking "what if?"".