Hugging our heritage while cutting our culture

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In the past week, Canadians have learned of a federal government initiative to search for the remains of Arctic explorer Sir John Franklin's ships. By taking a leadership role in a mission to reclaim our history, the government is establishing its patriotic credentials.

Patriotism matters for the Conservatives. Going back to the free-trade debate, many Canadian voters have questioned whether the Conservatives in their various incarnations really like this country. When we last checked in January, only 40 per cent agreed that Stephen Harper and his Conservatives are committed to defending the institutions and values that make us special as Canadians. That is down four points from the year before.

But patriotism wears many faces. On the day the Franklin story broke, the same people who created the cultural products that lionized the expedition were rising in protest against cutbacks in cultural programs. How can the government be hugging our heritage with the Franklin mission while cutting our cultural programs at the same time?

There are three theories to explain its behaviour. The first says cultural funding doesn't really affect political support. Well, that depends on how the cultural and opposition groups play the issue. In February of 2007, 74 per cent of Canadians told us they agree that "government investments in arts and culture are needed so we do not forget our past and national history." Culture can matter if the opposition and cultural groups use these cuts to make the case that Stephen Harper really doesn't value what makes us special as Canadians.

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A second theory says culture only matters to people the Tories can't win, and that attacking cultural programs actually helps the Conservatives mobilize their base. It's true that the deepest core of Conservative backing is much less supportive of arts and culture than average Canadians. They are also the one group in the electorate where a majority agrees that government funding of the arts is often wasted. But, to win, the Conservatives need more than a high turnout from this 10 per cent of the electorate. They need to win over a significant chunk of swing voters open to seeing the government's commitment to arts and culture as a demonstration of patriotism.

A third theory says this whole episode is an accident. Government is a big place and only a handful of people are running the government's core political strategy. The government has set an ambitious target for internal savings to keep a balanced budget, and the Prime Minister's Office can't micromanage the rollout of these cuts, no matter how much they may want to. In fact, this government has been arguing that overall spending on culture is up and that these program cuts are the exception, not the rule.

If this is an accident, there is a simple solution. The government can launch an arts and culture strategy that will complement their more muscular defence-led northern sovereignty initiative. This would be consistent with Conservative policy in the last election, and could be used as part of the government's "promise-keeping" brand identity.

A new culture policy would not necessarily mean an end to program cuts. But it would mean that any specific program cuts would be occurring in a broader context of increased total investment.

The bottom line is simple: If you want to be the prime minister, you need to be seen to like the place. If the Conservatives want a majority, they need to clean up the minefield they have been building on their cultural flank.

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