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How to Pay for Culture

THE new opera house planned for Sydney is expected to cost £3,500,000. As Sir John Medley pointed out in a recent interview with *The Listener*, it is really a cultural centre, and the architect's drawing embodies interesting and exciting ideas. But he was not sure that so much money should be spent in that way. Since then a solution of the financial problem has been put forward by the New South Wales Premier, Mr Cahill. He has suggested that quarterly lotteries be held until the construction costs are covered. The first prize would be £50,000, and each ticket would cost 30/-. The proposal has been opposed, and at the time of writing a final decision is yet to be made. Whatever is decided, however, the issues raised are of absorbing interest.

Who should pay for cultural amenities? A short answer given sometimes in this country is that they should be paid for by people who wish to use them. But art is closely linked to education; it is difficult in some ways to know where one ends and the other begins; and if education is organised successfully it must stimulate intellectual and spiritual needs in the adult community. Further, if a nation is weak in the arts its education will suffer. The schools are supported by taxpayers, who respond sensitively to any suggestion that their burden should be heavier. Yet it now seems certain that only the State can provide patronage adequately. True, there are still private endowments and benefactions, especially in the United States; but in countries like Britain and the Dominions, committed to welfare policies, any large enterprise in the arts must eventually become a charge on the public purse. This raises political issues of some delicacy. It would be difficult to convince taxpayers who had no interest in music that they should help to pay for an opera house.

In this situation the idea of a lottery becomes attractive. There may be some doubt on the breadth of public interest in opera, but there is none whatever about the interest in easy money. Very few citizens could be found without lottery tickets in their wallets

and handbags. Their private dream is to be told one day that they are richer by £10,000, and the dream is nourished whenever it is reported that someone has been lucky. "If it can happen to him," runs a single thought through a million minds, "it can happen to me." And on that day the sale of tickets is brisker than usual. People who buy the tickets are not deeply concerned about what happens to the profits. Some of them, perhaps, like to know that "worthy causes" are in the background, but their main interest is the glittering prizes at the top of the list. The willingness of the public to subsidise a dream suggests a painless way of obtaining money that could not be extracted by other means. What better use could be made of surplus money than to spend it on a project of value to the community? The principle has already been adopted. In New Zealand, for instance, musical bursaries are among the benefits taken from "art unions." It might seem logical to move on from bursaries in the general direction of an opera house.

People who see how desperately some amenities are needed feel impatient when at this point the moralist intervenes. Yet the moralist is right. A little gambling is harmless; it is no better and no worse than a little drinking. If, however, the State allows gambling, and profits from it, there is need of some restriction. As lotteries become larger and more numerous, people are tempted to spend more than they can afford: the fever spreads, and is heightened. Sooner or later a point is reached where gambling begins to be harmful. And at this point the use of profits for cultural purposes can no longer be valid. The ends have ceased to justify the means; indeed, the ends themselves begin to seem pointless in a community that is becoming unfitted to enjoy them. It is useless, and even wrong-headed, to try to stop gambling; but it needs to be controlled, and the State must always have a duty to see that toleration does not become encouragement. An opera house can be built at too great a price—and on shaky foundations.

—M.H.H.

N.Z. LISTENER, MAY 17, 1957.