

Report from never-never land

At first glance, many aspects of the Applebaum-Hébert report are exceedingly seductive.

It acknowledges the conflict between commercial gain and cultural objectives, challenging the government to free the CBC from the compromises which advertising inevitably create. It judges both the CBC and the NFB and finds them lacking, wasteful and unjustifiable in terms of current production. 'Shut down their production units,' it cries, and allow the private sector to produce those innovative, alternative programs that Canadians are longing for. 'Don't worry about the hardware or the bankruptcies which might follow the application of a vigorous cultural policy,' only culture can save the nation. License more local broadcasters to stimulate local Canadian production. Use the CBC to distribute NFB films; that exhibition system, the television, is in place!

As for theatrical films, let's strengthen the CFDC and clearly state that its mandate is primarily cultural. Let's give financial incentives to the Canadian-controlled distributor to allow him to compete. Use Film Canada to promote, sell and exhibit all films. Bring the Film Festivals Bureau under the CFDC to facilitate co-ordination. Reduce the Board to a film school.

Somewhere along the line, during the three years and the \$3 million which the committee spent, it wandered off into never-never land, outlining how things might be in the best of all possible worlds, but certainly not how they could become in Canada.

No one any longer disputes the primary role television already plays in film distribution/exhibition; video-discs and cassettes will further debilitate the theatrical market for films. In that, and in its analysis of the current situation and its problems, the Applebert committee agrees with the department of Communications. So far, so good. But between the analysis and the solutions proposed there would seem to be a gap which only the naïveté of the committee can bridge.

If one wishes to free the CBC from the compromises advertising introduces into programming, then how will turning production out into the private sector resolve that problem? Certainly private producers are more at the mercy of commercial market forces than the CBC ever was. A private producer cannot expect the new CBC to cover 100% of his production budget and must inevitably consider other markets - American network/cable/pay, foreign television, foreign theatrical or non-theatrical markets - and in these markets, he will be competing against productions conceived with commercial goals. How will the purity of intention (getting advertising out of the CBC) dove-tail with the implementation (shutting down CBC production)?

Whether or not the private sector, in its present state, could absorb the personnel of the NFB/CBC, were production shut down, is another matter altogether. The assumption is that staff people will walk out, set up new companies and continue doing business as usual. The reality is that few staff people are prepared - have the skills - to survive in the private sector or they would already be there. And few private sector people can conceive of introducing an over-paid bureaucrat into the tightly run production companies which are surviving and asking him to perform within constraints unlike any he has ever seen.

Then comes the tedious question of whether the Canadian public is lusting after Canadian programming, and if so, in what proportions and with what sort of slant? The idea of licensing greater numbers of local broadcasters to produce local-Canadian programs echoes the reasoning of the CRTC pay-TV decision: by licensing many, the quantity of programming and choice should augment. In fact, as the industry said in response to that decision, a proliferation of licensees only fragments an already fragile market, reducing the chances for quality programming and upping the odds that the public will not approve of what it is offered.

Obviously, the Committee leaves itself wide open for criticism each time it reiterates that the economic repercussions of its proposals is of no concern; that its mandate was exclusively cultural. Coming up with pie-in-the-sky formulas for a brave new world instead of workable alternatives is child's play. It takes more maturity, more knowledge and, finally, more imagination to conceive of how to convert the present system and make it useful than it does to chuck it all out and start again.

Nowhere in the study does the Committee offer the statistics, explain the measures, or conceive of possible implementation that would allow the reader to follow the reasoning. The jump from stated problem to proposed solution is a jump of faith, unfettered by research. One need only compare the Fournier Committee report on the Quebec film industry to understand that committees can imagine solutions and write proposals which become irresistible because of the hard logic which accompanies them.

As for the film chapter, it is weak indeed. The Committee writes as if it never heard that the NFB operates in the regions. It writes with no understanding of the reputation this country has abroad, and no consideration of the role either of the NFB or the Film Festivals Bureau in creating and sustaining that reputation. It suggests the use of Film Canada when no such organization really exists and the private sector has been vociferous and

unanimous in suggesting the idea be buried. It wants the CFDC, which is essentially a banker, to represent films in festival participation. Would foreigners not perceive an important conflict of interest? Furthermore, 75% of festival work has to do with short films, about which the CFDC is totally ignorant.

As for distribution, it's all good and well to suggest giving financial incentives to Canadian-owned companies to allow them to compete, but since when did a free-market situation exist in Canada concerning distribution? The report is especially weak in this area, but then the Canadian distributors failed to make representations to the committee so share part of the responsibility. Finally, which companies will have survived the time it will take any new proposals to work themselves through the system?

Sensing that the Applebaum-Hébert Committee would suggest drastic, even mischievous, changes to the CBC, the Minister of Communications Francis Fox, in a parallel effort, was preparing a National Broadcast Strategy. It, like the Applebaum-Hébert report, was leaked to the press long before its writers were prepared to defend it. No radical surgery would be done, it said, on the CBC.

The juxtaposition of the two reports outlines the limits of the debate which will surely follow. Should the CBC be strengthened or cut back? Should the CRTC be brought under political control or further distanced from the political process? Must we insist on the primacy of the cable distribution system in Canada, or adopt a more liberal view of the new technologies? How should private production be financed? Directly from consolidated revenues, or through a tax on cable subscribers? Neither report suggests any exciting innovation concerning exports and marketing, unless the extension of co-production treaties - which already work to the disadvantage of the film producer - is considered a step ahead.

Probably the benefits of the Applebaum-Hébert Report will flow from the amount of attention which is now focused on the problems. Somewhere between its recommendations and the Fox strategy lies a middle road in which the status quo can be set aside and a new way found to bolster the private sector without gutting the public agencies which have already served us well.

Meanwhile, there is a process. There are all the internal reports which are being written by all the agencies involved in the two policy papers, and the additional reports commissioned by the department of Communications to study the Applebaum-Hébert report. There are the Task Force reports to compile and an Arts and Culture Policy to write. Then there is the minister's Cultural Industries Strategy, of which Broadcasting is but one piece; the Cabinet may well want to hear of the larger context before it considers "broadcasting" at all.

Then there are the parliamentary delays which must certainly seem interminable for people in a hurry.

The people in the film industry and, increasingly, the television program production industry, are in a hurry. Last month, Norfolk withdrew, unable to continue production in today's climate. FIRA has yet to decide anything about the legality of the take-over of Columbia by Coca-Cola. Meanwhile, the American producer Orion has bought the distributor Filmways and has opened its own distribution company in Canada, removing the Filmways line from Canadian-owned Ambassador, the distributor who previously repped those films. In Montreal, the Mutual Film Group is up for sale, its parent company Civitas having over-extended itself in radio broadcasting. Mutual president Jean Colbert has left the company, and the perception is that one more independent distributor is out of business.

What with American distributors making such strides, should American producers be far behind? Why shouldn't Lorimar, for instance, scout out the possibilities of cutting out the Canadian middleman and set up shop directly? By the time the great Canadian Cultural Policy is unravelled, it could have shot a dozen films and be gone again.

It is well to call for a public debate on questions of cultural policy. Unfortunately, when it comes to film and broadcasting, calling for a state of emergency might be more appropriate.

The editors

LETTERS

To rally documentarians

Dear Editor:

As one of the many "Hollywood Canadians" I try to keep up on film/video at home, and I welcome the opening of the Film Canada Center here in Beverly Hills. Lorraine Goode at Film Canada has been very helpful to the new Inter-

national Documentary Association, most recently in providing names of available producer/directors in Montreal for possible contract work for a documentary company here in L.A. that had contacted our organization.

I was glad to read in the anniversary issue of Cinema Canada that a few Canadian filmmakers are not ashamed

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INTERVIEW

going to be another market, another reasonably important market, 10%, 15% additional on the existing market. It's an important 15%. It's a very welcome 15%. That's all it is.

Cinema Canada: How have your dealings been so far with the Canadian pay-TV licensees?

Michael MacMillan: We approached First Choice with at least one project, a month or so after they were licensed. They didn't show any interest in talking to us.

Cinema Canada: Were you disappointed?

Michael MacMillan: Certainly. But, they didn't seem to want to talk to us about anything and showed no interest, so we haven't talked to them since.

Seaton McLean: It's not to say that we won't. Right now they are trying to set things up. The mistake that I think we made was that the day after they were licensed there was a line-up outside their office of people with ideas and they weren't in a position to consider them or start giving out money that day. A lot of people got put off and I think that pay-TV probably will help production along, but it won't be to the extent that everybody thought.

Michael MacMillan: C-Channel has been an interesting experience. Perhaps because they were aiming at a very clearly defined market, had specific purposes in mind, and therefore were anticipating a much smaller penetration of the market, they simply have had to create effective relationships. C-Channel has very actively been talking to us and number of other independent producers and as a result we're in

serious discussions with them.

Cinema Canada: Do you want to make theatrical feature films some day?

Janice Platt: Not necessarily. As we've said before, for Atlantis, feature films are not and have never been the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. We don't think that documentaries and television programming are lesser things to be producing than feature films. Feature films are another area. A different area, but not a more important area. And certainly these days the trend is very much the wide audience. Many, many people are influenced by television programming and there is a lot of improvement to be done on television programming and television programming in Canada, especially drama. There's a whole wide area out there just waiting for exciting programming.

Seaton McLean: Until they sort out the distribution set-up for feature films in Canada I can't really see it as being anything but a frustrating exercise because of the number of good Canadian features that were made that have never received distribution, or received one week's distribution as token gesture. That to me seems like the ultimate frustration. Whereas here we are, making 1/2-hour TV, dramas that literally millions of people will see. How many people have seen 90% of the features that were made in the last three years in Canada? So, until that gets sorted out there really isn't much sense in it. And even after it does get sorted out, unless it seems to be a natural necessary step for us to take and a step that we want to take, we're very happy doing what we're doing now.

Michael MacMillan: A production company and producer and the industry in general has to justify its continued production of films based on the sales that it makes and we and everybody else will have to finance our films based on pre-sales. And, in Canada, that's possible in television because the mechanisms for distribution and exhibition are Canadian, they are controlled by Canadians. In feature films, it seems to us, with little knowledge and experience in that area, it's almost impossible to get significant pre-sale commitments from exhibitors and distributors, who we don't have control anyway. If you can't get pre-sales, which you can do in television, it's a catch-22, and you'll never finance a production. But, in television you can finance it that way. And when the tax shelter dries up - well, that's dead and gone - there still will be ways to finance TV productions.

Seaton McLean: If there's one thing we're aiming at, it's really contributing to television in Canada and I can't see any reason to stop going along the route that we're going given the fact that there are thousands of excellent Canadian stories that can be adapted into great Canadian films, dramas, documentaries, series, variety, whatever.

What has always bothered me about Canada is that way that Canadians tend to refer to television producers as the black sheep of the family or poor cousins. In the States there are very legitimate corporations that do nothing but produce television programming and do it in a very excellent way and never have made a feature film. In Canada it seems to be that everybody sees feature film as the be-all and end-all or end-all and be-all and it has always bothered me that this sort of thing exists. When people start realizing that you can be a very reputable television producer and co-exist with reputable feature film producers, then I'll be a much happier person.

Cinema Canada: Faced with an economic slump, how do independent filmmakers survive?

Janice Platt: Because times are so bad now, you can't survive on your own and the tendency has been very very much in the past to stay in your own backyard - not to share ideas, not to share experiences, not to share anything, but to just protect your border. Because it is so tough now, I think it's imperative for people to get together and share as much as they can, realistically.

Seaton McLean: There are two points of view right now: one side feels that the thing to do is protect your borders, to solidify, to dig in and wait till the worst is over. I liken that to the case of a corporation which runs commercials on television and cuts back during times of economic restraint only to find out they've lost half their market when they start up again.

In the last 18 months we've just gone out in a very forceful manner and basically forced people to listen to us. We have made in-roads that we could never have made if the situation was fine, the economy great, and everybody was producing films: they were forced to listen to us. Now we can talk to the NFB, we have made in-roads there; we have talked to the CBC and we've made in-roads there; we are dealing with the CFDC, dealing with C-Channel, T.V.O., people that would have been difficult to get hold of before are now calling us. It's a mistake just to get in the trenches and hide.

Letters

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to call themselves documentarians. Our organization has been founded as an international umbrella group to represent the interests of film and documentary makers, and we hope to convince people within and outside of the "industry" that documentary is not a second-class form of filmmaking, but an art unto itself. So I hope that Donald Brittain and Robert Rouveroy hang in there!

Some of your readers may be interested in our organization. We started in February and are now a non-profit trade association, with nearly 50 paid members. Most of our members are from L.A., naturally, but we are committed to starting chapters in other cities and countries. Interestingly, our first non-U.S. chapter is starting in Wellington, New Zealand! I would love to correspond with any Canadian documentarians interested in the IDA or in starting some Canadian chapters.

Our official goals are: "to promote nonfiction film and video, to encourage and celebrate the documentary arts and sciences, and to support the efforts of nonfiction and video makers all over the world."

Current members include a number of noted Hollywood documentarians, including David L. Wolper (*The National Geographic Series, Roots, The Undersea World of Jacques Cousteau*) and Jack Haley, Jr. (*That's Entertainment, Hollywood: The Gift of Laughter*).

One of our first projects is to create a computerized list of documentarians all over the world, with selected credits and specialties. This list will then be made available to interested parties worldwide and will become the basis of international co-ventures, distribution and employment for our members.

We also have a Marketing Committee that is studying the problem of marketability of documentaries, especially to the new media.

If any of your readers have questions, they can write to me at The International Documentary Association, The Production Center, 8489 West Third Street, Los Angeles, CA 90048 or telephone our office at (213) 396-3920 or (213) 655-7089.

Linda Buzzell
Founder
International Documentary Association

Credit to the distributor

We wish to correct an error in the article on distributors ("Planning to Stay Alive") in the October issue. The article incorrectly states that Asterisk negotiated a sale of *The World's Children* series to CBC Northern Services. It was one of the distributors of the series who negotiated that sale - not Asterisk.

David Springbett
& **Heather MacAndrew**
Asterisk Film &
Video Productions

● Michael MacMillan

