

OPINION

“Saving The Public Broadcasting Network”

Something interesting has happened this winter. A small group of establishment outs from publishing, film, broadcasting, and education have aimed their collective lance at the biggest, creakiest windmill in town. I'm referring to the Committee on Television's intervention against the CBC's English-language television licence renewal application.

The Committee includes Suzanne DePoe, Stan Fox, Robert Fulford, Donald Gordon, Allan King, Abe Rotstein, and Patrick Watson. I organized the Committee and Morris Wolfe wrote most of the brief we are presenting to the CRTC at the CBC hearing on Feb. 18 in Ottawa.

When we first got together in September the advice from filmmakers, writers, and others was simple. "Don't make a fool of yourself. The CBC has 30 lawyers and reams of statistics. No matter what you say they'll make mincemeat of you." The hearing has not yet occurred and they may indeed make mincemeat of us.

Whatever happens in Ottawa on the 18th, the lesson to be learned from COT is that it is not only possible to reach the decision-makers in places like the CBC — it is indispensable. They would seem to be fearful, self-righteous, and isolated. Foolish decisions will continue to be made and inertia will masquerade as policy if we all don't bang on the doors.

They don't react to individuals. I realized that when I wrote a letter to Laurent Picard in June, 1972 complaining about the lack of independent Canadian films on CBC and the hesitancy to innovate with video technology. I also sent copies to Don Lytle, Eugene Hallman, Gerard Pelletier, and Pierre Juneau. Only Juneau acknowledged receipt of my letter.

I think now the general level of frustration in the country with most of

our institutions is such that even the heavies are willing to fight in the open. Several years ago COT could not have happened. King/Fulford/Watson/Rotstein would have been too busy with their own projects or would have said the CBC is changing (like most CBC employees say) and nothing need be done.

These men are all long standing supporters of public broadcasting driven through sheer desperation to mount an analysis and critique of the most important public institution in the country. If one can believe Ottawa mandarins and odd members of parliament, COT has made a difference by its very existence and the acknowledged quality of its membership (myself and Wolfe excluded).

The other necessary ingredient for COT was the semi-judicial hearing before an outside body (the CRTC). Unfortunately, most of the public institutions don't have to make a public accounting of themselves like the broadcasting groups do. The National Film Board or the Canadian Film Development Corp. are answerable only to the Secretary of State and the appropriate parliamentary committee. These parliamentary committees do minimal research and tend to ask the objects of their supervision uninformed and shallow questions.

This brings up the greatest difficulty the COT had — research. The CBC decided we were the enemy and gave us no cooperation. We then asked the Canada Council and CRTC for research money for specific areas. These requests were not tied to any conclusions we might have reached, but only the research. The CRTC's negative decision was understandable. The Canada Council said no over their officer's recommendation. I interpreted this to mean that the Council will not fund research that might be critical of another part of the government. We did get help from

Memo From Turner Corp. which describes itself as "an information/communication support sharing network for innovative projects" — whatever that means.

Of course, in the final analysis the COT exists because the CBC has lost sight of the meaning of public broadcasting. The CBC can argue that they are meeting the Broadcasting Act's mandate and have generated some of the best television programming seen in this country, but the vision of men like Graham Spry has been lost. Vision is a difficult thing to write into legislation. It really depends on the quality of the men and women doing the work.

Maybe a bureaucracy as big as the CBC inevitably loses that sense of purpose, but the public broadcasting system is simply too important to the survival of Canada to be allowed to stagnate as it has. Sometimes it seems that too many of the men in power there are courageous cocktail party idealists by night and compromising pragmatists only doing their job by day.

For years it has been obvious to everyone outside the CBC that Mother was not feeding all of her children. The actors and some of the writers were doing fairly well — but the filmmakers and playwrights were excluded from the Canadian audience with chilling regularity.

For example, the Canadian Film Development Corp. has invested in 101 completed feature films. The CFDC says that 2 of these have been shown on the CBC English network, about one dozen on the French network.

The Playwrights' Coop in Toronto lists 150 Canadian plays in its catalogue. Ralph Zimmerman (general manager of the Factory Theatre Lab) considers 35 of these of international quality such as Freeman's *Creeps* which opened to good reviews in Washington and New York.

Of these, only David French's **Leaving Home** has been seen on the public broadcasting network.

The argument offered by CBC executives such as Thom Benson (Director of Entertainment Programming) for this unacceptable state of affairs is simple. Canadian filmmakers are really not good enough to get on the public network and everyone knows Canadians don't really want to see that stuff. Benson has said there are not 26 Canadian features suitable for television. Meanwhile, Global has bought 40-odd of these unsuitable films and CTV is airing another 13. The CBC has belated plans to buy 5 or 6 this year but seems to have difficulties finding good films — the private networks have bought most of them.

The fact that a very large segment of Canada's artists are being excluded from Canada's public television system doesn't make much sense unless one realizes that the men running that system don't seem to believe there is an English-speaking culture out there. I draw this conclusion from off hand remarks made by a number of CBC executives.

Lister Sinclair told a member of the Committee on Television that while there has been a vital cultural development in French-Canada there is a kind of malaise in English-Canada. He said few good films are being made, little vital literature or theatre is happening and the arts are in a kind of doldrums that CBC programming unhappily reflects.

Mr. Sinclair is certainly right. If the CBC believes there are no good writers or filmmakers in the country then they won't be able to find them.

However, the times are not easy for the men who run the CBC. They began working for the CBC when there was no alternative. It was a monopoly and had to be all things to all people. Those days are gone forever. We now have a private network reaching nearly as many people as the public system, another network in Ontario, independent stations in Toronto like CITY or CHCH in Hamilton, plus the provincial educational systems. Cable now offers 23 channels in some areas with a movie channel, a

stock exchange channel, an airport information channel, and on and on.

The people of Canada were once a captive audience for better or worse. Now the CBC is one option in an ever increasingly complex broadcasting mix. The crucial question is who should the public network program for? The answer should be high quality minority programming (low brow as well as high brow) which is an alternative to the homogenized commercial pap.

The CBC seems to have answered this question by trying to beat the commercial channels in the lowest common denominator sweepstakes. The result is **Gilligan's Island** on the network the people paid \$207 million for last year and \$240 million this year.

Another difficulty is the insidious influence of the CBC commercial advertising policy which warps the values and priorities of the public network. The result is a bastard child practically indistinguishable from CTV — half commercial television and half timid public television. The commercial tale has been wagging the public dog for many years.

Eugene Hallman (vice president and general manager, English Services Division) never said it better when he told the Association of Canadian Advertisers that "The CBC belongs not only to you as the Canadian people, but as advertisers." We see the results of this commercialism in the preponderance of American programming in prime time; mindless shows; and a slavish following of the trends set by the commercial networks in the US.

The CBC fears that without commercials and the super-mass appeal programs they generate, the CBC audience will dwindle until it becomes a minority of elitist intellectuals too small to justify another parliamentary grant. There is no law except the advertising imperative which says a single program must be watched by 4 million people. Harry Boyle once said the greatest obsession of his generation was the mass audience.

While the obsession has been with the mass audience, the major concern of the CBC has been to make sure no one knows the CBC exists. Their greatest fear is controversy. They must therefore try to square the circle by being invisible to the member from Nookie-in-the-islands and a quantifiable engineering function on graph paper to the civil servant at treasury board (filmmakers and writers don't really look good on graph paper) while delivering the mass audience in a somnolent state to the advertiser. They've got a tough job.

Can we blame these men for having lost the vision and meaning of public broadcasting? Can we afford to indulge this broadcasting system any longer? We need a sluiceway for the creative energies of our society to flow across the land, not a dam of timidity packed in memos which still finds it necessary to censor the works of writers like Mordecai Richler or ignore the works of writers like Bill Fruet.

We need a public broadcasting system. I hope the Committee on Television will help achieve that goal.

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