Another great flurry of debate, white papers, policy studies, commissions and god knows what else official grappling is once again underway as an attempt to deal with Canadian broadcasting. In the midst of all the verbiage, it’s useful to take a look at a structural problem that, in their way of thinking, is central to the whole morass. Not surprisingly, that problem is embedded in, and masked by, language itself. In this case, the crucial phrase, enshrined in the 1968 Broadcasting Act, is the notion that we have a “single system” of broadcasting. Those two words have done more to screw up our airwaves and broadcasting sovereignty than any other two words in the English language. It’s worth considering their origin.

In 1932 when Parliament passed the first Broadcasting Act, it created a broadcasting system that was entirely unique. In order to see its uniqueness, we have to look beyond the surface at its structure. Superficially, the system created in 1932 would seem to be one in which the CBC was the only shared broadcasting element. But the reason the CBC was to play the predominant role is that the 1932 Broadcasting Act granted it two major powers. The new network was to be empowered to engage in broadcasting and also to regulate all broadcasting in Canada. By permitting the CBC powers to both broadcast and regulate all broadcasting in Canada, Parliament made the public network the controlling frame for the whole system. The CBC, with its public-service goals, was set to be the boundaries within which the private-sector broadcasters would operate. The boundaries were to exist only as very small, circumscribed adjuncts within the national system, and their purely financial incentives were to be well bounded and structurally overridden by the powers and goals of the public-sector CBC.

In order to picture the 1932 broad- casting structure, think of a big circle (the CBC) containing within itself a tiny circle (the private broadcasters). The CBC, as both broadcaster and regulator, would ensure that any broadcasting element contained within its boundaries contributed to the national goals outlined in the Broadcasting Act. Meanwhile, the CBC these dual powers (or, to use a phrase from Gregory Bateson, by making the CBC the “higher logical type”) created a structure that was quite clearly a “single system” for broadcasting. In that the structure was non-contradictory to its goals.

Parliament’s decision to honour the integrity of what it had created and, over the years following the 1932 Act, neglected to adequately fund the CBC so that it might function according to its structural role. Nevertheless, that structure remained in place until the late 1950s: a single system for broadcasting. As broadcasting expanded, the boundaries within which the private broadcasters would operate. However, with the financial prospects of television on the horizon during the early 1950s, the private sector lobby began to really push for changes. Private broadcasters found a sympathetic ear in the person of Tory leader John Diefenbaker who was in favour of private-sector gains. Campaigning in 1958, Diefenbaker stated, “As under the new Broadcasting Act of 1958 removed regulatory powers from the CBC and granted them to a separate, independent broadcasting regulatory board – the Board of Broadcast Governors (BBG),” which later became the CRTC.

What’s most important about this 1958 piece of legislation is that it tried to pretend as though nothing significant happened to the broadcasting structure. The Broadcasting Act of 1958 refers to the “continued existence and in theory – but the 1958 Act effectively abolished it, while pretending nothing had been changed. It is this pretense – maintained by the broadcasting regulatory company that has eroded and destroyed broadcasting sovereignty.

To use an analogy: the human body is a single system. Its various parts cooperate and coordinate to maintain life. Though we may speak of the ‘nervous system’ and the ‘circulatory system’, these different functions do not compete with one another. If they do, the body dies. In terms of broadcasting, the private sector does compete with the CBC. Perhaps it always did, but at least in the old structure that impulse was contained, bounded and kept in place so that its energies might contribute to the health of the whole. But the 1958 Act changed the structure and freed the private sector to be a fully separate entity. It does no good to go on pretending that there is a “single system” when that is simply not the case. Of course, acknowledging the 1958 structural change certainly opens up new problems, and it’s no wonder that the legislators at the time preferred to pretend nothing had happened.

Though its stand, however, the myth of the “single system” has worked extremely well for the private sector, which has been fostered and pampered by a regulatory agency bent on proving that this “single system” exists, and works only for the private sector can become strong enough. Whatever the motivation, the examples – the Greenberg/ Bronfman bailout of pay-TV’s First Choice, and the creation of “superstations” – are the most recent ones – which suggest that the illusory notion of a “single system” has been continually used to justify decisions which simply catter to private-sector expansion. In 1980, for instance, the CRTC allowed the merger of Canadian Cable systems Ltd. of Toronto and Première Cable Inc. of Vancouver – creating a corporate cable-TV entity three times larger than any other cable firm in Canada. To those who opposed the creation of such a system, because of the dangers of concentrated media ownership, the CRTC (according to The Globe & Mail, July 13, 1980) pointed out, “The Broadcasting Act spoke of a ‘single Canadian broadcasting system.’” On the other hand, when the CBC wished to use that “single system” to protect its own broadcasting interests, the CRTC nixed the proposal by testing that the service would reach only a tiny circle (the private broadcasters).

More recently, the CRTC has agreed to let private TV stations cooperate in producing “Canadian content” shows, with each getting on-air credit for the show, which is clearly committed to producing quality Canadian programming; it gets its budget axed in a speech Feb. 7 this year. However, CBC president Pierre Juneau stated that, after the most recent $85 million cut, the CBC will have suffered budget cuts of $300 million over the past seven years, or “more than $60 million a year.”

To me, it’s clear that the myth of the “single system” of broadcasting is the mechanism which has been used over the years to simultaneously pamper and expand the private sector and demean hamstringing the CBC. This doesn’t mean that no decisions have been made, though the results suggest certain highly political conclusions. Nevertheless, it looks for all the world as if important things have come full circle – back to a (this time implicit) structure similar to that of 1932. Now, though, the labels, circles, and mental imagery are decidedly different. As of 1985, with the government and regulatory agency rather obviously “on-side” with the private sector and having been “on-side” for quite a few years – the private broadcasting sector seems to have become the “higher logical type.” Today it’s private broadcasting that’s the bigger circle containing within it the smaller circle, a circumscribed, well-bounded, and effectively curtailed CBC.