

# Waiting for Ottawa to end the cultural occupation

*The Majors "are controlling our market for us... What we are being offered is no less than cultural occupation and, to top it off, they want us to foot the bill!... Our domestic market doesn't belong to us, it's theirs."*

— Former federal minister of Communications Francis Fox at the Montreal hearings

For a brief moment, it looked like real progress was being made. At Toronto's Trade Forum, then minister of Communications Marcel Masse named a Task Force to concentrate on the problems of Canada's feature films, while Quebec readied itself for four days of public hearings to put the final touches to the regulations of its Cinema Law. Coordination between the federal and provincial governments was crucial, Masse said, giving every indication of being ready to follow Quebec's lead.

For all the talk about either culture or industry, both Masse and the commissioners of the Régie understand that film policy in Canada is basically a political question. This understanding is shared in Quebec by all the heads of all the agencies, by the unions and by many in the industry. The Cinema Law is, itself, the result of over 20 years of persistent lobbying by people like Nicole Boisvert and Claude Fournier who now head the provincial agencies.

In what must surely be some of the smoothest political manoeuvring on the cultural scene in a long while, the architects of Quebec's law managed to bring the Majors to Montreal (as opposed to going to L.A. to visit with them), listened to them politely as they grappled with windmills, and sent them home with a "thanks but no thanks" for their troubles. Unfortunately, none of the Americans bothered to stay around the hearings long enough to hear the eloquent response to their brief by the Société générale on the following day or to measure realistically the determination of a nation to take matters in its own hands.

After the Cinema Law was passed in 1983 and the Majors had duly expressed their dismay, Nicole Boisvert and Guy Fournier were mandated to negotiate with them over the definitions of "producer" and "world rights", the two terms which would decide who would have extraordinary license to distribute certain films. The regulations, as written in the proposed draft, were peculiar in the extreme, opening the door as they did to all the Majors who either put up 50% of the "financial interest" in a film or held distribution rights for a film in North America and Europe. Given the circumstances, the Majors couldn't have written a more accommodating definition. And that was perhaps the point.

When the Majors made their representations in Montreal, they quibbled over the technical aspects of the definitions, trying to water them down further. But, in retrospect, it would seem that the definitions themselves were never written to be implemented. The Majors' entire defence was rendered ineffective as every single brief from Quebec suggested the definitions themselves be thrown out in favor of a tough and unequivocal stance on the questions of producer and world sales. It was the Americans who used the word "revolution" in describing the law, but it was a revolution Quebec-style, engineered quietly and with great dignity and wit.

That same cultural revolution was the promise of Marcel Masse: that he would bring in to the federal Cabinet, about to embark on free-trade negotiations, some sense of the politics of Canadian culture and the fundamental nature of Canadian cultural sovereignty.

Until Sept. 25 – the day of Masse's dramatic resignation from cabinet – it looked like the Tories would enter into these historic negotiations with their zeal for increased participation in the American empire tempered by at least two crucial public concerns greater than the desire to get rich whatever the cost. These were: 1) Canada's territorial sovereignty, particularly as concerns the Arctic, articulated with surprising firmness by External Affairs minister Joe Clark, and 2) Canada's cultural sovereignty as represented by Masse.

Even if Masse himself, following the Sept. 23-24 Halifax meeting with provincial ministers of culture, would not specify a "shopping list" of cultural industries to be protected from U.S. takeover, he did at least recognize the principle of cultural sovereignty without which Canadian culture is nothing more than folklore. And with the backing of his provincial counterparts, Masse was able to present some guarantee, however ill-defined at that point, that everything would *not* be given away.

To his credit, Masse, in his first year as minister of Communications, did recognize the extent to which, as he put it, "the centrality of the concept of cultural sovereignty dictates our cultural agenda." In drafting that agenda Masse understood that, in the long run, this could only mean increased

recognition for Canadian culture, and the "nationalization" of Canadian cultural concerns – not in the narrow sense of government takeover, but in the broader sense of reclaiming Canada's own domestic market (whether in broadcasting, film or publishing). This was a vision of Canadian culture not at the service of state-policy, but as part of the national fabric served by state-policy. It was also clear to Masse that it would be a long and difficult process to bring about, and that doing so would be a fight – both within Canada and south of the border.

In Canada, he was beginning to win that fight. Now, with Masse's resignation, whatever momentum was getting underway comes to a standstill. The various task forces will continue their cogitations, Quebec will go it alone, but without a central figure of Masse's determination and influence, the entire "cultural revolution" inevitably flounders.

For what emerges, once again, from Masse's abrupt resignation, is the extraordinary fragility of Canadian cultural objectives. Precisely the problem that Masse hoped – and was beginning – to address.

By the end of October, Quebec will have taken those first crucial steps towards reclaiming its domestic cinema market. The Majors suffered a defeat at the Montreal hearings. Whether that remains just an episodic skirmish or signals the real beginnings of the battle for Canadian cultural sovereignty depends, like never before, on the extent to which Ottawa follows Quebec's lead.

## LETTERS

### Only Ontarians vanishing

Having been a reader of *Cinema Canada* since 1976, I have come to the conclusion that it is seemingly only Ontarians who suffer from a "vanishing cultural identity" (see no. 122). Is this because of the province's historical fascination and ridiculous competitiveness with everything American?

As a native Nova Scotian now living in Toronto, I was angered at the generality of Pratley and Zero's articles in the September issue. When I was 13, I saw Shebib's *Goin' Down the Road* and Reitman's *Cannibal Girls* in the same year, at my hometown's one and only theatre. *Paperback Hero* and *Face Off* followed. The point? Somehow, with Canada's messy distribution system, I managed to see four Canadian films in a small town of 8,000 – and I knew they were native productions.

Television? We had *only* CBC – the affiliate from Halifax – until I was a teenager. I remember Don Messer, *Singalong Jubilee*, *The Whiteoaks of Jalna*, *Razzle Dazzle* and *Drop In*. I even had sent to me autographed pictures of Al Hamel, Howard the Turtle and Trudy Young.!

Music? Besides our native daughter Anne, another big concert seller was *Valdy* – and when *The Stampede* and *April Wine* played my high school, we were amazed these bands would even travel to Nova Scotia.

Before I left home for university, I had the sadly missed *Take One*

magazine sent to me by subscription; *Motion* was only available in my high school library; and then I found *Cinema Canada*. Thank God you're still around to keep us all informed – and to help people like Pratley and Zero lament about what they think is a lost identity. Perhaps us "regionalists," albeit at times economically deprived, were a helluva lot better off than you Upper Canadians in seeing ourselves as Canadians, and not pseudo-Yanks.

Take off, eh?

**Bruce Bishop**  
Toronto

### Sonolab: no limit

Neither Sonolab nor the Atlantic Film Festival set a time condition upon the award (see letters, *Cinema Canada* No. 122.) An account was opened in my name and credited with \$300. At no time did Sonolab notify me that they would cancel this credit if not used by any particular date. I had tried to use the credit immediately after the Festival but the film I sent was not one they processed. It was returned by collect mail.

I had in the same Festival won a prize from Eastern Film Labs which they did honour, no problem, at as late a date as Sonolab was contacted. I mention all these details in order to set the record straight.

**Barbara Sternberg**  
Toronto