Towards a revived Canadian cultural nationalism

ONTARIO'S NEW ACTIVISTS

Not since the First World War has an Ontario government played such an important role as the current Liberal government in Queen's Park in contributing to the elaboration of national policies in film and broadcasting. In the late teens and early '20s, Ontario was in the forefront of cultural resistance to the onslaught of American radio and, by backing developments like the Trenton film studios, tangibly helped the Canadian feature towards an early, if short-lived, moment of glory.

The election of David Peterson's Liberals last June brought to power a new breed of Ontario cultural activist. Later that year Quebec would jumble its cultural leadership role with the Parti Quebecois's ignominious caving-in to U.S. pressure of Bill 109. Today, in 1986, it's Ontario that's carrying the ball. Premier Peterson stands up to Mulroney on free-trade. Citizenship and Culture minister Lily Masse joins Masse to build the foundations for a Canadian cultural policy. Ontario's Ministry of Transport and Communications comes out in support of the CBC as "the primary public policy instrument in the broadcasting system." An imminent end to the ludicrous film censorship system is promised.

In the autumn, Munro named Bernard Ostry to the chairmanship of the province's educational network, TVOntario.

Then on Nov. 1, Munro announced that Ontario would finally be joining Quebec and Alberta with a provincial feature film development agency of its own. The Ontario Film Development Corporation, she said, would be headed by former Festival of Festivals director Wayne Clarkson.

In the following Cinema Canada interviews, both men spell out in greater detail – Ostry from a broad cultural and technological perspective; Clarkson from a nuts-and-bolts approach to funding regulations – the responsibilities they have been charged with.

Rethinking Canada's cultural equations

An interview with TVOntario chairman

Bernard Ostry

by Tom Perlmutter

Last autumn former TV producer, author and cultural mandarin Bernard Ostry returned to a direct role in broadcasting by accepting the chairmanship of TVOntario. As the nation's second largest network reaching 95% of Ontarians and a significant proportion of Quebecois, TV has a quasi-national role in broadcasting. As TVO's chairman there is no doubt that Ostry's voice is one that counts in the formulation of broadcast policy in Canada.

Ostry brings to his task very impressive credentials as one of those rare beings who can bridge the gap between the worlds of industry and culture which he combines with a formidable understanding of the workings of technology. His are the kind of talents desperately needed at a time when free-trade negotiations, technological innovation and an overhaul of Canadian broadcasting are converging the long-standing economic, technological and cultural issues that underlie Canadian development.

Ostry came to TVO from Ontario's deputy ministership of citizenship and Culture where he implemented policies to further the arts in that province. Prior to that he served as deputy minister of Industry and Tourism coming to Queen's Park from a variety of positions with the federal government including deputy minister of communications (1978-1980) and special advisor (on culture and communications technology in Western Europe) to the Secretary of State and the minister of Communications.

Ostry has brought to the various positions he has held a historian's understanding of the deep-rooted forces at work creating the particular industrial and cultural profile of modern communications. He has also approached his work with a consistent commitment to enhance Canadian cultural and technological sovereignty. That is clear from the initiatives he took as deputy minister of Communications in Ottawa where, for example, he was instrumental in developing Canada's world-leading videotex, technology, Telidon, as well as in his drive to enhance Ontario's international trade while deputy minister of Industry and Trade. It is also evident in his book, The Cultural Connection, a classic analysis of Canadian cultural policy. This interview with Cinema Canada took place just after Ostry took over at TVOntario.

Cinema Canada: You are coming to TVO at a critical time both for the organization and for broadcasting TVO has established itself and its reputation but it is now operating in a dramatically different broadcasting environment where issues of technology, culture and free-trade, in all of which you have had a fairly major involvement, are converging. These are some of the topics I would like to explore here. Perhaps we could start by getting a sense of what you see are the issues facing broadcasting?

Bernard Ostry: It is no accident or whim of the minister of Communications that there is so much examination of the bits and pieces as well as the totality of the system of broadcasting. It is always dangerous to talk about watersheds, particularly in an industry that is so international, but I think for Canada, for Canadians, the industry is probably at a watershed. That will mean very different things depending on where you sit in the business.
FILM/BROADCASTING

Cinema Canada: What is contributing to the watershed? What are the crucial factors at play?

Bernard Ostry: In Canada, probably the most critical element is the degree to which governments and the public who have interested themselves in the subject are recognizing for the first time, without actually saying it, that there's been a very heavy tipping of the scale in terms of the degree to which we have one system that is both public and private. The weight of the public sector disproportionately has declined enormously. We now have a billion-dollar corporation, the CBC, coming for assistance, or being nibbled at or asked to participate in the general restraint program, however you want to describe it. You have a concentration on that institution and that leads to all these investigations of what is it and where is it and where are the others and how did we get there. It stimulates more and more careful examination.

You have a range of pressures going on: the federal sector is pressing the private sector is pressuring. Everybody is reflecting the pressures they are under whether it is for profit or for programs or for producing Canadian content or for satisfying audiences. They all have a different range of concerns that they aren't able to meet.

Then you have activities on the periphery which are so confusing they are left unexplained. For example, two prime ministers meet at 24 Sussex for lunch and the only matter of substance that comes out of it is a decision to extend a provincial educational service in French across the country. And there isn't a whisper about that. That is a constitutional issue. It's an interesting event in that political leaders make a decision, but where's the regulatory agency? The regulatory agency doesn't say anything about it. It's evidence of a kind of confusion that expresses the range of activities going on. There is so much going on that nobody even bothers to comment. And that's of immense importance.

I don't say it as a criticism; just that it occurs in a particular way: at lunch between two political leaders. It doesn't occur in the normal framework.

Cinema Canada: Are the issues today different from what you identified them to be in 1978 in your book The Cultural Connection?

Bernard Ostry: I don't think that given the geography and the economics of North America one should be surprised that the same issues continue to appear. They've been with us for a long time. Ever since the mid- and late '20s when people became concerned about our ability to hear ourselves speak across the country and control or have some say at least about the control of the airwaves. Today we are back to the issue of free-trade which John A. Macdonald first raised and was spurned by the Americans, turning him to a national policy. If there is a difference it is that Marcel Masse has made an enormous contribution to the cultural debate in this country in the short time that he has been minister. I don't mean because of the cuts associated with his first few months in office but because he's a historian and he's held an education portfolio and he is a nationalist in the Quebec context. He is not the first Quebecois in the federal cabinet who is a nationalist but he may well be the first who attempted to extend his feelings about sovereignty and nationalist into the English-speaking community. Don't anybody else who did, and I worked very closely with Gerard Pelletier and Jeanne Sauvé and, for that matter, Trudeau. I don't think that was their intent. It certainly is Masse's. I think that is a new element in the chemistry.

Cinema Canada: In your book you wrote that if television is to contribute to Canadian cultural development and sovereignty there will have to be a re-organization of the Canadian production industry and a new approach to its delivery system. You were writing in the context of the cable industry. But we are now looking at satellite technologies with the potential of an inundation of programming from all over the world. The re-organization problem seems to have become more acute. Do you feel that in coming back into broadcasting? As chairman of TVO can you bring a new perspective to the debate?

Bernard Ostry: Well, I don't know. I'm not opposed to participating in a debate on the subject. But it's premature for me. I'm not trying to be modest or to avoid your question. I think a great deal has happened on the technical side since I was deeply engaged in these things as the deputy minister of Communications. From quantum leaps in direct broadcast satellites and superstations to a thing like the VCR. Nobody at the moment really can tell you whether it is going to continue to grow in a place like Canada or whether it is leveling off or declining. There is a view on each side of it. In Europe they are convinced from research they have done that VCR's don't have much of a future because 12 months after the machine is bought it's not used. I don't know. I was just told this at an international communications meeting.

I'm not sure the problem, which has been with us for 50 or 60 years in terms of broadcasting, is really a different problem because of the technology. It may be more severe. You may use it to your advantage. It may complicate your life. The problem is the same problem.

The problem is that the weight of the world's culture that pours in here is unfortunately not the world's. It is one culture in the world. And we are a multi-cultural, pluralist society that wants to live that way socially and politically and be protected that way. And somehow or other, culturally, we've become the blotter of the accidental. (When I say accidental I don't think of America in terms of a hideous government in Washington planning to brainwash Canada). Not only have we become the blotter, we've invited more through our regulatory system and facilitated it. So the problem is no different.

We did that when we started in radio. Perhaps it was even more severe by 1929 when Aird got excited or when Borden finally did it in 1931-32. But the ratio of ourselves to the United States in the weight of this problem hasn't changed. What has changed now from when the CBC was at its peak is its access to Canadians and the presentation of Canadian material to Canadians and the degree to which everything else is American rather than British, French, Polish, Australian, Yugoslavian or Russian, Scandinavian, African, etc.

Everybody is making pictures, sounds, literature. The world is full of that. But 80% of the stuff coming in here is from one place. And I think that's the issue that governments and the public are always reluctant to address. That's the centrality of the problem. Not something else.

Cinema Canada: What seems to be different is that in the '20s there was a concerted public reaction against the American influence in radio.

Bernard Ostry: You didn't read that in my book.

TVOntario

The buck starts here. Ontario Citizenship and Culture Minister Lily Munro presents TVO chairman Bernard Ostry with a $200,000-plus contribution to the nation's second largest television network.
“Marcel Masse has made an enormous contribution to the cultural debate in this country”
Cinema Canada: Now the situation may change?
Bernard Ostry: There's a burden that goes with this kind of situation. You have a task force come down here. They tell me we have nothing like TVO. Incredible. The place knows exactly what it's supposed to be doing and what its goals are. It does it well. Totally organized. People know what their jobs are. I say there must be some other organizations. They tell me, "No. We've been all over. It's unique."

So if the task force has that feeling about it and they want to strengthen public broadcasting, particularly in English where the sovereignty issue is more important than it is, in a different context, for Quebec, where are they going to turn if they feel that they can't carry a government or funding to assist the CBC? That is an opportunity and also a big worry. Because we can't do that. We are not geared to do it. There is no big drive here. Nobody is looking for some imperial expansion. That's not in the style of this place and certainly not in its mandate.

Cinema Canada: But there have been some changes in that direction. For example, Telefilm opened its broadcast fund to the provincial networks. In that way it has immediately opened a national role for them.
Bernard Ostry: Well, it has and it hasn't. And it's not only Telefilm. It's also the Ontario Film Development Corporation. The OFDC will probably not wish to engage in other than feature films. It will resist, given the amount of money it has, wanting to underwrite in any way what I would describe as a TV series because of the degree to which Telefilm has been pushing television production. So, on the one hand, our own corporation is not going to be tremendously helpful financially. And Telefilm's interest is not in subsidizing the province to do programming for Ontarians. It is only going to be interested in what can move out of Ontario internationally. Now we are not opposed to that, but our first responsibility is to the people of this province who are footing the bill.

Cinema Canada: But there is nonetheless pressure to internationalize your productions. In a speech Gene Lawrence, TVO's general manager for educational services, mentioned the increasing success of the international marketing of TVO's programs. Does that begin to affect the way programming is done? Particularly if the international marketplace becomes an important source of funding and funding is always a critical problem. One can see that by these public drives.
Bernard Ostry: We don't go to the international public.
Cinema Canada: But you do go to the international marketplace.
Bernard Ostry: TVO is doing that now and very successfully. This place has been successful for years in marketing material for schools in the United States and while it does not return a lot of money it has an impact on the image of this country. It's interesting to know that millions of Americans on the Eastern seaboard are learning to speak English through TVO broadcasts. But we have to be careful here. It's not unlike the situation CBC got itself into when it got into advertising and now can't get out though people want to push it out. At the moment the percentage of our budget that flows from market sources is 30%. Personally, as I told the premier, I don't think that proportion is very healthy if it reflects, as it does, the degree to which the provincial government has failed to underwrite the growth of this place and its needs in programming over the years. We will get ourselves into a CBC situation. It may be piddly amounts of money compared to the CBC but the principal and the process are very similar. I would not want to be sitting here in the chair if the marketing people were driving the programmers.

Cinema Canada: Did the premier respond sympathetically to what you said?
Bernard Ostry: I think so. I didn't put anything on the table with a bill attached. The test will come then.

Cinema Canada: When does that happen?
Bernard Ostry: As soon as a document with the right quality can be given to them.

Cinema Canada: You mentioned that the 70/30 split in funding that TVO has at the moment is not one you consider very healthy. What would you rather see it at?

Bernard Ostry: I would care less about the split if I thought that there was a stable operating base that was predictive over time in terms of growth with a substantially larger amount going for programming. It's the dependency for programming purposes on the 30%, which in itself is very unpredictable, that is very bad for an institution.

To use an old cliché, the only important thing is what gets out: the product. In terms of funding, a place like CBC levies its money on a 1:2 or 1:3 basis. TVO levies it from 1:10. It has an extraordinary capacity to find partners. On the basis of a small amount of licence fee money it can generate Canadian and foreign interest in a series.

Cinema Canada: It still leaves unanswered the crucial problem of funding programming. The fact is even with the 70/30 split it costs so much more to create one's own programming than to buy it off the shelf.

Bernard Ostry: I don't know that.

Cinema Canada: In the speech I referred to by Gene Laurence he said that TVO created 500 hours of programming last year versus 700 hours of acquisitions. Nevertheless 85% of the programming budget went on in-house productions. That seems to suggest that making programs is very expensive and that there will be continuing pressure on TVO on how to continue to make programs.

Bernard Ostry: This country is telling us something about programs by producing institutions like Telefilm where the programs are made by independent producers. The proportion that's made in-house will be smaller. The question is how much of the programming will be directed by TVO. When we lever 1:10 we have minimal control over the product. By that time we are such a small player. We can't absolutely ensure the quality that our people are after. We need to have more say in the product and to do that we have to have more bucks up-front. And to reduce the proportion of recurs we have to have more product. All that is at the expensive end of the business. If we can find $20 million for a new institution (the OFDC) — I'm glad to see it; I recognized the need when I was still the deputy minister — I think if we can make a reasonable case we should be able to find several million dollars that can be simply handed over to programming.

Cinema Canada: I'd like to get back to TVO's role in Canadian broadcasting. As I understand it TVO is increasing its French language service.

Bernard Ostry: At the moment about 17% of our schedule is in French, largely concentrated on Sunday. The extension process has only just begun and depends on receiving our share of the funding from Ottawa. What people are going to see when they switch on in January, 1987, I can't tell you. It will be substantially greater than it is now. It will build to the point that French hours of programming would be pretty well equal to English.

The next question is how many Franco-Ontarians is it reaching. There is going to be a lot of growing pains in getting the signal, as our license tells us, to all Ontarians.

Cinema Canada: Is it going to be on a separate signal?

Bernard Ostry: It's going to be on a bunch of different transmitters and I would hope that we will have another place on cable.

Cinema Canada: Is TVO being cabled across Canada at the moment?

Bernard Ostry: No, only in Quebec.

Cinema Canada: So, in fact, the two most populous provinces are being reached by TVO. Doesn't that give it a quasi-national role?

Bernard Ostry: The cable coverage in Quebec is not complete. It's in Montreal.

Cinema Canada: That's fairly substantial. And with satellites.

Bernard Ostry: Broadcasting by satellite laps over all kinds of places. There are people writing to us from places where we shouldn't have a signal sending us money. We send it back telling them that if you are getting TVO it's illegal. So here is your money back, I'm glad you are enjoying it.

Cinema Canada: The dynamics of the technology willy-nilly push TVO towards a national role.

Bernard Ostry: There are a lot of things that may be pushing it. One of the elements is not TVO. You just have to believe me. People here are not strong advocates of moving beyond our territory or jurisdiction.

Cinema Canada: It's interesting to reflect on the way the technology does work. You suggested in your book that...

Bernard Ostry: Let me interrupt for a second. We tried to expand our coverage in a situation that was very advantageous. I would have thought as a Canadian, to this country when an attempt was made with the cooperation of Rogers Cable in having Galaxy approved by the CRTC. The CRTC rejected it.

Today the people cable companies won't support that kind of thing. We don't have a children's channel yet but we have an immense amount of pressure from Americans and the private sector is on our back. So when a place like this comes forward with a proposal obviously to the advantage of everybody and is rejected, it is hard not to sympathize with a lot of the (critical) things Herschel Hardin says in his recent book about the CRTC.

Cinema Canada: Do you want to say anything about the CRTC?

Bernard Ostry: No, I'm going before them for a license!

Cinema Canada: You've had a lot of experience in both trade and cultural matters. How do you think the free-trade debate will affect cultural industries and TVO in particular? Are we to believe that cultural industries will be protected?

Bernard Ostry: Nobody said that.

Masse said that cultural sovereignty would not be on the table. That's a very different thing. And Joe Clark has said that he believes that cultural industries will be protected.

Cinema Canada: What does that mean for TVO or to Canadian broadcasting?

Bernard Ostry: To be honest, it took a few days before I said yes. I had nothing to do with TVO. I had been in broadcasting and I'm not a great believer in going where you've been. I also felt I needed another six months at Citizenship and Culture to clean up the OFDC and the cultural industries and to get this French service clearly off the ground. There is a whole range of things like that I wanted to make sure had been completed. I wanted to protect a lot of the funding that had been built up with a lot of pain over the past year. The allocation for the arts needed protecting. We feel that it was wise in the budget. When you have a change it is difficult to know what is going to happen with the cash. Given my commitment to the cultural community, I was very reluctant just to walk out. But I was concerned about this place in ways I have to say I'm not sure they had a clear picture of, and I agreed to come.

Cinema Canada: Do you have a sense of the sorts of things you would like to accomplish while you are here?

Bernard Ostry: Oh, sure, a few but they derive more from ignorance than anything else. There are internal problems: tensions between programmers and the people who deal with money. I think that environment could be improved. I think that the programmers need a larger role in this institution. I think the board needs to be moved off of the kind of things it was asked to deal with and depends on the large policy issues. There are a time to able to the tuning of the place to make it a happier, more effective machine. I think it has to have more money if it's to meet the challenge of providing quality programming in this highly competitive environment.

Now we are lucky. We have very recently done market tests of our own viewers. A very high percentage know what they are doing when they watch TVO. They know that it's different. That's why they are watching it. It comes out very clearly in the surveys. So we mustn't let them down. To avoid that, let alone building on it, we have to have more and better products.

The larger issue is that of its role. Money has limited the extent that we can reflect Ontarians to one another. Not only on the French side. This is a multi-cultural, pluralistic society and Ontario is the heartland of it in Canada. It's hard to reflect that in a subtle and learning way without cash.

It's easy enough to go into the Italian community and put a microphone in front of somebody's face and say we did a thing on Italians. But that's not good television. Reflecting them to themselves is really not as important as reflecting everybody to everybody else.

There are a lot more to be there. And that costs money. There are a lot of large groups that are neither French nor English in this country who don't have as clear a play on the schedule as they should.

There is a whole range of things going on in the schools. We do a unique design system for educational materials. We have to do more of that.

And there is the issue of a national role. We have to be careful about presenting the country in terms of what's happening everywhere to Ontarians as part of the learning process.

They are some of the things I'd like to do in the first week. Come back next week and I'll give you another list.

"Today we are back to the issue of free-trade which John A. MacDonald first raised and was spurned by the Americans."

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