



photos: Garth Pritchard

# Strongly pro

## Canada's new Minister of Communications

by Connie Tadros

**Following a federal cabinet shuffle June 30, Flora MacDonald (PC – Kingston and the Islands) was appointed Minister of Communications, becoming the first woman in Canadian politics to hold this portfolio and the second after former Secretary of State Judith LaMarsh to hold responsibility for culture.**

**Formerly minister of Employment & Immigration in the present government and Secretary of State for External Affairs in the Clark government, MacDonald sits on the key cabinet committees of Planning and Priorities, Regional and Economic Development, Foreign Policy and Defence, Public Service and Social Development, as well, as on the Planning and Priorities subcommittee on trade negotiations.**

**Born in North Sydney, Nova Scotia, MacDonald is a graduate of the Empire Business College and has attended the National Defence College. With over a decade of administrative experience with the national Progressive Conservative Party, MacDonald taught in the political science department at Queen's University. A former director of the Canadian Political Science Association and other professional associations, she was first elected to the House in 1972.**

**Listing speed skating among her hobbies, MacDonald is also the star of the National Film Board's 1976 hour-long documentary, directed by Peter Raymont, *Flora: Scenes from a Leadership Convention*, a behind-the-scenes look at her bid for the national leadership of her party.**

**The following interview with *Cinema Canada* editor Connie Tadros took place in the Communications minister's Slater Street offices in Ottawa.**

**Cinema Canada:** *I was fascinated to read that your father was a telegraph operator.*

**Flora MacDonald:** Yes. I was born in Cape Breton and literally lived by the communications world of that day because he worked for the Trans-Atlantic cable. You would have had to live there during that period to understand the importance of the Trans-Atlantic cable, not just to us because it was our income and put food on the table, but, you see, it was the only communications link between Europe and North America.

It seems almost inconceivable today that, at the end of the Second World War, the only way that Roosevelt and Churchill could communicate was via that cable – unless they got on a ship and went to visit one another.

**Cinema Canada:** *Did that mean they communicated via your father as well?*

**Flora MacDonald:** Yes. He was a censor on the Trans-Atlantic Cable during the war. He started with the Western Union at the turn of the century and, almost 50 years later, was working still in the same office which is where the cable is grounded in North America. It comes to earth there and then it is transmitted overland to New York and Washington, Toronto and Montreal. All the messages at that point which were in code – I am talking now about the Second World War – had to be decoded and recoded to be sent on. That was his work, but, we never knew what he did.

I mean, he went off to the office like he had done all his life – to the cable office. I learned about this different dimension after the war.

**Cinema Canada:** *Was he interested in politics?*

**Flora MacDonald:** Oh, he was always fascinated by politics because everybody in Nova Scotia follows politics closely. But he wasn't a partisan in terms of organization or working in

election campaigns or anything like that. He always understood the political issues and followed them. And if any political leaders found their way to Cape Breton, whether it was the leader of the Conservative Party or the old CCF or the Liberal Party, my father would insist that the whole family go to hear that individual because that was the least courtesy we could pay them since they had found their way so far east to Cape Breton.

**Cinema Canada:** *And was this what eventually interested you in politics?*

**Flora MacDonald:** Where I really became interested in it, some years later, was in Britain. I was working and studying and so on and that didn't leave you with much money. I was very interested in theatre and used to spend a lot of time there, but I found before long that the best theatre in town was in the British House of Commons. And I would line up and go in the evenings to hear the debates and that's where I really got bitten because it was superb – the debating skills of some of them! That was a time when Clement Attlee was there and Anthony Eden, Churchill was just fading out but Harold MacMillan was there... They were marvellous.

**Cinema Canada:** *And that's what prompted you to take a job with the Conservative Party here?*

**Flora MacDonald:** Oh no! That was sheer accident. I had come back after wandering around Europe and Canada, working and studying in a number of places, and I decided that I should come to Ottawa and write the Public Service exams for External Affairs. I had my appointment all set and was on my way to write them but I was early. As I happened to pass the headquarters of the Conservative Party, I went in and said jokingly, "There is another Conservative in town," and they offered me a job and I took it. And it changed my whole life!

**Cinema Canada:** *Did you ever get to the exam?*

**Flora MacDonald:** No, I never got to the exam. The next time I got to Exter-

nal Affairs I was the Minister... a 22-year detour.

**Cinema Canada:** *Have you always been a Conservative?*

**Flora MacDonald:** Well, we grew up in what was known as a Conservative family but I think my father voted Liberal as often as he voted Conservative because he voted for the individual that he thought was best.

**Cinema Canada:** *But working for the Party is one thing, and becoming a politician is quite a different thing altogether.*

**Flora MacDonald:** One of the things that working for the party gave me was an opportunity to go into every town and village and community across this country. You get to know what the problems are, what the opportunities are and, in doing that for a number of years, you pretty soon find out what it's really all about in that area and what their concerns vis-à-vis Ottawa or vis-à-vis their provincial capital are, because they are not always happy with what goes on in any bureaucracy.

**Cinema Canada:** *What did you find out in those trips?*

**Flora MacDonald:** Well, what it emphasized for me is the tremendous diversity of Canada. Anybody who sits in Ottawa and thinks you can pass a piece of legislation that somehow is going to be monolithic – that applies in the same way in all towns and cities – that's just not Canada. It reinforced what I already knew about the country: that its richness comes from its diversity. You see, we are one of the few countries that encourages that diversity to develop.

**Cinema Canada:** *Why did you decide to go into politics, as a politician?*

**Flora MacDonald:** Oh, if I told you... I had been here (in Ottawa) working for about 10 years and then I left and went to work at Queens' University...

**Cinema Canada:** *The famous "She was fired by Diefenbaker" episode?*

**Flora MacDonald:** That's right. The city couldn't contain the two of us.

**Cinema Canada:** *Did he really fire you?*

**Flora MacDonald:** Well, he did it through a newly-appointed national director of the Party, that was his first job. He was hired and told to get rid of me. Whether or not I was as loyal as I should have been or whether or not I had too much influence in the Party organization, I don't know...

Anyway, I went to work in Kingston with John Meisel (political science professor and former CRTC chairman). I was teaching students about the political parties, working with them, doing administration and a lot of other things because I was always involved with other organizations. Then in 1971, I was invited, if I can put it that way, to be the first woman on the year-long course in international politics relations that was given by the Department of National Defence. They had a very select course for about 35 people and it had always been attended by men, mostly the military. They wanted to know whether or not a woman could really stand up and cope with it. So I was asked if I would be the initial guinea hen; and it was a

great year, not without its difficulties at the outset in overcoming the mythologies and hurdles, but it was a great year. We visited some 25 countries and met with business leaders, political leaders and labour leaders in all of these countries. During that course I happened to be in Hong Kong and I got a cable from friends in Kingston – this was the spring of 1972 – saying the Conservative Nominating Convention for the candidate was going to take place here in three week's time, would I let my name stand?

I was alone in Hong Kong, at least as far as Kingston interests were concerned, and had to make the most momentous decision of my life. I always do that best if I'm out walking, so I walked the streets of Hong Kong all night and in the morning, as people were taking the shutters off the little shops, I passed a shop which had an absolutely beautiful full-length green silk dress in it. And I said to myself: that's the dress that I'm going to wear when I'm sworn into Parliament. I went in and bought it and sent them a cable saying, "Yes, I'll stand." And that's how I made up my mind. I thought, that's the next step.

**Cinema Canada:** *It really was a momentous step. Was the campaign difficult?*

**Flora MacDonald:** Well, I ran against a man who was a long-time Kingston resident, president of the Chamber of Commerce, a well-known lawyer and everybody just thought it was going to be a shoe in for him; but I beat him. He's been my closest friend ever since. He's been my marvellous help. But it came as a surprise to everyone except me and a little group who was working with me in the organization.

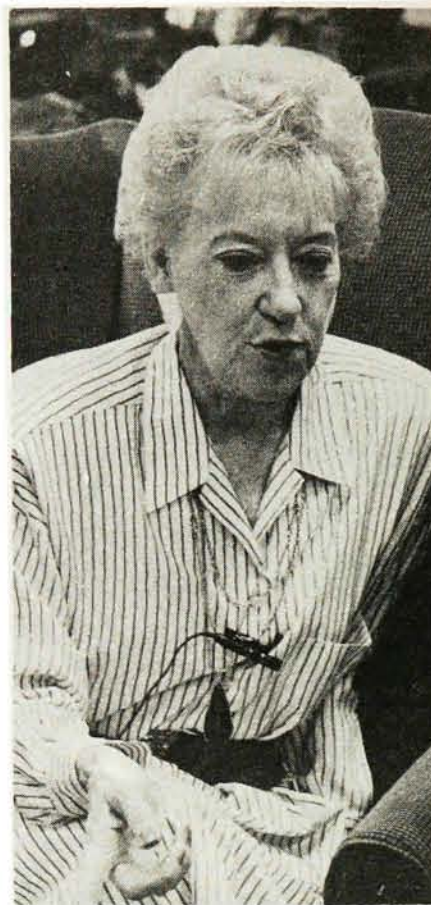
**Cinema Canada:** *Because you felt you had what it took to win?*

**Flora MacDonald:** I felt we had made sure that the people who were going to be there really wanted to have me as a candidate. I wasn't going to go into something where there would be no one who felt that I was worthwhile. But they did and voted for me in a nominating convention. And then they got out. The sitting member at that time was Ben Benson, the Minister of Finance, so it wasn't the easiest riding to take on.

**Cinema Canada:** *How much difference does it make to be a woman in the political process? People call you "Flora", the public "loves" you. This is a familiarity not used in talking about other politicians.*

**Flora MacDonald:** Then it was a negative! Well, I think in some ways... that was the way it started, even in 1972. I gave the advertising of my campaign over to a group of young people. They'd never really been involved before and they designed all of the advertising; it was a real fun campaign. Do you remember that early period of the flower children and so on? My campaign buttons were all daisies with "Flora Power" on them. And the whole thing was a kind of a happy campaign and it just took off.

But, at that point, it wasn't an asset to be a woman. People were still getting over the fact that a woman would run. Now, yes, I think it's a tremendous advantage.



**Cinema Canada:** *I was thinking of the leadership campaign. I don't imagine it was really an asset then either...*

**Flora MacDonald:** No. It wasn't. But it has changed in the last 10 years, I think.

**Cinema Canada:** *Do you find as you take on your various jobs in government that the role of women or their fair share becomes a preoccupation of yours?*

**Flora MacDonald:** Oh, sure. I went into the Department of Employment and Immigration and introduced legislation that I am sure is going to have a tremendously profound impact on the structure of the labour force in this country.

The Employment Equity Legislation is not like anything that's been done in the past so people didn't really know how to cope with it. Now, it's going to insure that the public is aware of how businesses and Crown corporations act, as to whether or not they are giving equal opportunity to women, to disabled persons, and the information is going to be in the public domain where it ought to be. You see, it's only public knowledge and public pressure that moves these things forward, not restrictive legislation. It's making sure that people know what the situation is and to challenge them as to whether or not they want it improved...

**Cinema Canada:** *Let's talk a bit about your new job. It encompasses telecommunications, broadcasting, cultural industries...*

**Flora MacDonald:** Those are the three major areas.

**Cinema Canada:** *What are your interests? What are your priorities?*

**Flora MacDonald:** The cultural ac-

tivities, and to some extent, broadcasting are things that I have been fairly familiar with, I don't mean all the details by any means, but things I have been involved with one way or another. I've always had this great interest in theatre, in drama; whether it was in Britain or in France or wherever, I always search out theatre.

I was working and studying in Britain in the mid-'50s which was just at the time when the great classical theatres were opening and were really coming back into their own after the war, and Stratford was just like a magnet. As I was studying, I had to work during the summer and I worked on farms across Britain. One of the places where we, a woman from Montreal and myself, worked was in the Vale of Evesham which is about 10 miles away from Stratford. We would go out working on the land all day, come into Stratford at 5:30, run into the Y and get a shower, go over and get tickets to stand behind the circle and then walk home 10 miles to the farm camp after the production to start again the next day. So you had to have some interest in it...

**Cinema Canada:** *But is that to say that because the cultural area is more familiar to you, telecommunications is the area which needs your attention now?*

**Flora MacDonald:** Well, again, I just mention that because wherever I go, I'm interested in culture. I was in India working at one point and sought out the great Kali dancers who do the epic poems of Indian dance and that sort of thing...

But in telecommunications, I have been brought up in what it could achieve... Just three years ago, I took my holidays – I always try and do something different on holidays – and that year I persuaded the people at Bell Northern Telecom, the big research labs, to take me in for several weeks as a techno-peasant and tell me where the world of the future actually lies. And it was amazing! It was an effort on my own, it had nothing to do with Parliament; I wasn't the critic in that field, it was just a personal interest. So I spent three weeks immersed in this and it was really a tremendous learning experience because I could see the silica sand built into chips, put into circuits, circuit boards and then carried across through fiber-optics and utilization. So I know now when I go into places, at least I know the buzz words.

**Cinema Canada:** *When you go through a cabinet shuffle, does anyone ask you which job you want? What is the process?*

**Flora MacDonald:** Oh no. The Prime Minister has to put it all together, this is the responsibility of any Prime Minister anywhere. He or she has to look at the material that is available and the jobs that need to be done and try to match them up.

**Cinema Canada:** *Did the Prime Minister tell you why he thought you were the person for this job at this time?*

**Flora MacDonald:** Well, in the sense that he said, "Flora, you've always been able to communicate," but really, no, it's not done that way. It's just, "Here's a challenge, I want you to take it on..." I was delighted.

# INTERVIEW

**Cinema Canada:** *You and Mr. Masse are certainly two very different kinds of people.*

**Flora MacDonald:** I think that our basic interests are the same but the way that we operate might be very different.

**Cinema Canada:** *In Manpower and Immigration you did a lot of house-keeping and left it in a state where patronage would become quite difficult.*

**Flora MacDonald:** You'd just better believe it! That was a cesspool of a department. Someone had to go in and make it into something worthwhile and I changed it into a major training department.

The problem with unemployment in the country is that many people don't have any usable skills and you've got to find ways to give it to them. One of the things that I was able to do was to say to the department: do you realize that one of the great growth sectors is in the cultural industries? Just last year in Employment and Immigration, we spent \$30 million for the first time in cultural-related projects – in theatre, in dance, and that had never happened before. These are people being trained, not just in the activities themselves but in work which would provide them with experience as box office managers, production people, stage set-designers, etc. That \$30 million worth of projects is a fair amount.

**Cinema Canada:** *I bring up the question because Masse, after an initial time of budget cutting and things like that, reacted very spontaneously with his various task forces and commissions. You are going to inherit a lot of studies and opinions, but getting things done is now going to be your job.*

**Flora MacDonald:** The two departments were in entirely different stages of development. I've come here just when there are a lot of decisions to be made and I look forward to that. I really do. I think that I have to be sure to apportion my time properly because I want to make sure that, whether cultural industries, broadcasting, or telecommunications, I don't short-change one in becoming so enthusiastic about another aspect that it takes all my time.

In moving the Department of Employment into more of a training mode, I came to the basic question of education and of ongoing education, and lifelong learning. Telecommunications is, if anything, a greater extension of that. We haven't really come to grips in this country with how we can use our telecommunications for the benefit of not just Canadians but other countries in the world – the Third World – in a learning experience. What can they teach us, and what can we teach them via telecommunications, via satellite? We are just scratching the surface of what can be taught, what can be conveyed by satellite – to sit in on seminars that are taking place in Lusaka and see the reactions and the way people act and the kinds of questions they have would be a great experience for me. And the other way around.

So, since we are world leaders in the field of the hardware, we could go on to be world leaders in the field of software.

**Cinema Canada:** *We've always done well in the hardware, in the technol-*



*ical breakthroughs, but when it's a question of putting in the software, of getting at the things which are more soundly cultural, it's more difficult.*

**Flora MacDonald:** Yes, but the technology offers chances that we've never had before. One of the problems that Canada has, and this is particularly true, or more true of English-speaking Canada than French-speaking Canada, is that our history books have been very dull. They haven't excited students to what this country is really all about. Much of the teaching in schools now is going to be through videos, computers, a different kind of teaching than when I was there teaching. For much of it we would use the new technology, the new hardware. Now if you are teaching mathematics, you can use a video that's prepared in New York or Stanford, but if you are teaching Canadian History, we'd better be prepared to do it ourselves and this time we can write in the social history of Canada which has been ignored when the early textbooks were written.

**Cinema Canada:** *There are a couple of things that I'd like to ask, but I know that you are pressed for time... One of the things that I imagine must be of concern to you is regional production because you are a Cape Bretonner. You have inherited very ambivalent and very ambiguous kinds of situations, like the need to have a strong industry and yet the will to produce regionally. It's difficult to reconcile these two things. Have you any ideas of what might constitute a fair, equal kind of distribution of resources?*

**Flora MacDonald:** Not in actual dollars and cents. Nor in any formula, but there is no question that I come from a background of belief that the individual regions of this country are what is so important to the whole... The great ideas will come from across the country.

**Cinema Canada:** *You said in a speech the other evening that your ultimate goal was the creation of a Canadian film culture, but there was real need to have a strong, industrial underpinning. This kind of thing is very difficult because a strong industrial network links into the American network, which would make it tougher to have a distinctive Canadian culture.*

**Flora MacDonald:** A number of people were there the other night from Nova Scotia, from Vancouver, and they came up and said to me, "Now, you've been to Toronto and you've been to Montreal. Does that mean that these are the boundaries of what you are thinking about?" And in no way. No, I've been too involved with Canada, from coast to coast, to think that it begins and ends in any one place.

Montreal and Toronto are very, very critical – it would be anything but common sense to say otherwise – and the industrial base in a sense is going to be founded there. But it's like so much that we have done in the past. You've got to draw on everything else.

**Cinema Canada:** *Industry people often conceive of their needs in protectionist terms. We need Telefilm Canada and we need the NFB; then we need broadcast production policies and feature films policies, without which we would just be absorbed so*

quickly. You were very active yourself in these questions when you were with the Committee for an Independent Canada.

**Flora MacDonald:** Indeed I was.

**Cinema Canada.** And yet here you are with Free Trade on your doorstep...

**Flora MacDonald:** Yes, but you see one of the things that I said then and I say now is that you don't build your place in the world by just being anti-something. You build it by being strongly pro-something. I've always been strongly pro-Canadian. I think that we can do things here and sometimes we sell ourselves short. We don't think we can compete with the best. Well, telecommunications has shown that we can compete with the best. The films that are being produced right now show that we can compete with the best, and I think we are gaining a greater self-assurance as Canadians and where our place is in the world. Certainly different regions of the country and different sectors of the industry need help and that's the same with anything that's developing. But I don't see it in protectionist terms. We are going to get A to C; at point B you are going to be helped to stand up but from then on to C you can run on your own. And I think that's what we can do very well.

**Cinema Canada:** Time and again, and I think of John Roberts as the first blatant example, the ministers have had an idea of what needed to be done but found it impossible to get the idea past

Cabinet because what the minister needed was running opposite to the various needs of Cabinet. You are popularly perceived as probably having more clout in Cabinet than several of your predecessors. Do you think that's fair and if so, are you going to use it?

**Flora MacDonald:** I have worked now very closely with two Prime Ministers recently, the present prime minister and Joe Clark. I can think of no stronger Canadians, no more dedicated Canadians in the sense that they are really the expression, the essence, of Canada. Yes, they have come from small communities, yes, they have gone on to larger communities, to study and work, and bring their ideas and their drive to it. They are essentially or quintessentially Canadian. They don't need any major pressure from me to want to express that. I'm there to assist them, or to work with them and they with me. I don't see it as being all that difficult because I know them so well...

**Cinema Canada:** But in some areas they might want to favour private sector initiatives for various economic reasons.

**Flora MacDonald:** Oh, no, no, wait a moment. This country never is, never has been and never will be a country operating in one sector to the exclusion of the other. My great predecessor in Kingston started this all off with the mix of developing the country through the private and public sectors, and there will always surely be that mix.

You know that government has to be involved. You simply know that in a country as vast and as different as Canada. And you couldn't do without, you couldn't leave communications or transportation solely up to the private sector. It just wouldn't work. So we know that there will always be a mix of the public sector and the private sector. The difficulty will always be to find the right level, the right mix. And it's the same whether it's in broadcasting, or the cultural activities.

One of the challenges will be to see whether or not we can stimulate more private sector participation. That does not mean that the government would back out of the necessary things that it has to do. Nothing would work if that were the way.

**Cinema Canada:** The Caplan-Sauvageau Task Force Report. When are we going to see it?

**Flora MacDonald:** You and me both! I haven't seen it.

**Cinema Canada:** Where is it?

**Flora MacDonald:** I think it's in process of being translated.

**Cinema Canada:** You don't get a copy before it's translated?

**Flora MacDonald:** No, and they are not ready to present it to me. That's fine. I'm going off on two weeks, holiday and I do not intend to take it with me. I'm going bicycling in France and it would be too heavy to carry along on my bike... So I expect when I get back...

**Cinema Canada:** The gossipers said that one of the things about Caplan-Sauvageau is that Masse picked exactly the people who would give him the answers he was looking for and that he would find it very easy to cope with. Perhaps your reception of this interminable report will be different.

**Flora MacDonald:** It's a huge job when you think of how long it is since we've had a real analysis of broadcasting.

**Cinema Canada:** Have you any thoughts on how you would see broadcasting independently of what Caplan-Sauvageau is going to say?

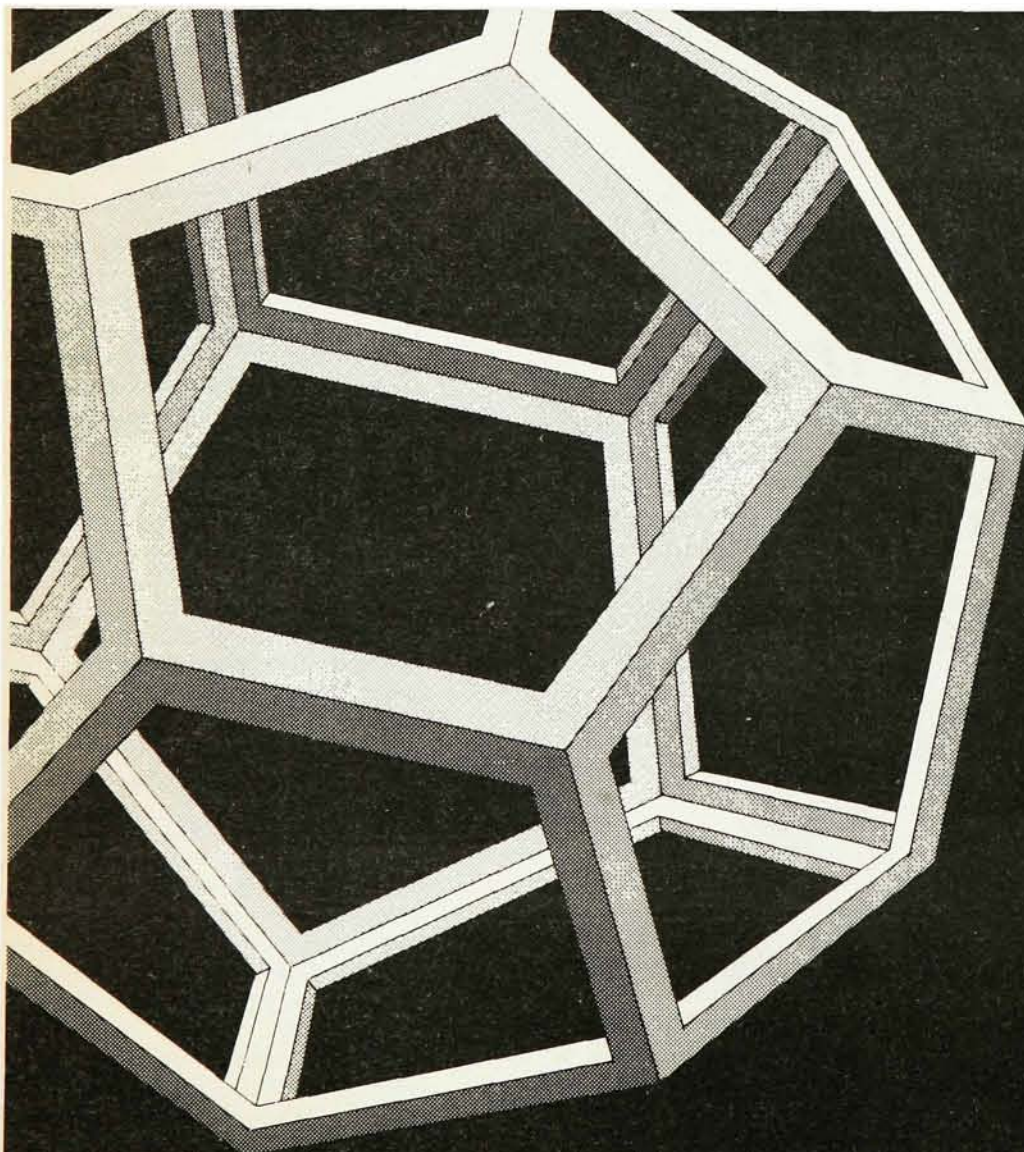
**Flora MacDonald:** I'm still in the process of discussion with all the heads of the agencies and I don't want to select one out on its own. I get up and go to bed with CBC Radio and it's very good. Unfortunately I get more opportunity to be with radio than television simply because of the nature of the demands.

**Cinema Canada:** Will major initiatives be taken after Caplan-Sauvageau?

**Flora MacDonald:** In the whole field of broadcasting, obviously. We are still operating on a Broadcasting Act that is rooted in 30 years ago...

**Cinema Canada:** Have you any time frame for when you'd like to see those reports or legislation articulated?

**Flora MacDonald:** You know we are halfway through our mandate. I'd like to see it through and into a new Broadcasting Act before this Parliamentary Session ends.



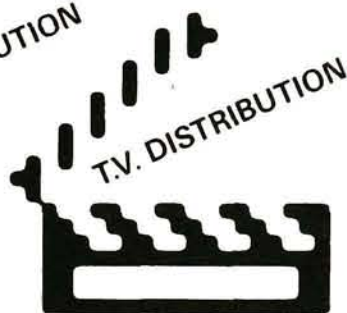
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