

# OPINION

## The Day the Parliamentary Committee Asked the CFDC

### Where the Feature Film Industry Was?

Before spring fever hit the 29th parliament and the election was called amid a storm of daisy petals — the Canadian Film Development Corporation appeared before the parliamentary committee to justify its work. It didn't succeed very well before that committee and by inference neither did the Secretary of State nor his film division.

The official title of this group is the Standing Committee on Broadcasting, Films, and Assistance to the Arts. There are 18 standing committees attached to the House of Commons. They are made up of about 20 M.P.'s each and their names suggest the subject matter that concerns them (such as Agriculture, Public Accounts, Regional Development, External Affairs and National Defence, etc.).

The members of the committees are selected by a "Striking Committee" of the House and each party is represented according to its strength in the House. After receiving second reading bills are usually referred to Committee to undergo detailed study and possible amendment. The Standing Committees are investigative and legislative in nature and may send for any persons or records they think necessary. They are the official eyes and ears of the House of Commons. They have some financial power as when the CBC budget was reduced by \$100,000 a year ago by this same committee.

The Broadcasting, Films, and Arts committee is responsible for the Secretary of State's department. It oversees the cultural organizations like the National Film Board, the CBC, the CFDC, the Canada Council, the Museums, National Gallery, and such, as well as the CRTC and Information Canada. It may amuse some people to know Pierre Juneau must sit before a group of inquisitors for several days and justify everything he does. He usually does very well, but never has an easy time.

Since the present Secretary of State succeeded Gerard Pelletier the cultural rhetoric has escalated while the action has noticeably diminished.

The reasons for this disastrous situation can only be surmised — maybe Faulkner was told to cool things down because S.O.S. had too high a profile under Pelletier; or maybe Faulkner doesn't carry much weight in the Cabinet; or maybe his staff is weighted towards patronage rather than decisiveness; or maybe nothing can be done after all and government by inertia is inevitable.

I am not cynical enough to accept the last proposition and not knowledgeable enough to weed out the others. Like others who have been watching the feature film industry dry up around me, I have been sitting in an expanding seabed of frustration. The Council of Canadian Filmmakers was organized to deal with frustration and has lobbied the Secretary of State with absolutely no visible result.

Then the Council discovered the Standing Committee on Films, Broadcasting, and the Arts. It seemed that the only way to put pressure on an unresponsive government was through the House of Commons — theoretically the highest body in the land (queens and such excepted).

The one major problem with these committees is their appalling lack of research. They remain a committee of gentlemen discussing often arcane and incomprehensible problems in terms of their constituents. The minutes of committee hearings are available through Information Canada and usually make superficial reading.

The hearing for the National Film Board is a case in point. The NFB showed up on April 23rd to discuss Vote 70 and Vote L75 which would grant \$17,676,700 for this year's operations. Sydney Newman gave a short speech pointing out all the good things the NFB did and the M.P.'s each got a press kit prepared by the NFB with more glowing information. (The NFB Union was not present.)

The Committee sits in a nondescript room at a rectangular table covered in green pool hall felt. There is instantaneous translation for those at the table and a woman sits high up in a corner identifying the

speakers for the benefit of the tape recorded minutes. She often seems like a tennis judge and occasionally disrupts play. Chairs are lined up around the walls for the public and civil servants (from S.O.S. or Treasury) who make a living watching these hearings.

Sometimes the press comes. A Canadian Press photographer took photos during the NFB hearing and commented that the only time newspapers ask for photos are when they aren't taken. One gets the impression of a courtly charade undertaken more for appearances than anything else.

After an hour of lackadaisical questioning the Film Commissioner left. The Film Board obviously thought the hearing went well because they bought out Information Canada's supply of the minutes and have sent complimentary copies out.

Two days later Michael Spencer and Gratien Gelinus walked into the same room and sat at the same green felt and contrary to tradition the backbenchers barked. The Committee had asked the CCFM to attend the hearing because some M.P.'s felt they did not have enough information on the CFDC.

Thus Peter Pearson began the hearing with an opening statement that was short and to the point. He simply said that six years of experience with the present CFDC-distribution-exhibition system had proved it doesn't work for Canadian filmmakers and the CFDC can't work successfully within this foreign-dominated system. If we don't change the system completely the CFDC will never succeed without tax loopholes.

CFDC chairman Gratien Gelinus followed this description of desolation with a glowing report on the successful financial return this year from their investments (about \$800,000.) and the film festivals which CFDC backed films attended. He did not mention any problems nor did he point out the drastic drop in production. It was a fantastic report.

The members of the Committee then questioned Pearson on the one hand and Gelinus/Spencer on the other trying to fathom the contradictory views presented. Graffety and Arrol began the questioning for the Conservatives followed by NDPer Mark Rose and Liberal Rod Blaker. A sense of anger developed — Where are the 20 films the CFDC says will be made this year? (answer — We hope

## Kirwan Cox

to fund 20.); Why can't filmmakers like Jutra fund their films? (answer — That is a special problem); What is being done about the Winnipeg Manifesto? (answer — It is a matter of government policy, we are operating through the existing system as well as we can.); Why are you pleased that only 6 per cent of Canadians are seeing Canadian films? What have you done about distribution? Why is the head of a foreign theatre chain on the Film Advisory Committee? Why are their meetings secret? Why the poor return to filmmakers from the Boxoffice? Where is a quota? (answer .../our mandate should be changed/ that is government policy/ we need more money to get into distribution/ only television sales are reliable but we are looking into four wall deals).

Time and again the questions dealt with government policy and only the absent Secretary of State had the answers. Finally Liberal M.P. Blaker said he was tired of being presented glowing reports from crown corporations — in this case a laundry list of films. In the end the Committee decided it wanted more information and also wanted a joint report from both the CFDC and the CCFM on the best solutions to these problems.

There was no quorum at that hearing and these suggestions didn't carry the weight of law, yet they were surprisingly strong. The backbenchers had bitten. The Secretary of State was due before them on May 20th and would have to answer the questions on government policy.

Then came the night of the daisies — an election. The Committee won't meet again until after the election and will not necessarily have the same members. Yet, the mechanism has been found to challenge the unspeakable "government policy". The election forced a hiatus, but not an end to the questions.

Perhaps most significantly during the CFDC April 25th hearing — no M.P. asked why the Canadian government was helping develop a feature film industry or suggested it was a waste of taxpayers' money. The CFDC was told to deal with the filmmakers and solve the problems of the "system". The members of the Committee from all the parties seem to believe strongly in the necessity of Canadian cultural sovereignty no matter how difficult it is to achieve. They want Canadian films in our theatres too.

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