

"Mutual defense pact" needed for public broadcasting

TORONTO — TVOntario chairman Bernard Ostry is calling on the free world's public broadcasters to create "a mutual defence pact" to protect the future of non-commercial broadcasting.

At the urging of Ostry, public broadcasters from North America, Europe, Asia and the Caribbean have decided to hold a planning meeting in Toronto in June.

The meeting has been called to set up strategies for cooperation between public broadcasters, he said.

Ostry, in a March speech to the Canadian Club of Hamilton, cited concern for the future of public broadcasting throughout the free world.

He discussed cutbacks faced by the CBC, the BBC, and PBS in the United States, problems of audience fragmentation caused by new technology and pressure for more commercialism in public broadcasting.

"Once overthrown, the principle of public broadcasting will be hard to restore," Ostry cautioned in written remarks.

"The notion, central to TVOntario, that there can be programs designed for viewers and learners, that there can be broadcasting without commercial distortions, programs without sales pitches and propaganda, will be lost."

In Scotland last year Ostry first proposed the idea of a meeting of public broadcasters. He said public broadcasters around the world are on the defensive.

Each public broadcaster, he said, "tries to preserve the means by which it can serve the public good, while making compromises in the face of competition from the private sector and hostility from governments impelled by ideology."

Acting together, however, public broadcasters can develop "a mutual defence pact" with basic principles and goals to remind viewers and governments of the importance of non-commercial broadcasting, he explained.

Public broadcasting traditionally has played an essential part in the Canadian communications system, he said, adding it must remain so.

"Public broadcasting is a public good — like education, like our highways, like proper medical care. It is up to the public to ensure that it isn't allowed to wither — or in the worst case, be taken away from them," Ostry said.

In Canada, the CBC is in

danger of deterioration and possible collapse and is unable to carry out its mandate, he added.

Despite recent calls from the federal broadcast regulator for more money to support the

CBC, the federal government cut an additional \$55 million from its budget, Ostry explained.

"The result: 320 lost jobs, fewer Canadian programs, more repeats and more U.S.

programs in prime time. Even the private broadcasters are calling for a halt to the cuts."

He said TVOntario is an exception to the downward trend facing public broadcasters in the free world.

Ostry added that TVO, a provincial educational broadcaster, can take a leading role in solving the international crisis facing public broadcasting.

A second meeting is planned for 1988.

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