

Open Letter to Flora MacDonald

Madame Minister,

The disturbing events that have recently beset Telefilm Canada prompt us, Quebec film directors, to send you the following reform proposals that we consider absolutely essential to the proper functioning of this government body.

Before continuing, however, we should point out that over two years ago we foresaw the present crisis. At that time, we tried to warn your predecessor, Mr. Marcel Masse, of the bad management reigning at Telefilm even then.

While imposing a sudden change of direction, and without developing any long-term vision, Mr. Pearson (supported, most certainly, by the Board of Directors), chose to disregard his organization's wealth of experience and highly competent staff, whose expertise in the field of film and television was offered to him.

Mr. Pearson, in fact, dismantled the existing (though insufficient) mechanisms of consultation with the broader community, leaving the way open to improvisation and to what can be interpreted as political interference.

We have witnessed the haste with which Telefilm's staff, hampered by this total lack of vision, hurried to leave the organization: it was obvious to them that anarchy had gained the upper hand over sound management.

It is within this context that supplementary funds – funds absolutely necessary to the well-being of our art and industry – were handed out without planning or concern for balance and fairness. The result has been this year's financial morass, both the surplus and the deficit.

We directors, together with our creators, represent the raw material of those industries termed 'cultural', and the lack of vision at Telefilm has affected us dramatically. Our passionate commitment to our profession (which often costs us more than it brings) affords us special insight into developments in the field, insight not shared by those whose minds are clouded by big business and

the vicissitudes of the stock market. Our primary concern remains *culture*, and above all, *Canadian culture*.

As creators, we are delighted by the recent successes of our English-speaking colleagues. They provide eloquent proof that not money but creativity determines a production's quality.

Moreover, all the great successes of Canadian cinema, whether in terms of box office or critical acclaim, have been personal, "author" films made with relatively modest budgets. All the great flops that are now costing us our livelihood were mega-productions, the scale of which was in keeping with their producers' financial appetite.

Our colleague, Denys Arcand, earned less money than the composer of his film's score, a lot less. Yet abroad, it is thanks to him, to Patricia Rozema, Atom Egoyan, Yves Simoneau, Jean-Claude Lauzon – and before them Claude Jutra, Norman McLaren and Frederick Back – that *Canada* achieved its reputation as a nation of cinema. However, in its recent policies, Telefilm Canada has discovered how to finance American productions in Toronto, and to throw money out the windows on expensive television series made in Montreal. Needless to say, we have the necessary information to substantiate these claims of abuse.

In the light of all this it is has become urgent that we, the creators of Canadian cinema and television, submit to you the following broad reforms for Telefilm in the hope of saving our national cinema.

I- Composition of the Board of Directors

The current Board of Directors is made up of seven members, the majority of whom were chosen from the field of business. It has now been proven that this is no guarantee of financial or cultural success!

What's more, the doubts and rumours surrounding the current Board indicate that it no longer inspires the film community's confidence.

We therefore propose that the Board of Directors be restructured and enlarged to include:

- a) representatives from the five Canadian regions;
- b) creators, who should compose at least half the Board;
- c) business professionals working in cultural activities.

All these people should be chosen for the range of their intellect, their commitment to the Canadian cultural community, and the interest they have demonstrated in the long-term development of a national cinema.

II- Profile of the Executive Director:

It would be inappropriate to retain as head, even in an interim capacity, a person who served as the former executive director's right hand, or any members of the executive chosen by him, after the

catastrophic results of this team's work. Thus, we recommend that a new director should be recruited as soon as possible.

We believe that this person should meet the following criteria:

- a) possess a *vision* of what a National cinema should be;
- b) have demonstrated, in a similar capacity, their stature in Canadian cultural life;
- c) have practical knowledge of international cinema structures.
- d) In addition, considering that, in its 20 years of existence, Telefilm has had only one French-speaking director, we suggest that special priority be placed on naming such a director.
- e) As well, in view of the extent of her or his responsibilities, we suggest that a managing director be appointed to assist the executive director.

III- Review procedures:

We believe that Telefilm's objectives, both financial and cultural, should be the object of improved *long-term planning*.

We submit that this planning should be supported by procedures for an annual *review* of how well these goals have been met and of the efficiency of personnel. The consequences of keeping in their jobs incompetent or negligent employees are disastrous to the entire profession. Still, this does not mean we would like to increase the turnover of Telefilm's staff. On the contrary, we hope to see a stabilization in staff, so that the same files are not constantly being studied anew.

While it is indispensable that representatives from the field be active in Telefilm's management, we believe that it must become common practice at Telefilm to admit potential conflict of interest.

It is of course inevitable that professional and personal ties will exist between Telefilm employees chosen from the community and that community. But it is unacceptable that files on a certain production company may be circulated to individuals who were formerly closely linked to it, and that they may be asked to pass judgement on its projects. Similarly, it is unethical that people leaving Telefilm not be subject to a six-month moratorium before joining any production company: they possess, do they not, privileged information about their competitors. A code of ethics must govern all such situations if abuses of power are to be prevented.

IV- Choice of projects

A- TELEVISION

Television's voracious appetite is well known. Hence, before substantial sums are devoured by productions intended for this medium, we are asking:

- a) that cultural criteria be established limiting aid to only those televi-

sion productions that are high-quality and innovative, both in terms of content and form, in order that these productions serve to raise the overall standard of Canadian television;

- b) that the types of shows often and easily produced by broadcasters not be eligible for assistance from Telefilm. This covers game shows, soap operas, talk shows, the run-of-the-mill sort of variety shows, concerts, etc.

B- CINEMA

- a) that we stop deceiving ourselves about the viability of exporting television products other than feature films – the only products that successfully cross broadcasting boundaries;

- b) that it be mandatory for all film productions to be made available immediately in versions in both official languages;

- c) that feature films receive simultaneous nationwide distribution, with special programs for distribution, including requirements for minimum theatrical bookings of three weeks;

C- ACCESS TO TELEFILM

- a) that Telefilm programs be reopened to directors and scriptwriters, and that the monopoly of rights and powers over the works of authors that Telefilm now grants to producers be reconsidered;

- b) that the eligibility criteria in Telefilm programs for producers and the evaluation of their suitability be at least as strict as those applied to directors;

- c) that Telefilm recognize the rights of a film's authors, and require that producers benefitting from its aid give these creators a share of the profits arising from their works.

Finally, we believe it essential that a public inquiry be held into the recent financial events: it is in everyone's interest that the fortunate few who obtained "verbal promises" from a government agency be made public. Needless to say, we were not among them. Are there minutes regarding these verbal agreements? Were witnesses called in? This is the first time that we have learned of such occurrences at Telefilm Canada.

Of course, all the above proposals are based on arguments which would take too long to expound here. However, we are at your disposal to discuss these matters with you at your convenience.

Madame Minister, it is with renewed hope that we submit these proposals to you. We remain convinced you share our conviction that film and television are the paramount cultural instruments of any nation, both at home and abroad.

Yours sincerely,

Iolande Cadrin-Rossignol,
Chairperson
Association des réalisateurs et
réalisatrices de film du Québec

(Translation: Robert Gray)