

Report from never-never land

At first glance, many aspects of the Applebaum-Hébert report are exceedingly seductive.

It acknowledges the conflict between commercial gain and cultural objectives, challenging the government to free the CBC from the compromises which advertising inevitably create. It judges both the CBC and the NFB and finds them lacking, wasteful and unjustifiable in terms of current production. 'Shut down their production units,' it cries, and allow the private sector to produce those innovative, alternative programs that Canadians are longing for. 'Don't worry about the hardware or the bankruptcies which might follow the application of a vigorous cultural policy,' only culture can save the nation. License more local broadcasters to stimulate local Canadian production. Use the CBC to distribute NFB films; that exhibition system, the television, is in place!

As for theatrical films, let's strengthen the CFDC and clearly state that its mandate is primarily cultural. Let's give financial incentives to the Canadian-controlled distributor to allow him to compete. Use Film Canada to promote, sell and exhibit all films. Bring the Film Festivals Bureau under the CFDC to facilitate co-ordination. Reduce the Board to a film school.

Somewhere along the line, during the three years and the \$3 million which the committee spent, it wandered off into never-never land, outlining how things might be in the best of all possible worlds, but certainly not how they could become in Canada.

No one any longer disputes the primary role television already plays in film distribution/exhibition; video-discs and cassettes will further debilitate the theatrical market for films. In that, and in its analysis of the current situation and its problems, the Applebaum-Hébert committee agrees with the department of Communications. So far, so good. But between the analysis and the solutions proposed there would seem to be a gap which only the naïveté of the committee can bridge.

If one wishes to free the CBC from the compromises advertising introduces into programming, then how will turning production out into the private sector resolve that problem? Certainly private producers are more at the mercy of commercial market forces than the CBC ever was. A private producer cannot expect the new CBC to cover 100% of his production budget and must inevitably consider other markets - American network/cable/pay, foreign television, foreign theatrical or non-theatrical markets - and in these markets, he will be competing against productions conceived with commercial goals. How will the purity of intention (getting advertising out of the CBC) dovetail with the implementation (shutting down CBC production)?

Whether or not the private sector, in its present state, could absorb the personnel of the NFB/CBC, were production shut down, is another matter altogether. The assumption is that staff people will walk out, set up new companies and continue doing business as usual. The reality is that few staff people are prepared - have the skills - to survive in the private sector or they would already be there. And few private sector people can conceive of introducing an over-paid bureaucrat into the tightly run production companies which are surviving and asking him to perform within constraints unlike any he has ever seen.

Then comes the tedious question of whether the Canadian public is lusting after Canadian programming, and if so, in what proportions and with what sort of slant? The idea of licensing greater numbers of local broadcasters to produce local Canadian programs echoes the reasoning of the CRTV pay-TV decision: by licensing many, the quantity of programming and choice should augment. In fact, as the industry said in response to that decision, a proliferation of licensees only fragments an already fragile market, reducing the chances for quality programming and upping the odds that the public will not approve of what it is offered.

Obviously, the Committee leaves itself wide open for criticism each time it reiterates that the economic repercussions of its proposals is of no concern; that its mandate was exclusively cultural. Coming up with pie-in-the-sky formulas for a brave new world instead of workable alternatives is child's play. It takes more maturity, more knowledge and, finally, more imagination to conceive of how to convert the present system and make it useful than it does to chuck it all out and start again.

Nowhere in the study does the Committee offer the statistics, explain the measures, or conceive of possible implementation that would allow the reader to follow the reasoning. The jump from stated problem to proposed solution is a jump of faith, unfettered by research. One need only compare the Fournier Committee report on the Quebec film industry to understand that committees can imagine solutions and write proposals which become irresistible because of the hard logic which accompanies them.

As for the film chapter, it is weak indeed. The Committee writes as if it never heard that the NFB operates in the regions. It writes with no understanding of the reputation this country has abroad, and no consideration of the role either of the NFB or the Film Festivals Bureau in creating and sustaining that reputation. It suggests the use of Film Canada when no such organization really exists and the private sector has been vociferous and

unanimous in suggesting the idea be buried. It wants the CFDC, which is essentially a banker, to represent films in festival participation. Would foreigners not perceive an important conflict of interest? Furthermore, 75% of festival work has to do with short films, about which the CFDC is totally ignorant.

As for distribution, it's all good and well to suggest giving financial incentives to Canadian-owned companies to allow them to compete, but since when did a free-market situation exist in Canada concerning distribution? The report is especially weak in this area, but then the Canadian distributors failed to make representations to the committee so share part of the responsibility. Finally, which companies will have survived the time it will take any new proposals to work themselves through the system?

Sensing that the Applebaum-Hébert Committee would suggest drastic, even mischievous, changes to the CBC, the Minister of Communications Francis Fox, in a parallel effort, was preparing a National Broadcast Strategy. It, like the Applebaum-Hébert report, was leaked to the press long before its writers were prepared to defend it. No radical surgery would be done, it said, on the CBC.

The juxtaposition of the two reports outlines the limits of the debate which will surely follow. Should the CBC be strengthened or cut back? Should the CRTV be brought under political control or further distanced from the political process? Must we insist on the primacy of the cable distribution system in Canada, or adopt a more liberal view of the new technologies? How should private production be financed? Directly from consolidated revenues, or through a tax on cable subscribers? Neither report suggests any exciting innovation concerning exports and marketing, unless the extension of co-production treaties - which already work to the disadvantage of the film producer - is considered a step ahead.

Probably the benefits of the Applebaum-Hébert Report will flow from the amount of attention which is now focused on the problems. Somewhere between its recommendations and the Fox strategy lies a middle road in which the status quo can be set aside and a new way found to bolster the private sector without gutting the public agencies which have already served us well.

Meanwhile, there is a process. There are all the internal reports which are being written by all the agencies involved in the two policy papers, and the additional reports commissioned by the department of Communications to study the Applebaum-Hébert report. There are the Task Force reports to compile and an Arts and Culture Policy to write. Then there is the minister's Cultural Industries Strategy, of which Broadcasting is but one piece; the Cabinet may well want to hear of the larger context before it considers "broadcasting" at all.

Then there are the parliamentary delays which must certainly seem interminable for people in a hurry.

The people in the film industry and, increasingly, the television program production industry, are in a hurry. Last month, Norfolk withdrew, unable to continue production in today's climate. FIRA has yet to decide anything about the legality of the take-over of Columbia by Coca-Cola. Meanwhile, the American producer Orion has bought the distributor Filmways and has opened its own distribution company in Canada, removing the Filmways line from Canadian-owned Ambassador, the distributor who previously repped those films. In Montreal, the Mutual Film Group is up for sale, its parent company Civitas having over-extended itself in radio broadcasting. Mutual president Jean Colbert has left the company, and the perception is that one more independent distributor is out of business.

What with American distributors making such strides, should American producers be far behind? Why shouldn't Lorimar, for instance, scout out the possibilities of cutting out the Canadian middleman and set up shop directly? By the time the great Canadian Cultural Policy is unravelled, it could have shot a dozen films and be gone again.

It is well to call for a public debate on questions of cultural policy. Unfortunately, when it comes to film and broadcasting, calling for a state of emergency might be more appropriate.

The editors

LETTERS

To rally documentarians

Dear Editor:

As one of the many "Hollywood Canadians" I try to keep up on film/video at home, and I welcome the opening of the Film Canada Center here in Beverly Hills. Lorraine Goode at Film Canada has been very helpful to the new Inter-

national Documentary Association, most recently in providing names of available producer/directors in Montreal for possible contract work for a documentary company here in L.A. that had contacted our organization.

I was glad to read in the anniversary issue of Cinema Canada that a few Canadian filmmakers are not ashamed

(cont. on page 22)