

Ostry launches movement to save public broadcasting

TORONTO — It's almost too late for public broadcasters around the world to protect themselves from cutbacks and negative public perceptions, TVOntario chairman Bernard Ostry says.

"Now is not the time to act. They should have been acting 25 years ago. I mean, it's almost too late," Ostry said.

Ostry, in an interview after two days of meetings with public broadcasters from around the world in June, cited cutbacks in public broadcasting in various countries as evidence of the problem.

"Do you think you're going to restore a third public broadcaster in France now that it has been sold off?

"Do you think they're going to be able to reestablish the PBS stations that they have closed down in several states because the states have decided not to fund them and they can't make up for it at the federal level?"

Ostry said in Canada and the United Kingdom governments are having a field day with the fact that "people love the BBC and CBC products, but they

don't like the institutions."

Ostry told *Cinema Canada* that people don't relate the programs to the institutions.

As well, he said, the technology now being used by the private sector poses a whole new problem.

While funding problems exist, the issue starts with a question of respect for the idea and need of public broadcasting, he added.

"It starts first with a genuine idea of freedom of choice," he said. The real question, in a world market flooded with private broadcast programming, is whether there is still room for public broadcasters who provide a product geared to a viewer and not to a market.

He said the two days of meetings by public broadcasters in Toronto were more successful than originally hoped.

When he first suggested the idea in an Edinburgh, Scotland speech last year, Ostry said he didn't expect such support from major public broadcasters.

"I was very surprised when the BBC (Britain) and PBS

(United States) and NHK (Japan) took the strong lead they did immediately after that speech to say...that's a terrific idea, call the meeting and we'll be there," Ostry said.

"I just assumed that they would ignore my criticism of the way public broadcasters have behaved around the world since the time they had a monopoly and could see the monopoly coming to an end."

The two days of meetings in June were attended by public broadcast officials from Canada, the United States, Japan, West Germany, Australia, France and Finland.

In what Ostry terms a concrete strategy to ensure the future of their industry, a decision was made to focus worldwide attention on public broadcasting in June, 1988. It may include a worldwide conference of non-commercial broadcasters.

Also, study groups to develop a public broadcasters' Magna Carta and mutual defense pact and also to create strategies to reeducate viewers about the value of public televi-

sion as a public service were formed. Broadcasters from nine countries will work together in the study groups.

In an interview after the first day of the meetings, CBC executive vice-president Bill Armstrong said public broadcasting needs to improve its public image.

Armstrong said a meeting of public broadcasters is a good idea, but added that non-commercial broadcasters aren't facing a crisis situation.

Bill Cotton, managing director of BBC television, said public broadcasters must keep watch on ratings, but remember "it's the art of the possible." Another criterion to judge public broadcasting is a gut reaction from providing viewing in the best interests of the audience, he said.

Dr. Richard Ottinger, chairman of the National Association of Public Television Stations in the United States, said the two days of meetings were an excellent idea.

Ottinger said a crisis situation for public broadcasters exists under evolving techno-

logical conditions. The development of cable and direct broadcast by satellite could squeeze public broadcasting, he explained.

Private broadcasting in the United States is the "epitome" of free enterprise and trying to position public television that is put into a marketplace alongside commercial television is a problem, Ottinger said.

"Somehow we're still not seen as a real prime force," he added.

Ottinger said the criteria for measuring success in public television are difficult to define compared to commercial television's use of earnings and ratings.

Ostry said a possible larger meeting of public broadcasters next year wasn't scheduled, because of what was accomplished in the two days of Toronto meetings.

"These steps to be taken went beyond the meeting. They are really the sorts of things that I thought the large meeting could excite an interest in. But this in fact bypassed that stage."

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