The Conservative policy thrust in communications is, of course, part of a process that is neither specific to that party, nor indeed, to Canada. The government is riding the global wave of general conservatism whose hallmark is the redefinition of the role of the state in all aspects of public life. 'Deregulation', 'privatization' and reduced budgets for public services are all manifestations of this general shift. Whether these manifestations coincide with the general ideological orientation of the Conservative Party, or are the reason the Tories are in power, the important thing is to understand the fundamental change in the system over which the government is presiding.

The historic importance of government as patron, organizer and enabler of the cultural and technological aspects of communication systems in Canada is self-evident. Government intervention has been the means by which the Canadian state has guaranteed Canada's national sovereignty, a secure capital base for its entrepreneurs and financiers, and free expression and access to communications for its social interest groups.

This multiple role has been made possible by an identification of the political function of the state with the 'defence of the public interest'. As the state—if not the government of the day—is perceived as the embodiment of the public interest, its interventions can be made in the name of public interest. Conversely, critics of government/state interventions put themselves forward as alternative representations of the public interest. This process tends to obscure the actual role of the state, as the promoter of particular private interests, and also the fact that a pivotal social institution, the modern state has its own particular interests.

In the advanced, industrial west, the state's interests include: (1) the need to maintain and promote a sound national economy, based on the expansion of capital and the furnishing of a minimal social welfare net; (2) the need to maintain social peace by minimizing class conflict and maximizing cross-cultural, inter-regional harmony; (3) the need to negotiate a favourable position for the national entity it represents on the global, geopolitical scale; and (4) the need to maintain its own legitimacy above and beyond question.

In the specific case of Canada, the state has had two principal tasks: (1) to protect the integrity of the national entity from the centripetal pull of the imperial neighbour to the south; and (2) to protect the internal cohesion of the national entity from the threat of fragmentation posed by Canada's particular 'national unity' crisis.
Until recently, a strong, central communications and broadcasting system was perceived as fundamental to both of these tasks, and federal policy flowed from that perception. This basic assumption has now changed.

Throughout the 20th century, it has been necessary, in all the western countries, to ‘defend’ the idea of public life against the advance of commercial and political interests. The public broadcasting system has been considered as a means of promoting public interest, public opinion, and the development of public culture.

The Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) was established in 1927, and its role was to promote the cultural and political interests of the nation. The ABC was funded by the government, and its programs were seen as a means of promoting national unity and cultural diversity.

The ABC’s role was reinforced during World War II, when it was used to disseminate news and information to the public. After the war, the ABC continued to play a key role in promoting national unity and cultural diversity, and it was seen as an important part of the nation’s cultural heritage.

The ABC’s role was further strengthened during the 1960s, when it was used to promote the cultural and political interests of the nation. The ABC’s role was reinforced during the 1970s, when it was used to promote the cultural and political interests of the nation.

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In conclusion, the ABC has played a key role in promoting national unity and cultural diversity, and it has been an important part of the nation’s cultural heritage. The ABC’s role will continue to be reinforced in the 21st century, as it is used to promote the cultural and political interests of the nation.
The Liberal's Bill C-20 gave the cabinet power to issue directives to the CRTC on any matter under its jurisdiction, except particular broadcasting licenses. Where 'matters of public interest' were concerned, however, the cabinet could issue a directive affecting specific licensees. Bill C-20 also proposed to amend the Broadcasting Act giving the entire broadcasting system a mandate and give the CBC the objective of becoming 'distinctive'.

Bill C-20 never made it into law and fell with the Liberal government. The Conservatives reintroduced it December 20, 1984, but with attention massively focused on the CBC cutbacks it has gone virtually unnoticed—except in Quebec, where public interest groups and to be sensitive towards government attempts to assert political control. Indeed, only the most persevering followers of policy development seem to have noticed it, yet Bill C-20 has long-range implications which make the CBC cutbacks pale in comparison.

The new version of the bill seemed to anticipate the charge of political interference. It no longer refers to special measures which might be necessary in the 'public interest'. Speaking in the House on second reading January 31, Masse emphasized the 'guarantees' that protect the public against abuse by the bill: (1) the Canadian Charter of Rights, which protects freedom of expression; (2) the exclusion on directives involving particular licensees; (3) a new provision requiring the minister to consult with the CRTC before issuing a directive; and (4) a 30-day delay during which the directive would be referred to a parliamentary committee (also in the Liberal version). 26

At the same time, Masse presented the bill as a major element of the new edge the government was putting on communications policy. He presented the new Tory gospel of Canadian communications history, lauding our telecommunications and broadcasting systems as concrete realizations of the prophetic dreams of such men as John A. Macdonald and R.B. Bennett—and as the result of dynamic cooperation between the private and public sectors.

Bill C-20, the minister said, aims essentially to clarify and establish a new equilibrium in the distribution of powers between the government and the regulatory agency. It aims to close the gap between communications legislation and the cultural possibilities of the new technologies which existing legislation did not anticipate. Quoting Montesquieu and Cardinal Richelieu on the role of the state, Masse said it may be in the public interest to deregulate certain telecommunications services. The telecommunications industry would flourish in the marketplace provided public regulatory intervention were kept to a minimum, and Bill C-20 aims to facilitate this.

It was time to review telecommunications and broadcasting policy, Masse said, and this bill was somehow related to that view, the but in just what way he did not make clear.

Last March, the Institut canadien d'éducation des adultes (ICÉA) and 30 Quebec labour and community groups called for the imposition of such interim legislative action until a new overall communications policy, based on a wide public consultation, was developed. 27

Bill C-20, according to the Quebec coalition, gives the minister a 'blank cheque' to make new policy as he pleases, and on an ad hoc basis, without obliging him to state his general intentions and debate them with the public. So far, the concern of his policy appears to be deregulation (Bill C-20 also
proposes to extend from five to seven years the duration of a broadcasting license, thus diluting public control.

Most important, the coalition said, the bill contradicts the 1968 Broadcasting Act, which states that an independent agency is the best guarantee that policy objectives will be met. Such a fundamental change in the basic framework of the system should not be made without public debate, the LIA argued. Yet, while Masé habitually mentions 'consultation' in his speeches, and in fact privately consulted specific groups and organizations, no public consultation mechanism has been indicated in connection with the policy review.

The task force announcement of April 9 continued this pattern of policy-making without public debate.

Indeed, under the Tory government, even the CRTC, the main public consultation mechanism of the past 15 years, has reduced its role as a place where the public can appear. On March 13, in advance of the ministerial review, the CRTC renewed the CBC's television licenses without holding the obligatory public hearings. As the ICEA pointed out, this was in effect implementing Bill C-20 before it even became law: already, in the case of the CBC, public control has been replaced with ministerial control. 20 CRTC hearings on the CBC at this time would have been a forum for public expression on the present and future role of the public broadcaster in the overall communication system. In their absence, the CRTC did maintain plans to go ahead with a slew of public hearings on other broadcast licenses. In Montréal alone, hearings last May dealt with the renewal of licenses for several private radio stations. Radio-Québec, the private television network Télé-Métropole and the awarding of a license for Québec's controversial 'second private French network'. Ironically, the timing of such public hearings coincided with the absence of the traditional forum on the 'national' public broadcaster, a step which underscored both the accountability of the regulatory agency's authority and the diminishing of the possibility for effective, independent public representation before it.

Traditionally, communications policy in Canada has been made, at least in principle, only following long and thorough public debate. While a case can be made for the government to make policy in lieu of an agency whose mandate is once removed — where is the justification for circumventing public debate?

What raises the question: if 'public' broadcasting is to be deflected from a national to a regional, or provincial level, is public debate to follow the same trajectory? Again, recent events in Québec provide a glimpse of an answer.

The oldest provincial broadcaster, Radio-Québec, has always appeared as a somewhat incomplete mutant form of public broadcasting. Last fall, the provincial minister of communications spoke publicly of transforming Radio-Québec into the 'second private French network' promised for Québec by former federal minister Francis Fox. Following several weeks of controversy over this plan, and an accompanying proposal to introduce advertising to the educational network, Québec undertook to produce a document clarifying the orientation of Radio-Québec.

The document Radio-Québec maintient was published March 11. It proposes that Radio-Québec remain unencumbrantly a public body, with a 'savoir' wherein 'educational' is interpreted in the broad cultural—as opposed to the narrow pedagogical—sense, and with financing based partially on a limited amount of indirect advertising.

In a statement accompanying release of the document, communications minister Bertrand said the report ought to be the object of a broad public debate; after all, Radio-Québec's shareholders, he said, were 'tous les québécois'. Bertrand said the report would be submitted to the Quebec cabinet committee on cultural development, to the provincial parliamentary commission on education and culture, to the CRTC and to Quebec's regulatory equivalent, the Régie des services publics, as well as to the Forum permanent des communications, a consultative body created after the October 1983 provincial 'summit' on communication.

The Québec government has a political interest in altering 'the public' with its policy on educational broadcasting. As the only broadcasting agency completely under its control (and even then, subject to CRTC approval), Radio-Québec is the province's point of entry into the field of mass communication. In terms of potential constitutional dispute (for example, over the definition of 'educational' broadcasting) it is important that a Québec position be legitimated by a demonstration of popular support. The origins of Québec's policy are apparently as dubious as its federal counterpart. According to a report in Le Devoir, the whole fuss originated with a top-level government committee named to develop a strategy for Radio-Québec ('Comité de consultation sur la participation de Radio-Québec aux mutation de la télévision au Québec'). This committee was composed of the secretary of the provincial cabinet, the deputy minister of communications and cultural affairs and the chairperson of Radio-Québec...hardly what one could call accountable public representatives.

This news prompted the ICEA to comment last December: 22 It is high time, in our opinion, to return to a more democratic practice in this area. We need to know who is making the decisions about Radio-Québec, on what basis and according to what policy.

We therefore demand that the minister of communications make public his department's policy on communication and cultural development, and submit that policy to public consultation.

What course the public consultation on Radio-Québec will take remains to be seen. In Québec, too, there is a strong tradition of public input to broadcasting policy, but here as well, the climate does not favour tradition.