Lack of bucks riles Canucks: public broadcasting taking the heat in Canada

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The Lower St Lawrence town of Rimouski, Quebec, is the last place one might expect to see street demonstrations in the frozen dead of an unusually bitter Canadian winter, but the townfolk of Rimouski were up in arms in the winter of 1990–1 after the feds took their TV away. Rimouski, Matane and Sept-Îles in Quebec; Goose Bay and Corner Brook in Newfoundland; Sydney, Nova Scotia; Saskatoon, Calgary, Windsor and even Toronto lost local Canadian Broadcasting Corporation stations in cutbacks announced by the national broadcasting service.

Ironically, on the same day last December when the cuts were announced, the House of Commons adopted an upbeat new Broadcasting Act stating, among many other things, that the Canadian broadcasting system provides ‘a public service essential to the maintenance and enhancement of national identity and cultural sovereignty’.¹

Now you don’t need more than two Canadians in a room to spark a debate that will never end about the meaning of national identity and cultural sovereignty. On the other hand, put three Canadians in the room, and you would find at least two of them ‘moderately or strongly opposed’ to the CBC cutbacks.²

This highlights the quintessential characteristics of Canadian broadcasting, which have remained basically unchanged since the 1930s, and which can be summed up in this way: people in Canada view broadcasting institutions (as opposed to the particular

¹ 'Broadcasting Act': Statutes of Canada (1991); chapter 11, art 31b
² Angus Reid/Southam News poll, 29 December 1990
programmes they offer) as part of the social fabric, and tampering with them is likely to become a contentious political issue; politicians in Canada recognize this and are prepared to make a rhetorical investment in popular sentiment, while dealing with broadcasting strategically as they go about carrying out their specific agendas; the various sectors of cultural industry play the people and the politicians against one another in their (generally successful) campaign to make broadcasting as profitable as possible.

More specifically, this situation tends to play itself out in three areas of conflict, concerning: firstly, the relationship of publicly and privately owned services in the overall broadcasting environment; secondly, the institutional role and structures of broadcasting within the Canadian political framework; thirdly, the social vocation of broadcasting.

Canadian broadcasting in the 1980s evolved according to the same pattern that marked all of the 'western' countries (Europe, North America, Australia) during that time. Canada, too, experienced the withdrawal of the state from its traditional responsibilities towards public-service broadcasting, and the increased economic liberalization and expansion of market-based broadcasting services. But the structural and regulatory developments of Canadian broadcasting have been strongly marked by their historical specificity and by the remarkably politicized nature of Canadian broadcast policy making.

The Conservative government elected in 1984 had as its main political objectives the negotiation of a continental 'free trade' agreement with the United States, and, internally, 'national reconciliation' of the constitutional wrangle between Quebec and the rest of Canada. Economically, it aimed to reduce the public debt and create new opportunities for Canadian capital. Broadcasting policy was strongly affected by all of these aims.

The free trade agreement, for example, was strongly opposed by Canadian nationalists. Early on, soon after beginning the negotiations with the US, the Mulroney government pledged publicly that cultural industries would not be placed on the table. In fact, the accord, which took effect in 1989, provides a grey area in which certain aspects of cultural activity are protected (ownership requirements, for example, or subsidies restricted to Canadian nationals), while others are not (Canadian cable companies must now pay copyright fees for American signals they previously picked up 'free', for example). But the need to counteract opposition to the accord is one reason for the strong nationalist rhetoric that continues to mark broadcasting policy statements, and which is clear, for example, in the new Broadcasting Act.

With respect to Quebec, Mulroney ambitiously sought to attenuate the persistent conflict that marked the sixteen-year regime of his predecessor, Pierre Trudeau. The cornerstone of his policy
was the so-called 'Meech Lake Accord', which proposed to recognize Quebec as a 'distinct society' within Canada. Meech Lake was rejected in June 1990, but, in broadcasting, the federal government has promoted a policy that bureaucrats in Quebec City consider to be an expression of 'Meech before its time'.

Since 1985, policy on French-language television has been made by a joint Ottawa–Quebec committee operating alongside the formal decision making structure. This committee has initiated, for example, the introduction of new private television stations in Quebec, 'Canada-Quebec' participation in the international francophone satellite service, TV5, and a range of subsidies to Quebec broadcasting entrepreneurs. (The fact that Ottawa and Quebec are on the same wavelength regarding broad economic policy has certainly helped this process.)

The new Broadcasting Act, furthermore, specifies that 'English and French language broadcasting, while sharing common aspects, operate under different conditions and may have different requirements'. This is a significant departure from the unitary policy that had marked the historical development of two parallel but nominally symmetrical broadcasting systems in Canada, in each of the 'official languages'.

The government's policy of fiscal restraint has been felt most strongly in the reduction of support for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. Annual funding of CBC operations has remained virtually at the same level since 1980 in real dollar terms, despite the obviously rising costs of meeting its obligations. Several times since 1984, the minister of finance has made surgical incursions into the CBC's budget – often to take away new funds injected previously by the minister of communications.

In this process, it has been left to CBC management to determine where and how to cut services, and the government has developed the particularly odious habit of washing its hands of any responsibility. But the chickens may be coming home to roost. The December 1990 cuts targeted local and regional services, at a time when the national government is perceived by communities throughout Canada as especially remote, elitist and self-serving.

As in many European countries, since the 1980s there has been an overall shift in emphasis from the 'public' to the 'private' sector as the driving force of broadcasting. In Canada, an important legacy of the Trudeau Liberals was the Broadcast Program Development Fund (Telefilm Canada), created in 1983, and the main instrument of the privatization of Canadian dramatic television production.

Through Telefilm, hundreds of millions of dollars in public funds – much of which used to go to the CBC – now go directly to independent producers by way of a bureaucratic agency whose purpose is to grease the wheels of industrial development. The programmes end up being shown on both public and private
networks, but the money, instead of being allocated to a public corporation, accountable to its public-service mandate, goes to businessmen. The government, meanwhile, meets its objective of promoting private industry without having to bear the political ill-will that would come from direct privatization of the CBC.

These trends will likely continue in the 1990s, but the dynamics of broadcasting in Canada often push things in unpredictable ways. As self-evident as it may seem to say so—and I suppose this applies to broadcasting in other countries as well—Canadian broadcasting is driven by politics and economics, but the role it plays in society is social and cultural.

For example, one of the interesting by-products of the 1980s was that the whole gamut of sociocultural groups in Canada became increasingly militant and aggressive with respect to their demands and expectations of the Canadian broadcasting system as a whole (that is, public and private elements combined).

Women and ethnic minorities have pressured successfully for industry-wide codes governing role-stereotypes in broadcast programming and advertising. Aboriginal groups have set up important autonomous radio and television networks, with varying degrees of public funding support. Largely as a result of intense, organized pressure, the new Broadcasting Act includes clauses referring to employment equity; the equal rights of men, women and children; community, educational and alternative programming services; access for disabled persons; and the obligation of broadcasting to reflect the multicultural and multiracial nature of Canadian society, as well as its linguistic duality and the special place of aboriginal peoples.

Organized groups in Canada see broadcasting as constituting an overall environment, whose well-being depends on an ecologically sound balance between national and regional services, foreign and Canadian programmes, professional and communitarian production practices, entertaining and enlightening content. Achieving the environmental balance depends on maintaining the predominance of the idea of public service, as the organizing principle of all broadcasting in Canada—that is the point of the policy article of the new Broadcasting Act.

In this context, one can begin to comprehend the outrage and mobilization that followed the CBC cutbacks announced last December. The issue was not simply the familiar one of a public broadcaster forced to reduce spending: the question was where and how the cuts were being applied. The closing or reduction to a single newscast of eleven local stations has meant the elimination of more than 140 local or regional programmes and 1,100 CBC jobs (as well as further hundreds of freelance contracts).

For the CBC, the cuts meant the abdication of local television to the private sector (radio was not severely affected by this round of
cuts) – something the entrepreneurs have been clamoring for since the first private stations were created in 1961. Under the mandate of the Broadcasting Act, the CBC has a duty to reflect Canada and its regions to national and regional audiences, while serving the special needs of those regions. The corporation now intends to meet that responsibility by producing one newscast in each province, and a handful of national network productions originating in regional centres. All other CBC programmes will originate in Toronto (English) or Montreal (French) and be broadcast from coast-to-coast.

This is of dramatic consequence in a country like Canada which, contrary to the prevailing mythology, is held together not by its national institutions but by the tension between the national centre and the regional peripheries. It is especially dramatic at a time when, in the wake of the failure of Meech Lake, a majority of the population of Quebec is in favour of some form of political sovereignty and the Quebec government is taking an increasingly autonomist posture in its dealings with the rest of Canada.

It is important to recognize that in the peculiar universe of Canadian political life, the CBC is perceived not only as a public broadcaster, but also as a federal government institution. So in protesting the CBC cuts, people were not so much responding to a government attack on the CBC (of which the cuts were a direct result), but to a CBC attack on them. Tellingly, Canada’s self-proclaimed (and only) national newspaper, the Toronto Globe and Mail, headlined an editorial: ‘The CBC has handled its budget cuts sensibly’. Seen from the centre, the decision to sacrifice local services for national ones was sensible, but it has not been seen this way anywhere outside Toronto. At any rate, the result is a truncated and seriously weakened CBC.

Paradoxically, the mobilization against the cuts became a national unifying force. The 23,000 member Friends of Canadian Broadcasting sent its supporters detailed agit-prop kits complete with instructions on how to harass their local MPs (phone them at home, fax them at the office). In mid-March 1991, dozens of groups appeared before a week-long Canadian Radio-Television and Telecommunications Commission hearing to oppose the CBC’s formal application to eliminate the targeted services. (The CRTC eventually rubber-stamped the changes.)

The mobilization also crossed Canada’s usually divisive linguistic boundaries. An ad hoc coalition formed to lobby against the cuts included not only anglophone organizations like the aforementioned Friends, but groups with names such as l’Alliance francophone pour la radiodiffusion publique, la Coalition pour la défense des services français de Radio-Canada, l’Institut canadien d’éducation des adultes and la Fédération des francophones hors-Québec. In all, member organizations claimed to represent over 2 million people...
The breadth of the coalition is equally impressive and includes not only citizens’ groups and public broadcasting lobby organizations, but associations of creative workers (the Alliance of Canadian Cinema, Television and Radio Artists, Canadian Actors’ Equity, the Association of Television Producers and Directors, the Canadian Conference of the Arts, Canadian Independent Record Production Association, Canadian Wine Service Guild, the National Association of Broadcast Employees and Technicians, the Writers’ Union of Canada and the League of Canadian Poets) and mainstream labour organizations (Canadian Auto Workers, Canadian Federation of Agriculture, Canadian Federation of Students, Canadian Labour Congress, Canadian Union of Public Employees, the Metro Toronto Labour Council, the National Union of Provincial Government Employees, the Public Service Alliance of Canada, and the Canadian section of the United Steel Workers of America).

The task force had just reported as this article was going to press. Its principal recommendations include a three-year moratorium on the introduction of new services, a reduction of advertising on CBC television from twelve minutes per hour to eight, and the convening of an industry-wide summit meeting "to decide on a strategy aimed at strengthening the industry’s economic base and its ability to compete in world markets." The report (Canada, The Economic Status of Canadian Television, 1991) has so far been received favourably by the industry and cautiously by the government.

(out of a total Canadian population of some 26 million).

Public outrage notwithstanding, the CBC’s problems are far from over. After five years of study by a string of committees, culminating in the Broadcasting Act, the government has set up yet another task force to report on the economic situation of Canadian television. This latest move was prompted by the uncharacteristically disappointing balance sheets that have begun to bother private broadcasters since the onset of the recession. The creation of new commercial services (additional stations, pay-television and speciality satellite-to-cable services) and the looser regulatory environment of the 1980s bloated the marketplace and there are now too many players. While advertisers and cable distributors are enjoying a boom (more than seventy-six percent of homes in licensed areas were cabled in 1990, and that figure was growing by about two percent a year), the providers of programme services are in agony. They have been pressuring the government to put a cap on CBC advertising revenue (currently thirty per cent of the CBC’s television budget), if not withdraw the public broadcaster from the advertising market altogether.

This would not necessarily be a bad thing, if the government were prepared to cough up the additional $250–300 million a year necessary to make up the shortfall. Ever mindful of their role as good corporate citizens, and willing to help out with realistic proposals, the broadcasters are suggesting the government do just that: beef up the CBC so that it can concentrate on providing culturally uplifting programmes without having to scramble for (their rightful) advertising lucre.