



Canadian Broadcasting, Canadian Nationhood: Two Concepts, Two Solitudes, and Great Expectations

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As social institutions subject to the tensions and pressures that characterize a given society at any point in time, mass communication systems provide a good indication of how a society sees itself and where it perceives that it is headed. This has been particularly true in the case of Canadian broadcasting, whose evolution over the past 60 years has closely paralleled the continuing debate over Canadian nationhood.¹

Various combinations of political and economic factors have come into play in the federal government's attempts to develop a policy on broadcasting since the late 1920s, but the national question has never been far from the heart of the matter. In this respect, the following characteristics are important to bear in mind:

1) despite often vigorous claims from the provinces, especially Québec, broadcasting has been staked out and maintained as an area of exclusive federal jurisdiction

2) despite the centralist, unitary nature of the system's governing policy framework, broadcasting services have developed along parallel lines in English and in French

3) despite the system's formal autonomy, Ottawa has tended to view broadcasting as an extension of the state—particularly in ascribing to the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation a role in the promotion of national unity.

As this combination of contradictions might lead one to believe, broadcasting in Canada has been seen not only as a means of communication, but as an object of struggle, a contested terrain.

Looking at the evolution of Canadian broadcasting from its inception in the 1920s up to the recent Meech Lake debates thus can tell us a good deal about the nature of our constitutional and national dilemma.

1928-1945: CREATING A SYSTEM ... AND ITS PROBLEMS

Although broadcasting in Canada actually began in 1919, the basic framework of the Canadian broadcasting system was laid out by the Royal Commission on Radio Broadcasting (chaired by Sir John Aird) that reported in 1929.² Remarkably, the central issues in Canadian broadcasting today are essentially the same as they were at that time.

The Aird Commission recommended wholesale nationalization of the then largely commercial radio system, and creation of a national publicly owned monopoly to operate all broadcasting in Canada on a basis of public service for the information, enlightenment, and entertainment of the Canadian people. Even before its report was tabled, however, the Québec government of Louis-Alexandre Taschereau passed legislation authorizing Québec to erect and operate its own radio station, as well as produce programmes for broadcast by existing commercial stations.

Before acting on the recommendations, Ottawa asked the Supreme Court to determine whether jurisdiction over broadcasting lay with the Dominion or the provinces, and in 1931 the court ruled in Ottawa's favour. An appeal to the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council in London took another year to resolve, and so it was only in 1932 that Ottawa had a clear signal to legislate.

The Canadian Radio Broadcasting Act of 1932 created a national public broadcaster, the Canadian Radio Broadcasting Commission, which had the additional responsibilities of regulating the activities of the private broadcasters. (This double mandate would be transferred to the CRBC's successor, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, by the legislative reform of 1936.)

Aird had proposed broadcasting content be overseen by assistant commissioners in each of the provinces, but this interesting recommendation was not retained by the legislator. The CRBC, meanwhile, set out to create a national radio service in English and in French: a single service, using both languages alternately in such a way that both English and French audiences heard the same programme. Or, to put it another way, the CRBC took the approach that there was only one radio audience in Canada, made up of members of two different language groups.

In its submission to the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism some 30 years later, the CBC reflected on this aspect of its prehistory:

[This] alternative was tried in the mid-thirties as being the simpler in practice and more feasible in view of the limited human, technical and financial resources then available. Obviously, such an alternative was only workable as long as the program needs of both groups could be met by a single network. With the passage of time and the development of broadcasting techniques and resources, the demands of each group for a more complete service continued to grow, presenting the Corporation with a situation which could only be met adequately by duplicate networks, English and French. These the Corporation proceeded to establish and the pattern then adopted has prevailed to the present.

Needless to say, the transition was not as simple and orderly as the foregoing would suggest.³

Indeed, it was not. The most important factor in compelling the CRBC to move away from a single service using two languages to "parallel services" in each language as early as 1934 was the absolute, militant refusal of anglophone communities in the Maritimes, Ontario, and western Canada to accept the presence of French on the air. This has been documented in the memoirs of Canadian radio pioneers such as E.A. Corbett, Hector Charlesworth, and Austin Weir, according to whom French programming on national radio sparked "a queer mixture of prejudice, bigotry and fear."⁴

By 1941, separation of the two services was complete—although the original CBC news service, created to meet the demands of covering the Second World War, operated bilingually. Paradoxically, yet to be expected, the institution of separate services was welcomed by French-Canadian nationalists, who had feared becoming the marginalized minority within a single, nominally bilingual service. The French network achieved a degree of administrative autonomy because of "the need for national unity raised by the war," but no sooner was it in place than it became the focus of a national crisis.⁵

In January 1942 the government announced it would hold a plebiscite on conscription. In the ensuing campaign, the Québec-based Ligue pour la défense du Canada, a broad front of political and social leaders opposed to conscription, sought to use the public airwaves in order to urge their fellow citizens to vote "No." The CBC, by order of the government, denied the "No" voice access to its stations. The opponents of conscription were able to promote their cause by purchasing paid advertising on commercial stations, however, resulting in another paradox: the identification of "public" broadcasting as an oppressive agent of centralized federalism, and of French-Canadian entrepreneurial capital as a progressive force.⁶

1945–1963: CONSOLIDATING THE SYSTEM ... AND THE SYNDROME

Citing the educational nature of broadcasting, as "a powerful medium of publicity and intellectual and moral training," the government of Québec under Maurice Duplessis claimed that Québec had the constitutional authority to create a provincial broadcasting service, and passed legislation setting up Radio-Québec in 1945.⁷ Duplessis's legislation was never put into effect, after C.D. Howe announced in the House of Commons that, "since broadcasting is the sole responsibility of the Dominion government, broadcasting licences shall not be issued to other governments or corporations owned by other governments."⁸

Meanwhile, outside Québec the "parallel services" of public broadcasting were developing unequally. While the CBC's English-language radio service extended from coast to coast by 1938, the same could not be said for French-language service in the 1950s. The Royal Commission on National Development in the Arts, Letters, and Sciences (the Massey Commission) reported in 1951 that French-speaking communities outside Québec were still poorly served by the CBC: "It has been pointed out to us repeatedly in different parts of Canada that the French-speaking

Canadian listener does not receive a broadcasting service equal to that intended for his English-speaking neighbor.”⁹ Six years later, the Royal Commission on Broadcasting (the Fowler Commission) found that many parts of Canada were still lacking French service, and suggested that this was more than a question of available resources: “It remains a moot question, however, whether Canada has yet reached the stage of complete national maturity where the introduction of French on the airwaves of Ontario ... would not be regarded by a substantial majority as an intolerable intrusion rather than the cultural complement that in truth it would be.”¹⁰

The Conservative government elected in 1957 sought to build up the commercial side of Canadian broadcasting, and paid little attention to its role in the complexities of the evolving national dilemma. This was most apparent in its response to the historic Radio-Canada producers’ strike of 1958–59, which saw, among other things, the rise to political prominence of René Lévesque. Gérard Pelletier has pointed out that much of the problem was attributable to the fact that the French network executives in Montréal lacked the authority to negotiate on behalf of the corporation, while the head office in Ottawa did not bother to take it seriously. The strike paralysed French-language television for 68 days (there was only one available Canadian channel in each language at the time), and became a symbol of the historic inequality of French and English Canada.¹¹

1963–1980: NATIONAL UNITY AND STRUGGLES FOR POWER

By the time the Liberals returned to power in 1963, the situation had changed. In fact, early in its mandate the Pearson government publicly identified cultural policy in general and broadcasting in particular as strategic weapons in its struggle against the rising and increasingly radical nationalist movement in Québec. In the House of Commons on 13 November 1964, Secretary of State Maurice Lamontagne announced the government’s intention to rationalize and centralize the activities of all federal cultural agencies under the jurisdiction of his office, and to create a cabinet committee on cultural affairs. Under the new policy, the national broadcasting service, the CBC, would play a central role:

The CBC is one of Canada’s most vital and essential institutions at this crucial moment of our history. The CBC must become a living and daily testimony of the Canadian identity, a faithful reflection of our two main cultures and a powerful element of understanding, moderation and unity in our country. If it performs these national tasks with efficiency, its occasional mistakes will be easily forgotten; if it fails in that mission, its other achievements will not compensate for that failure.¹²

This was the clearest enunciation of the CBC’s mission, in the government’s view, since the war. It became clearer still during the next few years. At parliamentary committee hearings in 1966, Liberal backbenchers from Québec and Radio-Canada middle-management executives sparred over their respective views of the CBC’s role vis-à-vis the emerging question of “separatism.” When a new broadcasting

act was introduced in October 1967, it contained a clause that read as follows: "The national broadcasting service [CBC] should ... contribute to the development of national unity and provide for a continuing expression of Canadian identity."¹³

In the House, Secretary of State Judy LaMarsh said the national unity clause was "perhaps the most important feature of the CBC's mandate in the new bill."¹⁴ This was the first time that Parliament had tried to spell out the goals and purposes of the CBC, she told the parliamentary committee: "[The CBC] is the instrument which Parliament has chosen with respect to broadcasting. Parliament is now, in this bill, saying to the instrument that this is one of its purposes, and as long as that purpose is there, to help weld the country together, Parliament is prepared to raise taxes from the people to keep it going ... I do not think there is very much more time for public broadcasting to prove itself, to prove to Canadians it is worth while spending the money on."¹⁵

After some vigorous debate, the broadcasting act passed, with the controversial clause intact. The NDP's R.W. Prittie expressed the fear of a witch-hunt. Gérard Pelletier admitted he had doubts about it "lead[ing] some people to believe that it is not a matter of promotion but of propaganda."¹⁶ And an important observation on the implications of the clause came from Conservative MP David MacDonald:

When we begin to move into areas such as ... national unity, we are in effect moving away from the concept of public broadcasting toward the idea of state broadcasting whereby the broadcasting system of the country becomes an extension of the state.¹⁷

Radio-Canada's interpretation of its mandate to promote national unity led to bizarre incidents such as keeping its cameras trained on the parade at the 1968 Saint-Jean-Baptiste Day celebrations in Montréal, while police and demonstrators fought a bloody battle on the sidelines. During the October Crisis of 1970, the federal cabinet closely oversaw what was and was not broadcast by Radio-Canada, and a few months later a string of management "supervisors" appeared in the corporation's newsrooms, with no apparent function other than political surveillance.¹⁸ The former head of Radio-Canada news and public affairs, Marc Thibault, remembers one official whose job was to monitor all news programmes and count the number of times the word québécois was used.¹⁹

The situation culminated with Prime Minister Trudeau's instruction to the federal regulatory agency, the Canadian Radio-Television and Telecommunications Commission, to inquire into CBC news coverage in the wake of the election of the Parti Québécois in Québec in November 1976:

Doubts have been expressed as to whether the English and French television networks of [the CBC] generally, and in particular their public affairs, information and news programming, are fulfilling the mandate of the Corporation.²⁰

The CRTC dutifully investigated and reported, in July 1977, that the CBC had indeed failed "to contribute to the development of national unity"—but not

in the sense anticipated by the prime minister. The problem was not a bias in favour of separatist politics, it said, but deficient representation of Canada's "two solitudes" to one another. In English and in French, the CBC did not pay adequate attention to the regions of Canada; it was too centralized and aloof, too influenced by commercial pressures, too bureaucratic. "In the modern world," reported the CRTC, "political and economic developments tend to centralize; cultural developments, on the other hand, tend to be regional, arising in much more sharply delimited areas."²¹

The 1977 CRTC inquiry appears to have been a turning point in the Liberal government's view of the role of media in Canada's constitutional struggle. By year's end it had created a new agency, the Canadian Unity Information Office, and a strategy for containment of the pressures of national fragmentation thereafter flowed through there. Political expectations of the CBC diminished, and in the important run-up to the Québec referendum of 1980, the corporation was left to establish and carry out an internal policy of news coverage according to rigorous journalistic standards and the principle of "the public's right to be informed."²² Ultimately, the referendum campaign was covered by CBC as a straight news event, while the government sought to mobilize its constituency directly, particularly through advertising.²³

The role of the CBC aside, political struggles surrounding the national question continued to mark the evolution of Canadian broadcasting in the 1960s and 1970s.

From 1968 on, renewed demands from Québec for constitutional powers in broadcasting highlighted the constitutional debates of the day and marked the evolution of communications in Canada. In its brief to the constitutional conference convened by Lester Pearson in February 1968, Québec claimed the right to play the role of a national state in matters pertaining to language and culture, including broadcasting. As instruments of education and culture, radio and television rightfully belong under provincial jurisdiction, the Québec brief argued. The court ruling of 1932 was "unacceptable"; federal agencies like the CBC should be made to reflect the "bicultural reality" of Canada; jurisdiction over broadcasting should not be the exclusive domain of the federal government.²⁴

In the coming months, debate focused on the question of "educational broadcasting." The new broadcasting act stated that "facilities should be provided within the Canadian broadcasting system for educational broadcasting."²⁵ As we saw earlier, federal policy explicitly excluded provincial governments or their agencies from holding broadcasting licences. Yet, education was clearly under provincial jurisdiction. Who then would have control over educational broadcasting? Returning to Québec from the constitutional conference, Johnson declared that his government had decided to apply Duplessis's 1945 law establishing Radio-Québec.²⁶ The move was enough to upset Ottawa's design. By the end of 1969, Ottawa and the provinces had settled on a definition of educational broadcasting under which, in the 1970s, provincial public broadcasting agencies would begin operating in four provinces.

The growing complexity of communications in the late 1960s prompted Ottawa

to create a Department of Communications (DOC) in April 1969. Determined to match Ottawa move for move, Québec created its own Ministère des communications six months later. In the early 1970s, negotiating a strong role for Québec in communications policy became one of the hallmarks of Robert Bourassa's programme for achieving "cultural sovereignty." In a series of policy statements authored by Communications Minister Jean-Paul L'Allier, Québec proposed "to promote and maintain a québécois system of communications,"²⁷ and to become "master craftsman of communications policy on its territory."²⁸

The cornerstone of Québec's policy was to be the Régie des services publics, the regulatory authority for utilities falling under the province's jurisdiction. L'Allier saw the Régie becoming a Québec equivalent to the CRTC, extending its activities to areas such as cable television—which, Québec argued, were not covered by the Privy Council decision of 1932. In 1973, the Régie began to subject the 160 cable companies then operating in Québec to its own regulation as well as that of the CRTC, and within a year the inevitable occurred: in applications to serve a community near Rimouski, the Régie and the CRTC awarded licences to two different applicants. It took until November 1977 for the Supreme Court to decide the Dionne-d'Auteuil case in favour of the CRTC, ruling that Ottawa had exclusive jurisdiction over cable.²⁹ Oddly enough, the court split neatly along national lines, the three judges from Québec dissenting from the majority opinion. As constitutional scholar Gil Rémillard put it: "On the strictly legal level, both options were defensible. The decision was based on the judges' different conceptions of Canadian federalism."³⁰

Under the Parti Québécois government, Québec did not directly engage with Ottawa over communications policy. The PQ carried over the policy thrust of the Bourassa government but basically abdicated due to its lack of power over communications under the existing system. In the view of Communications Minister Louis O'Neill, political sovereignty was the only solution to Québec's communications problems.³¹ Paradoxically, the PQ was thus a lot less aggressive than its predecessors in seeking concrete gains from Ottawa in this area. It concentrated instead on developing the programmes and policies begun by Union Nationale and Liberal governments: Radio-Québec, now a full-fledged broadcaster, and the particular Québec form of participatory communication known as "community" media.

1980–1990: POSTNATIONALISM AND THE TRIUMPH OF THE MARKET

Both in Ottawa and Québec, communication policy took on a new—yet strangely similar—shape after the referendum of 1980.

In Ottawa, as we saw earlier, the view of the CBC as the centrepiece of Canadian cultural policy had begun to shift as of the late 1970s. With the referendum out of the way, the entire cultural sphere took on a distinctly economic vocation. In July 1980, the arts and culture branch of the Department of the Secretary of

State and ministerial responsibility for culture were transferred to the industry-oriented DOC. Communications Minister Francis Fox told the parliamentary committee that the diffusion of culture would henceforth depend increasingly on its industrial base and the DOC would be concentrating on the growth of "cultural industries."³²

The new orientation was underwritten by the Federal Cultural Policy Review Committee (Applebaum-Hébert) that reported in 1982, and spelled out in detail in a series of policy statements signed by Fox in 1983-84.³³ Since then, federal policy has been marked notably by a gradual withdrawal of fiscal responsibility for public service broadcasting (CBC budget cuts), privatization of television production (through the Telefilm fund), and the introduction of a wide range of new commercial cable-delivered television signals (pay-TV and nondiscretionary subscriber-funded specialty services). In generic terms, the 1980s marked a shift from the political to the economic, and the eclipse of the traditional sociocultural objectives of broadcasting in Canada.

The new approach in Québec was strangely similar, as in the postreferendum context, Québec appeared to lose interest in the sociocultural possibilities of communications altogether, and placed its emphasis on industrial development during its second mandate. Québec Communications Minister Jean-François Bertrand signalled the new situation in June 1981: PQ communications policy would be based on economic development, and not on making jurisdictional demands from Ottawa.³⁴ Indeed, Québec under the PQ seemed determined to outpace Ottawa in shifting the accent in communications from the cultural and political to the industrial and economic spheres.³⁵

So the Québec referendum not only changed the underlying basis for both Ottawa's and Québec's strategy in communications, and shifted the emphasis from the political and sociocultural to the economic and the industrial; it also changed the nature of jurisdictional conflict between Québec and Ottawa—competition over control of cultural development could change to collaboration in the name of economic development.³⁶ But such collaboration was not possible while the Liberals were in office in Ottawa, given the rigidity of their historic claim to exclusive jurisdiction over communications. It had to await the election of the *Conservatives* in 1984.

The most generous thing one can say about the new Conservative government's broadcasting policy is that it had none. In general, the government's early initiatives with respect to broadcasting coincided with its general thrust toward reduced public spending and expanding the role of the private sector in the Canadian economy.³⁷ But broadcasting and communications generally quickly emerged as one of the sectors on the cutting edge of the government's plan for "national reconciliation" after the institutionalized antagonism of the Trudeau years.

Brian Mulroney's choice of Marcel Masse to be his minister of communications was an astute one in this regard. Masse was not only a loyal Tory, but a reputed Québec nationalist who had been involved with the *Union Nationale* government of the late 1960s in its battle for more provincial power through agencies such

