

Pas de deux: Media Policy and Cultural Politics in Canada and Quebec

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Introduction

Canada, as Richard Collins (1990a) might have written, is a polity in search of a culture. This is a country, after all, with a well-defined political but no cultural centre. Politics in Canada tends to reinforce and strengthen the centre, while culture -- which, in Canada, is anything but national -- tends to split it apart. In an era of globalization and widespread confusion about the future role of the nation-state, Canada provides ample examples of what Armand Mattelart (1995) has called "la revanche des cultures", or "revenge of the cultures".

Until recently, media systems were seen as mirrors through which a national culture was sure to be reflected (Raboy et al.). Canadian media have always presented a pesky counter-example of the problem with this hypothesis. Today, as national broadcasters control a decreasing share of every country's audiovisual space, analysts, practitioners and policy-makers worry about the possible impact on national consciousness. They may take some solace from the Canadian example. Or then again, it might just scare the living daylight out of them.

With respect to the problematic nature of the relationship between media and "nationhood", Canada provides a remarkable case in point. Here is a country that is literally held together by cultural discord. Its cultural policy, by systematically managing to achieve the opposite of its stated goals, has enabled Canadians to create a series of cultural institutions through which they have been able to fulfil many of their aspirations in spite of the best intentions of their political leaders.

There may be an interesting lesson here. Take for example, the question of national identity. Identity today is increasingly multifaceted, and national identity is a particularly contested issue in many countries, even among some of the most politically stable. This poses a particular challenge to broadcasting, which has traditionally been organized at the national level. Where national broadcasting has been well-established, it has almost invariably been through the presence of a strong, often highly centralized national public broadcaster (the obvious exception being the United States). It is not only the external pressures of globalization that challenge this model today, but also the internal pressures brought about by the fragmentation of traditional notions of nationhood (see Anderson, Pietersee, Barber). If national broadcasters today wish to speak to the real concerns of their publics, they have to rethink their approaches to one of national broadcasting's most cherished objectives: the cementing of national unity. This task may be especially difficult for politicians to accept - as it has been in Canada (Raboy, 1996b).

As I have written elsewhere (1990), Canadian cultural policy, historically, has aimed to strengthen the Canadian political and cultural space both with regard to the invasive, integrationist thrust of North American continentalism and the fragmentary, disintegrationist pressures from within. In doing this, it has had to take account of the tension between the need for political unity and the demand for cultural pluralism. On the surface, these imperatives may appear to be contradictory. In fact, the maintaining of multiple cultural spaces within a common political framework is the essential characteristic of the Canadian project.

We don't always act as though we realize this. Paradoxically, cultural policy in Canada has always been driven by politics and economics. It has been aimed, ultimately, at keeping the country together while creating a robust climate for the development of Canadian cultural industries. At the highest level, federal cultural policy has sought to reflect a unitary political structure. At the same time, it has fostered the flourishing of a range of cultural institutions which speak to the expectations of the various Canadian publics. This is especially true with respect to the historic issue of linguistic duality in broadcasting.

This well-known story is rife with contradictions -- so much so that neither federalists nor sovereignists dared venture onto this slippery terrain in the 1995 referendum debate. Having developed a series of strong, centralized national cultural institutions, mandated to oversee and promote the flourishing of two national cultures, in English and in French, federal cultural policy has fostered and supported two visions of Canada and the world. Paradoxically, by all accounts, it has been more successful at fostering the québécois alter ego to a certain monocentric vision of Canada, than at underscoring the Canadian difference with respect to the United States.

The extent to which this has been so can best be illustrated by recalling the history and evolution of the Canadian approach to linguistic duality in broadcasting.

Linguistic Duality in Canada's Broadcasting Policy¹

1928-1945: Creating a system... and its problems

Although broadcasting in Canada actually began in 1919 (Vipond, 1992b), the basic framework of the Canadian broadcasting system was laid out in 1929 in the Aird report (Canada. Royal Commission on Radio Broadcasting). 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 Quebec government of Louis-Alexandre Taschereau passed legislation authorizing Quebec to erect and operate its own radio station, as well as produce programs 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, when it was created in 1936.

Aird had proposed that content over broadcasting be overseen by assistant commissioners in each of the provinces, but this interesting recommendation was not followed. Instead, the CRBC set out to create a single national radio service in English and in French, using both languages alternately so that both English and French audiences heard the same programme. In other words, the CRBC took the view that there was only one radio audience in Canada, made up of members of two different language groups.

As the CBC reflected in its submission to the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism some thirty years later: "Obviously, such an alternative was only workable as long as the program needs of both groups could be met by a single network." Indeed, as the demands of each group for a more complete service continued to grow, "the Corporation [was presented] with a situation which could only be met adequately by duplicate networks, English and French" (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, 1964: 5).

The most compelling factor for 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

¹ Parts of this historical section have been published in Raboy (1996a).

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. Carbine, Hector Charlesworth, and Austin Weir, according to whom French programming on national radio sparked "a queer mixture of prejudice, bigotry and fear" (Weir, 151).

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 (Lamarche).

In January 1942, the government announced it would hold a plebiscite on conscription. In the ensuing campaign, the Quebec-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 (Laurendeau).

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 Quebec under Maurice Duplessis claimed that Quebec had the constitutional authority to create a provincial broadcasting service, and passed legislation setting up Radio-Québec in 1945 (Quebec. Statutes). This legislation was never put into effect, however, after the federal minister responsible for broadcasting, 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" (Canada. House of Commons, 1946: 1167).

Meanwhile, outside Quebec, 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 yet be said for French-language service even in the 1950s. The Massey commission reported in 1951 that French-speaking communities outside Quebec were still poorly served by the CBC (Canada. Royal Commission on National Development in the Arts, Letters and Sciences, 297). Six years later, another commission (chaired by Robert Fowler) found that many parts of Canada were still unserved in French, 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" (Canada. Royal Commission on Broadcasting, 242).

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 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. Lévesque, then a well-known television journalist, became an outspoken supporter of the producers, who were seeking their first collective agreement with the corporation. He would often say that if the strike had shut down English television instead of French -- there was only one Canadian channel in each language at the time -- the government would have forced a settlement in half an hour. As it turned out, Radio-Canada was paralysed for 68 days, and the producers' strike took on mythical proportions as a main reference point of Quebec nationalism.²

² Gérard Pelletier (1983), also a Radio-Canada personality at the time and later a federal cabinet minister, has pointed out that much of the problem was attributable to the fact that the French network executives in Montreal

1963-1980: National unity and struggles for power

When the Liberals returned to power in 1963, 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 Quebec. In the House of Commons on November 13, 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" (Canada. House of Commons, 1964-65: 10084).

This was the clearest enunciation of the CBC's mission, in the government's eyes, since the war. It became clearer still during the next few years. At parliamentary committee hearings in 1966, Liberal backbenchers from Quebec and Radio-Canada middle management executives sparred over their respective views of the CBC's role vis-a-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" (Canada. Statutes, 1967-68, art. 3.g.iv.).

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" (Canada, 1967-68a: 3754). But the NDP's R.W. Prittie expressed the fear that the clause could be used as an excuse for a witch-hunt against Radio-Canada journalists who did not toe a strict federalist line. Gérard Pelletier, then chairman of the parliamentary committee on broadcasting and soon to join the Cabinet at the side of his lifelong friend Pierre Elliott Trudeau, admitted he had doubts about it "lead[ing] some people to believe that it is not a matter of promotion but of propaganda" (Canada. House of Commons, 1967-68: 6017). And an important observation on the clause's implications came from Conservative MP David MacDonald, a future minister of communications:

"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" (6025).

After some vigorous debate, the broadcasting act passed, with the controversial clause intact. 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 Montreal, 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 (Raboy, 1990: 204-208). The former head of Radio-Canada news and public affairs, Marc Thibault, remembers one official whose job was to monitor all news programs and count the number of times the word québécois was used (Thibault).

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 a Parti Québécois government in Quebec in November 1976.

lacked the authority to negotiate on behalf of the corporation, while the head office in Ottawa did not bother to take it seriously.

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 meant by the prime minister. The problem was not a bias in favour of separatist politics, the CRTC 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" (Canadian Radio-Television and Telecommunications Commission. Committee of Inquiry into the National Broadcasting Service: 9).

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. Political expectations of the CBC diminished, and in the important run-up to the Quebec 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" (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, 1979: 377-424). Ultimately, the referendum campaign was covered by CBC as a straight news event, while the government sought to mobilize the federalist constituency directly, particularly through advertising (Johnson, Stark).

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 Quebec 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 prime minister Lester Pearson in February 1968, Quebec 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 Quebec 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 (Quebec, 1968).

In the coming months, debate focussed on the question of "educational broadcasting". The new broadcasting act stated that "facilities should be provided within the Canadian broadcasting system for educational broadcasting" (Canada. Statutes. 1967-68, art. s.2.i.). Yet, education was clearly under provincial jurisdiction. Returning to Quebec from the constitutional conference, premier Daniel Johnson declared that his government had decided to apply the province's 1945 law establishing Radio-Québec (Quebec. Legislative Assembly, 3). 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.

In the early 1970s, negotiating a strong role for Quebec in communications policy became one of the hallmarks of Quebec premier Robert Bourassa's program for achieving "cultural sovereignty". In a series of important policy statements, Quebec proposed "to promote and maintain a québécois system of communications" (Quebec. Ministère des communications du Québec, 1971), and to become "master craftsman of communications policy on its territory" (Quebec. Ministère des communications du Québec, 1973).

The cornerstone of Quebec's policy was to be the Régie des services publics, an agency regulating utilities falling under the province's jurisdiction, which Quebec saw as equivalent to the CRTC. In 1973, the Régie began to regulate the 160 cable companies then operating in Quebec, although they were already subject to the regulation of the CRTC. Within a year the inevitable occurred: in applications to serve a community in the lower St. Lawrence region 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 case in favour of the CRTC, ruling that Ottawa had exclusive jurisdiction over cable (Canada. Supreme Court, 191-210).

Under the Parti Québécois government of the 1970s, Quebec did not directly engage with Ottawa over communications policy. The PQ carried over the policy thrust of the Bourassa government but basically abdicated in view of its lack of power over communications under the existing system. When pressed, PQ politicians would state

that political sovereignty was the only solution to Quebec's communications problems (Quebec. National Assembly: B-2095). 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 programs and policies begun by previous Union Nationale and Liberal governments: Radio-Québec, now a full-fledged broadcaster, and the particular Quebec form of participatory communication known as "community" media.

1980-1990: The triumph of the market

Both in Ottawa and Quebec, 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 centerpiece of Canadian cultural policy had begun to shift in 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 Department of Communications. The diffusion of culture would henceforth depend increasingly on its industrial base and the DOC would be concentrating on the growth of "cultural industries," Communications minister Francis Fox told the parliamentary committee (Canada. House of Commons. Standing Committee on Communications and Culture, 1980-83: 2/9).

The new orientation was underwritten by the Federal Cultural Policy Review Committee (chaired by Louis Applebaum and Jacques Hébert) that reported in 1982, and was spelled out in detail in a series of policy statements signed by Fox in 1983-84 (Canada. Federal Cultural Policy Review Committee; Department of Communications, 1983a, 1983c, 1984). 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 both optional and non-discretionary subscriber-funded specialty services). In general, 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 Quebec was strangely similar, as in the post-referendum context of the early 1980s, Quebec appeared to lose interest in the sociocultural possibilities of communications altogether, and placed its emphasis on industrial development. Ottawa and Quebec thus found themselves on the same wavelength, as the PQ discourse on communications became increasingly economic, and its policy industrially-oriented. Instead of making jurisdictional demands, Quebec in the early 1980s seemed determined to outpace Ottawa in shifting the accent in communications from the cultural and political to the industrial and economic spheres (Quebec. Ministère des communications du Québec, 1982, 1983).

A historic shift occurred with the election of the Mulroney Conservatives in 1984. In general, the government's early initiatives with respect to broadcasting coincided with its general thrust towards reduced public spending and expanding the role of the private sector in the Canadian economy (Canada. Task Force on Program Review, 1986a). But broadcasting and communications generally quickly emerged as one of the sectors on the cutting edge of its 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 well-known Quebec nationalist who had been a cabinet minister in the Union Nationale government which had fought, in the 1960s, for more provincial power through agencies such as Radio-Québec. He was the ideal minister for thawing relations with Quebec while applying broad government policy to communications.³

³ After leaving federal politics in 1992, Masse resurfaced to chair one of the PQ's consultative commissions leading up to the sovereignty referendum of 1995.

