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 daylights 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 fulfill 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, Pietersen, 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 Policy

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

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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. Carrière, 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 (Laurenneau).

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-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” (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 "[a]d [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 economicistic, 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.
Tendering the olive branch to Quebec in communications was also a move to deflect criticism from the Tories' attitude towards national public broadcasting. Even as his government was administering crippling surgery to the CBC budget, Masse was fond of reminding audiences of the Liberals' attitude towards public broadcasting: "We're not the ones who threatened to put the key in the door of the CBC because we didn't like its news coverage," he told a meeting of Quebec journalists in Montreal in December 1984 (Masse).

In February 1985, Ottawa and Quebec signed the first agreement between them in communications since creating their respective communications ministries a few months apart in 1969. The industrial thrust of the accord was evident, aiming at technical innovation and support for the production, development and marketing of communications goods and services, especially in export markets (Canada/Quebec, 1985; Tremblay). The two governments also set up a permanent joint committee, chaired by the two deputy ministers of communications, to pursue further areas of collaboration.

The committee's first effort produced an important report on the future of French-language television, whose central recommendation was crucial to the developing federal policy with respect to broadcasting. It proposed "that the special nature of the French-language television system be recognized within the Canadian broadcasting system, and that government policies and regulations be adapted accordingly" (Canada/Quebec. Federal-provincial committee, 2). Such a proposal would recognize, for the first time, the historic reality of parallel development of Canadian broadcasting since the 1930s. It would also mark a major shift in Ottawa's official attitude, which had always been that there is but one policy for Canadian broadcasting, not two.

In addition to a series of specific proposals, the report proposed general ongoing consultation between Ottawa and Quebec. A "harmonization" agreement for the development of French-language television was signed soon thereafter (Canada/Quebec, 1986). Since then, areas of federal-provincial cooperation have included working groups on cable television, children's advertising, and computer software (Tremblay, 83), and the idea of tailoring policy to meet the distinct needs of different markets has been reflected notably in CRTC decisions (Canadian Radio-Television and Telecommunications Commission, 1987a) and in the functioning of the Telefilm fund.

Quebec public opinion welcomed the new distribution of resources in communications, which was seen as a move away from the traditional approach of massive, and exclusive, federal involvement in cultural affairs (Bissonnette, 1985). This, it was recalled, had begun as a kind of benevolent state intervention in the 1950s in the wake of the Massey report, only to be transformed into a strategic weapon for the promotion of national unity under the Pearson, and particularly the Trudeau governments.

The Mulroney government's first term in office was also marked by a series of formal initiatives with respect to broadcasting policy: a comprehensive review group chaired by Gerald Caplan and Florian Sauvageau (Canada. Task Force on Broadcasting Policy), lengthy hearings and a report by the responsible parliamentary committee (Canada. House of Commons. Standing Committee on Communications and Culture, 1988), a ministerial policy statement (Canada. Communications Canada, 1988), and, finally, a new broadcasting act (Canada. Unpassed Bills, 1988a).

The Caplan-Sauvageau task force welcomed the proposals of the federal-provincial committee on French-language television (Canada. Task Force on Broadcasting Policy, 157), and reiterated many of its key proposals. It proposed "that the distinctive character of Quebec broadcasting be recognized both in itself and as the nucleus of French-language broadcasting throughout Canada" (223). French- and English language services within the CBC should be recognized as serving "distinct societies", and be allowed to take "different approaches to meeting the objectives assigned to public broadcasting" (217). The CBC's French network budgets should be reviewed to bring hourly production costs for television more into line with the higher amounts allocated to English production (253). As for the CBC's national unity mandate, the task force found it "inappropriate for any broadcaster, public or private..."

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4 According to a senior official of the Ministère des communications du Québec interviewed by the author in June 1990, a few days before the collapse of the Meech Lake accord, this proposal was "Meech before its time".
It suggests constrained attachment to a political order rather than free expression in the pursuit of a national culture broadly defined" (283-4). The task force proposed to replace it with "a more socially oriented provision, for example, that the service contribute to the development of national consciousness" (285).

The parliamentary committee that studied the Caplan-Sauvageau recommendations made two pertinent proposals of its own. One concerned making the law reflect the CRTC practice of “take[ing] into consideration the distinctive characters of French and English broadcasting when implementing broadcasting policy” (Canada. House of Commons. Standing Committee on Communications and Culture, 1988: 418). The other extended the task force proposal on CBC budgets, specifying that production costs be established “so that the quality of the Canadian programs of the English and French networks would be comparable” (363).

The government’s position was formalized in the policy statement Canadian Voices Canadian Choices, signed by Flora MacDonald and made public a few days after the report of the parliamentary committee in June 1988. Here it was recognized that

“The problems and challenges for English-language broadcasting and French-language broadcasting are not the same... [and that] these differences between the English and French broadcasting environments necessarily require different policy approaches for each” (Canada. Communications Canada, 1988: 6-7).

The legislation tabulated at the same time (Bill C-136) featured a half-dozen clauses referring to the linguistic duality of the system. The key clause specified that “English and French language broadcasting, while sharing common aspects, operate under different conditions and may have different requirements” (Canada. Unpassed Bills, 1988a, art. 3.1.b.). The CBC’s mandate was changed to read that “the programming provided by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation should... contribute to shared national consciousness and identity” (art. 3.1.n.i.v.). An amendment introduced at third reading added that it should “strive to be of equivalent quality in English and in French” as well (Canada. Unpassed Bills, 1988b, art. 3.1.k.iv.).

Bill C-136 died in the Senate on September 30, 1988, as Parliament was dissolved for the national elections (Raboy, 1990: 329-334). It was reintroduced virtually intact, however, as Bill C-40 in October 1989 (Canada. 34th Parliament, second session).

While the debate on Bill C-136 had generated almost no controversy over its constitutional implications, this was not the case with Bill C-40. When the new bill went to legislative committee in January 1990, the minister -- now once again Marcel Masse -- was compelled to reiterate the general thrust of the legislation as it had been expressed in Flora MacDonald’s policy statement of June 1988 and to explain the wording of the CBC’s national unity mandate (Canada. House of Commons. Legislative Committee on Bill C-40, 11).

The semantic soul-searching culminated in a highly partisan parliamentary debate only months before the collapse of the Meech Lake Accord in 1990. In the Legislative Committee, New Democratic Party critic Ian Waddell accused the government of “Meeching” the CBC, before asking minister Masse point blank if he was a “separatist” (17-18). Liberals peppered CBC and CRTC spokespersons with leading questions about the CBC’s ability to serve the country if the wording of its mandate was changed. But the government’s majority in the House of Commons proved more reliable than its constitutional deal with the provincial premiers, and the Act passed essentially intact (Canada. Statutes, 1991).

The 1990s - Broadcasting, Culture, Communications, and Nation-Saving

For about seventy years, as we have seen, broadcasting policy has been one of the main arenas for playing out the paradoxical issues of Canada’s constitutional politics. Royal commission reports from Aird (radio broadcasting) to Massey (arts and culture) to Laurendeau-Dunton (bilingualism and biculturalism) have included some of the best efforts at making Canada work. Resulting legislation, funding programs and regulatory policies have reflected more mundane, sometimes partisan concerns.
Inevitably, the institutions and practices of Canadian communications have reflected the inconsistencies of Canada rather than the national unity designs of their architects. In one sense, they have fostered a dualistic view, but instead of tapping this as a source of strength, the Canadian policy apparatus continued to struggle against it during the 1990s.

The federal government was still spending close to $3 billion a year in the area of culture and communication, much of it explicitly earmarked to efforts at promoting national unity. In 1991, in the wake of the collapse of the Meech Lake Accord, the House of Commons Standing Committee on Communications and Culture undertook an investigation aimed at exploring the role of culture and communications in Canada's constitutional future, in the belief “that the constitutional issue is as much cultural as it is political” (Canada. House of Commons. Standing Committee on Communications and Culture., 1992: ix). The Committee sought to establish the relationship between cultural identity, cultural diversity and political unity, and the role of communications systems in this process.

Characteristically, the Committee identified the CBC as a critical institution, and, regarding regulation, proposed “...the continuation of a single, federal authority over broadcasting and telecommunications [the CRTC], with provincial and regional consultation in the national application of a comprehensive communications policy” (xi). In general, it recommended that “...the federal role in both culture and communications must be maintained and, indeed, strengthened” (xiii).

This conventional federal position was, to say the least, somewhat incompatible with the view Quebec was then articulating in every possible venue regarding jurisdiction, to the point that it could be seen as a virtual exercise in non-communication.

In keeping with the Mulroney government's constitutional position, however, the multi-party committee endorsed “the recognition of Quebec in the charter as a distinct society within Canada, based on its French-speaking majority, its unique culture and its civil law tradition (...)” (app. B), while recognizing the problem of limiting this to Quebec and thus negating other aspects of Canadian distinctiveness. The Committee's report elicited a formal response from the government (Canada. Communications Canada, 1993), but nothing in the way of concrete action.

Quebec, meanwhile, was insisting on full repatriation of powers in culture and communication -- while remaining characteristically vague about just what that might mean in any context short of full-blown sovereignty. Beginning with arts community testimony before the Bélanger-Campeau commission on Quebec's political and constitutional future (Quebec. Commission sur l'avenir politique et constitutionnel du Québec), and the Quebec Liberal Party's Allaire Report (Quebec Liberal Party) in 1991, forces in Quebec civil society persistently and consistently re-articulated a 'cultural sovereignty' position first developed in the early 1970s and, in some respects, dating back to the Taschereau government's abortive attempt to outflank Ottawa in the radio field in the late 1920s. A blue-ribbon committee chaired by Musée de la civilisation director Roland Arpin5 (Quebec. Gouvernement du Québec, Groupe-conseil sur la politique culturelle du Québec [présidé par Roland Arpin]) recommended Quebec seek full powers in 1991, and the ministry for cultural affairs tried to flesh out what this might look like in a document which became Quebec's official cultural policy the following year (Quebec. Gouvernement du Québec, ministère des Affaires culturelles).

Quebec's cultural policy would be concentrated in four main areas: 1) affirmation of cultural identity (promoting the French language, heritage activities, and reinforcing dialogue between cultural groups in Quebec); 2) support for the creative arts; 3) access and popular participation in cultural life; 4) new instruments of support (a ministry of culture, an arts and culture council modeled after the Canada Council, partnership with municipal authorities).

5 Later named deputy minister of culture by the Parizeau government.
Looking at specific proposals in terms of dollars and cents provided a clearer view of the problem, however: under the existing constitutional arrangement, Quebec simply did not have the power to exercise significant influence in this sphere. Its strategy for development of cultural industries, for example, was based on a funding agency called SOGIC, which had provided a total of $118 million in loans, guarantees and subsidies across the range of the cultural industries between 1979 and 1991 - about 10% of what Ottawa spends on the CBC alone in just one year.

Conflicting interpretations of who spent how much on what in culture and communication provided some of the less edifying material in the constitutional debate, but at least gave some indication of the scope of the issue. Thus, according to a study done for the Quebec ministry of cultural affairs (Samson et al.), Quebec financed arts and culture to the tune of $482 million in 1990, while in the same year, Ottawa spent $283 million in Quebec, excluding the part of CBC operations that could be attributed to Quebec. When one factored in this amount -- an estimated $450 million -- one can begin to appreciate both the nature of such guerres des chiffres, as well as the centrality of broadcasting to federal cultural strategy with respect to the national question.

As we have seen, the mechanics of dualism in Canadian broadcasting constituted an important aspect of the broadcasting policy review of 1985-90. In the framework of reduced available public funding, attention in Quebec was now drawn to the need to close the gap between money earmarked for French- or English-language CBC production. In the process leading up to the new broadcasting legislation, Quebec-based lobby groups had succeeded in including a provision that CBC programming should “strive to be of equivalent quality” in English and in French -- a neat peg on which to hang arguments for more money. Taken together with the emphasis on linguistic asymmetry that was equally part of the new context, however, the textual provisions of the new policy did not prevent the creation of new aberrations, such as the informational inequality that resulted from introduction of the CBC’s cable television all-news service, “Newsworld”, in English only.6

Here, the full essence of the Canadian dilemma could be appreciated. Does “programming of equivalent quality” imply an equal distribution of resources? Where do you distinguish between “distinct characters” and “different policy approaches”? Is symmetrical programming an imposition, or is asymmetry a smokescreen for discrimination? The CBC budget is an opaque document that begs for interpretation, but no matter how you read it, the linguistic breakdown indicates that budget allocation is based neither on demographics nor on strict application of the principle of dualism -- oscillating around 37 %, it is a solution characteristic of the compromise that is Canada: at one and the same time fair enough, yet sure to please no one.

The historic ambiguity of Canadian cultural policy with respect to duality was evident in the text of the agreement signed by federal, provincial, territorial and aboriginal leaders in Charlottetown on August 28, 1992. In a single paragraph under the rubric “Culture”, the accord managed both to give exclusive jurisdiction over cultural matters within provinces to the provincial authorities, and assert the continuing responsibility of the federal government in “Canadian” cultural matters. Furthermore, the federal government should retain responsibility for national cultural institutions, including grants and contributions delivered by these institutions (Canada, 1992).

The document contained what the Toronto Globe and Mail (Godfrey) described as “the makings of a minefield”. On the question that captured the most public attention -- Which level of government would henceforth be expected to patronize the arts? -- no clear answer was forthcoming. Were governments proposing to divide the turf, or share it? How precisely could one reconcile such clearly contradictory notions as “exclusive jurisdiction over cultural matters within the provinces”, “continuing responsibility of the federal government in Canadian cultural matters”, and “responsibility for national cultural institutions, including grants and contributions delivered by these institutions”? While a film documentary on the James Bay hydroelectric project or local radio in the Gaspé were quite arguably “cultural matters within a province”, funding the documentary, or regulating radio would most likely continue to fall under the responsibility of “national cultural institutions”. Establishing the hierarchy of authority in such affairs could keep the wheels of the constitution industry turning for a long time indeed.

6 The problem was finally corrected when the CRTC approved the CBC’s application for an equivalent French-language service, le Réseau de l’information (RDI), which began broadcasting in January 1995.
In fact, the new arrangement would have eliminated none of the ambiguity or policy overlap in the cultural sector (Julien). More to the point (from a Quebec perspective), it would have enshrined Ottawa's legitimacy in an area that had traditionally been the provinces', constitutionally, if not in fact.

In short, the Charlottetown accord would have constitutionalized the structural imbalance in the pragmatics of cultural dualism in Canada -- unlike the Meech Lake accord, which would have validated the symbolic goal that drives cultural and communication policy in Quebec. What we have instead is a most uncomfortable status quo, still struggling to find a suitable alternative to both centralized federalism and the breakup of the federation.

Conclusion

In October 1994, the Canadian Parliament debated a bill to establish the Department of Canadian Heritage, a new government ministry which would consolidate a variety of activities which, in the words of the minister, Michel Dupuy, "have a common objective namely, promoting Canadian identity."

The new ministry would combine such activities as communications, cultural industries, language policy, national parks and historic sites, amateur sport and multiculturalism. The keyword in the name of the new ministry, heritage, the minister stated, refers to "the set of signs that enable us to recognize ourselves as individuals who belong to a group or even a country" (Canada. House of Commons, 1994: 6416).

The opposition Bloc Québécois critic on cultural policy, Suzanne Tremblay of Rimouski, saw things differently. First, she pointed out, the administrative reorganization and merging of several departments leading to the creation of "Heritage" was a primarily economic operation, "unacceptable both for Canadians and for Quebeckers". Regarding the proposed division of jurisdictional responsibilities between the departments of Heritage and Industry, she pointed out that the bill put the minister of Heritage in charge of content "while his colleague from Industry will be in charge of the means required... In other words, the former will be responsible for culture, while the latter will look after the business side of things." This aspect, she added "makes us fear the worst as regards the future of Canadian culture."

Of course, Tremblay's strongest words were reserved for the part of her critique that scrutinized the bill through the prism of Quebec nationalism. The bill, she noted, "shamelessly infringes on what so far has been considered provincial jurisdiction: culture" (6419). In this respect, it underscored "the steadfast obstinacy of the Canadian government in refusing to recognize the distinctiveness of Quebec society". More specifically, she framed her argument in these terms:

Under a Canadian federalism, English Canada has the right to defend its culture against the American invader, but Quebec should drop its own culture... They want to make us all one nation and deny there are two. There are two nations in this country, and the act to establish the Department of Canadian Heritage should reflect an awareness of the situation in Quebec and the flexibility that Quebec needs to develop and prosper. (6421)

Now the problem here lies in the type of meaning one ascribes to the constructs 'Canada' and 'Quebec'. 'Canada' generally refers to the set of political institutions that have evolved since 1867, and until further notice, includes Quebec. 'Quebec', on the other hand, is used far more ambiguously, and depending on the context, its meaning can range from referring to an unproblematic component part of Canada all the way to a putative separate state. Most of the time it is somewhere in between, and reflects the tension of the unresolved aspects of the national question in both Canada and Quebec -- as I think a close textual reading of Tremblay's statement makes clear.

Indeed, many claim that there are far more than two nations in Canada, and here we have to consider the link between political structures and symbolic constructs. 'Canada' in its simplest sense refers to an existing political structure. Linguistic duality in Canada's cultural policy has been the result of a (rather successful, I think) strategy for accommodating the most serious threats to that political structure on the basis of conflicting views of nationhood
within Canada. The strong federalist attachments of French Canadians outside Quebec and English Canadians within Quebec is evident of this. On the other hand, this aspect of federal cultural policy has also led to frustration among the two linguistic majorities: the francophone majority within Quebec would like political control over the instruments of French-language cultural development -- hence the demand for repatriating jurisdiction over culture and communications to the province; elsewhere in Canada, the anglophone majority feels it is unduly subsidizing French-language culture.

Thus, in the latest, year-long parliamentary committee debate on the future mandate and financial structure of the CBC (Canada. House of Commons, Standing Committee on Canadian Heritage, 1995b), a common theme of the Bloc Québécois concerned closing the gap in the budgets attributed to French and English services of the CBC, especially television. This has been a demand of francophone groups since the extent of that gap was documented by the Caplan-Sauvageau task force in 1986, and is justified by the argument that it takes the same amount of money to produce quality programming in English or in French, irrespective of the size of the audience served. The commitment to provide "equivalent services" in English and in French -- written in to the CBC's mandate in 1991 -- is contingent on equivalent funding, the argument goes.

According to uncontested published reports at the time (Dion), the penultimate draft of the parliamentary committee's report included a call for reduction in the linguistic funding gap. But, at the last minute, when the Bloc Québécois announced it would issue a minority report objecting to the maintaining of "the political aspect of the Corporation's mandate" (to contribute to shared national consciousness and identity), the Liberal majority on the committee reportedly scratched the equivalent funding proposal. This kind of political trafficking is perfectly coherent with the history of Canadian cultural policy, where the accommodation of francophone demands is used alternatively as a bargaining chip with nationalist politicians and a carrot dangled before the francophone public in order to buy its support (or, at least, passive submission).7

As a result, another paradox of Canadian cultural politics is the realization that a sovereign Quebec would have more political control but over less resources than are presently available to francophone culture (assuming that a sovereign Quebec would attribute a similar proportion of public funds to cultural spending).

Cultural policy was not a high-profile item in the September 1994 Quebec election campaign -- a "warm potato" was how one journalist described it (Baillargeon). Short of promising to spend one per cent of the Quebec budget on cultural subsidies, the PQ's electoral program on culture was paper-thin. Otherwise, there was no indication of what precisely Quebec would do with the new powers it would acquire. Paradoxically, as the otherwise pro-péquist publisher of Le Devoir, Lise Bissonnette, wrote in a pre-election editorial, the Quebec Liberals actually had a better track record on culture than the PQ (Bissonnette, 1994). "While they had literally carried the PQ to power by providing it with a soul and a driving force," Bissonnette wrote, "the artistic milieu was left empty-handed at the end of the PQ era in 1985." The Liberals, meanwhile, brought in legislation on the status of the artist, an umbrella cultural policy, a cultural funding agency (Conseil des arts et des lettres du Québec - CALQ), and a new crown corporation for providing grants to cultural industries (Société de développement des entreprises culturelles - SODEC).

In broadcasting, there was little word on PQ plans. In all likelihood, Quebec broadcasting legislation and regulation would closely follow the Canadian model, in which, as we have seen, Quebec has had a prominent hand. But would a sovereign Quebec maintain public funding of broadcasting at present levels? The PQ government's attitude towards Radio-Québec was good grounds for skepticism on this question (Lesage).

On the other hand, there may be a more significant basis for differentiating between Ottawa and Quebec as prospective policymakers with regard to communication. Historically, various authors have noted the preponderant

7 The debate over the Report provided other signs of the present tortured state of Canadian national politics. While the Bloc subscribed to the Report's reiteration of the continuing role of the CBC as a public broadcaster, the Reform Party also dissented from the majority report, falling back on its platform which calls for the privatization of CBC television activities.
attention paid to the state and to public institutions as motors of social and cultural development in both Canada and Quebec (Hardin; McRoberts and Pogate). In the current climate of fiscal retrenchment, analysts have remarked that Quebec, almost alone among Canadian provincial and federal governments, continues to promote a relatively social-democratic attitude towards the role of the state. (See most recently, the Globe and Mail editorial, “Beyond public and private”, 28 September 1995 1995a], which found this deplorable.)

In the area of communication, this distinction emerges in recent policy proposals regarding the establishment of the new information infrastructures known metaphorically as the “information highway”. In April 1994, the federal government created an Information Highway Advisory Council to examine the issue and come up with a plan.4 The Council’s report (Canada. Information Highway Advisory Council, 1995) was made public on 27 September 1995. It contained over 300 recommendations. The document, as reported in the Globe and Mail (Surtees), “embraces a pro-marketplace thrust” so prominent that the only non-business representative on the advisory council, Canadian Labour Congress vice-president Jean-Claude Parrot, felt compelled to state a dissenting opinion. Among other things, the report recommends making competition the driving force on the information highway and liberalizing foreign ownership requirements in broadcasting and telecommunications (while maintaining the traditional emphasis on Canadian content and public broadcasting as promoters of Canadian culture and identity). The key idea, repeated in several places in the report’s 227 pages, was this: “In the new information economy, success will be determined by the marketplace, not by the government.” (Canada. Information Highway Advisory Council, x).

Meanwhile, with somewhat less fanfare, a Quebec report on the same subject was published two months earlier, in the dog days of July 1995. Here, the emphasis was on the information highway’s potential impact on education, health care and social services, the promotion of language and culture, the organisation of public services and, residually, the development of industry and export markets. Under “equality of access”, one reads: “It is necessary to guarantee the right to information and knowledge for all citizens, without regard to their financial resources or their language of use, in order to avoid the division of Quebec society into two groups, those who have access to the information highway and those who do not” (Quebec. Conseil de la science et de la technologie, Comité consultatif sur l’autoroute de l’information, v).

This is not to deny the obvious benefits to industry of such a policy, for as the report continues to say: “Facilitating accessibility in fact constitutes a way of stimulating demand for products and services” (37). Indeed, like its Ottawa counterpart, the Quebec committee that drew up this report was top-heavy with major industry players like André Chagnon of the cable giant Vidéotron and Charles Siros of Teleglob Inc. (who both served on the two councils, providing an interesting example of the way the present constitutional arrangement enables some to butter their bread on both sides). But the difference could be read in passages in which the report develops notions such as the idea that building the information infrastructure should be seen as a “social investment”, whose economic benefits will be reaped by future generations (42-43).

Characteristically, most of the legal and regulatory instruments required to orient the emerging technological environment remain under Ottawa’s jurisdiction. Thus, while the federal government indeed has the power to act on its advisors’ report, the Quebec report included the necessary recommendation that the Quebec government “use all means available to see that federal laws and policies regarding the information highway not only recognize the cultural specificity of Quebec but also allow Quebec to develop and reinforce it” (33).

In an age of globalization, one may be tempted to marvel at proposals that are contingent on a more active role for the state. But public attitudes towards collective institutions surely rank among the most significant markers of cultural distinction, and just as Canadians generally identify their social safety net, gun control and the CBC as characteristics that distinguish their country from the United States, the Québécois continue to define their difference in terms of the French language, the decentralisation of powers and the role of the state as the motor of social, economic and cultural development.

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4 The CRTC was also asked to advise on the areas under its authority, broadcasting and telecommunications. It reported in May 1995 (Canadian Radio-Television and Telecommunications Commission, 1995).
It is not likely that under the present federal structure Ottawa will relinquish any significant power to Quebec in the area of communication. But, regardless of Quebec's choice with respect to political sovereignty, its manifestations of cultural difference will not disappear. This is why it is clear that short of a radical constitutional restructuring, the dilemmas and incoherencies of Canadian cultural politics are going to remain with us for the foreseeable future. The challenge remains to keep looking for institutional arrangements that turn this into a source of strength.