

# Securing our future: What follows tomorrow? Chrétien and cultural policy

## FIXING THE DARK PERIOD

Between May and October 2001, in a cross-Canada road show, the federal Liberal government announced the jewels in the crown of its cultural program—over a half a billion dollars in cultural spending. *Tomorrow Starts Today* (TST), was intended to signal the Liberal Party's commitment to finally fulfill the promises it had made almost a decade earlier. On a number of fronts, it did just that. Representing, as the Liberals would repeat on a number of occasions, the largest investment in the arts since the Canada Council was founded in 1957, TST appeared to offer something for almost everyone.

But did it? Closer analysis makes it clear that the dollars offered in this new program did little more than replace funding lost during the Liberals' deficit reduction drive in the 90s. Between 1993 and 1998, in what Canada Council Chair, Jean-Louis Roux has called "the dark period," cultural spending declined 17 percent and culture took one of the heaviest hits of any portfolio.

## RED BOOK PROMISES

This was the case despite the fact that the Liberals' first and most comprehensive Red Book, *Creating Opportunity: The Liberal Plan for Canada* (1993) had declared: "Culture is the very essence of national identity, the bedrock of national sovereignty and national pride." Decrying the Conservative regime that had "deliberately undermined our national cultural institutions," a key Liberal promise focused on stable multi-year financing to national cultural institutions. Yet, in their first term, the Liberals would cut deeply into those same institutions that they had promised to support.

The second Red Book, *Securing Our Future Together: Preparing Canada For the 21st Century* (1997), reiterated the Liberals' commitment to the cultural sector, pledging "a more artist-centred ap-

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proach to ... cultural policy." In the aftermath of the split-run debacle, it also outlined the need to "build international rules that will support domestic cultural expression within a global marketplace." Outlining tax measures that had been introduced during the government's first term in support of both charitable donations and the cultural industries, it boasted of a "much more favourable" tax regime for the arts. Like its predecessor, *Securing Our Future* focused on national cultural institutions. Acknowledging that financial circumstances had prevented the government from fulfilling its earlier commitments, it promised the Canada Council \$25 million and described the government's "unqualified support for Canadian public broadcasting." The cultural industries remained a constant theme.

It was only in the campaign for a third mandate, backed by an improved financial situation, a tenacious minister of Canadian heritage (Sheila Copps had

taken on the portfolio in 1996), a skilled deputy minister (Alex Himelfarb joined the department in 1999), and a prime minister considering his legacy that the cultural sector came into its own. *Opportunity for All: The Liberal Plan for the Future of Canada* (2000) envisioned "a smart country where people are the greatest source of competitive advantage." Many of the Liberal initiatives in this mandate reflected that larger theme, promising to "connect Canadians," through high-speed broadband Internet access to be available to all communities in Canada by 2004. The chapter on culture, "Canadian Culture, Canadian Choices," focused on new technologies: the creation of Canadian cultural content for the Internet, the development of new media production, a one-stop all-Canadian Web site, and support for the cultural industries as the leading content providers in the new economy. Recapitulating earlier promises, this third Red Book once again reiterated the government's commitment to national cultural institutions; to promoting Canadian culture abroad; and to ensuring that Canada and its cultural sector would be connected and competitive in a globalized world.

In successive iterations, the Liberal government had echoed the current language of cultural policy internationally, moving from the rhetoric of national identity to that of social cohesion—culture as "embodiment of a country's creativity, spirit and identity, which binds us together and builds Canada" in an increasingly diverse country and the need to address that diversity. The centrality of the arts was also a theme and, in his 2001 reply to the Speech from the Throne, anticipating the announcement of TST, Chrétien committed his government to "provide significant new support to ensure that our cultural institutions, our performers, our artists, can play the critical role of helping us to know ourselves."

## THE RECORD ON CULTURE

If the Liberals took office committed to support for national cultural institutions, their record has been uneven to put it politely. Under their mandate, the CBC's funding dropped from \$1,089.5 million in 1993-94 to \$923 million in 2001-02 (and even lower in the intervening period). Except for the Canada Council and, to a certain extent the national museums, national cultural institutions have lost ground in real terms. Strikingly, over 70 percent of the funding for TST is administered directly by the Department of Canadian Heritage, representing an increase of more than \$400 million to a budget that in 2001-02 stood at \$952 million. This reflects a worrying policy shift away from the principle of arm's length in the management of the cultural portfolio.

Cultural industries remained a focus throughout the Chrétien years, with a steady shift toward support for building capacity in the private sector and compensating for the ramifications of an increasingly liberalized trade environment. Copps, for instance, highlighted the creation of the Canadian Television Fund and the "approximately \$1.5 billion" of funds which have gone into this private-public sector initiative as one of her greatest achievements. Technology and trade, along with the very real threat to domestic cultural policy capacity have been key drivers in shaping the agenda in recent years. Job creation and the rising percentage of GDP attributable to the cultural sector are among the reasons cited for action.

Among its many prongs, which included capacity building in arts organizations and renewal of cultural infrastructure, TST enhanced the international cultural portfolio with the Department of Canadian Heritage's Trade Routes Program. Positioning Canada in the era of global communications was another critical objective of TST. The virtual museum of Canada, French language and Canadian content on the Internet, development of the multimedia industry, and the creation of a Canadian portal were central to the policy objectives of con-

nectivity and access to Canadian content at home and abroad.

The Chrétien government introduced a number of significant initiatives in addition to TST. Tax incentives improved the environment for support to the charitable sector and, consequently, the non-profit arts and cultural sector in Canada. One of the government's last initiatives was the creation of the Commercial Heritage Properties Incentive Fund launched with the Department of Finance in November 2003.

Though the heritage sector did not fare particularly well over the last decade, Chrétien, like Trudeau, understood the importance of bricks and mortar in legacy building. Under his watch, The Canadian War Museum has found a new home and the Archives' long-awaited Portrait Gallery is scheduled to move into the former American embassy. Last spring, Chrétien announced the creation of the Canada History Centre, dedicated to Canadian political and civic history, to be housed in the former government Conference Centre in Ottawa. Like the merged National Library and Archives that the Liberals also announced during Chrétien's last mandate, the History Centre was to be a government agency rather than an arm's-length museum. At present, however, all projects are under review and the History Centre, at least, is unlikely to be realized. More generally, it will remain for Martin to address the need for adequate support for the maintenance and operation of the underfunded museum sector as a whole. We have seen little evidence of the national heritage policy called for by the Canadian Museums Association that would "engage all Canadians in their heritage, in all parts of Canada, not just in Ottawa."

Another legacy of the era bears the personal stamp of Minister Copps. After the split-run magazine decision at the WTO, Heritage moved into the international arena, taking a leadership role in the creation of the international culture ministers' network, the International Network for Cultural Policy (INCP). Heritage also lent its support to the cre-

ation of a very effective civil society organization, the International Network for Cultural Diversity that meets concurrently with the INCP. Today, the networks have members from around the world. The 2003 UNESCO General Conference voted for the creation of a world Convention on Cultural Diversity to provide a legal foundation for government measures that support cultural diversity and to encourage governments to use that authority domestically. Canada continues to house the Secretariat for the INCP and its election to the UNESCO Executive Council will enable it to work to ensure that the goals of the convention are realized when the convention is presented for approval at the next general conference in 2005. Whether the UNESCO convention will, as Copps suggests, "settle international disputes over issues involving cultural protection . . . rather than the WTO," remains to be seen.

In the meantime, foreign ownership, media concentration, and Canadian content remain critical agenda issues that have seen much discussion but little resolution. Canadian content in broadcasting has been the subject of a number of reports. Foreign ownership regulations in broadcasting and the media are hotly contested. In recent months, the Standing Committee on Canadian Heritage and the Committee on Industry, Science and Technology have taken opposing positions on the subject. The former recommended that there be no change to the existing rules and urged increased funding for Canadian content and the CBC. The latter, arguing that carriage and control should be distinguished and that broadcast distribution and programming entities can be treated differently, recommended that the rules concerning telecommunications and broadcast distribution be eliminated. This is a hot potato passed on to the Martin regime.


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**Securing our future, page 18**

## Securing our future continued from page 17

an uncertain future. Even those promises that reflect core values such as stability for national cultural institutions have not been ascertained. It remains unclear whether the individual pro-

grams bundled together under the umbrella of TST, the Chrétien government's most expensive and most publicized initiative, will be sustained in the Martin era. Most of the

initiatives introduced in Chrétien's last mandate reflect broad Liberal policy objectives. If it is wise, the Martin government will continue to build on its predecessor's achievements. 


## He kept us out of Buffalo continued from page 15

Adams describes. Or he may have finally had it with the nation's neo-conservative elites as they were rather ungraciously replacing him with one of their own.

Whatever the impetus, the record of Chrétien's last year as prime minister was unlike anything in the nine years that preceded it—or in fact anything seen since the constitution came home. His final

legislative program was a litany of un-American activities: gun control, decriminalization of marijuana, same-sex marriage. It would have pleased the by-now beatified Trudeau. Chrétien's signing the Kyoto Accord and standing with the UN against the second Iraq war would have made Pearson proud if not envious.

As Chrétien left office, there was more

life left in Canadian nationalism than either he or his critics could have anticipated. "Canada's New Spirit," as *The Economist* called it in September 2003, was more than a feel good factor or a smokescreen for importing Republican policies. Fostering and defending a national identity might yet be the measure of a prime minister. 

## The quintessential continued from page 13

approach that sold "national unity" on top of more tangible products. Equally salient, Chrétien reversed course on NAFTA soon after he became prime minister. Rather than opening up the NAFTA issue to a wide-ranging discussion in Cabinet or the country, Chrétien chose decisively—and personally—to close the issue once and for all.

In other, especially non-economic, areas, considerable autonomy was allowed for activist ministers such as foreign minister Lloyd Axworthy. On issues such as the campaign to ban anti-personnel landmines and the initiative to create an International Criminal Court, Axworthy worked closely not with the United States but, in a new speeded up version of classic Canadian coalition building, with a loose grouping of like-minded countries and NGOs. On the more successful of these initiatives—above all the landmines case—Chrétien could bask in the glow of reflected glory without having expended much political capital, energy, or exposure to risks.

### DEALING WITH THE AMERICANS

This search for balance comes out in most definitive fashion, however, in Chrétien's approach to dealing with the United States directly. In the aftermath of the shock and horror of 9/11, Chrétien

was willing to go along to satisfy US demands that Canada—with other allies—be onside with the war on terrorism. The Canada-US border was re-branded. Rather than just making contributions through naval and air forces, as had been the model in the Gulf War and Kosovo, Canada's commitment to the first Afghanistan operation contained not just deployment of a number of Canadian ships but the participation under US command of a 750-member "battle group" together with the deployment of personnel from the JTF2 (Joint Task Force Two).

Still, notwithstanding all the immense pressure from the Bush administration, Chrétien did not join the new coalition of the willing "Operation Iraqi Freedom." At one level, this resistance can be elevated to Chrétien idealistically adopting a value-based foreign policy, with Canada defined as a civilian/rules-based (or Kantian) state, increasingly disconnected and uneasy with US militarism

expressed in Hobbesian terms. At another—and more convincing level—the result can be attributed to Chrétien's impressive political and pragmatic instincts; a skillful calculation based especially on the unpopularity of the Iraqi intervention due to the sensibilities of Quebec, multicultural communities, and across an important gender divide.

When all is said and done, therefore, Chrétien's defining moment in foreign policy terms constituted a non-action—that is to say, what he was not prepared to do as opposed to any constructive design or strategy. The test for Paul Martin will be to raise the bar of Canada's position and role in the world. Just as the caution of Prime Minister Mackenzie King morphed into the so-called Pearsonian diplomatic golden age, the need is for a more decisive, creative, sustained, and operational focus on Canadian foreign policy in the post-Iraq and post-Chrétien period. 

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