

Jean Chrétien and cultural policy: The biggest deficit of all?

THE DREAMING DEFICIT

In recent years Canadians have developed a bold confidence based on glittering cultural achievements. From the Cirque de Soleil on the Las Vegas strip to the unsettling brilliance of painter Alex Colville, from the fantasy worlds created by the award-winning films of Denys Arcand to the books by Yann Martel and Margaret Atwood and CBC's often searing documentaries, there is an exuberant sense that our artists and indeed Canadian cultural products have arrived.

However stirring and self-satisfying as this vision might be, the gritty reality is quite different. Canadian films, books, TV programs, magazines, and music are still found for the most part at the back of stores, erased from hard drives, or at the very bottom of the list of programming choices. Indeed, some would argue that in the places where most people live their daily lives, Canadian cultural products are quickly fading from view—the legacy of 10 years of government neglect. Canadian drama on English-Canadian TV barely registers in the public consciousness, our music industries are struggling to stay afloat amid technological change, and surveys indicate that Canadians are reading less and buying fewer books than they were 10 years ago.

All this is to say that Jean Chrétien's cultural deficit may be the biggest deficit of all. Cultural deficits can be as damaging as fiscal deficits. As drama producer David Barlow has warned: "An interesting phenomenon occurs when a country looks to a foreign culture for its popular entertainment over a long period of time. If a society consistently chooses the dramatic fantasies of another culture, they come to believe that their own reality is not a valid place on which to build dreams. Their reality isn't good enough for dreaming."

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BROADCASTING POLICY OR LACK THEREOF

Perhaps the most glaring example of inaction is in the area of broadcasting policy. Broadcasting is a particularly poignant arena to look at because while convergence means that all media are converging on the Internet, TV still remains the central showcase for Canadian culture whether film, music, or drama. Canadians on average spend almost a full day out of every single week watching TV.

During the Chrétien years, the salient moment for Canadian broadcasting policy was undoubtedly the tabling of the report of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Canadian Heritage in June 2003. The committee's two-year study, chaired by Clifford Lincoln, was the most comprehensive in almost a generation. The Lincoln report found that despite many successes, aching wounds had been allowed to fester for years. It

called for repairs, readjustments, refocusing, and in some cases, for the creation of new institutions.

The report asked the government to deal with the grave concerns that it had about the decline in English-Canadian drama by making funding programs more efficient and dependable. Witnesses who appeared before the committee complained about being buried by an avalanche of paperwork. They also told MPs that funding was unstable and unpredictable. Indeed, in 2003, the Chrétien government substantially reduced the government's share of the Canadian Television Fund. This was a matter of considerable concern, even shock in some quarters, especially since the same budget had bolstered incentives for American TV and film production in Canada.

The Lincoln report also called on the government to provide stable and increased funding for CBC/Radio-Canada. The report recognized that in most advanced industrial societies, public broadcasting remained a central instrument for communicating values and identities. However, years of cutbacks and indeed of decisions by the Canadian Radio-Television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC) to deny the public broadcaster valued cable licences (with the notable exceptions of Newsworld and RDI), had weakened the CBC and forced it to largely abandon local and regional production. Except for news programs, local and regional production has almost ceased to exist in Canada. The report recommended new incentives to encourage more local and regional programming by all broadcasters including the CBC.

BROADCAST GOVERNANCE

But it was in the area of governance that the Lincoln report made its most dramatic recommendations. MPs were con-

The biggest deficit of all? page 27

The biggest deficit of all? continued from page 19

cerned by the degree to which the CRTC had displaced the government as the chief policy maker in broadcasting. They wanted to see greater transparency and accountability and indeed checks and balances in the system including the appointment of a media monitor who would report annually to Parliament on the health of the *Broadcasting Act*. In addition, they called for the creation of a single communications act and indeed a single department (merging Industry and Heritage) because in an age of media convergence, telecommunications and broadcasting could no longer be seen as separate universes.

The report also had a great deal to say about cross-media and foreign ownership. Under the Chrétien government, conglomerates have gained strangleholds in several Canadian media markets. In the Vancouver/Victoria market, for instance, CanWest Global owns all three major newspapers and the two most-watched TV stations. In Montreal, Quebecor owns *Le Journal de Montreal*, cable giant Videotron, the largest TV


franchise, TVA, as well as a bevy of magazines. Laws strictly limiting cross-media ownership have been introduced in France and in the UK. Even in the United States, the Senate recently passed for only the second time in history a resolution of “disapproval” to overturn the Federal Communications Commission’s decision to increase the reach of media companies from 35 to 45 percent of TV viewers. Yet the Chrétien government has failed to address the issue at all. Given that the right of citizens to have access to a diversity of viewpoints is the basic linchpin of a healthy and educated democracy and society, the silence is haunting.

The Lincoln report recommended that there be a moratorium on the granting of any new licences involving cross-media ownership until the government formulates a clear policy. MPs also drew a line in the sand on foreign ownership. The argument was that Canada had enough talent, imagination, and capital to be able to harness its own cultural industries without needing to sell the farm

to foreign interests. Moreover, current provisions allow foreign companies to invest relatively heavily in Canadian enterprises if they wish, but they have invested relatively little so far.

A VAGUE RESPONSE

The Chrétien government’s response to the Lincoln report is filled with vague promises to do better on some issues and abject silence on others. Indeed the response is to some degree a symbol of the attitudes that seemed to prevail during Mr. Chrétien’s tenure as prime minister. Key decisions are avoided, entrenched bureaucratic and corporate interests prevail, small steps are preferable to bold moves, and the government compliments itself on doing such a good job.

Jean Chrétien, adept politician and political battler, seemed to take little interest in Canadian broadcast policy. From his vantage point, there were few political fires that had to be put out. The irony is that he may have missed the larger fires that were blazing all around him. 

Courting democracy? continued from page 24

a crisis in Canadian democracy, it is to be found in the fact that politicians and legislators are simply not “democrats” in the full sense of the term. “Democracy” is used more as a rhetorical cloak for elitist practice than a measure and guide for popular politics. After all, a drop in turn out in federal elections from 76 percent in 1979 to 61 percent in 2000 is hardly reassuring.

There are no easy solutions to the present undemocratic trends. But improvement will not come from increased interventions by judges in the micromanagement of governmental policies. Chrétien midwived and parented a constitutional change with limited democratic value. Indeed, judicial prominence is a short-term crutch that actually harms a limping polity in the medium and long term. The replacement of one elite rule (executive) by another (judicial) can be

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considered positive only under the most warped sense of democracy.

POWER TO THE PEOPLE

So, if we want to reign in the judges, we need to ensure that politicians and rep-

resentatives are living up to their constitutional and democratic responsibilities. At present, they are palpably not. But simply construing the democratic challenge as being one about whether the judges stay out of or stray onto the political terrain is to misrepresent the problem and, therefore, to hamper any genuine solutions. The Charter is here to stay, but the elitist mentality that en-crusts it need not be.

Whatever else it means, democracy demands more power to the people and less to the elites. Aristocratic rule is no less palatable because judges and political leaders are the new dukes and barons. And, it is certainly no more acceptable when such elites wrap themselves in the trappings of democracy. Chrétien’s Charter has turned out to be more about elite power than about genuine democracy. 