POLICY
OPTIONS
POLITIQUES

CULTURAL DREAMS, POLICY SCHEMES

Robert Fulford

The idea that governments could do much to alter the course of the arts is a conceit. The arts are always seething with change, invariably in unpredictable ways. Nevertheless, Canadian cultural policy-makers persist in behaving as if they alone can protect us from the American and corporate hegemons they fear so deeply. Some parts of culture, writing most notably, are doing fine with minimal protection. Other parts, the collective enterprises such as film and TV that have been the object of so much attention in recent decades, languish. We must be much humbler in our approach to cultural policy and eradicate hubris.

L'idée selon laquelle les gouvernements pourraient exercer une action vigoureuse sur le monde artistique relève de la présomption, les arts formant par définition un domaine effervescent et imprévisible. Or, ceux qui décident des politiques culturelles canadiennes continuent d'agir comme s'ils pouvaient à eux seuls nous protéger contre une hégémonie américaine et corporatiste qui les effraie profondément. Certains secteurs, notamment l'édition, se portent très bien en dépit d'une protection minime. D'autres, c'est-à-dire les secteurs collectifs comme le cinéma et la télévision, dépérissent malgré toutes les attentions dont ils sont l'objet depuis quelques décennies. Notre approche de la culture gagnerait à troquer son arrogance contre une plus grande humilité.

We are engaged today in cultural politics, which means that we meet on a field of dreams and a field of battle, where contending armies assert their claims for dominance. We struggle to define in concrete and finite laws an infinitely elastic future that we can only glimpse, a future of shining possibilities and mist-enshrouded terrors. We have developed a multitude of theories about how we can help Canadian culture flourish while maintaining the freedom of choice that our citizens demand and deserve. But our subject is notoriously difficult to understand and to handle. It does not yield easily to those who hope to organize it.

One issue before us has been phrased by Christopher Maule as "Do the domestic policies that give rise to the trade disputes make cultural and economic sense?" Of course the honest answer is yes, no, and maybe, depending on which policy you mean; but what concerns me is our inability to answer questions of this kind in a realistic and unhysterical way.

In the course of about half a century, Canadian cultural politics has talked itself into a tight corner. Our persistent rhetoric defines us as victims. We have developed the most intense anxiety about hegemony: the hegemony of American imperialism or the hegemony of great corporations created in our midst. These, and not artistic expression, have become the subjects to which we devote most of our attention.

Our stance is defensive rather than aggressive. Among us a few artists and a few corporations look upon the world outside Canada as a series of opportunities, a place of potential conquest; but they are far outnumbered by those who see foreign cultures, above all American culture, as the enemy—even though almost every individual who subscribes to such a view is in some way an enthusiastic consumer of foreign cultures.

Taking a defensive stance, we set ourselves up for defeat by stating goals that are impossible. One is *sovereignty*. American culture has filled the air around us during the lifetime of everyone reading this page. There seems no reason to expect that to change; as a result, cultural *sovereignty* is not one of the possibilities in our future. We can't have it, and when we hope for it we are engaging in feckless dreams.

Actually, no one can have it anymore, not even the Americans. For a long time they have complained that the

British have dominated the historic heart of their theatre, Broadway, that Canadians with their cheap dollars have stolen much of their movie production, and that their children go to university and come home imbued not with healthy Americanism but deep-dyed in the French critical theory of Derrida, Foucault and company. Lately the Americans have discovered that Muslims among them watch their own worldwide television network, which is beyond the control or even the understanding of the U.S. government.

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For Americans as well as Canadians, *sovereignty* was difficult enough to maintain even as a vague dream in the age before the Internet and digital television. Now technology has placed it beyond anyone's grasp. Globalization in trade agreements merely expresses through law what technology has already made real. The campaign against globalization seems to me as sensible as a campaign against annoying TV commercials or cold weather. It is an argument against the inevitable. At the heart of this campaign there's a sentence I've heard uttered on countless occasions: "People no longer have the feeling that they have control over their lives." This frequent complaint implies that there was a time when people *did* have such control; but my studies of history, and my personal experience, suggest that no one except a few kings and popes ever had the control implied by that statement. If people believed they had it, they were deluded. Each of us, and each nation, manages to carve out a little freedom in the midst of gigantic constraints.

"We are here as on a darkling plain/Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight..." but are we also (as in Matthew Arnold's much-quoted poem) the "ignorant armies" that "clash by night"? The results of our efforts sometimes suggest we are blind to our circumstances, but certainly we have always done our anxious and good-hearted best *not* to be ignorant. We have demolished many innocent trees in order to document our progress and articulate our visions in print.

On this field of battle the monuments are reports of cultural committees, commissions, and task forces, reports on arts funding and newspaper ownership and broadcasting policy, reports that embody the best wisdom we have been able to gather about how we should communicate with each other and the world. They go by the names Aird, Massey-Lévesque, Fowler 1, Fowler 2, Davey, Kent, Applebaum-Hébert, Caplan-Sauvageau—to name only eight of the most renowned.

A row of these reports, gathered on one bookshelf, such as exists in my own house, provides a multi-volume definition of the term hubris—which we can define in this case as the presumptuous confidence of the ignorant. Bernard Shaw phrases one of the accusations against his heroine in *Saint Joan* in this way: "You have stained yourself with the sin of pride. The old Greek tragedy is rising among us. It is the chastisement of hubris."

Our own hubris, of course, lies in the belief that by taking thought we can design a system of culture that will make our artists and our media strong and free. We learn after a while that all our plans are contingent, meaning dependent on events or circumstances that may or may not occur. Most of our plans work either for a short time or not at all.

Hubris infects even our metaphors. Many times over the years our policy makers have spoken of the *architecture* of our broadcasting system, as if broadcasting were something like a building that, once erected, will stand in place more or less permanently. But of course broadcasting is more like a roaring, unruly river that widens in unpredictable ways, gets clogged from time to time, suddenly bursts forth in directions no one expected, and drowns many a bright hope.

In our case the chastisement that Bernard Shaw mentions comes from several places. From technology, which at times seems organized for the sole purpose of proving us wrong. From corporate reorganizations that change the priorities of those who own the media. From international trade agreements, which sometimes thwart our desire to maintain the status quo and sometimes provide opportunities for those willing to grasp them. This chastisement comes also from the quirky and unpredictable nature of culture itself in all its manifold dimensions. And perhaps most of all it comes from audiences and their frequently annoying refusal to act as we would have them act and enjoy what we would have them enjoy.

These forces conspire to frustrate the goals of cultural policy and to deny us the fulfilment of the fantasy we have sought for generations: a healthy, independent, richly expressive culture vigorously representing Canada to itself and to some part of the outside world. Despite our most earnest efforts, we have not called into being such a culture. Canadian artists accomplish miracles from time to time, but not quite

what we hoped and expected and articulated. They often perform superbly as individuals, either creators or performers, but they only now and then impress the world in the collaborative arts to which cultural policy has given so much earnest attention, above all films and television.

All this system-building, planning, strategizing, arguing, regulating: little of it has worked. For proof you need only look to the words and attitudes of those who are professionally involved with Canadian culture. The truth is, we live much of our lives in fear, as our language demonstrates. I say "we" because cultural journalists are part of this phenomenon. I wrote my first article on cultural policy in 1955.

Our very terms of discussion limit and paralyze our thinking about culture. Others may consider culture principally as an expression of exuberance, or principally as a way of penetrating to the heart of human existence; there are many more approaches in between those two. But in the fear-haunted discourse of Canadian cultural politics, we see it differently. Culture in our collective imagination appears to be something like a fortress, or maybe just a stockade, a place which we shelter and which we must at all costs defend. Certain key words dominate our everyday language: words like *save* and *protect* and *rescue* and *preserve*. This is a headline from *Maclean's* a few years ago: "On guard for thee: Sheila Copps turns up the volume to protect the culture."

"Guard" and "protect" in the same headline—these are words that all by themselves seem to prophecy defeat, or at best stasis.

I remember one occasion when an assistant deputy minister in what was then the Department of Communications went to an arts conference in Toronto with his latest plan to fight off American power in some field of culture, a field now forgotten by me. He failed to win the enthusiastic endorsement he wanted, and as he left the conference at which his proposals had been greeted with scepticism, he said to me: "Sometimes I think English Canada doesn't *want* to be saved." It was clear that he saw himself as the potential saviour of the cultures of Canada and even by extension Canada itself; I believe that over the years many public servants in this field have taken the same view, which we could use as a Canadian definition of hubris.

I'm not the first person to point out that what we call our culture ministry, the Department of Heritage, implies preservation rather than creation. It's more like a hiding place than a name. It verges on the apologetic. It seems to describe something settled and finished, rich with the patina of age, rather than the seething, stumbling, yearning, vibrant and occasionally outrageous work of living artists.

Dealing with these issues, we collectively develop a certain habit of mind. The English term for what I'm talking about is pathetically inadequate—"mental conditioning caused by one's job." But the French equivalent is poetic and evocative: in French it's called a *déformation professionnelle*.

In cultural politics it takes the form of tilting away from culture and toward politics. I first noticed it nearly 30 years ago when I discovered that I was dealing in various ways with young book publishers who had quickly acquired a peculiar set of new skills—new to them and new to everyone else.

The age of subsidized publishing had only begun and yet these publishers, like soldiers called to duty in a new war, had adapted swiftly. Almost overnight, so it seemed, like freshly minted fighter pilots in wartime, they had taught themselves grantsmanship. They had learned to run meetings, organize a lobby, reach politicians and civil servants, hector the media, write grant applications, and create out of nothing entire new organizations, funded by the federal government. They had learned in a twinkling to accept every federal or provincial nickel given to them without surprise or gratitude, as if it was simply their right, owed to them by their fellow citizens.

But in many cases what they had *not* learned to do was publish books. They issued books that were poorly conceived, wretchedly edited, ugly to behold, and printed on paper that turned brownish-yellow in a few years. These publishers also made it clear that marketing was not among the skills they had developed.

Many of those publishers ended up in other lines of work, the rest learned their craft and were soon joined by a new and more professional generation. Today Canadian publishing is more mature. Yet many signs of those first years still turn up; sometimes you can identify from across the room a book that has emerged from the still-existing "culture of grants."

On the other side of the process, cultural bureaucrats have over the decades developed their own *déformation professionnelle*. Egotism inevitably accompanies power, and it naturally comes with whatever power cultural bureaucrats

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accumulate. At its most serious it convinces them that they are principal actors in the drama of cultural development; they may even imagine that their decisions, as opposed to the actions of professionals in the arts and the tastes of audiences, will determine the future.

They also see themselves as practical, market-oriented, well-grounded executives, and they treat with condescension those artists they are forced to deal with. They can shift their attitudes with bewildering speed—when national unity is everyone's favourite subject they are dedicated to national unity above all else, and when cultural diversity goes to the top of the policy hit parade they become fanatic devotees of cultural diversity.

Their attitudes are embodied in Paul Donovan's satirical film, *Paint Cans*, based on his own novel. At the comic centre of that movie Donovan places a character named Wick Burns, an executive in a fictional version of Telefilm Canada. Chas Lawther plays Wick with malicious accuracy. Wick loves his beautiful corner office, which he calls "the chamber of power, where the tax money forcibly extracted from millions of losers was spent." What comes through is the belief that filmmakers can only direct and produce films but Wick can direct and produce money.

Together these two groups, the applicants and the cultural bureaucrats, are afflicted jointly by a delusion that also springs from their *déformation professionnelle*. They endorse government funding and government protection for the arts with such enthusiasm that they come to believe that such funding is a final determinant of a culture's health. For various reasons, selfish and altruistic, they develop the almost insane belief that government can set the tone and style of cultural expression, and can, on its own, cause the arts to prosper—or to die.

In Ontario, among any group of artistically inclined citizens, you can easily get majority support for the proposition that we are now living, culturally, in the Dark Ages, and that the Visigoths who have brought this about are the provincial Conservatives under Premier Harris. By cutting certain budgets they have apparently wrecked the province's cultural life.

This opinion is not lightly held. In many circles, to think otherwise is at least eccentric and possibly treasonous. It is perhaps best articulated by my old friend David MacFarlane, the novelist and journalist, who often expresses it in his *Globe and Mail* column. Last summer he wrote: "to live in Ontario and to write about the arts without mentioning the effect Mike Harris has had on the cultural life of this province would be like writing about the war in the Pacific without mentioning Pearl Harbor."

Of course this is nonsense. Most forms of culture in Ontario have lately been having their best years. The private art galleries, for instance, have flourished under Harris as never before; we have developed a wonderful new theatre company in Toronto, Soulpepper; the writing and publishing of serious fiction has blossomed to an extent that none of us expected in our wildest dreams.

It would be silly to attribute any of these successes to the policies of the provincial government, but it's even sillier to say that the government has ruined the arts. Governments have no such power. They can help here and there. They can hurt here and there. But the artists and their audiences determine finally the health of any culture.

In Ontario those who hate the government have become so blinded by their feelings that they can no longer see the arts as they exist now, even if they successfully practice and enjoy those arts. Cultural politics has affected them so deeply that they have lost touch with the reality on their own doorstep. When cultural politics operates this way, as a distorter of perceptions, cultural politics becomes the enemy of culture.

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For bureaucrats operating in this milieu, the greatest temptation lies in the creeping growth of mandates and regulations. A regulatory agency listens to each pressure group that appears before it, adds that group's demands to its own ambitions, and then projects a future reality that may be not only impractical but outlandish. This is what happened to the CRTC as it drew up its recent directives to the CTV and Global networks.

The CRTC did not propose to put its own agents into the executive suites and newsrooms of the two networks, but it came within an inch of that idea. What it handed down is so staggeringly detailed that it sets a new benchmark for government intrusion. The CRTC tells the networks precisely how to manage their relations with the newspapers that are their sister companies, it orders news managers from CTV and Global not to sit on the editorial boards of their allied newspapers, it directs the corporations to establish Monitoring Committees that will ensure compliance, and it goes into the most elaborate detail in telling CTV and Global how to handle race relations. Casting directors are ordered to "make a

concerted effort" to hire visible minority actors in leading roles. Script editors are told they must make sure that minorities aren't portrayed as stereotypes. That alone will be a major project, since characters in TV shows are typically based on stereotypes, whatever their race.

This is bureaucratic hubris on a grand scale. Glancing backward, we might decide that there was a specific moment when Canadian cultural politics took a turn in this direction, when it was uncoupled from the reality of public opinion, government and even the arts themselves.

It was in the autumn of 1982. The event was the publication of the 406-page report of the Federal Cultural Policy Review Committee. That was the first survey of all the arts since Massey-Lévesque reported in 1951. It was headed by the composer Louis Applebaum and the author-publisher Jacques Hébert and its 18 members ranged from a painter to an economist.

Applebaum-Hébert not only issued recommendations on the funding of individual artists and arts organizations in both the elite and popular arts—a huge subject in itself—but also pursued every imaginable cultural issue that had arisen or might arise. In all of Canadian culture, not a sparrow fell unnoticed. Applebaum-Hébert wrote about the plight of disabled artists and over-age ballet dancers, about amateur artists who felt neglected by the Canada Council, and even about painters who used hazardous materials that are improperly labelled. There was nothing even distantly related to culture that they did not feel qualified to comment on. They made their federal report into an endless anthology of complaints, problems and spending suggestions. Beneath their micro-policies there was one macro-assumption: that federal funding was expanding and would in future continue to expand infinitely.

They encouraged those who were campaigning for government control of movie theatres. "There is no doubt that the critical problem for Canada's filmmakers is breaking into their own domestic market," wrote Applebaum-Hébert. This theme is sounded as often today as it was two decades ago; and of course the main criticism of it is that while access to the market may be difficult, the really critical problem is making films that people want to see.

The issue of movie exhibition has changed. Access to theatres remains difficult, but access to television is now entirely different. Today there are very few Canadian movies that do not appear on television. In fact, some viewers have come to believe that in the age of pay television and digital channels, certain Canadian filmmakers have *too much* access to their own market. Being one of those viewers who insist on getting and sampling every channel available, I've observed, particularly this season, that broadcasters have been scouring the vaults for Canadian product. The result is that many Canadian films that should have been allowed to die quiet and unmourned deaths, years ago, are now running regularly on TV, maintaining the quotas of broadcasters while astounding the audience not so much by their low quality as by the very fact of their existence.

When they were made, often for purposes understood only by tax lawyers and a few public servants, no one but the participants knew of their existence; now we find them popping up across the dial, finally provided with an audience during that brief period between the moment when the viewer starts watching and the moment when the viewer reaches for the magic wand that makes this nightmare vanish.

Little that Applebaum-Hébert recommended came to pass. The government did not turn the National Film Board into a school, as the committee suggested, nor did it create a national museum of contemporary art or eliminate all in-house production except news from CBC television. But it now seems apparent that Applebaum-Hébert set a new tone of all-encompassing intrusiveness; it established the principle that there is nothing in the whole world of culture on which a federal agency should have no opinion.

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The unfolding of Canadian culture in recent times has presented us with one surprise after another. For example, one day five or so years ago, Conrad Black became the most powerful publisher in Canada. This created an entire industry of commentators expressing the dark fear of hegemony: it was said that no opinion would ever grow again in this country without his approval. And then one day in the year 2000, at the top of the market, he abruptly sold out most of his holdings; and this year he sold out the rest. Many of us miss him, but perhaps those who miss him most are those who made worrying about his influence their major preoccupation.

The CRTC did something equally surprising though not quite so public: it led us into the era of digital TV by licencing dozens of new stations, some of them owned by people of whom

no one, including the CRTC, had ever heard before. Even as it was setting down rigid rules for CTV and Global, it was also pointing us toward a time when television will be as free as the printed press.

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And then there was the surprise of surprises, the convergence that left everyone so breathless it still hasn't aroused much commentary. I should mention here that I began my working life at *The Globe and Mail* a little more than half a century ago, and over the intervening years I've taken part in many, many conversations about the paper's future ownership. But the recent changes at the *Globe* made me realize that neither I nor any of my colleagues have any real idea what the future holds. In all those conversations, public and private, not one person ever mentioned as even a remote possibility the idea that *The Globe and Mail* might be purchased by the phone company. It suggested once more that in outlining our plans for cultural development we should never underestimate our profound ignorance of the future. It was the kind of revelation that should make all of us humble. In theory, at least.

Robert Fulford is arts columnist for the National Post. *This is the text of a luncheon address to a conference on* Trade Policy and Culture *put on by the Centre for Trade Policy and Law at Carleton University and the University of Ottawa, Ottawa, November 28, 2001.*

Unsentimental education It was time to file my first T-1 income tax form, Canada's version of the U.S. 1040. It was actually a fairly simple form. I started working my way through it, but every time I tried, I got so angry I had to stop. In filling it out, I felt that I was begging the government to give me back most of the money it had taken from me. I had earned that money. They hadn't. I ended up having my brother fill out the form for me, and I signed it. I wanted the money back, but I just couldn't bring myself to play the government's game to get it back...

As I gained experience, I learned that the income tax was only one of many taxes that various governments impose. I also learned, partly from observation and partly from studying public finance ... just how much of our behavior is influenced by taxes. There are the obvious ones, We tend to buy bigger houses and finance them more with debt, for example, because we can deduct the mortgage interest. Most of us in the United States get health insurance from our employer because it's a way that employers can pay employees with tax-free income. One of the classic cases in England was the tax on windows. The government, having noticed that people with bigger windows tended to be wealthier, therefore decided to tax windows. The result: many people covered up their windows, and people building new houses built them with fewer windows. When I told this story to some of my students, most of whom were military officers who had traveled widely, they recalled that in some countries in Europe, houses don't have closets; instead, people buy portable closets for their homes. The reason is that governments in those countries tax houses according to the number of rooms—and a closet counts as a separate room. In another European country, noted one student, houses are like bowling lanes—long and narrow. When he had inquired about why, he found out that taxes on houses are based on the amount of street frontage. Another student told of a country in Asia in which few people ever complete their houses and, instead, live in houses that look as if they are perpetually under construction. The reason: the government sets a higher tax on completed houses than on uncompleted ones.

David HENDERSON, Expatriate Canadian economist, in *The Joy of Freedom: An Economist's Odyssey* (*Financial Times*/Prentice Hall, 2001)

Mr. Martin's deficit The government has relied on three measures to balance its books next year. First, it will be implementing a 6-month deferral of income taxes paid by small corporations, which will have the effect of shifting $2 billion in revenues from fiscal 2001-02 to fiscal 2002-03... Second, the government plans to significantly pare back in the amount set aside for contingencies and economic prudence, beginning this year. And, third, two newly-established funds in this year's budget—the Strategic Infrastructure Foundation and Africa Fund—will be financed largely out of the unused portion of the $1.5 billion contingency reserve set aside in fiscal 2001-02 even though the monies will not be dispersed until future years. If one were to exclude the revenue deferral and pre-booking of the trust funds, and use the caution established under the older planning framework, the government would be targeting a deficit in the order of $5.5 billion for fiscal 2002-03.

TD Economics' federal budget commentary