

May 30, 2006

As a general statement on my views on broadcast policy in Canada, I think that the House of Commons Standing Committee on Canadian Heritage (the "Committee") report "Our Cultural Sovereignty" (the "Report") was an outstanding bipartisan document and that a government I lead will be guided by many of the recommendations in the Report.

1. Protecting Canada's cultural sovereignty

Foreign companies are already permitted to own up to 47% of Canadian broadcasters and some of our broadcasters want to sell out completely to American interests.

Do you believe it is important to maintain Canadian majority ownership of our media and communications sectors?

As one witness told the Committee in 2003, ownership in broadcasting:

... has an importance well beyond most commodities. It's not a commodity, it's a cultural influence, and that's why we are here to talk about it and not about cups and saucers and pens and pencils. Ownership has a great deal of influence, I believe, over what is produced and why.

I agree with this statement and others who argue that a continued strong Canadian voice on our airwaves is an important component of making Canada the first international country. An international country is one that is internally cohesive and strong. Maintaining our vibrant Canadian culture is part of that effort and as such, I agree with the Committee's recommendation to maintain the current restrictions on foreign ownership.

2. More Canadian drama programs on television

Since the CRTC relaxed Canadian programming regulations in 1999, private broadcasters have fed Canadian audiences a steady diet of cheap American programs while the quality and quantity of Canadian drama have declined.

Do you think it is important to increase the quantity and quality of Canadian drama television programs on TV? How would you ensure Canada's broadcasters air more and better Canadian drama programs?

The problem Canadian broadcasters face in producing high quality Canadian drama is well known: The production of English Canadian programming that will attract a large audience has become very costly. This is because viewers, particularly in English Canada, have grown accustomed to American programs with high-production value. Further complicating matters is the fact that American programming is cheaper to buy and generates a higher rate of return for Canada's broadcasters than the purchase or production of made-in-Canada programming.

As the Report pointed out, this challenge is not new. When the *Broadcasting Act* was reviewed in the mid-1980s, 98 per cent of the drama and comedy that English-speaking Canadians were watching was foreign. Thanks to progressive government action, the overall supply of original English Canadian drama and comedy has increased significantly since the 1980s, from 2 per cent of all drama and comedy in 1984 to 17 per cent in 2001. At the same time, there have been moderate increases in the overall viewing of English Canadian drama and comedy, from 2 per cent in 1984 to numbers consistently in the 7 to 9 per cent range throughout the 1990s and early 2000s.

While there have been some successes, challenges remain. The current funding system for Canadian programming has become an exceptionally complicated and bewildering experience.

I support the Report's finding that the federal government must develop a comprehensive and integrated Canadian programming policy and strategy that:

- (a) Establishes clear goals for the programs that support the creation, production, distribution and viewing of Canadian television programming;
- (b) Includes a clear statement of the cultural objectives, realistic estimates of the cost of meeting these objectives and a comprehensive set of performance measures;
- (c) Simplifies the process to obtain funding so that broadcasters and producers can focus on creation; and
- (d) Includes a strong emphasis on measures to ensure that Canadian programming is viewed by Canadian audiences and that it includes appropriate support incentives and performance measures.

I would also undertake a thorough review of the manner in which the federal government finances programming in this country both in terms of tax credits and through direct funding.

3. Re-building CBC's grassroots capacity

CBC's connection to Canadians and the communities in which they live has weakened in recent years. Grassroots programs and CBC's presence across the country have been slashed in the face of severe budget cuts. Today's centrally produced programs make CBC look more like the Toronto Broadcasting Corporation than the national public broadcaster it should be.

Do you believe the federal government should ensure that CBC has the resources and commitment to serve Canadians in their communities wherever they live? If so, how would you accomplish this goal?

As somebody who grew up in a small, rural community (The Pas, in Northern Manitoba), I know how important local broadcasting can be to a community in terms of engaging the citizens in cultural, civic and other crucial ways.

The Committee was concerned that community, local and regional broadcasting services have become endangered, and that many parts of Canada are being underserved. I share that concern.

As the Report stated, "an entire layer of Canadian life and experience is missing from the screen and the airwaves — and these forms of expression are arguably the places where the Canadian experience is the most original and vibrant, where the country discovers and defines itself." The status quo is not working.

The paradox is, at the precise time that we are failing our local communities and regions, new technologies like digital channels and the proliferation of high-speed internet access are making it both cheaper and technologically easier to get more local voices on the air. We are still lacking the sense of purpose and drive to promote grass roots broadcasting.

Providing this service remains a core mandate of the CBC. CBC should be producing high quality civic and cultural programs while promoting local voices and perspectives. While I will always respect the independence of the CBC, I do share the opinion that that the CBC operate as a truly national broadcaster – able to represent and speak to Canadians from all parts of the country including big cities, small towns and villages. As such, I will provide sufficient federal funding to allow the CBC to implement its strategic plan to ensure that the CBC re-grow their local offerings

4. End patronage appointments to CBC's Board

Positions on CBC's Board, including its President, are currently Prime Ministerial patronage appointments. The Commons Heritage Committee unanimously recommended reforming this practice so that CBC's Board is appointed at arms-length from patronage to include the best and brightest Canadians, and that this Board, not the Prime Minister, should have the power to hire CBC's President. Friends believes that implementation of this reform would likely have prevented the recent lockout of CBC employees.

Should the practice of political patronage appointments to CBC's Board be ended and should the Board be given responsibility to hire and fire CBC's President?

I believe in a CBC with a strong, independent board of directors and a President who is accountable to that board. As such, I agree with the Report's recommendations that "in the interests of fuller accountability and arm's-length from government, nominations to the CBC Board should be made by a number of sources, and the CBC President should be hired by and be responsible to the Board."

I am concerned with the fact that women, aboriginals and minorities have been under-represented on the CBC Board, as have appointees from western and northern Canada. In selecting future Board members, we should ensure that the Board is broadly representative of the country.

For more information on additional positions and policies, please contact:

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