

WHERE DO THE CONSERVATIVES STAND ON PUBLIC BROADCASTING AND CULTURAL SOVEREIGNTY?

A briefing note for FRIENDS of Canadian Broadcasting supporters from Ian Morrison

There is a huge and troubling gap between the 2006 policy statements of Stephen Harper's Conservatives and their past comments on public broadcasting and cultural sovereignty that suggests a hidden agenda.

For example:

The Conservative candidates' Pocket Policy Guide for the recent election states, on page 10: "Arts and culture make essential contributions to our national identity. A Conservative government will ensure that the CBC and Radio-Canada continue to perform their vital role as national public service broadcasters." (www.friends.ca/policyguide).

Yet, on January 3rd, 2006, the Conservative central campaign office in Ottawa sent the following message to candidates advising them on how to respond to FRIENDS supporters' e-mail questions: "We are to use this in response – it is a one size fits all response to broadcasting issues."

That e-mail includes the following statements:

- "The CBC-SRC is an important part of the broadcasting system in Canada. It must be a true public service broadcaster, relevant to Canadians. The Conservative Party will focus the CBC-SRC services on its mandates as public broadcasting services."
- "Private sector broadcasters and service-providers first and foremost are businesses that must be able to compete in an ever-increasing fragmented and global market."
- "The CRTC's role in content regulation will be reduced to eliminate duplication where other legislation exists."

These three sentences:

- threaten CBC's role in presenting the Olympics and professional sports (Hockey Night in Canada for example),
- highlight the Conservatives' affiliation with the private broadcast lobby, which opposes CBC's local presence, and
- undermine the CRTC as a defender of minimum levels of Canadian programming in the radio and TV systems.

In the lead up to the 2004 election, on May 19, 2004, Stephen Harper was asked by a CBC reporter in Winnipeg to comment on his plans for CBC.

Here's what he said then: "I've suggested that government subsidies in support of CBC's services should be to those things that are not... do not have commercial alternatives."

He added: "When you take a look at things like main-English language television and probably to a lesser degree Radio Two, you could there (sic) at putting those on a commercial basis." [See transcript on other side.]

Later that year, in a speech to the Canadian Association of Broadcasters (the private broadcast lobby) Harper seemed to contradict this, when he stated that: "we would seek to reduce CBC's dependence on advertising revenue and its competition with the private sector for these valuable dollars, especially in non-sports programming."

During the 2004 campaign, John Reynolds, who chaired the Conservatives' 2006 campaign, wrote a FRIENDS' supporter as follows: "CBC Television will be completely cut loose to compete and will have to depend entirely on its advertising revenue."

One of the Conservative candidates in the 2004 election told us he calls CBC "the Communist Broadcasting Corporation".

...over please

The March 17, 2005 Conservative Policy Convention passed the following motion on foreign ownership of Canadian broadcasters:

"The Conservative Party supports relaxing foreign ownership rules on Canadian industry in concert with our major trading partners in the telecommunications, broadcast distribution, and airline industry. We will conduct an immediate review to determine whether to reduce or completely remove these rules."

All of this extreme ambivalence toward CBC and willingness to undermine cultural sovereignty should sound alarm bells for those of us who care about our national public broadcaster's role in defending a distinct culture on the northern half of the continent, and demonstrates why all of us need to keep a close eye on this new government's actions on CBC, broadcasting and our cultural sovereignty, including maintaining Canadian ownership and control of broadcasting.

THE MOST EFFECTIVE WEAPON ON OUR SIDE IS PUBLIC OPINION. AS WE KNOW FROM IPSOS-REID'S POLLING ON OUR BEHALF:

- **Canadians value the CBC and want it preserved and strengthened in the 21st Century: 71% of Canadians agree strongly and 23% agree somewhat with the following statement:
"I want to see the CBC survive and prosper." (May 13, 2004)**
- **85% of Canadians want their government to maintain Canadian ownership and control of broadcasting (May 13, 2004)**

The following statements are from a transcript of a CBC Radio News report covering Stephen Harper's views on the CBC.

PROGRAM: WORLD REPORT TIME: 07:06
DATE: 19 MAY 2004

HARPER COMMENTS ON THE CBC

JUDY MADDREN (CBC-R): What to do with the CBC appears to be causing some confusion in the Conservative Party. Stephen Harper has suggested government spending on CBC's English television channel and CBC Radio Two should be reviewed. But as Sandra Abma reports, the party's cultural critic says that's not on.

SANDRA ABMA (Reporter): At a press conference in Winnipeg on Monday, Conservative Party Leader Stephen Harper was asked by a reporter if he would scrap the public broadcaster:

STEPHEN HARPER (Conservative Party Leader): No. I've suggested that government subsidies in support of CBC's services should be to those things that are not... do not have commercial alternatives.

ABMA: Pressed for specifics, Harper had a couple of targets:

HARPER: And I think when you look at things like main-English language television and probably to a lesser degree Radio Two, you could there at putting those on a commercial basis.

ABMA: Jim Abbott, the Conservative Culture critic seemed bewildered by his Leader's remarks:

JIM ABBOTT (Conservative Culture Critic): There is nothing afoot at this particular point in time to be taking a look at funding issues with respect to the CBC.

ABMA: Abbott says over a decade ago, when he first came to Parliament as a member of the Reform Party, he and his Party believed the CBC should be privatized. But that has changed, and the Conservative Party has an appreciation of how the CBC fits in the Canadian broadcasting landscape. He says, he made that message clear in a memo to the Party leadership just yesterday.

Sandra Abma, CBC News, Ottawa.