

- Transcript -
Standing Committee on Finance Hearing
Tuesday, September 19, 2006

The Chair:

We have Ian Morrison here, with Friends of Canadian Broadcasting. I invite you to make a presentation, Mr. Morrison.

Mr. Ian Morrison (Spokesperson, Friends of Canadian Broadcasting):

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Friends of Canadian Broadcasting is a watchdog group, financed by 100,000 Canadians. Our mission is to defend and to enhance the quality and the quantity of Canadian programming in the English-language audio-visual system.

[Translation]

I wish to thank you for meeting with us today. We always appreciate the privilege of appearing before you to present our viewpoint in an effort to influence your proceedings.

[English]

As citizens of a small country dependent upon international trade for wealth creation, Canadians have a large stake in promoting abroad our identity and our brand. In large measure, Canada's branding is the product of our audio-visual system, the export of our images and stories to other countries. Confidence in our cultures, a belief in the integrity of our identity, and a projection of those values beyond our borders are key to our national development.

Successful models of national branding among our principal competitors abound. Other than the United States, where Hollywood plays this role, the best international branding models come from countries with strong national public broadcasters, such as Finland, Denmark, Norway, the United Kingdom, and Germany.

The House of Commons Standing Committee on Canadian Heritage researched investment in public broadcasting by OECD countries in its recent report, *Our Cultural Sovereignty*, and identified that Canada ranks 20th among 25 countries. These data are reproduced in our written submission; they come from page 178 of the Lincoln report. Canada spends 0.08% of our GDP on public broadcasting, well below the OECD average of 0.14%, and far below the range of 0.28% to 0.19% in the leading countries I just mentioned.

Friends of Canadian Broadcasting recommends that the committee recognize the importance of strong public broadcasting to Canada's identity and branding in the world. As a long-term goal, funding for Canadian public broadcasting should be increased to at least the OECD average. In return, Parliament should establish practical benchmarks for Canadian public broadcasting.

Second, we recommend that your committee re-adopt a recommendation from your December 2004 report that the federal government provide stable, long-term

funding to a number of important cultural institutions. Specifically, your committee recommended then that the government should increase funding to the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation and Radio-Canada.

The recent CBC lockout demonstrated what a Toronto broadcasting corporation would sound and look like. As you know, it has also demonstrated how strongly Canadians rely upon our national public broadcaster.

In this respect, you might be interested in data from an Ipsos Reid opinion poll that Friends of Canadian Broadcasting commissioned during the week before the writs of the 2004 general election. In that poll, Ipsos Reid posed the following question: "Assume for a moment that your federal member of Parliament asked for your advice on an upcoming vote in the House of Commons on what to do about CBC funding. Which of the following three options would you advise him or her to vote for: decrease the funding to the CBC from current levels, maintain funding for the CBC at current levels, or increase funding to the CBC from current levels?" Ipsos Reid found that 9% of Canadians would recommend decreasing CBC's funding, 51% would maintain it at current levels, and 38% would increase CBC funding from current levels.

We also draw to your attention a series of recent recommendations from the Senate Transport and Communications Committee, which touched on reforms to CBC's mandate. Among its recommendations, the Senate called on the CBC to reduce its dependency on advertising revenues and professional sports.

Friends of Canadian Broadcasting recommends to the finance committee that it endorse a two-part reform in CBC financing. In return for reducing or eliminating its reliance on advertising revenues, the CBC's public funding should be increased. This funding could come from either general revenues or from charges to the television distribution system akin to the subscription fees charged for services like TSN or Sportsnet. Friends of Canadian Broadcasting notes that such a reform would likely enjoy the support of many of Canada's private broadcasters, it could be introduced gradually over several years, and it would fulfill the Prime Minister's commitment to, and I'm quoting, "...reduce CBC's dependence on advertising revenue and its competition with the private sector for these valuable dollars, especially in non-sports programming".

In conjunction with these reforms to the financing of public broadcasting, Friends of Canadian Broadcasting endorses a proposal that Heritage Minister Bev Oda made, "That the government should undertake to establish an independent task force to review the mandate, role and services of the CBC-SRC". That task force should be charged with recommending reforms to the CBC's management and governance, which would remove political patronage from the CBC's board and presidential selection process in keeping with the best international standards for public broadcasting.

[Translation]

CBC is our largest cultural institution. It plays a major role in our democratic life and we must ensure that it remains healthy and that it has the capacity to carry out the important mandate given to it by Parliament.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The Chair:

Thank you very much, Sir.

Questions from the committee

Mr. Rick Dykstra:

Mr. Morrison, one of the recommendations I read with great interest was the one that our heritage minister, Bev Oda, is moving forward on. It is in terms of undertaking to establish an independent task force to review the mandate, role, and services of the CBC. The task force would be charged with ensuring the removal of political patronage from CBC's board and presidential selection process, in keeping with international standards for public broadcasting.

Could you expand on that a little bit? Are there any thoughts on how we could improve over the last 13, 14, or 20 years?

Mr. Ian Morrison:

Yes, sir.

First, on the recommendation of Minister Oda, there's an end-of-quotation mark before you get to the patronage part. The comment about patronage is one we brought to the table. In the best practice of western democracy public broadcasting, it is not effectively the prime minister, the cabinet, or an order in council that appoints the senior leadership of the public broadcaster; in common with private sector corporation practice, a board of directors hires and fires the chief executive officer. That process should be brought to bear in Canada. That is our opinion; it was also the unanimous opinion, if I recall, of the Lincoln committee in 2003.

Then, of course, arises the question of how the board of directors gets there. There have been recommendations in public policy--again, the Lincoln report--that nominations for the board of directors of something as important as the Canada Council or the CBC should come from a variety of sectors and represent a variety of perspectives and experiences. The best and the brightest people should be running billion-dollar corporations. That is not a fiscal measure, but it would increase public confidence--and probably governmental confidence--in the management of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation.

Mr. Rick Dykstra:

So that type of accountability hasn't happened in the past, but it should certainly happen in the near future.

Mr. Ian Morrison:

Yes, we would be very supportive of an initiative of that type.

Mr. Rick Dykstra:

Thank you.

The Chair:

Thank you, Mr. Dykstra.

We'll continue with Madam Wasylycia-Leis, please.

Ms. Judy Wasylycia-Leis:

Just following up on my colleague's comments on CBC, are you not a little worried at all, Mr. Morrison, about Bev Oda's task force, which may in fact really be an attempt to further dismantle CBC and put another knife in the back of our public broadcaster? Maybe I'm overreacting to some of the previous comments by the Conservatives, but I certainly worry about the future of a public broadcaster. Also, perhaps you could indicate why you think a public broadcaster is important in terms of building a competitive nation.

Mr. Ian Morrison:

Sure.

The Friends of Canadian Broadcasting is supportive to the intent of Minister Oda's plan. That was a motion she moved in the last days of the last Parliament at the heritage committee, and it passed that committee with the support of the Bloc; the Conservatives and the Bloc voted for it. My information is that her proposal to do that has been blocked by the Prime Minister's Office, which is a cause of concern to us. We don't think, at the moment, that that proposal is going forward. I would love to be wrong about that.

With respect to the second part of your question, the public broadcasting role in Canada, with respect to competitiveness, is partly to tell Canada's story to the world. It's also to gather stories from a variety of locations in Canada. I referred in my remarks to the evidence of the Toronto broadcasting corporation--what it would look like if in fact the kind of broadcaster that happened during the lockout of last year were to become the case. You represent Manitobans in this Parliament, and Manitoba's share of CBC employment and resources has gone down a great deal in the recent past. There's a question of equity. There's also a question of Canadians, particularly young Canadians, having access to stories, factual and fiction, about their own culture, as opposed to stories from Los Angeles or Miami.

Ms. Judy Wasylycia-Leis:

Thank you.