CULTURAL POLICY IN CANADA: A BRIEF HISTORY

ABSTRACT

Canada has grown and transformed itself from a predominantly rural nation to an urban society of peoples of diverse heritages. Technological change has focused attention on the economy of the mass media and the cultural industries. The need for change in the policy roles of federal, provincial and municipal governments and for a broad-based cultural infrastructure remains.

JOY COHNSTAEDT is Professor Emerita and Senior Scholar at York University.

Cultural policy and cultural institutions began as instruments of nation-building and social cohesion. The Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR), begun in 1881 and completed in 1885, linked Canada's populated centers with the relatively unpopulated west. The establishment of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation in 1936 linked Canada by radio. As Graham Spry put it in arguing for the creation of public broadcasting, Canada had a choice between "the state and the United States." This distinction has been the unspoken premise behind much of our cultural policy and many of our cultural institutions.

Over time, Canadian cultural policy has had to reflect the points of view not only of peoples of British and French heritages but those of European and Aboriginal heritage. Recent growth and demographic change has resulted in still more diversity in Canada's population. Tension between claims of history-based rights, especially associated with language, and the more recent needs and demands of contemporary Canadian society are in play throughout the country. Add to this issues of jurisdiction and political and government priorities, and it's not surprising that the outcomes of cultural policy-making are bound to be asymmetrical and turbulent.

The history of the founding of early cultural institutions mirrors the pattern of settlement before and after the passage of the Constitution Act of 1867. The earliest libraries made their appearance in Quebec City in the 17th Century. The first legislative libraries in the Atlantic Provinces marked the arrival of government. Today all governments maintain legislative libraries. Their initial collections often predate their creation. As a record of nation-building, they document the intrusion of foreign values on lands first occupied by diverse Aboriginal peoples and the invention of Canadian values.

Early governments were engaged in aggressively building an infrastructure to support a resource-based economy. The new economy demanded settlers and workers. In turn they required transportation to natural resources, agriculture, fishing, and their markets, in addition to employment opportunities and access to retail. This need and demand encouraged the development of rural and urban infrastructure: water and sewage, electricity and communications, education, health, libraries, and other social services.

The competition for immigrants promoted by the provincial and the federal governments put pressure on entrepreneurs and municipal governments to make new and growing communities attractive. The pattern of economic development varied across Canada. Telephone services, for example, were originally the

responsibility of municipalities in communities such as Edmonton. In Saskatchewan and Manitoba, they became public utilities rather than private sector businesses as in eastern Canada. As the economy expanded, the demand for new skills and training followed.

Racism became imbedded in Canadian legislation with the passage by the federal government of the first *Indian Act* in 1876. The belief by those of British and French origin that they were intrinsically superior was not limited to Aboriginal peoples. Blacks, Asians, and Jews were subjected to racist policies and practices. The continuing presence of racism is slowly being mediated by the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms*. Regardless of place, or social and economic status, telling our stories to one another has been, and continues to be, a shared value and a source of social cohesion. In response to interest in documenting our past, the Public Archives of Canada was established in 1873, twelve years after Nova Scotia passed the first *Public Records Act* (1861). The National Gallery of Canada (1880) was the first federal museum to be established, followed by the Museum of the Geological Survey in 1927. The Battlefields Park, an urban site in Quebec City, was created in 1908 and in 1919 the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada was established. Some provinces have been more aggressive in establishing heritage institutions. In 1906, one year after the *Saskatchewan Act*, the Provincial Museum of Natural History, now the Royal Saskatchewan Museum, was created. Military history has been a central feature of our cultural infrastructure. The new Canadian War Museum is a testament to that.

Unfortunately, artifacts of local Aboriginal heritage were taken off-shore or to the United States by early explorers, missionaries and traders, and lost to their communities of origin and to Canada. Stewardship of our natural and human heritage remains one of Canada's pressing cultural issues and requires the attention of each level of government.

The first *Copyright Act* came into force in 1924. The nation-building mission of broadcasting was begun privately in 1923 on the Canadian National Railway. The Canadian Radio Broadcasting Corporation was established as both public broadcaster and regulator of broadcasting in 1932. It was replaced by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) in 1936. The regulatory function of the CBC was taken over by the Canadian Radio Television Commission (CRTC) in 1968. In 1976, jurisdiction over telecommunications was transferred to the CRTC, now known as the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission, from the Canadian Transport Commission. In 1939, the National Film Board was established to create war-time propaganda and to help educate Canadians.

The collapse of the stock-markets in 1929 plunged Canadians into unemployment and hardship. The economic collapse was felt primarily in the prairies because of drought and a depressed wheat economy and in communities dependent on mining and forestry when commodity prices dropped. The federal government responded to the needs of the unemployed with minimum wage guarantees and unemployment insurance, but the provinces protested on jurisdictional grounds. Public work/projects were developed but too late to make a real difference. The strain in government relations during the Depression led to the establishment of a Royal Commission on Dominion Provincial Relations in 1937. Its Report in 1940 is regarded by many as the most comprehensive study of regional disparity to date, and paved the way for shared jurisdiction in areas such as culture. For example, the *National Physical Fitness Act* (1943) permitted the flow of financial support through a ten-year cost-sharing agreement with Saskatchewan that enabled cultural, recreational and physical activities.

The first national gathering of artists, museum directors, art historians and lay people met in Kingston in 1941 to discuss the "welfare of art" and the value of the artist in a climate of free enterprise. The arts clearly had a role in enhancing democracy and nation-building but artists needed to be fairly compensated. There was tension between broad-based community support for the arts, exemplified by the *Alberta Cultural Development Act* (1946) and the Saskatchewan Arts Board (1948), and a narrower definition that eventually led to the creation of the Canada Council (1957).

A decade later, in 1951, the Royal Commission on National Development in the Arts, Letters and Sciences was established to survey institutions, agencies and organizations "which express national feeling, promote common understanding and add to the variety and richness of Canadian life." The Massey

Commission identified the basic problem: a small scattered population in a vast area clustered next to a much more populous country of far greater economic strength. The exclusion of cultural influences from abroad, the Commission stated, is both impossible and undesirable. Canada needed proactive measures: a strengthening of the arts and letters, and a deepening confidence in what Canadians could do themselves.

The Massey Commission identified the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation as its most complicated problem: Its "importance as an instrument for the promotion of Canadian unity and the strengthening of Canadian identity [can] hardly be overstated." A continuing worry, Massey argued, was that attacks on the CBC by the ill-informed and those who would gain financially from its failure would undermine Canada's public broadcaster.

The question of jurisdiction in cultural policy-making raised by Quebec delayed the implementation of the Massey Commission's recommendation that a Canada Council be created. Two questions demanded answers: What public interest is served by allowing the involvement of government in culture? What level of government should be involved and would jurisdiction be shared? The report of the Bilingualism and Bicultural Commission (1967-70) made clear that Canada was no longer made up of people who were of either British or French heritage. A policy of multiculturalism in a bilingual framework was announced in 1971. Manitoba established Canada's first Advisory Committee on Multiculturalism in that year and in 1974 Saskatchewan passed Canada's first *Multiculturalism Act*. A federal Multicultural Directorate was established by the Secretary of State in Ottawa in 1972. The *Canadian Multiculturalism Act* was passed in 1985. It's not surprising that tension and competition existed between provincial and federal governments about which level should act on a perceived need in the cultural sector.

After the Canada Council was entrenched, staff met regularly with their provincial counterparts. Ontario and Quebec had a special relationship with the Council. Provinces without a cultural department or ministry responded by creating arts councils with various levels of independence from the government and new departments responsible for culture and related community activities. But not all provinces believed the work of the Canada Council was in their best interest or met their particular needs. Quebec had protested the very establishment of the Council and continued to object to the intrusion of the federal government in the communication and cultural sector; they regarded it as the province's jurisdiction. The Ontario Arts Council included among its objectives the ability to fund artists and organizations elsewhere in Canada who focused on the arts in Ontario. The legislation establishing the Manitoba Arts Council directed that body to cooperate with the Canada Council.

Another significant change took place in 1979, when the federal government ceded responsibility for lottery management to the provinces. In one province, Saskatchewan, the not-for-profit community assumed responsibility for the operation of the lottery and the net revenues were delivered to the arts and culture, sports and recreation sectors. Other provinces assigned the revenues to the general budget. Ontario and Manitoba, for example, contributed a share of these revenues to the cultural sector but also spent the funds on other provincial needs. The maturing of the cultural bureaucracies resulted in the recognition of the need for intergovernmental co-operation.

In the summer of 1971, the federal government announced a new funding program, Opportunities for Youth (OFY) to provide young people with employment. Community-based arts, culture and heritage projects undertaken by students resulted in a significant change in the demand for financial support from federal and provincial cultural organizations when the OFY and the Local Initiatives Projects (LIP) programmes were discontinued. The Canada Council and the provinces were ill-prepared for the dozens of new organizations, such as the Mummers Troupe in Newfoundland, that OFY and LIP helped to establish across Canada.

In the 1970s, the federal government began to pay more attention to tax issues related to cultural industries. The Cultural Statistics project at Statistics Canada, established in 1973, encouraged research in the cultural sector but few provinces could match its capacity to gather information until later. The result was an understanding of how tax base and other revenues influenced practices in the cultural sector throughout Canada. Although there was remarkable growth in government expenditures

on culture and the labour force that supported it during the 1970s, in the 1980s the economy took a down turn. In 1980, the federal government transferred responsibility for cultural affairs from the Secretary of State to the Minister of Communications, who oversaw radio, television and telecommunications. The department's industrial focus led to a growing expectation that cultural expenditures would have a role in the economic well-being of the nation.

Until now, arts administrators met at the national level, but in 1980 meetings of federal and provincial ministers responsible for culture began to be held. The call for an umbrella federal cultural policy led to the creation of a short-lived advisory committee in 1979. In 1980, the Federal Cultural Policy Review Committee was established. Its Report (1982) focused on the need to support the role of the creator. It distanced itself from the perceived anti-Americanism of earlier years and promoted choice, in part because of the growth of the cultural workforce and the benefits changing technologies were bringing to the cultural sector. The changes the Report proposed for the CBC, NFB, Canada Council and Telefilm sent shockwaves through the federal agencies.

In 1980, Canada signed a UNESCO recommendation on the Status of the Artist. It was followed by Status of the Artist legislation in Quebec in 1988, four years later by federal legislation, and in 2002 by Saskatchewan legislation. Visual artists won the right for payment for exhibiting their work in galleries in 1976. The Public Lending Right Commission was established in 1986 to pay authors for the use of their work in libraries. In 1988, CanCopy, a copyright licensing agency, was established to benefit rights holders. Culture as an industry had come of age.

A significant change took place during this decade in the way the cultural sector was funded by both the federal and provincial governments. An Economic and Regional Development Sub-Agreement on Communication and Culture between Canada and Manitoba was signed in 1984. The Agreement was funded by monies set aside for economic development rather than cultural expenditures. The economic benefits of culture became the measure for spending under the Agreement but the priorities were negotiated by the two parties. This model was followed elsewhere in Canada. Employment strategies to encourage cultural industries were adopted and from then on, the cultural sector found itself arguing the economic benefits of cultural activity. Museums and the performing arts, as well as heritage events, were included as parts of cultural tourism. The result strengthened the capacity of the regions to tell their own stories.

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By now, the changes that were predicted in the early 1970s resulting from new telecommunications and information technologies had found a place in policy-making. Telidon, a Canadian improvement in two-way TV technology, was overtaken by personal computers and was a wake-up call for the cultural industries and communications sector. Attention to the structural problems of production, marketing and distribution was renewed. At the provincial level, film-making and publishing began to be promoted as viable regional cultural industries. A demand for federal resources to be spent equitably throughout the country resulted in reassigning some resources claimed by central Canada and in particular Toronto and Montreal's cultural communities. The two cities, the cultural engines of Canada, now faced domestic competition for limited resources, while cultural tourism was to become a Trojan horse failing to deliver on the promise of new and stable markets.

In 1990, the Business Development Bank of Canada established the Cultural Industries Development Fund, one of many measures taken by the federal government and provincial governments to strengthen an industrial approach to supporting culture. Film, video, multi media and information technologies

including broadcasting, magazine and book publishing were pre-eminent. Professional training in cultural administration and the various skills demanded by the sector was supported by both industry and postsecondary institutions. International agreements and initiatives such as GATT (General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade) exempting cultural services but not goods and SAGIT (Cultural Industries Sectoral Advisory Group on International Trade) demanded greater understanding of the world of business on an international level than had ever faced the cultural community.

A series of amendments to the *Copyright Act* helped Canada address changes in the new technologies environment by, for example, bringing it in line with the North American Free Trade Treaty (1994) and the World Intellectual Property Organization (1997) as well as the earlier the 1961 Rome Convention and the 1971 Berne Convention for the Protection of Literary and Artistic Works. Again a series of studies of the economic, social and cultural needs of cultural industries were initiated by federal and provincial governments. But as in the past, the timing of change and the changes themselves have been controversial in part because of the conflicting objectives of the not-for-profit and profit-making communities.

Canadians have adapted to changing needs throughout the country's history. Early creative industries included making and selling cultural artifacts. Communication technologies have played a pivotal role in nation-building. Governments responded to the need to build the cultural infrastructure expected of a maturing nation. Over time, intergovernmental co-operation has grown. Competition from the health, education and other sectors has limited the response of the public sector to the needs and demands of the cultural sector. The growth of the cultural sector, especially in communications, has been significant; it now makes up a measurable portion of Canada's labour force. The early role of cultural institutions and cultural policy as instruments of nation-building has been supplanted by the assumption that cultural policy is an economic tool as well as an instrument for social cohesion.