FOUR "CONSTANTS" IN CANADIAN CULTURAL POLICY

ABSTRACT

Political and public attention to cultural policy in Canada goes through cycles, varying over time, and has often been motivated by technology change. Many programs, rules and strategic directions were developed over the past century, giving rise to a unique national model for promoting and enhancing cultural expression. Today, in response to the global revolution in communications and information management, Canadian cultural policy is again being challenged. The history of previous public initiatives shows that it is entirely possible for Canada's cultural strategy to adjust creatively and effectively to this latest set of conditions. This is important because an assertive cultural policy is an essential condition for Canadian unity and continuity.

Even as we continue to be affected by the world wide revolution in digital technology, it is important to keep the cultural impacts on Canada in perspective. Canada's ability to express its independent cultural voice has often faced dynamic challenges. Whether these were technological or demographic, institutional or artistic, there have been certain patterns to cultural policy debates which have asserted themselves regularly. We need to recognize these patterns, even while agreeing that the digital revolution has introduced a profound global challenge to sustainable cultural diversity. In my opinion, there are four fundamental constants – we can call them Canada's cultural 'verities' – that describe how this country has responded to past challenges and shaped a successful record of cultural policy initiatives.

1. Cyclical public attention

Concern with cultural policy issues goes through alternating cycles of public and political attention. At different times in Canadian history there have been widely varying levels of interest in culture as a subject of policy concern. I use the term 'culture' in a wholly inclusive manner to mean all aspects of expression that communicate social identity and creativity. We can readily identify periods of high interest in culture when issues were very visible and voluble. Some of these periods date back to the early years of Canadian modern history, while others are more recent.

In the mid-1860s, for example, when the terms of Confederation were being negotiated, the issue of language was very sensitive. For representatives from Quebec, the right to use French in the Dominion's Parliament and in the courts was essential. And for Thomas D'Arcy McGee, a non-French member of the Quebec delegation, culture represented an idealistic opportunity to shape a national character that would suit the new country. McGee, who eloquently promoted an inclusive, tolerant Canadian identity, was silenced in 1868 with a bullet to his brain from an assassin who felt his views on political cooperation betrayed the cause of militant Irish nationalism.

The tragedy of McGee's violent death was never repeated in Canada's political life, but his quest for defining a unique national approach to cultural expression has been echoed on many occasions. In 1929, for example, the Royal Commission on Radio Broadcasting chaired by Sir John Aird concluded that the country required a publicly-owned broadcasting system to enable Canadian voices to be heard over the airwaves. Aird was the President of the Canadian Bank of Commerce and his

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recommendations led a Conservative government under Prime Minister Bennett, followed by a Liberal government under Mackenzie King, to create the forerunner of today's CBC. A mere twenty years later, in 1951, another Royal Commission, this time led by Vincent Massey, recommended many additional initiatives to promote cultural undertakings under state patronage. The Massey Commission laid the policy basis for the Canada Council for the Arts and for public support of many other cultural activities.

Issues of cultural policy have repeatedly surfaced in modern history as sensitive and controversial, often leading to new program or regulatory initiatives. In the early 1970s, following intense debates around bilingualism and biculturalism, the first Canadian content (Cancon) rules were adopted for radio broadcast license holders, specifying minimum requirements for air play of Canadian music. Ten years later, after extensive hearings at the Canadian Radio-Television and Telecommunication Commission (CRTC), licenses were issued for the new medium of PayTV, with the requirement that a small quota of Canadian films be offered to subscribers. At the same time, a parallel decision was made by the federal government to support more output from Canada's emerging commercial film industry.

There have also been periods when the cultural sector was not successful in the competition for government attention. In essence, political interest in cultural programs ebbs and flows, sometimes growing stronger and other times becoming weaker. At present, Canada is going through a phase of lessened interest in activist cultural policy. This is apparent in the federal sphere, extending over several recent governments, but it is also the situation in many provincial jurisdictions. We might speculate as to the reasons for this lower interest. We should certainly recognize that even in low-profile periods, the ongoing administration of cultural programs may spark occasional controversies, but this is not the same as engendering debates and public expressions of support that galvanize initiatives for new directions.

Political interest in Canadian culture is cyclical in nature; this is one of our 'verities'. We can anticipate that cultural issues will return to prominence in a number of years, much as Canadian environmental concerns returned to the public agenda after a quiet period during the 1990s.

2. Driven by technology

While political and social leaders occasionally proclaim their love of things artistic and cultural, it has really been technology challenges that propelled cultural policy development for nearly 100 years. Innovations and commercial opportunities triggered private and public investments, political uncertainties and strategic decisions. For example, the emergence of commercial radio networks in the United States and their spillover to Canada gave rise to fears about this country's lack of presence in this new communications medium. The cultural importance of Canadian broadcasts and was key to the Aird recommendations in 1929. Similarly, concerns about the new commercial technology of television and recognition of the power of the 'mass media' were powerful stimulants to the proposals of the Massey Commission.

We can identify other key technology motivators for cultural policy innovations. In the 1960s, the rapid expansion of cable distribution systems drove political debate on the importance of Canadian ownership rules and priority carriage for domestic broadcasting. In the 1980s, the arrival of Pay-Per-View technology led to the licensing of television movie channels. In the mid-1990s, the availability of satellite distribution systems led to a major controversy and, eventually, to revised regulations on broadcast licenses and 'Cancon' balance. Again in the mid-1990s, the new ability to transfer content across borders through digitized signals led to a high profile trade dispute with the United States over so-called 'split run magazines'. The potential effects of this technology persuaded the federal government to create a new program of support for Canadian publications.

Technology impacts on culture during the Twentieth Century have been seen especially in the field of broadcasting. Even the powerful medium of commercial film has been harnessed to the packaging and distribution capacity of television (although feature films are still normally shown in cinemas for their first-release window). Consequently, the primary focus of new policy and funding has been on broadcasting. A second focus has been complementary to broadcasting, in the sense of assisting the creation of Canadian content to supply the needs of broadcast media. Assistance to recorded music, to the feature film industry, and to documentary film production were directly related to challenges in broadcasting. Even the traditional activity of book publishing, which has

often received government attention, can be thought of as a nurturing ground for the supply of materials to TV production.

By contrast, those areas of cultural activity that are not readily perceived as related to new technologies, notably arts performance and museum operations, are usually relegated to the lowest position on the cultural policy totem pole. Of course, Canadians and foreign visitors continue to attend and enjoy the performing arts and museums, even while these receive less political attention and funding than comparable institutions in other major countries.

In other words, culture in Canada has often obtained its strongest political attention as an offshoot from its relationship to technological innovation, rather than for its intrinsic worth as a voice of creativity, social values and identity. We might speculate as to why this is so. Does technology make public opinion leaders feel vulnerable? Alternatively, do they feel that technology creates uniquely effective vehicles for cultural expression? In other words, is technological innovation viewed as a threat or as an opportunity for Canadian culture and identity? Whatever the underlying motivation, the outcome is that technology has been the fundamental driver of modern cultural policy and this has been a consistent 'verity' in the shaping of the policy agenda.

3. A Canadian cultural model

Despite periods of cyclical neglect and the narrow political focus on technology impacts, a distinct Canadian cultural model of considerable breadth and depth did emerge during the second half of the Twentieth Century. Research studies and public consultations examined the dynamics of different cultural activities, shaping policies toward the arts and what became known as the 'cultural industries'. Interventions to support Canadian content were implemented across a full range of undertakings, and a pattern or 'model' has been defined. This model came under pressure during the mid-1990s, when some major players in the fields of digital technology systems argued that the 'convergence' of telecommunications and broadcasting would make cultural regulations entirely outmoded. An acute observation by the federal Heritage Minister of the time, Michel Dupuis, summarized the essential challenge. He pointed to the emerging growth of 'converged' undertakings and commented: "Ça, c'est le contenant; mais où est le contenu? Those wires are the containers; but where is the content?"

Minister Dupuis' ironic question drew attention to the continuing relevance of cultural policies and programs that had evolved over many years. Despite funding restrictions and occasional campaigns from trade liberalization advocates (often related to suppliers of foreign TV programs and films) a policy model that envisages public intervention across the cultural production continuum remains effective in Canada. This model touches all aspects of cultural creation, production, distribution, consumption and preservation. It recognizes that there is vast access to imported cultural products, but that access to Canadian products, with support from funding and regulatory regimes, is essential to national identity.

In effect, as Sir John Aird and Sir Vincent Massey had foreseen many years ago, culture is similar to education or even to national defence: it is a 'public good' that must be managed to achieve more than economic market outcomes. In the absence of public interventions, a purely market-driven approach would relegate most large-scale cultural expression to economic oblivion (whether in the English or French languages).

This model is a central constant in Canadian cultural life: it is one of our cultural 'verities'. It can be modified through timely initiatives, such as the recent efforts to negotiate an international legal convention to protect cultural diversity. The model is not purely federal in scope, allowing for complementary measures by different levels of governments. When major cultural construction projects take shape, for example, they inevitably require tiered funding from federal, provincial and municipal governments. Similarly, it is the layering of tax credits from different governments that effectively enhance the value of private philanthropy, or the value of private funding in operations such as film companies and book publishers.

Ironically, the only institutions that do not benefit from the layering of assistance are those of a national nature, notably the national museums. No provincial or municipal governments accord any support to national projects: everyone seems to expect that Ottawa alone will look after the pan-Canadian perspective. That unfortunately is another Canadian cultural 'verity'.

4. Culture and national continuity

Controversy and competition between private interests, or between private undertakings and public authorities, are normal aspects of civic democracy. Examples are found in many activity areas, even in the field of cultural policy. Conflicting views are expressed on the broad goals and the detailed designs of cultural funding programs, broadcasting rules, copyright laws, construction of museums and so on. We should not mistakenly assume that because there are differences of opinion there is a lack of support for the essential public model. This leads to my final observation on the wider importance of cultural expression and public policy within Canada – an importance which reflects a fundamental concept of community values.

The continued existence of Canada rests on its capacity as a collective social enterprise to protect the independence and distinctiveness of its peoples. After all, if there is nothing unique about the country, why should it exist as a political entity? This is hardly a truism: the survival and strength of the French language and Francophone communities is a unique attribute of this country within North America.

While tensions with Quebec and with other French language groups are ongoing national realities, the unity of Canada has been sustained through the persuasive argument that this country operates as a first barrier for linguistic protection. This is one effect of cultural policy. A similar though more subtle argument applies to English-language communities. The ability of English-Canadians to voice narratives, values, goals and histories that differ from the American colossus depends entirely on the effective communication of independent Canadian cultural thought.

Beginning with the *Quebec Act* of 1774, reaffirmed by Confederation in 1867, the identity of Canada has been rooted in its bilingual and bicultural nature. In recent years, with the immense growth of immigration from 'non-traditional' areas, and with the entry of aboriginal interests and voices into the mainstream, Canada has invented an approach to social identity which is called 'multiculturalism'. This important social experiment is very different in concept and outlook from either the American or European traditions of integrating (and managing) diverse populations.

The success of this country's multicultural initiative, and its future success in remaining united despite tensions over language, ethnicities, or regions, will depend on a combination of economic and social factors. Canada's historical challenge of being a home to its founding peoples and a welcoming place of settlement to widely diverse immigrants is profoundly cultural. We might adapt the German expression of 'kulturkampf' or 'culture struggle' to describe the challenge of creating shared identities, values and historical experiences while also respecting diversity. We cannot abandon this cultural struggle without also abandoning the battle to survive as a sovereign country. This is another 'verity' in our cultural being.

Concluding observations

Today, as we witness remarkable innovations to all forms of communications and information management, it is not surprising that the shape and methodologies of Canadian cultural policy are being challenged by some people. Yet, the essential cultural goals identified in the past remain unchanged: to develop practical methods that enable the creation, promotion, distribution and exchange of Canadian creative materials.

During the current period of intense innovation, there will inevitably be pressure from some who will argue that new forms of digital technology cannot be harnessed exclusively for Canadian content. Critics may argue that the country cannot afford to provide financial assistance for cultural production. Others may argue that the international rules governing global trade will nullify efforts by Canada – or any country – to protect 'space' for domestic cultural voices.

The history of past encounters with these types of arguments indicates to me that it is entirely possible for Canadian policy makers to respond creatively and effectively. Moreover, as long as there remains a collective interest in sustaining the Canadian experiment, an assertive cultural policy will be part of our solution for national continuity. The greatest threat to future success in Canadian cultural policy is not from technological innovation or foreign pressures. In my view, it is from our own pattern of domestic cyclical interest and our short-term attention span. We cannot afford to be passive, defeatist or 'asleep at the wheel' while innovations and commercial pressures accelerate along Canada's cultural networks.