

by Peter Grawski
Jan 20/97

ADDRESS TO
1
THE CANADIAN CLUB OF TORONTO

~~Madame~~

Mr. Chairman, honoured guests, members and ~~friends~~ ^{brother} friends of this distinguished and historic club.

Thank you for the warmth of your welcome, the eloquence of your introduction and the honour you present in my name. I accept it with pride and humility ^(shows what a guy can do if he quits his job.) but note as I do that I do so not personally, but on behalf of the great Canadian institution it has been my joy and my privilege to serve for much of my adult life, and both my gratitude and my pleasure are amplified this afternoon by the presence here of so many of the colleagues and friends who have made my work and my life, not to mention whatever honours have come my way, not only possible but, on more days than any one person ought to be entitled to exciting and fulfilling.

Like virtually all of the CBC, Morningside, as you will know if you are among the million and a half or so Canadians who listen to at least some of it every week, is a very collegial operation; its strength is in its teamwork and the skill and dedication of the young people--or they seem to me to be young--who work at its core: producers, technicians and other studio personnel and the support staff who surround them, and though the demands of the endless hours--the need, as we say, to keep stoking the engine^{l-r} have burned out more people than I like to think about in my own time on the air, I have been taught, supported, coached, cajoled, chastised, encouraged, made to laugh and occasionally to weep and always to appear, on the radio, not only nicer than I am in private, but, thanks to the research that awaits me every morning, much smarter too, and, in this happy interlude in what has not been a particularly happy year for us, I

want to take this moment to salute and to thank them all.

That said, and at the risk of quibbling with my flattering introduction, there is one distinction that has come my way over the years, which is, I can say without fear of argument, mine and mine alone. I refer, of course, to the fact that I am a living, breathing, Canadian sex symbol. Even I, on occasion, can forget this fact, but I was reminded ^{of it} again this very day, when I was stopped on my way into Salon B as I am so frequently stopped at airports and in other lobbies all over the country, by a striking looking young woman, lithe of figure, fair of countenance. Catching my eye, she approached me, as is so often the case, shyly. "Excuse me," she said, "but aren't you Peter Gzowski," and when I replied, equally shyly, that yes indeed I was, she said, as her counterparts everywhere have said, "My

mother is your greatest fan.”

I said in passing this has not been a happy season at Morningside, nor, indeed, at any part of the CBC. Because I want to talk a bit today about some of the causes of that unhappiness, and why I think not all of them are necessary, I should probably take a minute here and explain my own decisions about my future--decisions, alas, that have been the subject of more public speculation than I would have preferred. Late last summer--ah, remember summer--I came to the conclusion that this ^{SEASON} would be my last as the host of Morningside. I did so for a number of reasons. One is simply that I'm getting on. I turned 62 in July, and for some time now I've been certain that 3:13 in the morning, which I like for its symmetry on my digital alarm, comes earlier with each passing year. Another is that it's been a lovely run. It was twenty-five years ago last

September when I began my daily broadcasting career at the program we then called This Country in the Morning, and, since I took a bit of a hiatus after 1974, fifteen years since I returned to Morningside. That's a lot of daily radio to do, and, while I still feel welcome by the audience and still feel the sense of expectation and discovery that comes each day at 9:06 a.m. in most of the country (9:36 a.m. in Newfoundland), when I press the little button that allows me to be heard from Inuvik to Cape Race, I want to step aside while that feeling is still there; want to step, indeed, before I'm pushed. I also think--dare I say this?--that it may be time for a new and younger voice: someone who is thrilled by the technological revolution and not intimidated by it; someone who is more inclined to want to take part in the revivification of Canada than to try to cling to values that may well be being left behind

by a changing world. This is, I realize even as I say it, more dramatic than I want to sound, and if there is a hint in it that I have given up on the things I cherish about this country, then I have put it more strongly than I meant to. I believe as fervently as I ever have in the inherent decency of Canadians. If ~~is~~^{it's} true, as Conrad Black likes to say (with an uncharacteristic lack of poly-syllabics) that you can't define a country by its social safety network, surely it is also true that you *can* define it by the spirit on which that network has been built, and that spirit--of co-operation, of pooling our resources, of creating public institutions to do what private concerns either can't or won't do, of huddling together against the cold--is as vital now to our survival as it has ever been, if not, in fact, more important. I just think it may be time that newer, fresher voices begin to say so.

And finally, I concluded this summer, I'd like to

try some other things, many of them, if I may, on the CBC. I'd like to try some television adventures--I have a proposal in now, if anyone's interested, for an occasional series of live concerts, based on the events we've learned to stage for literacy across the country, which would be a celebration of our poets, singers, dancers, comedians, jugglers, flute-players, ^{fiddlers} story-tellers, magicians. I'd like to mix them all up, the way the Queen Street band called Jughead (surely you know their hockey song) accompanied Quartetto Gelato on *O Sole Mio* at a literacy affair we threw at the Red Barn, or the bass player from the Barenaked Ladies ^{who} started polka-ing with the amazing Walter Ostenak. I have some other ideas I'd like to try on radio, too; I love it too much to want to stop altogether. I'd like to write some more--in all these years of broadcasting for a living, I've

--love its conversational nature, its informality, its reflections, and the fact that (unlike television) it values content more than style.

never lost the feeling that I'm a writer who has just happened to be working on the radio for a while. And, as I say, I'd like to sleep in--at least past 3:13. But I am not, no matter what has been in the newspapers and elsewhere, about to retire.

I have spelled all this out in some detail for a couple of reasons. One is that I hope I have made it clear that whatever my future holds I am stepping away from the exhilarating but exhausting job that has been my life. I have until now--with a notable exception I'll come to in a minute--been pretty silent in public about what's been happening to the CBC, in particular to CBC Radio, although I did offer to show up at one demonstration bringing along my granddaughters who would wear signs saying "Save My Grandpa's High-Priced Job." With all due respect--and it's both substantial and affectionate--to all my many friends among the

usual suspects who *have* spoken up, I just don't think that ours are the voices that can turn things around. I think the people who can change the tide are the *unusual* suspects, the voices of people you would not immediately identify with the CBC--of the Establishment, of the corporate elite, of the supporters of the major parties. I think someone who can get Paul Martin on the phone has a much better chance of having this government rethink the draconian nature of its cuts than any number of well-meaning petitions.

I think those petitions are important. (But I think now it's more important to pull some other levers. And--remarkably--I actually think that's beginning to happen. I don't think it would be fair to name names here, since the ~~p~~ people I'm talking about are quite capable of delivering their own messages, but in the last several weeks and months, I have heard either directly or indirectly

and am delighted to see one here (may you get a million signatures).

from an impressive number of people who ^Ldo have access to power, who are concerned about what's happening--in particular, may I say, about what's happening to CBC *Radio*--and who are more and more determined to do something to change it. If whatever message I can deliver this afternoon, ^{with my own high-priced job coming to an end.} gives them encouragement in their task, I, from the sidelines, would be content.

The other reason I wanted to be explicit about my "retirement," or lack thereof, is that the word was, I'm afraid, the trigger for an intemperate outburst I indulged in last fall when I was talking to a very good reporter from Maclean's. You may have seen it; heaven knows I have--everywhere from an Aislin cartoon ^{to a Dalton Camp column} to a great deal of my mail. I rather expect it will make the next edition of Columbo's Canadian Quotations, right after "The world will end at midnight, 12:30 in Newfoundland," which I also said. If you missed it, I

blush to say, I called Perrin Beatty, the president of the corporation I was and still am contracted to, an unfortunate name. And in case the reporter missed it, I took the trouble to spell it out: "S-O-N of a...," well, you get the point. This was not a career-enhancing move, even if you are nearing the end, and I am now, as I wrote to the president not long ago, sorry I made it. And what triggered it, as I say, was the matter of my retirement.

What had happened after that word made its way into the journals, was that I had begun to feel shunted aside. Morningside. I now learned, would disappear in its current form. ^{The team - my team -} The whole ^{would be scattered.} system would be redesigned, and I felt left out. It was if the powers that were had simply said, "Okay, Gzowski's gone, now we can dismantle everything he's been part of." And, unfortunately, just at the height of these feelings I read a report in the wire service to the effect that Mr. Beatty

had said, in response to a question that followed his speech to, as it happens, the Canadian Club of Ottawa, that, yes, Gzowski was retiring. He was sorry, but that was the way it was. And when I read that, I said, "that son of a..."

The president, may I presume to say, took my outburst with dignity and good humour-- certainly more grace than I could have mustered if circumstances had been reversed. The evening Maclean's appeared, he called me at home, announcing himself with "it's the son of a bitch himself," and proceeding to engage me in a frank, and, I think, friendly, open discussion of the corporation and my own feelings of frustration and anger.

Furthermore, he--or his people--took the trouble to root out not only a videotape of his remarks to the Canadian Club, but a transcript. He had not, in fact, said "retire" at all. So, sorry, Perrin; next time I'll bite my tongue.

I remembered, as I mulled this all over, the time This Country in the Morning got itself into trouble over swearing. We had assembled a panel of artists and for reasons that escape me now I asked them how they'd paint Canada. One of them--it was the late and much loved Greg Curnoe, actually--said, "I'd paint the whole flipping thing blue"--except he didn't say flipping. Now live ^{normal}radio in this vast and disparate country is, with rare exceptions (one of them is Cross Country Check-Up) is in fact live only once. What you hear at 9:06 in Atlantic Canada--9:36 in Newfoundland[✓] when I say, "Good morning," is in fact me talking at 8:06 Eastern Time; that hour, and the subsequent ones, are taped and played in order across the land, so everyone hears them at the same time on their clocks. Thinking that the "flipping" might be all right in Cape Breton but not fit for the tender ears of Ontario, we instantly

took steps to edit it out. To do this, we marked the specific second the word had escaped, and then, as the tape began to roll ^{in the Eastern time zone,} a producer made his way to the ominously named master control, stopwatch in hand. As the word approached he prepared to hit the "tone key" which is roughly the equivalent of the National time signal. Unfortunately, we failed to take two things into account. One was that CBC producers don't have the fastest reflexes in the world, and the other was that audio tape stretches imperceptibly every time you play it. The result was that where the Atlantic provinces had heard "the whole flipping thing," the rest of the country heard "the whole flipping beeeep." I used to wonder how that would sound on someone's car radio. "Did the CBC actually use 'flipping?'" "They must have because they underlined it." "Wait a minute. If they left that in, *what did they take out?'"*

→ Lorne Green read me the news and such stalwarts as Norman DePoe and Mathew Halton set the standards of broadcast journalism that would still be notable today.

My own love affair with CBC Radio began long before I ever darkened its doorstep. I listened to the Craigs and the Happy Gang and L for Lanky, as a child of the war. As a young reporter in Timmins, Ontario, I went upstairs to the CBC affiliate to catch the wonders of Andrew Allen's--and Esse W, Llung's--Stage series, Stage 54 as it was when I discovered it. As a not much older city editor in Moose Jaw, I came to a better understanding of--and deeper love for--the prairies through the magic of W. O. Mitchell's Jake and Kid than through any work I did on the old Times Herald. (And if I may digress completely for a second, I've always thought it a measure of how CBC Radio touches everything in our lives, ^{in the mid 70s and} when, to my great pride, I had the honour of introducing the brilliant Quebecois monologist Yvon Deschamps--a towering giant of Quebec culture but until then unknown in

English speaking Canada--to late night English television, and the pleasure of dining with him after the show in Vancouver when a call came through from his mother-in-law, who had watched him from Toronto. "All these years," she said, "I've known *how* popular you were, but never, until tonight, *why*. And now I do." Yvon Deschamps' mother-in-law, it turned, was Billie Mae Richards, who had played the Kid in the golden age (I remembered from Moose Jaw.)

The golden age? Depends where you sit, I guess. CBC Radio is doing drama now--some of it, indeed, on Morningside ^{and producing + recording music} that would measure up to many of my fondest memories. But of current affairs, I think you could say, the best years began in the early 70s, with the creation not only of This Country in the Morning, but of the daily As It Happens and the weekly Sunday morning. I was, as I say, lucky enough to be part

of those heady times, to build with some of the most exciting people I have ever worked with radio programs that were based on no one else's model -- no Canadian version of this or that, simply the best radio we could do to suit our own sense of what the listener might want to hear. This wa, we may have forgotton, a time of incredible renewal, the rebuilding of a service that for all its long and glorious history, had grown, in many ways, moribund and out of touch with its potential audience.

As Mark Starowicz, the man who built both As It Happens and Sunday Morning before moving on to The Journal and television, said in Maclean's last week (Mark chooses his quotations more carefully than I do) "there was no more desolate place in 1970 than CBC Radio."

Could it happen again? With new and fresh voices, new and fresh formats, and a renewed inspiration to play a role in the nation's agenda, could the CBC--either Radio or Television or both--survive its current state of crisis of confidence and rise again? No one would be more pleased than I if that were to come about, not only because I'd like to continue to do some work for it but as a

listener, a viewer and a Canadian--and there are positive signs, I'm happy to report, of a renewed audience interest in the increasingly more Canadian English language television network. But, I can't help thinking, the rebirth of Radio in the early 70s, if that's the model we want to look to, came and a time of budget increases, not drastic and devastating cuts, and came under the direction of a number of people who had a vision of what they wanted to achieve.

I have mentioned a couple of times the anger and frustration the working broadcasters of the CBC have been feeling this already long and bitter winter. Not all of this, it may surprise you to learn, is directed at the politicians' decisions--and their failure to live up to yet another promise of the Red Book. In a time when virtually every public institution is being trimmed and cut to the boneⁿ, one, surely, could ever have expected the

to roll on blithely on a billion
dollars a year.

19

CBC to be immune. Yet what has dismayed many of us is not only the degree of the cuts but the manner in which they've been imposed. As my friend Robert Fulford has said (Fulford says many of the things I think before I think them), you would assume that before anyone took a management course in the 1990s--before anyone even opened a textbook--the teacher would say, "Look, can we agree that across-the-board cuts are wrong? That's where we start, and after we've all absorbed it we can move on to our real studies." Yet that, in principal, feels like what's been happening at the CBC. Oh, I'm sure there are exceptions--know, in fact, that some things, some programs, some departments, are being cut more than others. But that's not what it feels like. It feels as if someone had just run over the top of everything with a buzz saw, that (and I except the Canadianization of the English-

language TV service) that has everything has been reactive to the decisions of our political masters, that if there IS a vision behind the revamping of the CBC no one is articulating it. If the CBC realized - as it must have - that some form of budget reduction was inevitable, no one was saying, "Look, if you'll just make the future FORSEEABLE, here's what we could continue to do - and here's what we'd have to stop doing. And the result of what I can only call their failure, is that we work in an atmosphere of gloom, suspicion and despair; the wonder, I think is not that we still frequently do good programs and occasionally great ones, but that, in these times, we do any programs at all.

And now I want to talk about some good things. I want to talk about The National, and the National magazine, about the Nature of Things and This Hour Has 22 Minutes, about the Air Farce and The Newsroom (it is coming back, apparently) about North of 60 and Black Harbour -- portraits of ourselves -- about The Fifth Estate and Rita MacNeil and Hockey Night in Canada (even with Don Cherry), about the appointment of the daring and imaginative young executive Slawko Klimkiw to a senior post in the main English TV network, and the re-emergence of Mark Starowicz as a force to be reckoned with, about Newsworld, which is,

in many ways, I think, a beacon for the future, operating as it does on the most modest of budgets yet maintaining its own obvious esprit de corps, willing to try new things, about the French-language television service, and perhaps especially their tele (?) (some of which have audiences that practically outnumber the people who voted Yes in 1995), and, as I prepare to leave you, about English-language Radio -- the heart, in my view, of what the CBC has been for 60 years.

The difference between the English Radio and Television networks, I would argue, is that one exists and the other does not. No one actually watches CBC Television; they watch PROGRAMS ON IT--including, in remarkable numbers, many of those I've just named--and then they turn to a program somewhere else. But people DO listen to CBC Radio--just as they listen to other favourite private stations all over the country. That's what

they turn on in the morning, and that's where they stay tuned all day, as if their dials were welded in place. I have never, in all my working life, felt anything like the bond between the Morningside audience and the people who put their program on the radio, or anything like the warmth that flowed through the Broadcasting Centre in November, when thousands of people-- many of their faces, by the way, giving the lie to the stereotype that all CBC listeners are middle aged or older--streamed through the Barbara Frum Atrium to help on a bittersweet occasion, celebrate 60 years on the air.

I love and admire much of what I see on CBC English television, and, as I say, I'd like to contribute something to it in seasons to come. But I would nevertheless argue, if anyone is listening, that with the proper vision and a determination to express who we are, it might be possible to

make some adjustments without destroying its essence. CBC Television, as I say, is comprised of various parts, and some of them could be stronger, I'm sure, and some of them might have to go. But radio is different and I just don't think you can cut it in the same way; radio is all of a piece, and, when you cut it, you're hacking at its soul. So if there is indeed a growing public feeling to ease the pressure on the CBC in general, I hope that's where it will be directed - at trying to restore some of radio's strengths.

One final word, if I may. The last few days have not been full of good news for anyone who believes in the importance of retaining and encouraging Canada's cultural voices. The decision last week of the World Trade Organization, albeit, one notes with faint hope, a tentative one, certainly threatens our magazines and may well have far-reaching implications on everything from books to films to broadcasting. If this is indeed a country that has built itself on the spirit of our publicly-supported institutions, this is certainly not the time to let our most important one wither through neglect. If it goes, I wonder how and where will we continue to talk to each other, and to hear the voices of our land. Thank you for the honour and for your attention this afternoon.