

An Address

By

THE HONOURABLE HENRY N. R. JACKMAN

CHAIRMAN

THE ONTARIO ARTS COUNCIL

“CANADA’S CULTURE”

To

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Madam Chairman, it is indeed an honour to be invited to be a speaker at one of your meetings celebrating the millennium, although I must say I was very nervous when you suggested that I should talk about culture, particularly that rather elusive entity, Canadian Culture.

I looked up three dictionaries to find a definition for culture -- one Canadian, one American and one English. The dictionaries of course all gave many definitions, but it was interesting to see which definition each dictionary listed first.

The first definition in the English Dictionary said that culture was "a refined understanding of the arts and other human intellectual achievement".

The American Webster Dictionary called culture "a set of shared attitudes, values, goals and practices that characterize a company or a

corporation, or traits of a racial or religious group". Note the difference.

The Canadian Dictionary stated as its first definition "the cultivation of plants, the rearing of bees, silkworms, etc." or "a quantity of bacteria grown for study".

I am being of course somewhat facetious here as all the dictionaries gave alternative definitions and came around to approximately the same position.

But of the definitions cited I personally prefer the first definition in the Oxford English Dictionary, "a refined understanding of the arts and other intellectual achievement", which implies a knowledge and understanding of the arts acquired through intellectual and aesthetic training. Culture so defined transcends national boundaries. It represents the highest quality of the human spirit. It rejects a narrow

"jingoistic" definition. Appreciation of fine art, music and literature is a personal attribute attained through study, rather than a national characteristic. Encouragement of art and cultural expression of all kinds, not just Canadian, is a legitimate avenue for government support as the greater appreciation of art and culture enriches our lives.

I suspect however for the purposes of your Canadian Club Millennium series, we are attempting to define the word culture in the American Webster Dictionary sense as being "a set of shared attitudes and values which might characterize us as a nation". This is a much broader definition and could include social attitudes, consumer preferences, the sports we enjoy, attitudes towards government, etc., all of which might define us, but are hardly examples of artistic expression. In this sense the word "culture" is synonymous with "identity" and is far broader than simply appreciation of the arts.

The problem in Canada, particularly when it comes to government policy, is that we tend to confuse the two definitions. Policies which encourage an exploration and appreciation of arts and the humanities should and do receive government support in most civilized societies. Government policies on the other hand that deal with "identity" are much more of a problem. Much of Canada believes that the state should have no role in promoting a specific identity. The problem is compounded by the fact that there seems to be no consensus in this country as to what our identity truly is.

Can we define Canadianness with a country spread out over thousands of miles with differences which in the past hundred years have grown greater rather than lessened? The twin forces of globalization on one hand and the growth of regionalism are much

stronger now than they were a hundred years ago. Does this make the search for our Canadian identity or culture even more elusive?

Governor General Adrienne Clarkson articulated sentiments in her installation speech that many Canadians might support. Perhaps she was less successful two weeks later when she read the Speech From The Throne, though she might be excused as she had a different speechwriter on that occasion.

That the Government is concerned about the lack of a Canadian identity goes without saying as witnessed by the myriad of programs and dollars that are lavished on our so-called cultural industries in an attempt to define "identity" with questionable relevance to artistic merit. Developing cultural policy is not an easy task, particularly in the absence of any consensus as to what culture it is we are trying to protect.

And yet, in spite of this cultural ambiguity, artistic expression in Canada seems to be in pretty good shape.

At the moment our so-called "cultural industries" are enjoying remarkable growth. Canada is becoming a cultural powerhouse. Canada's artists and cultural entrepreneurs have made Canada one of the top exporting nations against countries two or three times its size. Books by Canadian authors in terms of both titles and sales have trebled in the past decade and foreign-rights sales are booming. In the 1960's only 5% of books sold in Canadian bookstores were by Canadian authors. Now the figure is over 30%.

Much of this growth is fuelled by the 1988 Free Trade Agreement and the cheaper Canadian dollar. Canadian film and TV production, according to a recent Price Waterhouse survey, now totals \$3 billion, double the figure seven years ago. Between them Alanis Morissette,

Shania Twain and Celine Dion have sold 155 million albums, of which 95% are sold outside Canada. Private TV networks are voluntarily increasing Canadian content, a development that would have been unheard of only a few years ago.

Yet in spite of all this, many Canadians suggest that much of this may be simply a symptom of further Americanization of our society.

One of the chief problems with our quest to find our identity is that we keep making comparisons to the United States. In fact, we are in danger of developing a mega-sized inferiority complex which seems to tell us that if only the USA were not here we could develop on our own and that the huge US engine south of the border is somehow destroying our separate and distinct culture. We label American culture as self-assertive, expansive, vigorous and robust. In spite of the tremendous growth in Canadian film, theatre, music, books we still continue to say

that our culture is fragile and undernourished. Our federal arts bureaucrats, concerned with their own budgets and those dependent on government handouts, encourage this perception. Since Americans are characterized as being brash or harsh, we take refuge in calling ourselves "a kinder and gentler people", an assertion which may have little ground for legitimacy. In other words, our obsession with the United States means that discussion of culture in this country which should be a celebration of the remarkable achievements Canadians have made in the "arts", tends to be a hand-wringing wake where we wallow in our own supposed cultural deficiencies and ask for more government funding.

This has led to a huge cultural establishment at the federal level which supports organizations like the CBC and the National Film Board, the Museum of Civilization which gobble up the lion's share of

the Department of Heritage budget. The question of what it is we are trying to protect however never seems to be answered.

A Canadian magazine may get a different tax treatment from an American magazine. What is the difference between an American and a Canadian magazine? Answer: The Canadian magazine gets a different tax treatment. Does this mean that it is only the extent of government support that defines its Canadianness?

What is a Canadian book? I just finished reading a biography of the late John Marshall, former Chief Justice of the United States during the early 19th century. A friend of mine asked me why did I not read a comparable book about our Canadian judicial system? The book I read was certainly published by an American publisher, but when I read the flyleaf the author was a professor at the University of Toronto who wrote the book in Canada. Is this book Canadian? A biography of

Laurier published by the Oxford University Press – written by an Oxford professor who did his graduate work in Canada – is this a Canadian book? Probably not by our government definition.

Some years ago I was walking to my home and my way was blocked by a film crew who were shooting a movie. I asked someone who appeared to be in charge whether this was a Canadian movie. The person I questioned turned out to be the Executive Producer who said, “hell, no, this is definitely not a Canadian movie”. I asked him “why not”? It was my understanding there were a lot of grants given to Canadian productions. He said, “if this were a Canadian movie the distributors would not touch us”. Admittedly this was some years ago, but it was obvious Canadian Government funding was the last resort of bad movies. Good movies, or at least commercially successful movies, could and did receive money from the private sector.

Canada as a movie capital at the moment is booming. Twenty-five per cent of Hollywood's movies are now made outside of the United States, most of them in Canada. Are these Canadian movies? According to our cultural bureaucrats most of them are not. By definition Canadianness of a film can only be defined, like publishing or magazines, by reason that they receive government subsidies. If you do not get a Canadian Government grant you are not a Canadian movie and presumably are not contributing to our cultural fabric. Yet until you see the credits at the end of the film it is often very difficult, if not impossible, to determine the film's nationality.

The biggest threat in my opinion to Canadian culture is the faulty logic coming from Ottawa which defines our identity in terms of government support. The CBC, which soaks up over a billion dollars of our taxpayers' dollars, presumes to give Canadians a common sense of

identity even though its television audience is only a small fraction of what it once was a few years ago. Any discussion of the CBC, including the present press surrounding the hiring of the new President, makes it very clear that the CBC itself has no clear idea as to what its mandate should be. Yet this lack of purpose does not prevent the CBC from asking for more money. CBC supporters will say the very existence of the CBC is a reflection of our identity. What it may or may not broadcast therefore becomes secondary. In other words, according to Ottawa and our cultural mandarins, Canadian identity is defined by government policy and largesse. In the absence of any clear ability to define who we are, perhaps they may be right. Government handouts have certainly become part of our culture.

Although we do not have an authoritarian regime in this country, cultural policy still remains subject to political pressure and the dictates

of what might be called the politically correct. The CBC a few years ago came up with a documentary entitled "The Valour and The Horror" which, according to some, denigrated the service of the Canadian armed forces during the Second World War. The issue here was not an artistic question but their interpretation of history which was vigorously criticized by veterans groups. The CBC apologized. There is a lesson to be drawn here. Surely an artist may write or publish or produce anything he or she wishes, but should they do so if it is produced and funded by governments? Contrast this with the tremendous number of anti-Vietnam War feature-length films that have come from Hollywood. These movies I am sure were to some Americans as equally offensive as "The Valour and the Horror". Yet there was no public outcry. Why? The difference was that they were not funded by governments. In a country that believes in free expression no one really

has the right to complain. But if it is the government or the CBC that funds one point of view to the exclusion of all other viewpoints you can see the problem.

The Canada Council, which again prides itself as an agent for allowing the "avant garde" to express itself, came out with a program to celebrate the millennium. What were these avant garde themes the Canada Council wished to promote? Well, there was giving our native peoples a voice which had so long been denied them; expressions of celebrating our multiracial, multicultural diversity; recognizing the place of women in our history and in our society; and recognizing the duality of French and English language across Canada. Now these sentiments, however laudable, are hardly "avant garde". "Avant garde" is meant to shock and to raise questions and challenge

established tastes and values. The Canada Council here is simply reconfirming what our Government feels is politically correct.

Similarly government funding, as practiced by the Canada Council, simply because it is one Council, inevitably leads to a uniformity of cultural choices which everyone must agree is detrimental to the creative process. It is far better to have a multiplicity of funding sources. Patron A may be eccentric in his choice of art but his or her eccentricities are cancelled out by the eccentricities of hundreds of other patrons. It is only from this variety of tastes that true art or culture can emerge. There are still many in the Federal Government who feel that private sector funding is somehow corrupting and that government should be the exclusive funder of the arts. The truth of the matter is that private sector donors are far less subject to political pressures than governments.

What therefore is the answer? I have said earlier that our preoccupation with our identity, particularly our insecurity relative to the United States, is self-defeating, perhaps even soul destroying. It prevents a healthy, robust culture from ever developing at all. I believe that we should not try to define ourselves; we should simply let it happen. We are very different people living in this country. The fact that we are different does not make any of us less Canadian. It is not the Government or the CBC that gives us our identity. The Government should be a reflection of what we are, not someone who tells us who we should be.

What then do we have in common? For two hundred years now the northern half of this continent has decided to live separately from our neighbour to the south. Why did we do it? Our history tells us why, which leads me to ask why in the interests of political correctness,

have we stopped teaching our history in Canadian schools, but that is another story. Our history would show that Canada is not the product of a revolution against authority as was the United States, but is the product of the counter-revolution. We are the product, not of a proclamation of set principles or a way of life, but are the product of a pragmatic, evolutionary process which perhaps resists ringing declarations such as an "American" or a "Canadian" way of life. Perhaps because of the evolutionary nature of our development, our culture or identity is therefore incapable of being defined. Nor should it be defined. For in spite of our differences we have created a nation on the north half of this continent, sprung from ancient traditions, nourished and enriched by the countless millions who came to these shores to join their destiny with ours.

We do not need the Government to tell us who we are or what we should be. Culture and artistic expression, however you define it, must come from within; it cannot be imposed.

Government funding of the arts should be limited to art in its truest sense. I again quote the Oxford Dictionary, "a refined understanding of the arts and other human intellectual achievement".

We do this through the support of our schools, universities and other cultural institutions.

I said earlier that we have been told that we are a kinder and more generous people, particularly when compared with the United States. That statement only rings true if we talk about government programs. If we measure the words "kind" and "generous" in terms of volunteerism or charitable giving, the facts show otherwise. Volunteerism as measured by the number of volunteers relative to

population is three times greater in the United States than in Canada. Charitable giving, according to the House of Commons Finance Committee, is also three times as great in the U.S. relative to personal incomes.

Why then do we seem to be less generous? It is not because on a personal level we care less, but simply because in Canada our Government leaders have told us they would do more and therefore as individuals we need to do less. We therefore have a system of medicare, hospital and unemployment insurance, government grants to arts, culture and public broadcasting which are much greater here than in the United States. Whether these should be carried out by the Government or whether the private sector should play an increased role can be a matter of debate. However there is no question there is a

correlation between government support and lack of private sector support.

Whatever one feels about government involvement in the arts or society in general, it is clear that if government programs do not expand then private philanthropy must fill the gap. Therefore it must follow that the purpose of both public and private policy as we approach the millennium should be to take the necessary steps to ensure that government policies should be designed to encourage greater private support.

For the past two years I have had the honour of being Chairman of the Ontario Arts Council, which distributes funds to artists and not-for-profit arts organizations. We have undertaken many changes, some of which are controversial, in the arts community. The most important change however is to change the focus from government arts

bureaucrats giving out money to not-for-profit arts organizations on a basis of what is generally called "peer group assessment", a flawed process heavily influenced by the Arts Council officers themselves, which has frequently been criticized as elitist and which tends to perpetuate the same grants to the same organizations year after year and more often than not, prevents newer and more experimental organizations from gaining access to the system. We have changed all this to emphasize policies which reward arts organizations that help themselves by gaining a wider degree of public acceptance and private sector support. The centerpiece of our program is the Ontario Government's Arts Endowment Fund which is making millions of dollars in taxpayers' money available to those organizations which match government funds from private sector fundraising. After one full year of operation this program has achieved remarkable results - \$25

million in new endowments have been set up. To put this amount in perspective, this program has already put almost twice as much into the hands of arts organizations than the annual grants that the OAC makes under its regular assessment process. These expenditures of taxpayer funds are not driven by government telling us what we should do; they are driven by the charitable giving, individual generosity of countless Ontarians. This is a tremendous shift in public policy, away from the elitist Canada Council model, and has perhaps not been adequately covered by the press nor understood by the public.

In effect governments are saying not that you deserve less money from government, but that your future destiny must lie within yourself. If you give generously the government will effectively match your gift. Thus Canadians have been given the opportunity to prove that they are as kind and generous as we keep saying we are.

We have great traditions in our country. Reliance on government is not one of our traditions; it is simply an act of dependence. Our traditions embrace freedom, self-reliance but also a commitment as individuals to help those organizations which enrich our lives.

Volunteering and philanthropy are not just characteristics of Canada; they are Canada. Canadians are clearly willing and eager to take control of their daily lives. Canadians are ready for what might be called "a new citizenship for a new millennium". And for a great many Canadians it will mean that we will finally be getting our country back again.