

A Vision For The CBC

by

Mme. Guylaine Saucier
Chair of the Board
Canadian Broadcasting Corporation

to the
Canadian Club
Toronto, March 24, 1997

Check Against Delivery

Thank you _____ and good afternoon.

C'est avec grand plaisir que je m'adresse au Cercle canadien, en cette année qui marque votre centenaire. Cette honorable institution -- cette institution civique -- a toujours encouragé les Canadiennes et les Canadiens à faire valoir leur identité et promouvoir les valeurs qui nous sont chères. Vous avez entrepris cette initiative quatre décennies avant la Société Radio Canada, et c'est avec fierté que je rends hommage à cette noble tradition.

The CBC has been privileged to have two guest speakers at this podium since the New Year. But I can say without hesitation that Peter Gzowski is a tough act to follow.

Peter spoke with the easy grace, warmth and humour that is his trademark. He talked about his great love of the CBC, his fears for its future and his passionate belief in its central role in our public life. I share many of those sentiments. The fact that the CBC has attracted and been home to such luminous figures as Peter Gzowski is itself one of the best arguments for our future success.

Would a Peter Gzowski have become a distinguished radio journalist and host without the CBC? Absolutely. But without the CBC's national audience, would he have become so deeply ingrained in our collective consciousness? I think not.

As a woman recently wrote to the Globe and Mail about Morningside,

"I've covered many miles with Mr. Gzowski's voice. When I'm driving from province to province, I always get a particular satisfaction knowing that the voice that is passing the miles with me is being heard by people all over this country."

Now as Peter reminded his audience that day, he has shouldered the burden of being a national sex symbol. Think of him as the CBC's answer to "Sex in the Snow."

Like countless other Canadian women, I will grant him that exalted status. But I feel it is also my duty to say that he couldn't have done it without the CBC.

The CBC is to Gzowski as blue suede shoes are to Elvis.

Le moment ne saurait être plus propice à une allocution de la présidente de conseil de la Société Radio Canada devant l'assemblée du Cercle canadien. Nous venons en effet d'assister à l'équinoxe de printemps -- symbole de l'espoir et du renouveau, qui appelle chacun d'entre nous à tourner notre regard vers l'avenir. Renewal sometimes occurs in ways that are least expected. Take, for example, the critical acclaim that has greeted new shows like "The Newsroom", prompting this recent magazine headline:

"CBC Programs Get More Daring as its Budget Gets Eviscerated."

According to this logic, the Corporation is now approaching the peak of Mount Everest in terms of daring and creativity!

In fact there is some truth to that headline. We all know that creativity doesn't come with a dollar sign attached. If it did, we would all be a great deal poorer in spirit.

At the same time, we know that it took more than creative genius to build the Sistine Chapel. The CBC can still create magic with fewer dollars. We will prove it to Canadians in the months and years ahead. But there is also a point where budget cuts could impair the CBC's ability to carry out its mandate under the Public Broadcasting Act. This would not only contravene the will of Parliament, but would also be a grave disservice to this country.

It seems that we may have been approaching this threshold, and I was therefore especially happy to see recently another sign of renewal for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. For the first time in a long time, this year's federal budget did not include new cuts. Instead, it provided some welcome relief.

For that we have to thank our audience who have made countless phone-calls, sent letters and E-mails, or signed petitions on our behalf. We have to thank leading commentators like William Thorsell, Richard Gwyn and Hugh Segal, or the many famous artists who had their start at the CBC. All these voices have paid tribute to the central role we play in the cultural life of Canada. **A Vision for the CBC**

But these voices aren't the only ones making themselves heard. It seems as if everyone wants to fix the CBC.

Some offer a fairly radical cure -- they want it to be abolished.

Others want to see it privatized.

Some want more news and current affairs; some want less.

Still others want to see it buy rather than produce its programming.

The good news about this debate is that few Canadians seem to be indifferent. The CBC, for better or worse, is a part of the family. It is part of our Canadian consciousness, the mirror of our soul, reflecting our brightest achievements and our darkest secrets, our hopes and dreams. But the rising crescendo of the debate in recent years also reflects current economic realities. Our country is in debt, taxes are high and unemployment is high. Public support is declining for any activity whose social value is not readily apparent.

In such an environment, it simply is not enough to say that the CBC is central to Canada's cultural life. First, the case must be made as to why it is necessary for a public corporation to play such a role. And second, a vision must be described as to how that role will evolve in coming years so that the CBC's social value will continually increase.

Organizations need a vision at all times, but during times of change the need is even greater. Today I want to outline a vision for the CBC.

I could not think of a better time and place than this to do so. Since everyone here is a shareholder in the CBC, I'd like to think of this luncheon as an Annual General Meeting. And it is a well-known fact that shareholders look to an organization's leadership for a well-articulated vision.

The Need for a Cultural Policy

Most Canadians, looking to the CBC's past, would agree that it has been a mainstay of the cultural life of this country. But the real question going forward is whether we can and should continue to play this role.

Before we can answer that, we need to widen the perspective a bit. First, we need a working definition of culture itself. Let us say that it is a process in which a society's knowledge and values are developed and defined over time, and ultimately consumed by its citizens. The cycle is continuous as we integrate culture into our personal lives and public discourse, and transmit it from one generation to the next. This creative process is neither spontaneous nor does it come without cost. Canadian culture is part of the nation's "social capital", which is in essence a belief in shared values and a willingness to collaborate in a common cause. The "return" on this capital is the economic and social benefits that emerge from a shared vision of community.

And in an world in which technology is leading to the globalization of culture, this shared vision of community is more important than ever.

So if we can all agree that a national culture doesn't fall like manna from heaven..... that it can't be begged, borrowed or stolen..... that it has to be painstakingly created and passed down from generation to generation..... then it is clear that Canada should have a cultural policy.

Established by an Act of Parliament in 1936, the CBC's mandate is to help nurture, promote and spread the values that define the Canadian identity. By making sure that all Canadians have access to our common values, we ensure the survival of those values.

Among the broadcast media, only a public institution, with public support, could fulfill such a mandate. While many private broadcasters air some excellent Canadian programming, it is nonetheless incidental to their central role, which is to make profits for their owners and investors.

Our decision to greatly increase the Canadian content on CBC television can be seen in this light. We complement rather than compete with private networks because we occupy a market niche that no one else could fill. It would be economically impossible for private networks to sustain the level of Canadian content that we do and transmit it to all regions of this country. Yet our ratings consistently demonstrate that there is a huge and loyal audience for Canadian programming. The need for a strong cultural policy in Canada is far greater today than it was in 1936. Back then free trade was only an economic theory. There was no 500-channel universe, no Information Highway and no Sports Illustrated Canadian Edition. One might say that we didn't have to work quite so hard at being resolutely Canadian.

Canadians, of course, are not the only ones to worry about their culture being overwhelmed by external influences. When I travel abroad, especially in countries that face powerful threats to their own identities from dominant neighbours, I am struck by how many people see the CBC as a model for the preservation and transmittal of national and regional culture.

I believe that any cultural policy in Canada should, at minimum, bestow the following three benefits :

- First, it must provide for continuity, or the transmittal of culture from one generation to the next -- a "succession plan", we might say.

Canada must continue to discover and promote its new voices -- its emerging writers and producers, actors, singers and musicians. Nurturing home-grown talent often involves taking financial risks, but it is also absolutely essential to our cultural survival and growth.

The CBC achieves this goal by giving emerging Canadian artists the largest possible audience. This has always been -- and always will be -- a top priority for us.

Ask yourself this. If the CBC had never existed, would the Canadian screen and stage be as rich and vibrant as it is today? Would any other institution have been able to provide the critical mass of resources, the sense of purpose and sustained commitment to Canadian content? The answer is, "Clearly not."

- The second essential benefit from a cultural policy is to support the exercise of democracy and citizenship by widening the access to our political process.

As one commentator recently wrote, the CBC must "sustain the Canadian dialogue by involving those who otherwise would not be heard". I could not agree more. The CBC's news and current affairs programming already offer an unparalleled platform for ordinary Canadians through town hall meetings, panel discussions and investigative documentaries. We contribute strongly to a shared national identity by opening channels of insight and awareness among our official language communities.

Mais notre rôle ne signifie pas pour autant que nous prenions parti dans le débat sur l'unité nationale. Il nous commande de rapporter fidèlement les faits jalonnant l'évolution de ce débat historique et d'encourager les Canadiennes et les Canadiens aux quatre coins du pays -- quelle que soit leur conviction -- à y participer.

- The third essential benefit of a cultural policy is that it serves to link Canada together, reflecting our regional diversity while celebrating the transcendent values we hold in common.

It is often said that the CBC is all about Canadians telling stories to each other. So let me tell you a story.

In late January of this year an elementary school in Old Crow in the Yukon burnt to the ground in a matter of minutes, leaving students standing out in the cold without coats at 38 below zero. A teacher in Brampton Ontario heard about it while listening to CBC on the way to work. Her class had been studying native communities and they quickly decided to hold a book drive to help rebuild the Old Crow school library. Within days, ten thousand books were collected from her own and other schools in Southern Ontario. The principal in Old Crow heard about the book drive from the CBC in Whitehorse. Another listener was the manager of Canadian Airlines in Whitehorse, who decided to ship the forty cartons of books free of charge to Old Crow.

There are many ways you could characterize the actions of the individuals, the companies and the communities I've just described, and the role of the CBC in bringing them all together. My own choice would be to say they were involved in the exercise of "nation-building".

Mission

The CBC has contributed enormously to building this country and it will continue to do so for generations to come. But Canadians are dealing with enormous changes in their lives. All our institutions are undergoing upheaval, and the very means by which we communicate with each other -- radio, television, the telephone, the Internet -- are experiencing phenomenal technological change.

So in the midst of all this transformation, what does the CBC stand for? Let me read you a brief mission statement that was written a few months ago, yet articulates a vision that has guided us for sixty years.

"The CBC is a public resource, owned by all Canadians. Our services in French and English inform, enlighten and entertain. We contribute to Canadian's shared national consciousness by celebrating Canada's cultural and regional diversity, building bridges between our official language communities and helping our citizens take full part in their country's life. We create, procure and present high quality Canadian programs and offer the best from around the world."

Operating Principles

That statement is a solid foundation on which to build our future.

Now let's look at a few operating principles that will help the CBC renew itself and continue to be a vital force in the cultural life of Canada.

- The first principle is that the CBC will only survive and prosper if it can differentiate itself from other broadcasters.

Our programming must be truly unique and it must be in demand.

- The second principle is that we must at all times be fully accountable to our shareholders, the citizens of Canada.

We will be accountable in terms of maintaining levels of service, for the quality and innovativeness of our programs and for nurturing Canadian talent and culture.

We will be proactive in dealing with the public. You will see a tangible demonstration of this in the new role of the CBC ombudsman. He or she will not sit and wait for the phone to ring, but will actively seek the views of CBC constituents and give feedback on journalistic policy.

We will also be accountable to our shareholders -- Canadian taxpayers -- by managing your investment wisely, running an efficient and productive corporation.

- Third, the CBC must recognize as an operating principle that it has no captive audience..... that its most important asset is not an act of Parliament. It is, instead, the power of the CBC brand.

What does that brand stand for?

Creativity, insight and daring.

Programming like The Boys of Saint Vincent, Morningside, Dawn of the Eye, The Newsroom, This Hour has 22 Minutes, The Arrow.

The CBC stands for Norman Depoe, Barbara Frum, Foster Hewitt, Laurier Lapierre, Anne Medina, Rex Murphy, Terence McKenna, Patrick Watson and yes, Peter Gzowski's sex appeal.

Our brand is our badge of honour, a hallmark of quality, intelligence, objectivity, creativity. It is an enduring symbol of Canadian excellence, and a beacon for the next generation of Canadian talent.

The CBC's brand is being rejuvenated, not in the boardrooms and executive offices, but on the studio floor, among the producers, assistants, researchers cameramen, technicians, broadcasters, journalists -- in other words, by the content providers.

They are the CBC's heart and soul. Their artistic talent, creativity, passion and dedication to the ideals of public broadcasting are not commodities. Their contribution must be recognized. But recognition isn't enough, and this leads me to the next operating principle.

- We have to do a better job of communicating with our own employees.

There is an old saying that "the shoemaker's children always go barefoot". We spend so much time and energy planning, strategizing and "number-crunching" at the highest levels that we sometimes forget to communicate with our internal audience.

We see our own people as consummate professionals and overlook the fact that they are also employees who need information, dialogue and input into the strategic planning processes of the Corporation. It is our employees who have made the CBC a centre of creative excellence and journalistic achievement that is envied around the world. They have dealt with uncertainty and difficult times long enough. They are entitled to know what the future holds for the CBC and what their place will be in it.

- Finally, as a Corporation, we need to adapt to change.

Most Canadian companies and individuals have undergone difficult economic adjustments over the past decade, and we know that pining over past glories is self-centred and self-defeating. The mark of successful organizations or individuals is their willingness to embrace change while preserving what makes them unique. Let me quickly recap these operating principles:

- First, we will differentiate our programming from private broadcasters through a heavy emphasis on Canadian content.
- Second, we will be accountable to our shareholders, the Canadian public.

- Third, we will build ensure that the CBC brand is always a synonym for superb, innovative and provocative programming. We won't ever play it safe or comfortable.
- Fourth, we will recognize and reaffirm the role of our employees in rebuilding the CBC.
- And fifth, we'll embrace change as a way of life at the CBC, reflecting not only new fiscal realities but also our rapidly changing communications and cultural environment.**Conclusion**

Ladies and gentleman, CBC shareholders, let me conclude with this final thought on the subject of Canadian culture.

The world is changing very fast. The need for cultural policies and strong cultural institutions in this country has never been greater. But there is one thing that I am sure of, it is this: as long as the CBC does its job right, we will be always be a cornerstone of Canadian culture.

If there were no CBC, we would have to be invented. Since Confederation, successive Canadian Governments have understood the need for institutions that sustain Canadian values and culture against the tide of American influence that beats against our shores. Do Canadians themselves support this endeavour? Politicians have been telling us for years that we have to make tough choices, and the choice these days is increasingly to support our national identity and value systems. This should surprise no-one. We do indeed cherish what is distinctly Canadian and are willing to make sacrifices to preserve it.

Some look at the CBC and see an instrument of cultural policy created sixty years ago.

I see that, but also more.

For me, the CBC is a crucible -- a crucible in which we forge a new vision of ourselves -- a crucible from which the next generation of stories and story tellers will emerge.

Thank you.