

Submission To The Standing Committee On Canadian Heritage

Investigating The Role Of The CBC/Radio-Canada As A  
Public Broadcaster In The 21<sup>st</sup> Century

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

“In short, the *Broadcasting Act* provides that the broadcasting system safeguard, enrich, and strengthen the cultural, political, social, and economic fabric of Canada; that it encourage the development of Canadian expression; that it maintain and enhance Canadians’ sense of national identity and cultural sovereignty; and that it inform, enlighten and entertain Canadians of all ages, interests and tastes.” -- ***Our Cultural Sovereignty: The Second Century of Canadian Broadcasting, The Government of Canada’s Response to the Report of the Standing Committee on Canadian Heritage***

To ensure that Canadians enjoy the option of a viable and culturally distinctive public broadcaster into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, The Writers’ Union of Canada urges the Government of Canada to:

- Put in place a formula to provide increased stable funding to CBC/Radio-Canada so that it can provide programming as prescribed in its existing mandate as set forth in the Broadcasting Act 1991;
- Take appropriate measures to stabilize broadcasting policy in Canada in order to guarantee stable funding, adherence to the cultural diversity inherent to our cultural sovereignty, and the continued existence of public broadcasting in all forms as a viable choice for Canadian broadcast audiences;
- Provide additional funding to CBC/Radio-Canada to ensure that this country’s public broadcaster can take advantage of 21<sup>st</sup> century technological opportunities; and
- Increase its efforts to protect Canadians from the homogenization, deterioration, and narrow informational alternative that results from media convergence and foreign ownership of media.

“It further provides that the system be effectively owned and controlled by Canadians; that programming be drawn from local, regional, national, and international sources; that it include educational and community programs; that it operate primarily in English and French; and that there be a national public broadcaster, a single regulator, and a single system.” -- ***Our Cultural Sovereignty: The Second Century of Canadian Broadcasting, The Government of Canada’s Response to the Report of the Standing Committee on Canadian Heritage***

## INTRODUCTION:

*The Writers' Union of Canada* appreciates this opportunity to participate in The Standing Committee on Canadian Heritage's investigation into the role of the CBC/Radio-Canada as a public broadcaster in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This Union, founded by writers for writers in 1973, has evolved into the national voice for approximately 1,600 authors of books in all general trade genres, with a mandate to promote and defend the interests of its creator membership and all Canadians' freedom to write and publish.

The relationship between this country's writers and its public radio broadcaster, the CBC, has existed virtually since broadcasting began in this country in 1906. Over time, Canada's writers and the CBC have shared a welcome and inspired responsibility in articulating the wonder, magic, diversity, and integrity of this country's diverse culture and imposing geography. This successful marriage of writing and broadcasting has not only helped to make household names of writers such as Pierre Berton, Morley Callaghan, Margaret Atwood, Mavis Gallant, Gabrielle Roy, and others too numerous to mention here, but the integration of radio plays, essays, commentary, fiction, and poetry into the daily programming on CBC Radio-Canada has served to broaden the artistic and cultural foundations of Canadians for many decades.

*The Writers' Union of Canada* endorses the mandate of CBC/Radio-Canada set out in the Broadcasting Act of 1991. We feel the eight mandated requirements – that it be predominantly and distinctively Canadian; reflect Canada and its regions to national and regional audiences, while serving the special needs of those regions; actively contribute to the flow and exchange of cultural expression; be in English and French, reflecting the different needs and circumstances of each official language community, including the particular needs and circumstances of English and French linguistic minorities; strive to be of equivalent quality in English and in French; contribute to shared national consciousness and identity; be made available throughout Canada by the most appropriate and efficient means and [sic] resources become available for the purpose; and reflect the multicultural and multiracial nature of Canada – represent our similar collective perspective on how best to reflect this country's cultural and informational requirements successfully.

The Canadian Government response to the aforementioned Standing Committee on Canadian Heritage report, *Our Cultural Sovereignty: The Second Century of Canadian Broadcasting*, points out that “it has been the goal of federal policies and programs to support the creation of distinctive programming that reaches out to and reflects Canadians in all communities and in all their diversity.” It further adds, “The Canadian broadcasting system is also a window on the world and brings Canadians the best programming the world has to offer.”

In recent years, however, *The Writers' Union of Canada* has become alarmed at changes in CBC Radio-Canada programming that reflect a turning away from the

aforementioned mandate. We have written letters to the CBC and met with CBC representatives to express our distress at a number of specific changes. These include what appears to be a general move to infuse CBC programming with broadcasting influences from the internet, various private broadcasting sources nationally and internationally, and perceived digital broadcasting developments, which results in duplicating programming more properly provided by private sector broadcasters. This gradual abdication of CBC Radio-Canada's mandate has resulted in significantly reduced literary content in CBC programming. The dramatic reduction in programming featuring books and writers has had a negative impact on publishing in Canada. As writers, we do not believe that a demographically younger audience has no interest in culture or literature; in our estimation, any pursuit of younger listeners by CBC/Radio-Canada needs to include a healthy dose of literary culture.

Much of this general deterioration in programming can be attributed to a lack of stable and appropriate funding, an increasingly fuzzy approach to management based on a failure to align or clarify broadcasting mandates and policy in general, and a lack of commitment to guiding principles pertaining to foreign ownership, media convergence and cultural sovereignty, which Canada has traditionally upheld in order to promote this country's artistic and cultural diversity. This brief will examine these related components of current and future CBC Radio-Canada policy and programming, offering a series of recommendations along the way.

### **CBC RADIO-CANADA'S MANDATE:**

Since February 1991, when the mandate of CBC/Radio-Canada was assented to, the need for the CBC to maintain the integrity of its mandate has been continually assailed by forces in Canada that are out of step with the cultural realities behind the creation of this mandate. For one thing, any change in the mandate implies its various components are no longer needed or have already been successfully achieved. To the contrary, an assault on this country's cultural diversity is currently underway. The CBC's mandate has never been more relevant than it is today, more than fifteen years after it was created.

We submit the CBC's mandate – namely to encourage Canada's English, French and multiracial nature – is not a matter of economic expedience. While Federal Government budget surpluses mount up, funding to the CBC continues to deteriorate and the thrust of its mandate deteriorates along with its programming. This Committee wonders in its terms of reference if the CBC's mandate would be more readily maintained if the public broadcaster forged stronger partnerships with private broadcasters. We submit it would not. As other sections of this brief point out, private broadcasting suffers dreadfully from a narrow ideological view proliferated as a result of continued media convergence in this country; to make the CBC a party to this deplorable narrowing of informational and cultural options would only weaken adherence to its mandate further.

## **CLARITY AND ALIGNMENT OF BROADCAST MANDATE:**

While this Standing Committee's mandate in this investigation is to focus only on CBC/Radio-Canada as a public broadcaster, The Writers' Union of Canada maintains that an important context must be maintained within the overall broadcasting mandate of the Canadian Government. We concur with the Canadian Government's response to this Committee's report on *Our Cultural Sovereignty: The Second Century of Canadian Broadcasting*, which said: "The Government agrees with the Committee that there is a need to ensure the clarity of the mandates of the agencies and programs with which it supports Canadian broadcasting and to ensure that they are aligned and integrated in pursuit of the goals of the broadcasting system." The same principles of cultural diversity and sovereignty that exist in CBC/Radio-Canada's mandate must also be consistently maintained throughout all of Canada's broadcasting mandates, from the necessity for stable funding to a necessary resistance to the narrow viewpoint that results from media convergence.

## **PUBLIC BROADCASTING AND STABLE FUNDING:**

Programming for a public broadcaster like CBC/Radio-Canada can not resist the homogenization of programming in the private broadcasting sector without increased stable funding from the Government of Canada. It is this funding that releases the public broadcaster from the narrow ideologies of the marketplace so that it can concentrate its efforts on sound cultural programming that is distinctly Canadian and reflects our cultural and linguistic heritage. Private broadcasters are one option for the Canadian radio audience; our public broadcaster must be another vibrant and engaging option. The more these two options converge in viewpoint, perspective, and informational bias, the less choice is offered to the Canadian public. The less choice that is offered, the more narrow our options and view as thinking Canadians with an historic sense of our culture. Our public broadcaster has a purpose different from that of private broadcasting: namely to provide programming that reflects our sovereign heritage. Without increased, stable funding, CBC/Radio-Canada can not live up to the principles in its mandate and the more it must homogenize itself with the alternatives offered by the private broadcasting sector. This denies an intelligent Canadian public a fundamental choice in programming.

## **ECONOMIC IMPACT OF ARTS AND CULTURE:**

For many years, we in The Writers' Union of Canada have acknowledged and even cherished the role of CBC/Radio-Canada in popularizing all aspects of Canadian artistic culture, from literature to theatre to music to comedy. Indeed, until recent years, CBC/Radio-Canada has served as a stimulus to Canada's tremendous artistic and cultural growth, not just nationally, but internationally as well. Some of our most famous artists and cultural icons owe a significant measure of their success to our public broadcaster's role in acquainting the Canadian population with its artists and cultural representatives, whether regionally or beyond our borders. This role for the

CBC of sewing together the various fabrics in this country's rich artistic and cultural heritage continues to be needed.

Strangely enough, there are those who think this country's cultural and artistic health is a frill. Recent cuts to cultural institutions generally bear out the shortsightedness of this view. Only recently, the United Nations has pointed out that arts and culture account for nearly \$2 trillion dollars of the world's Gross Domestic Product, making it the healthiest of all sectors in the world economy. Arts and culture boast an annual growth rate of ten percent, far outstripping any other sector of human endeavour. For this reason, economic investment in the dynamic world of arts and culture at any government level is shrewd and tactically sound. An appropriately and stably funded CBC/Radio-Canada – because it has traditionally stimulated the growth of arts and culture in ways that private broadcasting has not – reflects an equally shrewd and tactically sound investment in Canada's arts and cultural sectors.

### **NEW MEDIA OPPORTUNITIES:**

Much is made of the challenges for CBC/Radio-Canada as a traditional public broadcaster, because of the various new broadcast media services such as satellite radio, internet radio and new communications and information platforms. As book authors, we too face radical changes in all aspects of publishing, book promotion and the proliferation of what we write. But we view these changes primarily as opportunities to reach larger and more receptive audiences. We submit that new media services can be opportunities for CBC/Radio-Canada as well. In a broadcast universe with hundreds of channels, a properly funded and managed CBC/Radio-Canada can live up to its mandate in a more diversified fashion. Why not more channels so that a listener in Yellowknife can tune in to interesting information from Halifax? Canada's motivation for broadcasting historically was to bring the inhabitants of a country with a large geography together from coast to coast to coast. New media technologies, rather than impede this unifying tradition, could enlarge the process. With creative management and stable funding CBC/Radio-Canada could utilize new media technology to transport Canadians to the various regions of this country in bold new ways.

### **FOREIGN OWNERSHIP AND MEDIA CONVERGENCE:**

Informational freedom is a cornerstone of democracy. However, for some time now, the Canadian Government has recognized – to use its own words – “that convergence is now a core business strategy in the information era.” In recent months a Senate Committee addressed the issue of media convergence and The Writers' Union of Canada expressed its concerns at that time that a concentrated ownership of the news media now deprives Canadians of balanced and diversified news and information. We see the effects on the private broadcasters. The recent takeover of many CHUM radio stations by Bell Globemedia resulted in the termination of news programming on the affected CHUM radio stations, as well as the news departments that generated this

news information. In urban centres such as Vancouver, the concentration of the media has transferred commentary from a variety of perspectives into one narrow voice. This tendency in media for ownership to become more and more concentrated has yet to be properly addressed by the Canadian Government.

One means of doing so in the short-term would be for the Canadian Government to encourage CBC/Radio-Canada – through stable funding and adherence to its existing mandate – to provide quality news and informational services that provide in-depth analytical coverage with a wide range of viewpoints. It is the function of a public broadcaster to provide the broadcast audience with an alternative source of information to the homogenized version that is generated by the corporate broadcasters. Such an economic shot in the arm would encourage the availability of alternative and accurate information for the broadcast radio audience and even impart a refreshing and thoughtful challenge in the news-gathering business to the media giants that measure news accuracy and value only on the basis of the bottom line. And it would ensure an alternative voice to the ideological braying so prevalent in news delivery by Canada's media giants in news delivery in this era in our history. Once again, Canadian radio audiences would enjoy a fundamental freedom of choice.

Linked to the question of convergence is the issue of foreign ownership of our media. The Standing Committee on Canadian Heritage has already registered its disagreement over any removal of restrictions for “broadcasting distribution undertakings” or BDUs. “The Standing Committee on Canadian Heritage recognized that present Canadian ownership requirements and the overall regulatory framework for broadcasting have helped overcome the major challenges Canada faces as a country with vast territory and population one-tenth the size of the United States, the largest producer of programming in the world,” the Government response noted. “Through its current [2003] approach to foreign ownership, Canada has developed a broadcasting system which is the envy of many around the world, allowing Canadians to hear and see Canadian stories, as well as rich diversity from other sources.”

The Writers' Union of Canada supports this approach to foreign ownership. While cultural diversity includes the opinions and culture emanating from the United States, it is vital that the Canadian voice be heard as well. CBC/Radio-Canada has traditionally served as the flagship for that distinctly Canadian voice, which is the first item proclaimed in its mandate.

### **CBC RADIO-CANADA AND OUR CULTURAL SOVEREIGNTY:**

As you are well aware, Canada has taken a leadership role internationally in guaranteeing cultural diversity by putting in place a mechanism to ensure this country – indeed all of the world's countries – can exercise the sovereign right to hear their own diverse, non-homogenized cultural voice. “The Government believed that countries around the world should maintain this means to ensure that their cultures can flourish. For this reason, Canada has been a leader in international efforts to build

support for an instrument on cultural diversity – efforts that came to fruition on October 14, 2003 with a decision by UNESCO to begin development of an international convention with respect to the diversity of cultural content and artistic expression.”

Since 2003, when the Canadian Government made that statement, not only has the instrument – the Convention on the Diversity of Cultural Expression – been approved by all but a handful of the world’s nations, but in recent months the required thirty signatories required to enact it as an international agreement have been garnered. This means there is no question that Canada has the sovereign right to develop a broadcast policy that reflects and encourages what is distinctively Canadian about all of us. Our success internationally in this regard underscores the fundamental appropriateness of an economically healthy and culturally mandated CBC/Radio-Canada so that Canadians can enjoy the sovereign choice their own Government has so successfully protected for them through international agreement.

## **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS:**

It is the view of The Writers’ Union of Canada that CBC/Radio-Canada has a vital role to play for Canada’s cultural community in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, a role that is clearly defined by the mandate given to it in the Broadcasting Act of 1991. Distinctively Canadian in nature – culturally, historically and artistically – CBC/Radio-Canada programming has been deteriorating in recent years because of a lack of appropriate stable funding. Accordingly, the mandate of this cherished institution has fallen victim to shortsighted and unrealistic austerity measures, and ambivalent government approaches to such issues as media convergence, foreign ownership, cultural sovereignty, and cultural funding policy generally. To reverse this deterioration, The Writers’ Union of Canada respectfully makes the following recommendations:

- That the Government of Canada immediately put in place a formula to provide increased stable funding to CBC/Radio-Canada to permit it to provide programming prescribed in its existing mandate as set forth in the Broadcasting Act 1991 so that Canadian Radio audiences have the option of listening to a distinctly Canadian public broadcaster;
- That the Government of Canada take whatever measures appropriate to stabilize broadcasting policy in Canada to reflect guarantees for stable funding, adherence to the cultural diversity inherent to our cultural sovereignty, and the existence of public broadcasting in all forms as a viable option of choice for Canadians and Canadian audiences;
- That the Government of Canada provide additional funding to CBC/Radio-Canada to ensure that this country’s public broadcaster can take advantage of 21<sup>st</sup> century technological opportunities; and

- That the Government of Canada dramatically increase its efforts to protect Canadians from the homogenization, deterioration, and narrow alternative that results from media convergence and foreign ownership of media, not only through the provision of a healthy public broadcaster, but through government policy that respects our national and international commitments to cultural sovereignty.

Respectfully submitted,  
The Writers' Union of Canada,  
February 26, 2007