

BOOK REVIEW

THE PUBLIC EYE

By Frank W. Peers

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By Ronald Grantham  
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of the Ottawa Citizen*

The Public Eye, a catchy title, continues The Politics of Canadian Broadcasting, 1920-51, now in paperback. These volumes are indispensable to students of the subject.

Frank Peers knows that subject intimately. He was, in turn, 1947-63, a CBC program producer, public affairs program supervisor, and information programming director. He is now a political science professor at the University of Toronto.

Others write about broadcasting in Canada in journalistic style, recreating events in colorful prose, indulging in personal opinions. But not Dr. Peers. His book is a model of scholarship, thorough in research, clear and quiet in style, with few but pertinent personal comments.

His subject is the development of broadcasting policy, with its public and private components. He was granted interviews, and access to private papers, by many persons who were prominent in the events he chronicles. Some of this information is newly published.

Since the chronicle is thickly detailed, the reader would do well to read first the concluding summary.

The Aird Commission's report on radio broadcasting, 1929, influenced all that followed in this field. It warned that if left to their own resources private stations would become chiefly a means of pumping American material into Canadian homes.

(It is interesting that Sir John Aird, president of the Canadian Bank of Commerce, was a Conservative, as were Sir John A. Macdonald, author of the national policy of tariff protection, and Prime Minister R. B. Bennett, who declared that national control of broadcasting was essential. Aird's colleagues were Charles A. Bowman, editor of The Ottawa Citizen, and Augustin Frigon, Quebec's technical education director.)

The Aird report was strongly backed in the press and by the Canadian Radio League, formed by Graham Spry and Alan Plaunt, two of many idealistic young patriots of their time.

(Spry had worked for the International Labor Organization and was secretary of the Canadian Clubs. Plaunt was an Ottawa of French Canadian and Nova Scotia Scottish parentage. He became a CBC governor. He died at 37. Commemorating him, Carleton University sponsors the annual Plaunt lectures.)

In 1932 a broadcasting act established the Public Canadian Radio Broadcasting Commission.

(To counter hostile propaganda, Spry bought the Farmer's Sun, which he and Plaunt edited. Brooke Claxton won from the Privy Council in London rejection of the claim by Quebec and three other provinces that the federal government lacked jurisdiction over broadcasting. For C. D. Howe, in the Bennett cabinet, Plaunt drafted the 1936 bill that created the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation.

(Howe, powerful in cabinets for 22 years, was the industrial czar who got Canada into maximum wartime production. He was interested in results. When state initiative suited him, he was for it, and in the cases of the CNR, the CBC, and Air Canada's precursor.)

Characteristically, as Peers records, in October, 1948, Howe convinced the cabinet that television should be left to risk-taking private enterprise, since he thought it couldn't be brought to most Canadians for many years.

The Massey Commission (1951), warning of pressure on the CBC to use American programs, asked that

the CBC be given the security of statutory and capital grants.

But controversy steamed up in the 1950s, affected, more than Peers indicates, by the cold war, and the McCarthy witch hunt in the United States. It was stimulated, too, by the arrival of television in 1952. Many newspapers cooled toward the CBC. Some proprietors had backed it in hope that it would not compete for advertising revenue, but had become involved in increasingly profitable private broadcasting.

The controversies, continuing for decades, had to do with the roles of public and private broadcasting, personality clashes, diverse motivations--the drivers for money and power, dedications to quality and public service. Peers deals with all these calmly, but high drama is implicit.

In the 1950s the CBC (and the National Film Board), wanting to reflect a changing world, offended, of course, this or that opinion element.

Some Conservative MPs objected to radio programs critical of the rearming of Germany (as was in tone the Liberal government and the third-party Co-operative Commonwealth Federation). Others asked why the CBC should regulate its "competitors."

Powerful Liberal cabinet ministers objected to a planned CBC program on unemployment. C. D. Howe "blew up," threatening mass firings. Robert Winters purged the National Film Board of several "leftists." He found the commissioner,

J. Ross McLean, "unco-operative," and replaced him. (At issue here was control of filmed material for TV--was it to be by the minister to whom CBC was answerable, or by Winters, to whom the NFB was answerable?)

Important Liberals blocked the CBC in favor of a private St. John's station. Others complained that during the stormy pipeline debate in 1956 the CBC had been unsympathetic to the government.

In 1957 the Fowler royal commission found Canada threatened by American pressures, via the air waves. It made a very Canadian proposal: public and private enterprise in a flexible system, supervised by a Board of Broadcast Governors. Five-year money grants would enable the CBC to plan ahead. (Robert M. Fowler, president of the Canadian Pulp and Paper Association, was distinguished for other important public services.)

Support came from the Canadian Broadcasting League (Graham Spry again), representing millions of votes in organizations of labor, farmers, women, churches, co-operators, educators. But the Progressive Conservatives favored private stations in nearly equal systems under a Board of Broadcast Governors, and so legislated in 1958.

CBC's "most productive years" were also its "sea of troubles." Tight budgets, loss of much talent, a Montreal producers' strike that left French-Canadian staff aggrieved; cancellation of a radio

program that caused Peers and his colleagues to resign, alleging political interference.

In 1961 the new CTV network posed problems related to American hook-ups, clashes of interests and personalities.

In late 1964 there began within the CBC the eruption caused by the weekly program *This Hour Has Seven Days*, very popular, but adversely criticized as abrasive in interviews, unfair in treatment and unduly sensational. Peers thinks the producers' fight with management was questionable, for a few programs were banned. Patrick Watson is quoted as wryly saying later that he had seen himself as president of an empire within the CBC!

One of the most dramatic episodes in Dr. Peers' book has roots in 1953, when history professor Arthur Lower of Queen's University injected into controversy the assertion that private ownership of broadcasting would mean American control. Lower called for members in a defence of Canada association. In 1954 the Canadian Radio and Television League was formed. After the 1956 Fowler Commission hearings, it became the Canadian Radio League (1930-6). Radio and TV broadcasters attacked "egg heads" and "socialists."

The curtain rises again in September, 1961. Lower wrote to Prime Minister Diefenbaker, begging him to prevent the Board of Broadcast Governors "selling out our television to one of the American 'chains.'" Parties to that would be

"little better than traitors." Board member Eugene Forsey also blasted the proposal, which was dropped.

Named by Lower was John Bassett, whose large modern CFTO plant was opened with "much hoopla" on January 1, 1961, aiming at national as well as local audiences. Chairman of the enterprise was Bassett; financial backer, John David Eaton; in and with the Toronto Telegram they had control. To buy out the president, Joel Aldred, they wanted to bring in the American Broadcasting Company, owned by ABC Paramount, motion picture makers.

In 1966 color TV further fragmented the audience and intensified competition. Peers frowns on the CBC for imitating American programs and catering to some "shocking" minority tastes.

A move next year to limit any minister's control of broadcasting policy angered Judy LaMarsh, secretary of state, who made an unproven charge of "rotten management" within the CBC.

Prime Minister Pearson then pointedly thanked CBC for excellent coverage of Canada's centennial year programs and events, especially those at Expo '67.

Pearson reaffirmed the original concept, missing in the 1958 legislation, that the air waves are public property, in a single distinctive Canadian system.

The Liberals' 1968 Broadcasting Act stated that broadcasting was to use predominantly Canadian

resources, to be effectively owned and controlled by Canadians to safeguard and enrich the cultural, political, social and economic fabric of Canada. A Canadian Radio-Television Commission was given authority over cable transmissions.

Under CBC leadership, TV growth in Canada had been the fastest, and in total programming the largest, of all.

Frank Peers deplores the increasing concern with commercial gain that has caused a massive commitment to programs, many of them American, that are "irrelevant to Canadian needs." He calls for a better balance between the public service and the private commercial principles. "We can drift no longer."

Moreover, "new technologies are forcing change--not only cable, but pay-TV, video recordings, and the possibility of international satellite penetration."

Indeed so.

Fibre optics can bring hundreds of channels into the home.

Some want a public pay-TV system. The CTV network wants broadcaster control. It agrees, however, with the CBC (which has not yet been given longer-term financing with annual increases) that pay-TV profits should be used to make better Canadian TV programs, to attract many of those viewers who now watch mostly American productions.

How much control will Ottawa give the provinces? Quebec wants content control, as well as regulation.

Cable companies are eager to carry pay-TV into the homes.

However, a federal government-private enterprise demonstration has bounced "scrambled" TV programs off a satellite to a rooftop receiving dish. Programs can be unscrambled in the subscriber's TV receiver.

With its Anik satellites, Canada is a world leader in such transmissions. Telesat Canada will launch another Anik next year to strengthen signals.

Telidon (our version of Videotex) can link a computer to a TV receiver that accepts a keyboard. Information can be put into the

computer, and drawn out of it. Many newspapers are now so equipped, in place of using metal type. Telidon can bring into the home, school, office, information in the quantities and varieties desired. Its impact on society will be very great.

This spring the Canadian Radio-Television and Telecommunications Commission will hold hearings related to these matters.

For those taking part, reading *The Public Eye* would be good homework.

Frank Peers concludes his sober book with a stirring statement of his hope that advanced technologies can help amplify Canadian expression, which in its many fields has developed enormously in one generation.

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