

THE SYSTEM OF RELEVANCES AND THE POLITICS OF LANGUAGE
IN CANADIAN PUBLIC POLICY FORMATION:
THE CASE OF BROADCASTING

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Systems of relevance can change over time as new meanings become purposefully or unintentionally attached to the "sacred texts" of public policy. This article, from an American observation post, seeks to demonstrate precisely such a shift in the case of the strengthening of the position of private sector broadcasting in Canada.

Les systèmes de rapports peuvent évoluer avec le temps, à mesure que de nouvelles significations s'associent délibérément ou involontairement aux "textes sacrés" des politiques publiques. Cet article, d'un point de vue américain, cherche précisément à démontrer un tel changement dans le renforcement de la position du secteur privé de la télé- et de la radiodiffusion au Canada.

Alfred Schutz, writing in 1955, argued that successful communication is possible only between persons, social groups, nations, etc., who share a substantially similar system of relevances. The greater the differences, the fewer the chances for successful communication. Complete disparity makes discourse impossible. "To be successful, any communicative process must, therefore, involve a set of common abstractions or standardizations." (Schutz, 1955, 197)

This is perhaps an obvious statement when applied to the problem of everyday communication. But Schutz's observation has a less obvious meaning when applied to the more formal communicative context of public policy debate. Just what is a "system of relevances" in the debate over allocation of resources, or involvement of the state in economic, social or cultural affairs? Is it not possible--or even likely--that the participants in a debate over the necessity of state involvement in, say, broadcasting would not share

the same system of relevances, or that such relevances would be so abstract (compared, for instance, to everyday conversation) that they would, in fact, lack common interpretation?

It is true that the system of relevances which governs much debate over public policy and state intervention in people's activities are abstract. But they are also typically tied to some document (a declaration, constitution, charter, court decision, etc.) which serves as "sacred text" determining the parameters of legitimate debate. It is the sacred text itself which must be interpreted, its terms defined and its meaning divined, in order that public policy can be formulated and maintained or altered over time.

Such texts are sacred because their validity is unquestioned. They are the starting point of all public debate, and they determine the legitimacy of policy overtures and budgetary decisions. But their meaning is not always self-evident. Typically, terms require definition, underlying assumptions must be made explicit, cultural and historical biases must be identified, precedents set in similar policy arenas must be applied and new political realities must be used as relevant hermeneutical tools.

The wider the system of relevances, and the more abstract its components are, the more difficult it is to reach policy consensus. Relevances at odds with one another make the task of achieving consistent policy problematic; they may even paralyze policy formation and application. Divergent interpretations require some means to achieve convergence, or, (at a minimum) a means for competing groups to understand alternative formulations, and to address them in public debate. (Schutz, 1955, 169).

A debate over public policy thus can be seen as an exercise in the politics of language. Since language is the vehicle by which reality is apprehended, interpreted and made legitimate, any shift in the key terms, relevances and accepted interpretations of history undergirding the language essential to public policy formulation can

have serious consequences for the outcome of on-going policy debates. In addition, the longer issues are debated, the more opportunity exists for the relevances of the debate to change; the better the opportunity for a new universe of discourse to emerge. In broadcasting, the continuing process of technological change since the mid 1920's, the changing international environment for programming, and the larger cultural debate of which broadcasting questions have formed a part, have kept Canadian policy debate and formulation a lively business. Canadian debate concerning broadcasting began in an environment relatively unencumbered by government. During radio's first decade, (1919-1929), the medium was entirely in the hands of private owners, as it was in the United States. Minimum government regulation was exercised by the federal Department of Transport. Canadian Marconi and the Canadian National Railways were the most prominent promoters of the medium, but radio stations also were operated by equipment manufacturers, newspapers, religious organizations and interested amateurs. Frequencies were shared in many communities by a number of broadcasters, and audiences often searched for distant signals on crudely constructed sets in an effort to be in contact with other parts of the world. It was common for Canadian listeners to tune in to American broadcasting stations in the evening hours when the AM signals had their greatest range. Stations KDKA, Pittsburgh, and WLW, Cincinnati, were often mentioned by listeners in letters to the editor, or to the Department of Transport, as favorite stations.

By the mid 1920s, however, people had begun to express concern that Canadian radio was being overshadowed by American stations. American network programming was particularly popular after NBC went on the air in 1926 and CBS in 1927. As in the United States, NBC's program, "Amos 'n Andy," was Canada's favorite radio show. By 1928, at least four of Canada's most powerful radio stations, CFCF and CKAC, both in Montreal and owned by Canadian Marconi and La Presse respectively, and CKGW and CFRB, both in Toronto and owned by Gooderham and Worts and

Rogers Majestic respectively, were affiliated with American radio networks.

Listeners began to write to the prime minister and to the minister of marine, as well as to local newspapers, expressing concern about American domination of Canada's airwaves. John E. Skelton of Fesserton, Ontario, in a typical letter, wrote to Prime Minister W. L. Mackenzie King in 1925 that, "when we want to sit down to listen to a real radio concert we have to go 'across the line' to U.S.A. to get it. [sic] This gives us all a poor opinion of our countries [sic] ambition for boosting itself." (Skelton, 1915) R. Workman, North Bay, Ontario, wrote to Deputy Minister Johnston of the Marine and Fisheries Department in 1926 that he could not receive Canadian stations, because they were silenced by more powerful American ones. (Work, 1926) The Leader of Regina editorialized in 1929 that, "Private enterprise, in the opinion of some persons, should be left in charge of [radio], but in Canada private enterprise has found it profitable to make use of the organizations that have been built up in the United States." (Leader, 1929)

As these three opinions indicate, concern existed in Canada both about the powerful American broadcasting facilities which crossed the border and monopolized Canadian airwaves by overpowering domestic Canadian stations, and about the common practice of Canadian stations picking up American programs and rebroadcasting them. Although concern clearly existed about Canadian stations affiliating with American networks, the situation was part of a larger issue, prompted partly by the powerful WLW phenomenon which used a frequency that interfered with many Canadian stations, and partly by the proximity of many American border stations to the majority of Canadians. A third part of this matrix was the rebroadcasting phenomenon within Canada. Even station CKY in Winnipeg, operated by the Manitoba Telephone System, set up listening posts in homes of employees who tuned into American stations. If reception was good, these employees would telephone the station, and CKY would plug into the line to rebroadcast the signal. As many as six different American stations'

broadcasts might be carried in this way during a single evening. (Reynolds, 1980)

In response to developing public concern, Parliament appointed Canada's first Royal Commission on Radio Broadcasting under the chairmanship of Sir John Aird. It reported in 1929 that Canadian listeners unanimously wanted Canadian broadcasting, and among many other things it recommended that radio in Canada be nationalized.

This was a radical suggestion. The Aird Commission, however, had been impressed by the work of the British Broadcasting Corporation, and wanted a comparable cultural achievement in Canada. Something of the popularity of the report may be seen in the fact that even private broadcasters were not unanimously opposed to the Commission's recommendation. The Canadian Association of Broadcasters, for example, formed by the private sector in 1926, was unable to take a united position when it met to discuss the Report on February 14, 1929. (Allard, 1976, 2)

The Aird Report eventually became "sacred text" directing the development of radio in Canada, even though its recommendation for complete nationalization of the medium was never followed. Its status as sacred text becomes clearer over time as it is consistently referred to as the governing vision for Canadian broadcasting, as its terms are quarrelled over, and as witnesses before Parliamentary committees, (and committee members themselves), refer to the intentions of the Commission in subsequent debates on the broadcasting issue.

This document, in effect, established a set of relevances with which all parties, and particularly private broadcasters, would have to contend as participants in the process of determining radio's future in Canada.

The Aird Report claimed that the character of what was broadcast within Canada was important to Canadians. While it

commended private broadcasters for their effort to "provide entertainment for the benefit of the public with no direct return of revenue," it also said that this lack of revenue had forced "too much advertising upon the listeners," and had resulted in "the crowding of stations into urban centres" and had left "other large populated areas ineffectively served." It also claimed that, "the majority of programs heard are from sources outside of Canada." (Aird, 1929, 6)

Each of these claims established relevances to the policy making process, relevances which private broadcasters would have to turn to their own advantage by defining (or re-defining) them in such a way that they would not stand in the way of continued private broadcasting activity. Otherwise, the "expected interpretation," (Schutz's term), might lead eventually to the dissolution of private broadcasting, which the Aird Report advocated. This text, then, with its appeal to Canada's pride, identity and sovereignty, provided the relevances which, in the absence of alternative suasive interpretations, would be used at face value. This situation would ultimately damage the aspirations of private radio broadcasters.

The strategies adopted by the private sector response to this sacred text were eventually successful in turning policy away from wholesale adoption of the radical restructuring envisioned by Aird and his colleagues. Over time, the efforts of the private broadcasters resulted in a rewriting of the history to which the report was a response, and a redefinition of a central concept in Canadian broadcasting development strategy. This idea, (eventually known as the "single-system concept"), was the focus of the struggle which resulted in the formation of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, the Board of Broadcast Governors, and ultimately the Canadian Radio and Television Commission, (later known as the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission). This rewriting of history and process of redefinition occurred while Parliament, further Royal commissions, and evolving regulatory agencies, continued to endorse the original formulation of the Aird Report, thus certifying its "sacred text" status. (Third and Final Report, 1936,

3078; Third and Final Report, 1951, 471; Royal Commission, 1957, 13; "Pay Television Service," 1975, 2, 3)

The crucial period in the Canadian Association of Broadcaster's rewriting of 1920's radio history were the years 1951 to 1958. In 1951 the House of Commons appointed another in a succession of Special Committees on Radio Broadcasting, and the submission of the CAB to this Committee argued that, although radio advertising was unprofitable in 1929, "only four of the existing 62 privately owned stations received any programs whatever from United States sources." (Canadian Association of Broadcasters, 1951, 159) The CAB concluded that, "Canadian privately owned broadcasting was never at any time dominated by United States interests, nor did the threat exist." (Canadian Association of Broadcasters, 1951, 159)

While these statements appeared to contradict directly the Aird Commission's conclusion about the U.S. threat, actually they addressed an entirely different issue. As Charles Bowman, a member of the Aird Commission had made clear in his testimony to the 1932 Special Committee on Radio Broadcasting, the American programs which the Commission was concerned about were those coming over the border from the U.S., not those coming from Canadian affiliates of American networks. (Bowman, 1932, 81)

The CAB's use of the term "regularly" was also somewhat deceptive, since it overly qualified an early phenomenon of radio, which was the use of transmitters for relay and power boost of distant signals into local areas. This was precisely what station CKY in Winnipeg "regularly" practiced in the early 1920's. It also failed to acknowledge the problem of large scale importing of electrical transcriptions (early recordings), a phenomenon which was widely protested by Canadian musicians and which had caused the Department of Marine such difficulties in the mid-1920's when such imports from one Judge Rutherford were aired over stations owned by the International Bible Students (Jehovah's Witnesses) attacking mainline churches and the government. (Weir, 1965, 102; Bennett)

But the CAB's overly restrictive use of the term "regularly" in this context, attaching it only to the issue of actual network affiliation, was an effort to deny that these other considerations were germane.

T. James Allard, General Manager of the CAB, also claimed during the hearings of this 1951 Special Committee that "There is no evidence to support the old claim that broadcasting is 'public domain'; that its usage is somewhat loose on the part of most Canadians." [sic] (Allard, 1951, 128) This conclusion came in spite of the CAB's earlier testimony (1936) that it was prepared to co-operate with the Radio Commission to make chain broadcasting "feasible, profitable and useful to the listeners." This in spite of Sir John Aird's remark in 1932 that he had "nowhere seen any statement of estimated revenue from private Canadian sources that would warrant the belief that the operation of broadcasting stations can be left in private hands," and in spite of a 1932 Department of Marine analysis that the lack of advertising revenue outside Toronto and Montreal had resulted in 40% of the Canadian population being unable to receive Canadian programs on a regular basis. (Sedgwick, 1936, 669; Aird, 1932, 494; Brockington, 1939, 4)

It was the recognition of the economic difficulties faced by private radio interests outside Toronto and Montreal which had originally led the Aird Commission to declare the airwaves a public resource, a theme which Prime Minister Bennett had picked up in testimony in 1936 when he declared, "All you have to do is grant enough licenses [to private broadcasters] and you destroy the public character of Canadian broadcasting." (Bennett, 1936, 3710) But Allard chose to ignore such widespread beliefs in his reformulation, instead declaring that there was "no evidence" to support the claim that broadcasting was a public service, thus attempting both to rewrite the facts and opinions of the late 1920s, and to deny the latter assumption that broadcasting should serve the public interest, and thus required Parliamentary involvement.

The CAB, in its 1951 re-examination of the Report of the Royal Commission on National Development in the Arts, Letters and Sciences, (the Massey Report), released the preceding year, also claimed that the conclusion reached by both the Aird and Massey commissions regarding the failure of private broadcasters to serve the "hinterlands" was mistaken. (Canadian Association of Broadcasters, 1951, 179) But the facts were again contrary to Allard's claims. In 1930 the total broadcasting power of all Canadian radio stations was only 35,000 watts, with 10,500 watts of this total (30%) concentrated in Toronto. (Duranleau, 1931) This compared with 675,000 watts of power controlled by American stations "regularly and easily heard in Canada." (Prang, 1965, 3) By 1935, after the establishment of the Canadian Radio Broadcasting Commission (CRBC), Canada used only 79,000 watts, 15,000 of which were controlled by a single station, the Manitoba-owned CKY in Winnipeg. (Canadian Radio Broadcasting Commission, 1935)

Such claims by the CAB caused Mr. Robinson of the Special Committee to remark to Allard that the organization's brief was quite a departure from earlier presentations to Parliamentary Committees in which the CAB had been generally supportive of the Broadcasting Act. Allard responded that private broadcasting had matured and become "more conscious of its responsibilities to the community at large." (Allard, 1951, 246, 247) In this response he as much as admitted to a new formulation of history, and to the CAB's effort to establish new relevances for public debate on broadcasting-relevances which could deny the legitimacy of state intervention into radio and television.

Apparently the CAB understood its newly claimed public responsibility to require it to question in a more substantive way the activities of the State in broadcasting. Joseph Sedgwick, general council of the CAB, had raised the issue in 1943 when he said that people did not want non-commercial radio in North America. (Sedgwick, 1943, 207) By 1953, other players had recognized the significance of the shift. Donald MacDonald, Secretary-Treasurer of

the Canadian Congress of Labor, responded to the CAB position by suggesting that the CAB's sense of "happy harmony between the pursuit of profit and the public interest," was based "on nothing more substantial than verbal sleight-of-hand." (MacDonald, 1953, 213)

By 1956 the CAB was claiming that, "the fear of Americanization [was] becoming everyday more of an imaginary bogey than it ever was before," and that, "ever since broadcasting got under way in Canada, a certain vocal minority of our population has been spreading the gospel of fear that without a strong and all-powerful state-owned broadcasting system, Canadian broadcasting would be overrun with programmes having their origin in the United States and that our Canadian culture would be dominated by that of the United States.... [T]his threat does not exist." (Estrey, 1956, 7345; Neill, 1956, 3745) But Harold A. Innis had not been convinced only four years earlier when he had warned against the "powerful...impact of commercialism" emanating from the United States which was, he said, persistent in all areas of Canadian life. It struck, he continued, "at the heart of cultural life in Canada." (Innis, 1952, 19) And, as a result of the enactment of new broadcasting legislation in 1958 which created the Board of Broadcast Governors to regulate both the CBC and private broadcasters as equals--a goal long sought by the CAB--Robert E. Babe says, the balance was dramatically tilted "toward the private sector, and to commercial incentives." (Babe, 1979, 19)

In other words, answering the question of whether private broadcasting in Canada was threatened by Americans depended on whether one defined the threat in terms of potential American ownership of Canadian stations, or of Canadian affiliation with American networks, on the one hand; or in terms of the American business/commercial ethic dominating the Canadian broadcast environment, on the other. Clearly Americans were not going to be allowed either to own Canadian broadcast properties, or to seek Canadian affiliates for the major television networks. But widespread import of American programs and advertising (or programming and

advertising strategies) could have similar effects. This was a point that the CAB was not interested in addressing, although it was interested in importing ever greater quantities of American prime-time programming. Again, the system of relevances which the CAB wanted to control the debate over broadcasting would not allow such admissions.

The recommendations of the Aird Commission that all radio stations be nationalized served as the basis for what became known as the "single-system concept" for Canadian broadcasting. Since Parliament had chosen not to do as the commission suggested with this recommendation, there was the problem of the relationship between public and private broadcasters. Parliament addressed this problem by constructing a premier public system which had the responsibility of developing a national service, and giving it the responsibility, as well, of regulating the activities of private broadcasters. The private sector was thus put in a clearly subservient position to the CRBC, (later the CBC) but was expected to act in the Parliament defined national interest as part of the single system. Private broadcasters chaffed at their secondary status, however, particularly at their inability to construct an independent network which would allow them to share program development and production costs on the model of the American networks. Eventually they began to chip away at the single-system concept, but the irony of their position was that the concept had been conceived to preserve a place for private radio ownership within the context of a public system. The alternative would have been to follow the original recommendation.

The first forays against the single-system concept by private broadcasters were subtle. In 1939 L. W. Brockington, Chairman of the Board of Governors of the CBC, was able to say simply that the Board did not recognize the existence of private networks apart from the national system. (Brockington, 1939, 70) But only a year later Alan Plaunt, in his letter of resignation from the Board of Governors, complained that, "the desire of certain private broadcasters...is to bring about the establishment of a private network, which would

compete directly with the national network and which would, they doubtless hope, ultimately undermine it." (Plaunt, 1940, 129) In 1946 the Third and Final Report of the Special Committee on Radio Broadcasting, while recognizing the importance of the public system, went to some pains to respond to private broadcasters' concerns by recognizing a "definite need for private community stations supplementary to the national system" to "serve particular needs of their community." (Third and Final Report, 1946, 846)

By 1958, as already noted, the CAB had convinced the Parliament of the need for a regulatory body separate from the CBC, though the original intent of the single board to oversee radio had been to assure that all components of Canadian broadcasting would contribute to the establishment and maintenance of a distinctive Canadian voice in radio. The 1958 Act's very existence suggested that the CBC was in competition with private broadcasters, (or at least that private broadcasters' interests were somehow separate from those of the national system), a fact that had long been denied by both the CBC and Parliamentary committees. (Frigon, 1944, 521; Coldwell, 1944, 498; Third and Final Report, 1944, 551; Third and Final Report, 1951, 472)

But the 1958 Broadcasting Act did not satisfy the CAB either. Allard wrote that, 'As early as 1962, it had become obvious that the 1958 Broadcasting Act was already obsolete in some respects....' (Allard, 1976, 39) And by the middle of the decade, Don Jamieson of the CAB was actively rewriting history in his report as part of the so-called "Troika" to advise the government on broadcasting policy. Jamieson referred to the "single-system concept;" implying its demise by writing in the past tense and claimed that "no one can say" whether a private national network would have been successful had it been tried in radio's early days. (Jamieson, nd, 4) Ignoring the best evidence available in 1929, he concludes, too, that there was no longer "more than a semblance of the 'single-system' in Canadian broadcasting" and that as the service provided by private broadcasters increased, it was logical to assume "that the

responsibilities of the public sector" would diminish. (Jamieson, 22; Ellis, 1979) He did not suggest, however, why the reverse logic would not work just as well, why private broadcasting's role could not likewise be diminished.

By the mid 1960s the understanding of broadcasting within the public policy arena in Canada had changed. In CRTC was created in 1968 and, although ostensibly still committed to a national communications system, the private broadcasters' interpretation of the meaning of such a system was now more salient than the old interpretations based in the original "sacred text" terms of the Aird Commission Report. And the new watchwords of the 1980s are competition, variety and access for Canadian audiences. (Department of Communications, 1983)

While the government continues to use the watchwords of the past, at least the commitment to "Canadian content," the effort to maintain the "single-system" to concentrate Canadian resources and provide a distinctive Canadian voice to counterbalance American broadcasting spillover, (including on-air carriage of American programs, cable system importation and satellite selection of American signals by individuals), has ceased. The CBC's national program service is now expected to compete directly with all other Canadian and foreign privately-owned systems, and to be "an essential instrument of Canadian cultural development" in the new reality of international content imported into Canada. (Department of Communications, 1983)

In this 60-year process, various Parliamentary committees were reluctant to abandon the sacred language of the past. But the language became hollow, and was finally largely abandoned, as its definitions were altered, and the relevances of the debate shifted. New political and economic realities were forced upon those responsible for shaping Canadian broadcasting policies. The perseverance of the CAB, particularly with its increasingly aggressive posture in the post-Massey Report era, eventually overcame the

understandings of the past. A new universe of discourse was established, one grounded in misconstruction of facts, subtle turns of phrase and redefinitions of key terms. The result was a rewriting of history, a rewriting which would justify new departures from the status quo.

Whether this change has been for good or ill in Canada is a matter of personal determination. But there are lessons of significance for understanding the development of public policy. What happened in the case of broadcasting happens as well in all other arenas of public policy making. The interpretation of history, and the definitions of key terms, are important relevances which circumscribe the truth. Their significance increases as first hand knowledge wanes with the passage of time and the turnover among participants in debate. The stakes get higher. These terms, relevances and interpretations of history determine what is possible and what is unthinkable.

To the extent, then, that history can be altered and definitions changed, new possibilities and impossibilities can be created. In the end the division between the sacred (possible) and profane (impossible) are, at best, muddled, and at worst, reversed or made irrelevant. **The fundamental basis of society can change as a result.**

As Mr. Coldwell said to Allard in 1951: "You are arguing or suggesting to the government that the Radio Act and so on be scrapped and that we go back on all that Mr. Bennett said regarding the necessity of having these controls." (Coldwell, 1951, 246) Yet what Coldwell thought unthinkable was written into policy only a few years later.

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