



BROADCASTING POLICY IN CANADA AND THE UNITED KINGDOM: POLITICS, TECHNOLOGY AND IDEOLOGY

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The present moment is a good one to compare government attitudes in Canada and Britain to broadcasting, for in both countries Conservative governments have been developing new policies for broadcasting. The Canadian situation offers the British observer an interesting contrast with the one which pertains in his own country. The convergences do not appear quite where they might be expected and the divergences are rather surprising.

Canada has always regarded communications as fundamental to the creation and maintenance of the Canadian nation. From Sir John Macdonald's determination to push the railroad through the Rockies to the Pacific as part of his grand plan for the federal unification of the country, to the provision of satellite television for indigenous communities we see the same underlying belief that in a country as large and as sparsely populated as Canada, development and control of communications is a *sine qua non* of the nation's existence.

In Britain there has not been the same overt emphasis on nation building, for the obvious reason that the existence of the British state has not seemed particularly problematic for the last hundred years, notwithstanding the Irish rebellion and the subsequent establishment in 1922 of the Irish Free State (even now a threatened constitutional upheaval in Scotland does not loom large in British consciousness). However, despite the lack of emphasis on nation building, communications technology has been considered too important to be left to the dictates of the market, for the market could not be relied upon to ensure that the public interest was taken into proper account. But that public interest has been defined in terms of access and availability at uniform cost, rather than in terms

of nationhood. So the British telephone system for most of its existence has been nationalised. Canada's industry on the other hand has developed on a mixed private and public basis, but it too has been regulated from its early days by federal and provincial authorities, and has since 1976 come under the jurisdiction of the CTRC. In Britain, although the system was substantially privatised by the Conservative government in 1984, it is now regulated by OfTel (Office of Telecommunications), a body specifically set up to supervise the operations of British Telecom and its fledgeling competitor, Mercury Communications.

As far as broadcasting is concerned, R.B. Bennett's speech in the House of Commons in 1932 epitomises the official Canadian approach, with its emphasis on the strengthening of national unity.

This country must be assured of complete Canadian control of broadcasting from Canadian sources, free from foreign interference or influence. Without such control radio broadcasting can never become a great agency for the communication of matters of national concern and for the diffusion of national thought and ideals, and without such control it can never be the agency by which national consciousness may be fostered and sustained and national unity still further strengthened (Bird, 1988:112).

In Britain the "brute force of monopoly" (Reith, 1949:99) which the BBC enjoyed under John Reith was justified in terms of ensuring the speedy achievement of national coverage, something which private broadcasters would have been reluctant to provide, since it would have involved subsidising transmitters in remote areas from the more lucrative operations in the south of England. R.B. Bennett deployed a very similar argument in his 1932 speech. In both Britain and Canada there has been in discussion of broadcasting policy an additional and crucial emphasis on its potential for cultural enrichment. Reith (1924) put this in a typically forthright and unapologetic fashion in *Broadcast over Britain*, a book he wrote before the government-inspired British Broadcasting Company had been transformed into the Corporation it became in 1927.

As we conceive it, our responsibility is to carry into the greatest possible number of homes everything that is best in every department of human knowledge, endeavour and achievement, and to avoid the things which are, or may be hurtful. It is occasionally indicated to us that we are apparently setting out to give the public what we think they need—and not what they want, but few know what they want, and very few what they need. There is often no difference. One wonders to which section of the public such criticism refers. In any case it is better to over-estimate the mentality of the public, than to under-estimate it (Reith, 1924:34).

The idea that broadcasting is not simply a technology for disseminating information but an enricher of people's lives has run through debates on the subject in Britain since Reith wrote these words. It was on the basis of that assumption that the Pilkington Committee (1962) criticised ITV so severely and even the Annan Committee (1977), the last wide ranging royal commission on broadcasting, which was generally seen as less committed to traditional cultural ideals, had this to say about the objectives of broadcasting:

Traditionally, the State has set broadcasters their objectives. At present, their role is to provide entertainment, information and education for large audiences. It is hard to conceive of a programme which would not be held in some way to inform, educate or entertain at least some section of the population. We would add to the list a further objective, unfortunately incapable of being put in statutory form, namely enrichment. To enlarge people's interests, to convey to them new choices and possibilities in life, this is what broadcasting ought to try to achieve. Sir Huw Wheldon, with remarkable brevity, has said that programmes should "create delight and insight". This sums up our views (Report of the Committee on the Future of Broadcasting, 1977:27).

In Canada the Task Force on Broadcasting of 1986 for its part was very clear that cultural objectives must be to the fore in broadcasting policy.

Our first priority is to make the broadcasting system serve Canadian culture, broadly defined, more effectively in the future than it has done in the past. We want the system to be program-driven, with Canadians able to choose from a substantial number of quality Canadian programs (Report of the Task Force on Broadcasting Policy, 1986:41)

This was seen as a crucial part of the fight to secure cultural sovereignty.

...the Task Force had little difficulty in reaching its views on the issue of Canada's cultural sovereignty. Only one conclusion is possible under our priorities. We interpret cultural sovereignty to refer to our own control of our cultural destiny, our own control of the instruments of decision-making which determine our cultural future. The broadcasting system has a pre-eminent role to play in both nurturing and reflecting Canadian culture. Governments must therefore not consider measures to achieve the objectives of Canadian broadcasting as mere chips that may be traded across a bargaining table. Canadians must maintain the sovereign right to make whatever decisions we deem necessary to protect our own culture (Report on the Task force on Broadcasting Policy, 1986:41).

In both countries broadcasting developed at a point in history when the modern democratic state, based on adult suffrage, had come into being. The early struggles between newspapers and government over access to information had been resolved in favour of the right of the public to know—in theory at

least—unless the security of the state dictated otherwise. The development of the cinema had led to the establishment of national and/or local systems of censorship, the objective of which was to protect the public in general and young people in particular against “unsuitable” material. “Unsuitability” has usually meant excessively violent, over-explicit sexually, linguistically objectionable and on occasion politically “subversive”.

Because broadcasting offers such a comprehensive service of actuality fiction and diversion, inevitably the kinds of issues which have been debated throughout the development of the press and the cinema have come to be seen as issues which arise there too. But because the technology of broadcasting offered the potential of universal simultaneous transmission, then the question of its national significance and power had to be faced by governments as the primary issue. To the modern observer it might seem that the issue of cultural sovereignty should have been well to the fore in public policy discussion before the development of broadcasting, since it was already clear by the end of the First World War that the American cinema industry would use its economic muscle to dominate the world. Discussion of that issue, however, developed only gradually, for cinema, being part of the entertainment industry, was never taken as seriously by policy makers as broadcasting. So in Britain the first attempt to impose a minimum quota of British product on exhibitors came in 1927, five years after the BBC was established, while in Canada no significant government action was taken until the establishment of the National Film Board in 1939. History has moved on, however, and it is now no longer possible in Canada to discuss any of the media without an engagement with the cultural sovereignty argument. And in Britain, as we shall see, that argument is now more central than it has ever been.

Nonetheless it cannot be claimed that there are at present unified communications/media policies in either country. Policies remain pragmatic and to a large extent reflect the balance between the various contending forces, entrepreneurs, practitioners, politicians, consumers and advocates of the public good. Only in broadcasting has it been possible to establish the pursuit of the public good firmly at the centre of discussion. That public good has been variously defined with varying emphases, but the basic principles as far as broadcasting is concerned have been universal access, at reasonably uniform cost, independence from government and other powerful interests and above all the provision of a wide range of indigenous programming of quality which reflects the life of the society concerned. (The British Film Institute's Broadcasting Research Unit [1986] has offered a useful discussion of these ideas.) Over the years the debates in Britain and Canada have followed similar courses, but *action* has recently been much easier in the UK. Criticisms of the CRTC and its members have sometimes been very harsh—witness Herschel Hardin's

(1985) vitriolic attack—but it would be foolish to underestimate the difficulties of regulating a broadcasting system, which has been “invaded” by a foreign power in a way that Canada’s has. John Meisel, a former chairman of the CRTC, who is not spared Hardin’s lash, has offered eloquent testimony to that fact (Meisel, 1984).

It is generally assumed that public service broadcasting is under pressure universally at the present time. It is not just CBC which feels itself beleaguered, but also the BBC and ITV companies in Britain too. These companies have taken to describing themselves as public service broadcasters, on the grounds that although they are financed by advertising, they are tightly regulated in the public interest. (This characterisation has, it should be added, produced a jaundiced response from commentators such as Garnham, 1989.) In continental Europe state-sponsored broadcasting organisations have found themselves under pressure to curtail their demands on public funds, and even in Scandinavia, which held out for a long time against advertising finance, Denmark has succumbed and the other Nordic countries may soon do so. At the same time expansion of the commercial sector has exposed the public service broadcasters to increased competition, and in some cases they have been forced to become more commercial themselves. In the United States the struggling PBS is having to compete in the acquisition markets with the Discovery and Arts and Entertainment cable channels, and with its myriad of sponsors’ announcements at the beginning and end of programmes looks more and more like commercial television—as indeed does CBC TV at peak times.

It is possible to identify a number of related forces which have been at work and which have made life more difficult for public service broadcasters.

First of all there has been technological change. Cable has been around for a long time but its potential for delivery of an ever larger number of channels and of interactive non-programme services has been enhanced by the development of fibre optic cable, the capacity of which greatly outstrips the capacity of copper coaxial cable. Telecommunications satellites have been with us since the 1960s. However the use of satellites for direct broadcasting to the customer is a recent development. Both cable and satellite appear to offer a solution to the problem of scarcity of wavelengths, which was one of the reasons for regulation of broadcasting even in countries like the USA where the free enterprise model was accepted, and encouraged. The video recorder—which has made a greater impact proportionately in the UK than anywhere else in the world—is the third major technological change which should be mentioned. Its dual function, the “timeshifting” of broadcast material, however received, and the viewing of purchased or rented non-broadcast material gives it a flexibility, which traditional delivery systems lack.

These technological changes have offered business opportunities from the humblest level—the small dealer who sells VCRs to the highest—the international media entrepreneurs who have seized the chance to expand their empires.

The political climate has been right for such private sector involvement. There have been many analyses of why the 1980s have been the decade of deregulation and privatisation. Dissatisfaction with collectivist solutions and a renewed enthusiasm for individualism in both private and public activities will, one suspects, be seen as no more than a passing phase by future historians, perhaps a necessary corrective to the complacency of liberals and socialists who become so committed to the corporate state that they did not notice its inefficiencies and its corruptions. Be that as it may, the deregulators have made a significant impact—in Britain, perhaps most of all. Here deregulation, and its soulmate, privatisation, have cut a swathe through the economy, so that in a country where the big national corporations were once more likely than not to be nationalised corporations, all has been transformed, and not only have industries like steel and oil been returned to the private sector, but utilities like water and electricity are about to be transformed into private sector companies, albeit with regulatory bodies to oversee them to ensure that they do not operate against the public interest. (It is one of the paradoxes of the privatisation programme than in the name of eliminating government involvement more government regulation has had to be introduced.)

Straightforward deregulation in Britain can be seen most clearly in the removing of alleged “restrictions” on employers’ freedom to operate, and in the imposing of restrictions on trade unions’ ability to take action against employers. Canada does not seem to have caught the deregulation or privatisation bugs to quite the same extent. To the outside observer the striking thing about Canada is the number of its citizens who will tell the visitor that Canada “has the best of capitalism and the best of socialism.” What is meant, I think, is that Canada is a country where it is accepted that private enterprise is the best engine for creating wealth, but that wealth has to be shared out in a reasonably equitable fashion, and people are obliged to have some kind of concern for each other, particularly when misfortune strikes. This view seems to be very widespread and deep-rooted, so that Canadian politics do not exhibit the polarisation which has characterised British politics throughout the eighties. It is not altogether surprising that Canadian voters have some difficulty in choosing between the three main parties, for the differences among them do not seem to be nearly as obvious as those between the Labour and Conservative parties in Britain. So despite the enthusiasm for privatisation of Mr. Bill Vander Zalm’s Social Credit administration in British Columbia, it is not surprising that when the Mulroney government came forward with its plan to privatise Air Canada it was proposing to retain over half of the shares itself. Nonetheless privatisation

had been on the agenda in Canada and elsewhere, and that has made it extremely difficult for public service broadcasters to defend their positions and to take maximum advantage of technological developments.

The attitudes of politicians to broadcasters, particularly public sector broadcasters, has been another relevant factor. Politicians do not generally like broadcasters very much. It is in the nature of both trades that the relationship is bound to be a prickly one, and it is in the interests of democracy that it should remain so. It is not therefore surprising to hear about tiffs between British cabinet ministers and television interviewers, or that a senior Canadian politician was allegedly reluctant that CBC be given another channel, since that would mean "these bastards" would be able to double their criticisms of him. However, the relationship in Britain has in recent years become worse than the one in Canada. There are a number of specific reasons for this. First of all, the broadcasting system, both commercial and non-commercial sectors, is perceived as being the embodiment of the consensual corporate statist approach, which the present government and Mrs. Thatcher in particular, are determined to eradicate. Consensus as a mode of problem-solving has been replaced by conviction. It is not just that the BBC is a public sector corporation and that ITV is regulated by the IBA, a public sector quango, but that the values these organisations embody are anathema to the Prime Minister and to several of her closest associates. Furthermore both parts of the system are seen as insulated from market forces—despite the fact that television-viewing figures are the highest in Europe—and inefficient in their use of labour and resources.

A second reason is the growing authoritarianism of the present government. It has won three successive elections and although its share of the vote in the second and third of these has barely reached 43 per cent, this has ensured overwhelming dominance of the House of Commons. It is now a supremely self-confident government, led by a woman who has put her personal stamp on her party's victories. It has become—and some commentators have argued this stems largely, if not exclusively, from Margaret Thatcher's character—the most authoritarian government of the post-war era. At the heart of Thatcherism is a combination of economic liberalism and social illiberalism. The state must ensure the minimum of regulation for private (and privatised) business but is perfectly entitled to strengthen its control of the public's access to government information, and to resist challenges to the government's authority or threats to "traditional" moral values. So attempts to establish a Freedom of Information Act have run into implacable opposition—indeed the revised Official Secrets Act is generally regarded as more draconian than the original—the government has pursued an ex-spy around the globe in order to prevent publication of his memoirs, and workers at the government's communications headquarters have been told that their employment is incompatible with trade union membership.

As far as broadcasting is concerned, there have been a number of incidents where the government's concern to limit information and criticism has been very clear. In 1985 for example BBC Scotland commissioned a series of films from Duncan Campbell, an investigative journalist, with the title "The Secret Society". The subject of one of these was a spy satellite, the construction of which Campbell alleged had been concealed from the relevant House of Commons committee. Before the programme could be transmitted government pressure led to its withdrawal on "the grounds of national security" in January 1987, and shortly thereafter BBC Scotland's Glasgow studios were raided by special branch police—the special branch is concerned with political subversion—and papers and videotapes were carried off, allegedly in order to ascertain whether the Official Secrets Act has been breached. No prosecution has ever been brought and the original programme has since been transmitted, but the message was clear. There have been other instances of government pressure on the broadcasters, including an attempt to prevent Thames Television broadcasting a programme which cast doubt on the official version of the killing of IRA members in Gibraltar in May 1988. The culmination of all this pressure was the invoking by the Home Secretary in October 1988 of reserve powers which have not been used in peace time, to order broadcasters to refrain from interviewing representatives of the IRA, Sinn Fein, the UDA and other terrorist organisations in Ulster, whether, as was the case with some Sinn Fein representatives, they were legally elected councillors or MPs or not.

One of the striking features of the Thatcher years which has made life easy for the Government has been the weakness of British civil society. The government has been able to appoint to public bodies individuals sympathetic to its views, and to dispense with the services of those who are less sympathetic. No government would have attempted this before 1979 on the scale on which it has occurred. Furthermore, areas of society such as the education system and the arts, which might have been expected to resist, have been either unwilling or unable to do so. Attempts by the Church of England to mount some kind of opposition have been treated as akin to subversion by government spokesmen and the many newspapers sympathetic to their cause. It has to be added that in Scotland the resistance has been greater, both at the electoral level (where the Conservative party has been reduced to less than a quarter of the popular vote) and at the institutional level.

The conditions described above do not seem to pertain in Canada. A conservative federal government has been in power since 1984, but it does not give the impression that it wishes to reduce civil society to total acquiescence, nor is it able, should it so wish, to exercise the kind of controls on the flow of information which have been employed in Britain. Public service broadcasters do not seem to be perceived in the same hostile light (though cynics might observe that

the weak position of CBC vis à vis the commercial broadcasters renders it a much less powerful potential enemy than the BBC and ITV are sometimes seen to be in British government circles). Fundamentally, Canada remains a much more consensual society than Britain has become—or the vagaries of the first past the post electoral system have allowed it to become.

What follows from the above is that the Caplan-Sauvageau Task Force and the Peacock Committee on financing the BBC, which both submitted their reports in 1986, were working in a general climate which favoured the private sector. But in Britain the situation was complicated by the attitudes of a government, hostile to public sector broadcasting, and supremely self-confident. The divergence could be seen in the choice of chairmen: it is inconceivable that the Thatcher government would have asked an opposition politician to co-chair a report on broadcasting. The British government's choice, Sir Alan Peacock, was a noted free market economist, who was later asked to chair the Scottish Arts Council, the Scottish arm of the Arts Council of Great Britain, an organisation which has also been "Thatcherised".

The Task Force Report's proposals evoke a rather nostalgic feeling in the British observer. The emphasis on the importance of the public sector, English and French, on the need to both support and expand that sector through higher appropriations to CBC, the proposals for the creation of an all news channel and of TV-Canada, and the insistence that the commercial sector should improve the quality of its product remind one of the Pilkington Report (1962), which paved the way for BBC2, and forced the British commercial television companies to improve their programme performance. Of course the Task Force was operating in a much more commercially driven environment than has ever existed in Britain, and it is easy to be cynical about the motives of some of the players in this particular drama. But reaction from the Mulroney government, however slow it was in coming, suggested that it had accepted that there would have to be greater support for the public sector. The government's rather half-hearted enthusiasm for private sector solutions could be seen lurking behind the insistence that the CBC satellite to cable news channel should have some commercial involvement, but in the summer of 1988 when the government brought forward its proposals, it did seem as if the Cabinet had accepted the basic thrust of the Task Force's recommendations. Public reaction from CTV and the other commercial operators suggested that they too, however reluctantly, had come to accept that they were going to have to make a better job of pursuing Canadian cultural objectives than they had done thitherto.

As the the Mulroney government's motivation, it was clear that the minister concerned was very committed to increasing Canadian content. She was no doubt helped by the all-party standing committee on Communication and Culture's comments on the Task Force, which came out shortly before her

announcement. However it remains significant that a government of the right, which has shown some enthusiasm for privatisation and deregulation, was apparently committing itself to increased regulation of the private sector and increased support for the public sector. The Free Trade Treaty was obviously an important factor here. The Mulroney government, reversing the historic Conservative position, had negotiated the treaty with the US. For all that cultural goods were specifically, if somewhat provisionally, excluded from the treaty, there were widespread fears of loss of cultural sovereignty. To any astute politician the summer of 1988, with the free trade debate hotting up and an election starting to seem inevitable, was a good time to offer increased government support for the Canadianisation of broadcasting. The post-election cutbacks of the CBC budget have of course had a considerable souring effect, though it is too early to be sure about the ultimate fate of the Task Force's proposals.

In Britain the deregulation bandwagon in broadcasting started rolling with the Hunt Report (1982), which led to the Cable and Broadcasting Act (1984). Hunt reflected the government's view that Britain stood to gain economically out of the growth of cable, because of the country's lead in fibre optic technology. It also followed the government in advocating entertainment services as a basis on which future interactive services could be built. Ministerial pronouncements suggested that a "wired society" was just around the corner, but in fact it is clear that the Cable Act was the first attempt to increase the range of commercially supported television services available to the public, and at the same time to undermine the so-called "comfortable duopoly" of BBC and ITV. In fact cable development in the UK has been very slow. To date only 1.5 million homes are passed, and less than 20 per cent of these homes have bought the services on offer (*Broadcast*, 1989). This is not surprising, for in a country with four off-air channels and over half the homes in the land owning video recorders, which are used mainly to time shift, it would have been truly astonishing if substantial numbers of people had felt obliged to pay for additional services, which compared poorly in range and quality with what is available either free, or in return for a tax which is difficult to avoid, the television licence fee.

The Peacock Committee was set up in 1985 to inquire into the future finance of the BBC on the ostensible ground that there was a difficulty in continuing to persuade the public to fund the Corporation through the licence fee. This difficulty, which politicians of both major parties have been known to cite when the BBC has asked for an increase, does not seem to be borne out by any reliable research, although there is some evidence that when asked if the BBC should take advertising and so reduce the licence fee or even abolish it, people will reply in the affirmative. The consequences of two large broadcasting organisations chasing the same advertisers for a limited amount of advertising are

rarely spelt out to respondents in such surveys. Peacock was asked to consider the introduction of advertising and sponsorship on BBC services and to consider other ways of raising revenue, which might be used as an alternative to the licence fee.

The committee ranged more widely than its remit required, and performed a useful service in so doing. The basic thrust of its report, however, mirrored the government's thinking about choice and the sovereignty of the consumer.

"The fundamental aim of broadcasting policy should in our view be to enlarge both the freedom of choice of the consumer and the opportunities available to programme makers to offer alternative wares to the public" (Report of the Committee on Financing the BBC: 125).

However, the economic liberalism was accompanied by a social liberalism which was much less in tune with government thinking, for Peacock advocated that as regulation of the system was phased out, so only the normal laws of the land on such matters as obscenity and defamation should apply to broadcasting, rather than the more restrictive codes currently employed by the BBC and the IBA. As to its deregulatory thrust, the committee rejected the idea that it was advocating "commercial *laissez faire*" in broadcasting, which would involve complete deregulation and privatisation.

The recommendations of the committee were grouped so that their implementation would lead the British broadcasting system "towards a sophisticated market system based on consumer sovereignty." This, "the third stage", is seen as one where "a full broadcasting market" obtains. In the first stage the BBC's licence fee was to be indexed against inflation, while in the second, subscription—via peritelevision sockets and encrypting technology—was to become the main source of BBC income. The committee split on the immediate privatisation of two BBC radio channels (the popular music ones) with five members favouring immediate privatisation, and the committee as a whole favouring the BBC being given this option for consideration. ITV franchises, the committee recommended, should be auctioned at the next renewal date to the highest bidder, with the Independent Broadcasting Authority having the right to turn the highest bid down, but with the obligation to make a public statement as to its reasons. Channel Four, the innovative channel set up by the Conservatives in 1982 as a result of a recommendation of the Annan Committee, and financed indirectly by the ITV companies, was to be given the option of going it alone and selling its own advertising time. Both ITV and the BBC were to be required to move within ten years into the situation where 40 per cent of their programmes came from independent producers. A Public Service Broadcasting Council was to be established in order to support programmes and services which would not otherwise exist in this new broadcasting market place.

There is no question that Peacock marked a watershed in discussion of British broadcasting. Although the report talks a lot about the inevitability of technology producing an end to the current system and of itself producing a market where the consumer was king, there is no doubt that the basic driving force, which was reflected in the committee's membership, and above all its chairmanship, is enthusiasm for privatisation. The broadcasters were now faced with a dilemma. They could fight against the basic philosophy of the report or they could embark on a damage limitation exercise, apparently embracing some of Peacock's recommendations, but resisting those which threatened to undermine their overall position. They chose the latter strategy, hoping, one suspects, that the General Election due in 1988 at the latest, would leave the government with a much reduced majority and much less enthusiasm for Peacock's more radical ideas. In the interim both BBC and ITV accepted that they would have to take a significant proportion of their programmes from the independent sector and began the process of making themselves look more efficient and cost-conscious. The election in June 1987 scarcely dented the Conservative majority, so the broadcasters then had no option but to accept that they faced a government determined to change the structure of British broadcasting.

It became clear that the government was at odds with itself as to which direction it should take. The more traditional Tory paternalists, to an extent represented by the Home Secretary, Douglas Hurd, favoured some kind of compromise between Peacock's free market approach and public service ideals, while the Prime Minister, and the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Nigel Lawson, supported the free market. In the event the government's White Paper, *Broadcasting in the 90s: Competition, Choice and Quality* published in November 1988, proposed that the BBC should not be privatised but that its licence fee, which had already been inflation indexed post-Peacock, should be de-indexed after 1991, and that the Corporation should increasingly seek revenue from subscription. As the White Paper said, "The Government looks forward to the eventual replacement of the licence fee." ITV franchises were to be auctioned to the highest bidder, after applicants had passed a "quality threshold," and the future of Channel Four was opened to discussion. Restrictions on hostile takeovers of ITV companies were to be abolished. The government envisaged one additional national terrestrial channel being set up and possibly a sixth, and more services being beamed in via satellite. Local television, using cable and microwave transmission, were also proposed. All of these non-BBC services would raise finance through advertising, sponsorship and subscription.

A new authority was to replace the IBA and to operate with a lighter touch as would the new Radio Authority which regulated commercial radio, which is also expected to expand substantially under plans set out in a consultative document in 1987. The economic liberalism was not accompanied by cultural

liberalism, for the White Paper made it clear that the Broadcasting Standards Council, established by the government early in 1988, with the remit of monitoring and reporting on the portrayal of sex and violence, and standards of taste and decency, was here to stay, on a statutory footing. Furthermore obscenity legislation would be extended in scope to cover broadcasting.

The reception accorded to the White Paper was not favourable. Newspapers owned by Rupert Murdoch, who has a direct interest in the commercialisation of British broadcasting, were enthusiastic, but other papers—including Conservative papers—were worried that British broadcasting would cease to be the byword for high standards and popular programming which it is generally considered to be. Both parts of the broadcasting industry were again faced with a dilemma, and there was no general election in the offing to offer hope of change. The ensuing campaign by the broadcasters suffered from lack of unity and the desire in several quarters to save as much of one's own bacon as was possible. So the BBC, which at one point pre-Peacock had feared that it might lose one of its two television channels, preened itself on being described in the White Paper as "the cornerstone of public service broadcasting" and hesitated about contesting the idea that it should move to subscription; it happily cited some experiments in downloading programmes to doctors in the middle of the night, which had gained a few thousand customers, as evidence that it was taking subscription seriously. The Corporation then regained its nerve and argued for the retention of the licence fee as a necessary basis for universal coverage in both radio and television. But it did not see fit to comment on the proposals for ITV nor to offer any opinion whatsoever about the future of Channel Four. In the light of the government's open solicitation of opinions, this was a distinctly odd omission, which can only be explained by a desire to be seen as not causing too much trouble. The ITV companies for their part had difficulty in arriving at a collective position, but resisted the idea of auctioning franchises to the highest bidder, as did the IBA, which also argued for a continuing role for a regulatory body willing to insist on high programme standards across the board—and not just in news and current affairs, which is what the White Paper had laid down. Channel Four argued for some form of trust to preserve its programming remit.

Anyone involved in this debate has been struck by a number of facts. First of all it is clear that Mrs. Thatcher has either cowed or converted the liberal elite of the great and the good. Despite widespread hostility to the government's plans, there was no concerted campaign of the sort which took place against the introduction of ITV in the 1950s, or indeed against restrictions in the hours of broadcasting of the Third Programme—very much a minority radio channel—in 1957. Opposition politicians did offer criticisms, as did various other public bodies, but there has been no great national movement. In addition it has been

clear that with the broadcasters on the defensive, they have seemed to be engaging in special pleading on their own behalf. Indeed anyone who supported the ITV companies in their arguments against the highest bidder approach to franchise allocation has felt uneasy that he might appear to be offering uncritical support to companies whose performance has not always been of the best. The situation might well have been greatly improved if there had been a British equivalent of the Canadian Friends of Public Broadcasting.

There is an organisation called Voice of the Listener, but as the name implies it is primarily concerned with radio: furthermore it is based in the south of England and has difficulty engaging with popular taste. Friends of Public Broadcasting is much more firmly established, and while it might be argued that the history of broadcasting in Canada does not suggest that it has had a great impact, and its own publications are characterised at times by a somewhat apocalyptic tone, nonetheless the existence of an independent body, membership of which is open to all, which argues for high standards, would be a very useful addition to the British scene. In the past British broadcasters have basked rather complacently in the assumed security of their position, and at times that complacency has bordered on arrogance. There are some signs that they have now grasped that the enlisting of active public support will be necessary in the future.

In the current debate one argument which has surfaced, which echoes a perpetual Canadian concern, is that of cultural sovereignty. British broadcasting has till now been highly regulated, and it has been highly protected, with up to 85 per cent of television programmes being made in the country. So although there have been occasional complaints about the incursion of American programming, this is not an issue which has caused too much anxiety, for the protection enjoyed by the broadcasters has been used to build up large audiences for domestic programming. The weekly viewing figures demonstrate the preference for domestic drama, although that preference has not prevented the Australian soap opera *Neighbours* enjoying high success with the audience, nor *De Grassi Junior High* doing extremely well with young people. However, although American material is watched, it does not dominate British viewing. But during the discussion about de-regulation, before and after the government's White Paper was published, the phrase "wall-to-wall Dallas" was heard repeatedly. The Home Secretary denied that he wished to see any such thing, but the programming offered by the cable companies—to the few people who purchased their services—and by Sky Television, which started offering its full DBS service in early 1989 to Britain from a Luxembourg-owned satellite, bore out the suspicion that deregulation did not mean better British broadcasting but inferior American broadcasting. The poor sales of satellite-receiving dishes have tended to confirm in their convictions those observers who believe that the

British audience will not be easily persuaded to abandon its existing services for satellite or cable ones, unless these services offer something new and better than what is already available. Alternatively, if the terrestrial channels are weakened, by having their financial base eroded to the point where they can no longer support the current range of programmes and the distinctiveness of their services becomes less obvious, then the satellite services will get their opening.

This is being written as the government drafts its new Broadcasting Act. There has been some modification of the proposed ITV franchise bid procedure, with the regulatory body given—as Peacock suggested—the rights to turn down a bid “in exceptional circumstances” and powers to penalise franchise holders who fail to deliver on quality programme promises. A lot will depend on how tough the Independent Television Commission, the successor to the IBA, is allowed to be, and how “quality” is defined. Channel Four is to be converted into a trust, with a guarantee that if in selling its own advertising time it fails to obtain 14 per cent of national expenditure on terrestrial television advertising then the ITC will raise a levy from the ITV (renamed Channel Three) companies. However ownership by EEC-based companies and “hostile” takeovers will not be made illegal. The basic thrust of the government’s policies has not changed.

We now have a fair idea then what the future shape of British broadcasting is likely to be. ITV will become more commercial, more business-oriented, less programme-oriented. It will have to compete for its revenue with a restructured Channel Four, with a new terrestrial channel, covering most of Britain (though not all of the lucrative south of England) and such cable and satellite channels as survive. The BBC will remain as the public service broadcaster, its financial future very uncertain after 1991, with subscription firmly on the agenda. There will be less regulation on the economic front and more on the moral front. What is very far from clear is how the audience will react. My own feeling is that the British audience is an educated one—it may like soap operas and game shows, but it also watches news, current affairs, documentaries, wild life programmes and intelligent indigenous drama. It is unlikely to respond positively if its opportunities to choose from such a wide-ranging menu are diminished.

As the British situation moves towards some kind of immediate pro tem resolution, the Canadian one seems confused. As Marc Raboy (1989) has pointed out, Bill C-136, though far from perfect, did represent significant progress as far as the public interest lobby groups were concerned, for it emphasised that Canadian broadcasting should, *inter alia*, improve employment opportunities for Canadians, enlighten its audiences and include community programmes. The bill fell with the November 1988 election and although the new Communications Minister is Marcel Masse, who was responsible for setting up the Caplan-Sauvageau Task Force, he has come into office at a time when his government is imposing further budget cuts on CBC. This action must

put at risk the efforts of the Corporation to increase its Canadian input, and has raised the spectre of advertising having to be introduced on the radio services and in television news programmes. The Mulroney government does seem to be in a difficult situation: it is apparently committed to the objectives of the Task Force, and presumably its new Broadcasting Bill will reflect that fact, but its financial policies render the achievement of these objectives almost impossible. Ironically, on this occasion it is not so much that the government's ideological convictions are in conflict with its desire to promote Canadian culture as that simple financial necessity—a larger per capita external debt than the one which affects the US—has been the imperative.

The observer of the broadcasting scenes in Canada and Britain, who attempts to stand back from the immediate situation, finds himself drawing a number of provisional conclusions about the contending forces.

The role of technology is obviously crucial to understanding what is happening and mention was made earlier of recent technological development. Yet as Robert Babe (1988) has forcibly pointed out, it is dangerous and foolish to assume that some kind of technological determinism is at work. Technology is not a divinely ordained force whose progress is to outwit the control of ordinary mortals. On the contrary, decisions about which technologies are developed and how they are developed stem from the interaction of a number of forces, only one of which is purely technological. The Concorde aeroplane does not fly back and forward across the Atlantic, losing money and probably damaging the ozone layer, because the technology of supersonic flight necessitates its existence. It is there because successive British and French governments believed—erroneously—that such an aircraft would offer excellent export opportunities for their indigenous aerospace industries, and would also be a marvellous symbol of technological sophistication. The nuclear power industry in Britain has not developed because it was technologically possible, but because in the initial stages at any rate it was a good vehicle for the manufacture of the raw material from which weapons-grade plutonium might be obtained. If it continues to expand in the future it will be in spite of the fact that it is economically ruinous, and to a large extent because the present British government wishes to destroy permanently the economic power of the coal miners. The home video recorder was not inevitable after the broadcasting industry began to use Ampex machines in the 1960s, but only came about because the industrial-governmental alliance which runs modern Japan saw its potential on the domestic front and was prepared to devote the investment funds necessary to produce an efficient and affordable domestic model. The relatively slow development of effective contraception was not due entirely to technical and medical difficulties. The attitude of society to its desirability was just as significant a factor.

What all of these examples suggests is that technological change interacts with political, economic and social forces. We are the masters of technology, but our control operates in complex ways which are sometimes so difficult to unravel that it is easier to talk of technological imperatives and technological determinism. What is clear from the development of broadcasting in recent years is that technology has been used quite unashamedly in order to promote particular political policies. The British government's "gee whiz" endorsement of the "wired society" owed as much to its desire to lessen the power of the existing broadcasters as it did to any genuine belief in the interactive future, and its current enthusiasm for cable and satellite TV, which are often spoken of as if they were technologically inevitable, stems directly from its hostility to the "comfortable duopoly" of the BBC and ITV, a hostility which is as much political as it is economic. The frequent endorsement of the technological imperative by Canadian government officials catalogued and derided by Babe, can easily be represented as a political unwillingness to challenge the power of the commercial organisations who have gained so much from the colonisation of Canadian culture.

It is the political process and its interaction with the economic system which is central. That is why the privatisation/deregulation debate is so important, for it has represented a different kind of accommodation between the political and economic than what has been obtained up till now. In Canada that shift has not been so obvious as in Britain, for, whatever the rhetoric, Canadian broadcasting has been dominated by the commercial sector for a long time, and regulation—by British standards—has been more apparent than real. In Britain, however, the shift has clearly signalled that the public service orientation of broadcasting is to change and the market is to become the model. That is why the Peacock Report is so important, for it represents a crucial ideological moment in British discussion of broadcasting policy. As noted earlier, Caplan Sauvageau gives voice to concerns and ideas about the purposes of broadcasting which in the British content are distinctly pre-Peacock.

In both countries, cultural sovereignty has been articulated as something which stands in opposition to supposed technological and economic determinants. It has been a Canadian issue since the inception of broadcasting, but has only become a British issue as the government's vision of the future has unfolded before the eyes of the public. It is now clear to the British—though if we had asked the Canadians they could have told us long ago—that the free play of market forces and the retention of cultural sovereignty are not easily compatible. They may be compatible in the United States, where, whatever may be said about the quality of much American broadcasting, it cannot be denied that it is almost entirely American, but the United States is (still just) the most powerful economy on earth, and its cultural "software" industries have long

since established a position of extraordinary dominance at home and abroad. Canadians have struggled for most of this century to come to terms with that cultural power and to retain some kind of say on how Canadian experience is represented to Canadians.

If Britain is now waking up to the problem of cultural sovereignty (one is almost tempted to say England, for in Scotland, we have had to cope with cultural colonialism and the distortions it brings for a very long time) then it could perhaps learn something from Canada. That would be useful, and perhaps also humbling, for the British have some difficulty in believing that they can learn much from former colonies. The dangers of a broadcasting free market, weakly regulated, are very clear from the Canadian experience. But there are a couple of more positive things which are also clear. Firstly, there is always an appetite in any country for programming which talks about the experience of the people of that country. It may be difficult to provide it, but when it is provided, as CBC's (1984) statistics show, it does attract reasonable audiences. The scepticism shown by commentators such as Collins (1986) about how much of this material the audience does actually want cannot be dismissed out of hand, nor should Canadian-ness be used as an excuse for such things as the employment in dramatic fiction of narrative strategies which seem designed to produce audience non-involvement. But it is surely clear from the experience of the Québécois that cultural production must to a significant degree reflect the experience of its audiences if it is to have any kind of meaningful resonance with those audiences. The distinctiveness of Québec and its language is not a reason for assuming that this general proposition is any less true of English Canada.

The second lesson is that ways must be found in Britain of articulating the voice of the viewer and listener other than through audience rating charts. There is of course the danger of establishing an elite organisation doggedly middle class in origin and outlook. Nonetheless it is worth trying to find some mechanism for enfranchising the people for whom broadcasting is produced and on whose support it ultimately depends. It is here that Friends of Public Broadcasting perhaps offers a useful model as a starting point. For the BBC and ITV, with their retinue of advisory committees, appointed by the broadcasting organisations themselves, a body, of this sort if it achieved substantial membership and clout, would be a new force with which to deal. Such an organisation would also, one hopes, compel politicians to argue their case at more length and in a more stringent context, for instead of simply dealing with interested parties, they would be talking to a body which represented the very people the present British government says are at the heart of its plans for the future of broadcasting, the viewers and listeners.

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