



# Canada and Australia: Pertinent Comparisons

In the past decade, Canadians have had to adapt to the pressures of an increasingly global marketplace, but Canadians have proven again and again that we are most successful not when we copy the successes of others, but rather when we offer the world music, art, film, theatre, products and services that are wholly and uniquely Canadian. We speak best when we speak with a voice that is truly our own.

Perrin Beatty, Canadian Minister for Communications, April 1993.

**In cultural and communications matters, there is probably no other country in the world which bears closer comparison with Australia than Canada.**

Both are multicultural societies with indigenous populations as well as more recent arrivals, both have to cater to audiences scattered across vast distances, and while Australia does not share Canada's geographic proximity to the United States, cultural incursions from that direction have been insidious in Australia as in Canada. In both countries, a relatively small but highly skilled production industry faces similar pressures in terms of funding and employment opportunities.

One important, and fundamental, difference is that in Canada, the Department of Communications is responsible for cultural matters as well as broadcasting and communications. Another is that the Canadian Broadcasting Act is entirely technology neutral, an intended aim of our own Act which, as a result of the bumbling approach to the delivery systems for new services, has not eventuated in practice.

The quotation above is taken from *Unique Among Nations* (April 1993), a response by the government of Canada to the recommendations of a report (April 1992) on the role of government in the support and development of culture and communications in Canada. This report by the House of Commons Standing Committee on Communications and Culture, *The Ties That Bind* and other documents issuing from this committee, ranged over a large number of cultural issues, and

its comments on broadcasting and communications are particularly relevant to the Australian situation. For example:

*Rapidly emerging technology, such as satellite and digital services, raises questions about the capability of the regulatory system to control the use of the broadcasting spectrum effectively. It seems technically impossible to contemplate blocking signals from the proposed American SkyPix satellite to television sets in Canadian homes. As well, the developing convergence between broadcasting and telecommunications is already creating regulatory imbalance and conflict. Further, serious economic difficulties are being encountered throughout the broadcasting industry and there are major new competitive developments within Canada's telecommunications networks. All of these factors point to the need for a continued strong and unified federal government authority in these areas.*

The Committee identified four major issues in broadcasting and communications:

- The advent of multi-channel direct broadcast satellites.
- The need to focus investment on programming excellence.
- The need to develop special niche markets for cultural products.
- The need for innovative incentives to attract production funding.

On the last of these issues, Australia has a better record than Canada, with

reasonably effective initiatives already in place, but the other three are directly comparable with the situation here.

The Committee believed that in the face of the technological threat, 'the only sure way of maintaining the demand and availability of Canadian broadcast programming in domestic markets would be through an intense emphasis on niche marketing with high quality domestic productions'. Witnesses argued convincingly to the committee that 'excellence in distinctively Canadian programming will be the surest approach for Canadian producers to reach and build audiences at home and abroad'.

## Centrality of Public Broadcasting

It is significant that the Canadian Committee emphasised the importance of national public broadcasting in this uncertain new environment. 'In the view of our Committee, there is simply no doubt about the importance of, and the justification for, a publicly funded national broadcasting institution'. The CBC was 'an essential national institution which helps bind Canada together, coast to coast, and community to community'.

In words that would be balm to the ears of the ABC's board and management, the Committee said that CBC had long endured 'difficult and even unreasonable restrictions upon its financial management capabilities'. It

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recommended that the Government provide the CBC with 'a stable and predictable five-year funding program, revolving annually'.

The Government's response was non-committal: 'While current constraints limit the Government's ability to make long-term financial commitments, the Minister of Communications has stated publicly that he understands the importance of stable funding to the CBC in the years to come'.

In the production area, Canada has survived threats from two US-Canada trade agreements, and has protected its ability to maintain and introduce support measures for production including government subsidy programs. Nevertheless, Canada continues to face similar problems to Australia in producing and distributing material for the domestic market, and the Committee recommended legislation to improve distribution and access for Canadian films to the domestic market. The Government acknowledged that many 'complex and far-reaching' structural problems affecting the production and distribution of films in Canada remain, but did not commit itself further than saying that it would continue to work with producers and distributors to find out how best to meet their needs.

## Telecommunications

In telecommunications, the Committee concluded that a new and current federal telecommunications policy and regulatory system were essential to the availability of new technologies and services, as well as to their diffusion across the country.

But legislation was only one element in the development of a comprehensive Canadian telecommunications strategy. There needed to be a concerted approach by federal and provincial governments and the private sector to issues like R&D, convergence, concentration of ownership and international competitiveness. The Committee nevertheless made no specific

recommendation on telecommunications.

## Coherent Approach to Cultural Policy

Perhaps the most important recommendation of the Standing Committee, given Australia's current move towards a cultural policy (see CU 92) concerned the need for a national cultural policy for Canada in which broadcasting is an integral part. The Government said that it 'fully agreed' with this recommendation and claimed that it had already put in place many of the key elements that the Committee considered critical to developing sectoral policies in culture and communications.

The Committee further recommended that guiding principles for policy development in culture and communications should include:

- recognition of a priority for standards of excellence in programming and production;
- equitable participation by, and reflection of, aboriginal peoples, cultural minorities and women in culture and communications programming and employment; and
- integrated policy planning among all Federal departments to ensure that they are aware of their responsibilities with respect to culture and communications.

Once again, the Government endorsed this recommendation and claimed that its existing policies and programs ensured that it was being met. □

## Canada to Ban Auto-Dial

**The Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC) has proposed to ban automatic telephone dialling devices used for such purposes as soliciting money, advertising other telephone services, and fund raising.**

The devices can store or generate numbers, and can convey a pre-recorded or synthesised voice message.

The proposed ban is a response to 'dramatic increases' in public complaints about these devices, the CRTC says. In 1987 these complaints represented less than 3 per cent of all telecommunications complaints; by 1992, this had risen to over 25 per cent. Between January and June this year, the devices gave rise to nearly 5,000 complaints or 40 per cent of all complaints to the CRTC about telecommunications during that period.

The complaints included the timing of calls (often waking people up) and repeated calls, sometimes several a day; random or sequential dialling of unlisted numbers, and tying up of lines in institutions like hospitals; and lack of caller identification.

The Telecommunications Act, which came into force in August gives the CRTC wider powers to deal with unsolicited telecommunications, such as imposing this ban. The CRTC was reluctant to impose an outright ban on the technology, pointing out that it could be useful for emergency purposes such as use by fire or police departments, or for companies to notify recalls of dangerous products. It has opened the issue up to public process and called for submissions.

Our own regulator AUSTEL in its report last year on privacy and telecommunications made no recommendations on devices such as these, though it drew attention to the inherent conflict between people's perception of their right to privacy and others' perception of the right to go about their business.

If Canada's experience is any guide, when such devices become more widely used in Australia, AUSTEL may find firmer action is needed. □