

Public Notice CRTC 1998-134 Submission to the CRTC Public Consultations on the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation

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Key Questions from the CRTC: In your view, how well does the CBC fulfill its role as the national public broadcaster? In the new millennium, should the CBC fulfill its role in a different manner than it has in the past? How well does the CBC serve the public on a regional as well as at a national level? Should the programming provided by CBC radio and television be different from that provided by other public broadcasters? If so, what should those differences be? Is there a special role that the CBC should play in the presentation of Canadian programming? If so, what should this role be?

The questions posed by the Canadian Radio-Television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC) offer wide scope for discussion of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) and its mandate. The Institute of Island Studies' reply to these questions is premised on the following assumptions about the CBC:

-- **Roles and responsibilities.** As Canada's sole national public broadcaster, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation has an important role to play in creating a forum for public debate and cultural representation and has an important responsibility to the people of Canada to provide balanced information and insightful analysis and to tell stories of Canadians.

-- **Reflecting a nation.** CBC has an important obligation to reflect Canada as a nation of ten provinces, three territories, and three founding peoples: aboriginal, Francophone, and Anglophone, and that these obligations set it apart from privately-owned broadcasters and other media.

-- **Representing diversity.** The best way to ensure that the CBC represents diverse groups, individuals, interests, and points of view is to ensure that it creates opportunities for public discussion, debate and input across the country, and that the best way to gain input from across the country is to maintain strong local radio and television stations.

-- **Representing the provinces.** CBC radio and television has a special responsibility to maintain and to enrich broadcasting on a provincial level.

The comments that follow are reflections on current practice in the CBC and hopes for its role in fostering an understanding of Canadian nationalism and Canadian culture in the new millennium. Our National Public Broadcaster The CBC faces serious challenges as a national public broadcaster in a nation that is geographically large with a public that is widely and unevenly

dispersed. There is no identifiable, quantifiable, objective set of assumptions we can label as "Canadian," no defined set of characteristics (or radio listening or television viewing habits) we can associate with "Canadians."

"Canada" as a nation and "Canadians" as a public are what we understand, and understand imperfectly, from an understanding of a collectivity of provinces and peoples. However, because we live together as a nation with an elected government, and because we interact with the wider political world as a nation, there are most certainly issues that are issues of national importance. As a national institution, the CBC plays an important role in providing the nation with information about these issues; as a public institution, the CBC must remember that its audience is a diverse group of Canadians, approaching issues from a variety of perspectives from across the country.

As a result, it is crucially important that CBC remain a steadfastly public institution. It should not be forced to rely on funding from advertising or have its impartiality breached by big business or big government. Likewise, its programming decisions should not be entirely driven by markets or entirely reliant on national ratings. The value of representing a nation and a public to itself sometimes goes beyond the value assigned by the market. In order to accurately reflect the nation and the public, the CBC should represent groups whose views are invisible in the profit-driven private media. CBC should reflect the interests of the public (including minority and provincial concerns) whose rights to be represented in the media and to have their voices heard should be held as intrinsic, not contingent.

The CBC should reach communities where there is limited choice of media or where media are monopolized by a few companies. Whereas a private broadcaster has a responsibility and goal to return profit to its shareholders, the profits the CBC returns to its shareholders, Canadian citizens, are less tangible. They are the profits that derive from having citizens who have access to information about the events and topics that shape their country. They are the profits that derive from having citizens who have an opportunity to be part of an ongoing, national, public debate. The key consideration in evaluating the CBC should not be how many individuals tune in, but rather that citizens have the option to tune in and that when they tune in, they have an opportunity to hear Canadians' stories in information and entertainment programming.

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A Nation of Many Parts and a Public of Many Visions

The CBC must continue to play a special role in presenting Canadian programming. Some would argue that the role of the CBC should be to tell "Canadian stories," stories of a young nation, a narrative of social and political development. But there is no homogeneous "Canadian story" to tell. The tale to be told is, rather, in Canadians' stories: those stories that have specificity, content, and depth, that fully describe the people and parts that come together to create Canada. Canadians' stories should make up the news stories that allow us to understand each other and know what is happening in the country; the stories of our arts and our cultures; the stories of ordinary and extraordinary Canadian lives; the stories that are the products of our experience, our

neighbours' opinions, and strongly-held beliefs. The best, most direct way to tell Canadians' stories is to build strong local programming.

Unfortunately, CBC, as a corporation, has not always put its highest priority on providing funding for local programming, particularly since the corporation has responded to pressure on budgets by consolidating resources for "national" programming broadcast from Canadian "urban centres." In Prince Edward Island, local programming includes, "Island Morning" for news and information and "Mainstreet" for community cultural events and items of interest on radio, and, on television, "Compass" for local, regional, and national news, sports, and weather.

"Island Morning" continues to be produced out of Charlottetown and continues to offer news and analysis that spark consistent public interest and debate. Weekday afternoon programming has faced more challenges. Programming changes dictated from Toronto and said to be dictated by budget cuts have deeply affected the content of the "Mainstreet" program on Prince Edward Island; recycled, generalized human interest stories from across the country and programmed from Toronto have reduced the broadcasting time available to present more in-depth and specific coverage of music, readings, or performances by local people and to interview local people about cultural events and community happenings here. While the small staff remaining on the "Mainstreet" programme continues to present quality local content, it does so under the duress of tight budgets and rigid control from programmers in Toronto.

The main threat to our only locally-produced television newscast comes from statistics. When looked at from a national perspective, CBC supper-hour news programs are losing their audience; however, not all individual, local news programs are losing. In the ratings that foretell the demise of CBC supper hour news shows, we find another reason that a national perspective always needs to be balanced by a local perspective. In Prince Edward Island, "Compass" maintains astounding ratings for viewership – estimated as up to 80% of viewership. If "Compass" were replaced by national programming, the logic (or illogic, in this case) or ratings would dictate that the programme should be designed specifically to cater most to the interests of the largest markets. However, in the case of supper hour news, it is the largest markets where most competition from other media exists; it is the largest markets whose ratings are slipping most.

Local listeners and viewers form the core of CBC's audience, and they want to see themselves reflected in news and in entertainment broadcasting. The importance of local stations is paramount. PEI's smallness in size and in population mean that we are not well- represented in so-called "national" broadcasting. If we are better represented at a regional level, it is because the strength of our local CBC station in Prince Edward Island helps ensure that our province is well-served in regional programming. However, to have local programming subsumed under or replaced by regional programming would not be an acceptable alternative to a well-maintained local CBC for Prince Edward Island.

The need to maintain a strong and vital and adequately funded local CBC station with locally-controlled radio and television broadcasts is particularly important in Prince Edward Island for one additional, important reason: Prince Edward Island is a province. The most recent historical commentators maintain that the true building blocks of modern Canada are not the regions, but

the provinces. Contemporary government functioning, and initiatives like the Social Union and other increases in devolution of responsibilities from the federal government to the provinces underscore the importance of this premise.

As provincial governments gain more and more autonomy, it becomes more and more important that they be held publicly accountable for their actions. CBC Charlottetown's role in providing a forum for public debate is fundamentally important to the public interest in this province. Commitment to maintaining provincial radio and television programming should be of highest priority to the CBC. National programming must be balanced by strong provincial programming that addresses the issues, needs, and concerns of the provincial audience. Only by giving equal weight to both can CBC fulfill its proper mandate.

Canada is much too large and much too diverse to be culturally centrist. The apparent trend towards a homogenization and centralization of programming goes against what, in fact, has made CBC relevant and attractive to Canadians. To suggest an island metaphor, one big grain of sand is a boulder, not a beach. Canada is a beach, made up of multiple, discrete parts that come together to create a broader scene, an ecosystem where the parts work together to create a whole and sustain a population. One large, centralized broadcasting system would not serve Canada well. The nation and the public need pebbles and sand, not boulders.

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