

Will Cultural Diplomacy Be Reborn?

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According to Evan Potter, public diplomacy is the effort made by one country's public institutions to influence public opinion in another through the media.¹ The aim is to communicate with a foreign public so they can understand your ideas, your ideals, your culture, your goals, and your policies.

To cite just one example, Canada's most intense years of public diplomacy in Mexico were more or less the ten years after the signing of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). In that period, as Bélanger points out, cultural diplomacy could be considered to have been the third pillar of Canadian foreign policy.²

But to carry out such an ambitious project, you have to have a budget.

A document prepared for the Canadian Conference of the Arts, the Canadian Arts Coalition, and the Saskatchewan Arts Alliance, *Budget 2014: Culture and the Arts – Still Smarting from Budget 2012 Cuts but Better Times on the Horizon? Annual Analysis of the Federal Budget from the Perspective of the Cultural Sector*, states that, despite the fact that no more cuts were made that year in cultural institutions' budgets, they were barely recovering from the restrictions of previous years. It goes on to say,

The Canadian Heritage portfolio sustained close to [Can]\$200 million in permanent cuts between 2012-13 and 2014-15, the majority directed at the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation ([Can]\$115.0 million) and the Department of Canadian Heritage ([Can]\$46.2 million), with Telefilm, the National Film Board and Library and Archives Canada also experiencing major cuts. These cuts come on top of the fact that for several years now, the government has not provided funding for inflation on goods and services, which has had an important impact, particularly



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on large organizations like the CBC or the Department of Canadian Heritage, which have a large number of employees.³

Let's look at the example of the National Film Board of Canada (NFB), one of the bastions of the creation and export of very high quality Canadian content.⁴ Created in 1939 with the mission of producing and distributing films that would help Canadians from all over the country understand the ways of life and problems of their compatriots across the vast expanse of its territory, it operates today under the aegis of Heritage Canada. Since its founding, Canadians and Quebecois have spearheaded the training of great artists in animation and documentary-making. Many of these, committed to social and political causes, after the founding of the Challenge for Change program (1967-1980), would follow a strict ethical code that forbade the exploitation through filming of people whose daily lives they shot.

With the passing of the decades, the aim of the NFB has changed, both due to technology and because of budget cuts.⁵ For example, in 1996, after the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) came into effect, its mission was reevaluated, together with those of Telefilm Canada and the CBC. It continued in its role as a publically-owned production company; however, its activities were rationalized to focus on the renovation and dissemination of production, mainly through television.

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In 2002, a strategic plan was drawn up to reduce the impact of the 1990s budget cuts and to rebuild the NFB “brand,” renew its connection with Canadians, and commit it to producing and distributing audio-visual content that would be culturally diverse, challenging, and relevant, and would provide both Canada and the world with a singular Canadian perspective. The most recent reform, made in 2008, involves dissemination strategies in the digital era and attempts to return to the institution’s roots, supporting artists, putting imagination and creation with social commitment first, regardless of the technological medium. The results will be accessible to all Canadians, and some will also be available to the rest of the world.

In short, today, the mission of the National Film Board is to reflect Canada and the issues that interest Canadians, aimed both domestically and internationally, through the creation and distribution of innovative, distinctive audio-visual works based on *Canadian points of view and values*. As a result, in addition to producing and training audio-visual artists, the entire NFB archives are being digitalized.

It is expected that by 2018, the NFB will become an important player in the world of globalized audio-visual media. That is, it will once again be competitive and noteworthy in the sphere of the world’s cultural institutions and of publicly-funded film production.

The hope that this will be attained depends on Justin Trudeau’s fulfilling his campaign promise, explained in September 2015 in Quebec, one of the provinces most concerned with these issues. For this to be possible, he will have to support the minister of Canadian heritage, lawyer Mélanie Joly.⁶ Trudeau’s proposals include a series of points to reverse the effects of the Conservative government’s approximately Can\$45 million in cuts, among them:

1. Invest Can\$150 million in new annual funding for CBC/Radio-Canada;
2. Double investment in the Canada Council for the Arts to Can\$360 million per year;
3. Restore the Promart and Trade Routes international cultural promotion programs that the Conservative government has cut;
4. Increase funding for Telefilm Canada and the National Film Board; and
5. Increase funding for the Young Canada Works program to help young people prepare to work in the heritage sector as part of the Liberals’ investment in social in-

frastructure of nearly Can\$6 billion over the next four years.⁷

If this is achieved, these measures would return Canada to its outstanding role not only as a producer, but also as an exporter of high-quality content. This would mean, in turn, that the country would recover the intensity of its cultural diplomacy, on hold during the Conservative government, which seemed to believe that art and culture were expensive ornaments unworthy of investment. ■■■

NOTES

¹ Evan H. Potter, *Branding Canada. Projecting Canada’s Soft Power through Public Diplomacy* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2009), pp. 31-40.

² Louis Bélanger, “Redefining Cultural Diplomacy: Cultural Security and Foreign Policy in Canada,” *Political Psychology* vol. 20, no. 4, 1999, pp. 677-699.

³ *Budget 2014: Culture and the Arts – Still Smarting from Budget 2012 Cuts but Better Times on the Horizon? Annual Analysis of the Federal Budget from the Perspective of the Cultural Sector*, December 2014, http://www.canadianartscoalition.com/en/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/Budget_Analysis_2014_en.pdf, p. 3, accessed January 6, 2016.

⁴ See the institution’s web site at <http://onf-nfb.gc.ca/en/about-the-nfb/organization/mandate/>.

⁵ Waugh, Baker, and Winton, in the introduction to their excellent volume about the Challenge for Change/ Société nouvelle program, denounced Prime Minister Stephen Harper’s cuts, which they considered scandalous, not only to the NFB budget, but to many other very important programs, based on his assertion that ordinary Canadians were not interested in art. These authors considered these cuts equivalent to those made by Brian Mulroney in the mid-1980s. Thomas Waugh, Michael Brendan Baker, and Ezra Winton, *Challenge for Change. Activist Documentary at the National Film Board of Canada* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2010), pp. 3-4.

⁶ “Mélanie Joly, Montréal MP, named minister of Canadian heritage,” November 4, 2015, <http://www.cbc.ca/news/arts/joly-heritage-minister-1.3303730>, accessed January 6, 2016.

⁷ See “Canada Council for the Arts/ Conseil des Arts du Canada,” <http://canadacouncil.ca/council/overview-of-the-canada-council>, accessed January 6, 2016; “Canadian Heritage,” <http://www.pch.gc.ca/eng/1266037002102/1265993639778>, accessed January 6 2016; “CBC job cuts,” <http://www.huffingtonpost.ca/news/cbc-job-cuts/>, accessed January 6, 2016; Luise von Flottow and Reingard M. Nischick, *Translating Canada: Charting the Institutions and Influences of Cultural Transfer: Canadian Writing in Germany* (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 2007); “Justin Trudeau promises increased funding for the arts, CBC/Radio-Canada,” September 22, 2015, <http://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/canada-election-2015-trudeau-arts-culture-funding-1.3238369>, accessed January 6, 2016; “National Film Board Job Cuts, Shared Offices Announced,” March 2015, http://www.huffingtonpost.ca/2015/03/12/national-film-board-of-ca_n_6859652.html, accessed January 6, 2016; “National Film Board of Canada,” <https://www.nfb.ca/>, accessed January 6, 2016; “Telefilm Canada,” <http://www.telefilm.ca/en/?q=en>, accessed January 6, 2016; and “Trudeau’s pledge of arts investment leaves cultural groups cautiously optimistic,” October 31, 2015, <http://www.cbc.ca/news/arts/trudeau-arts-optimism-1.3297284>, accessed January 6, 2016.