

# The Canadian Commitment to Culture

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As the 1990s draw to a close, arts and culture are back on the national agenda in Canada. The wait was long and painful. From 1984-93, the Progressive Conservative government of Brian Mulroney cut back federal support for the arts. In addition, from the late 1980s through the mid-90s, a deep recession ravaged the Canadian economy. The costs of servicing the runaway national debt left the Conservatives with ever less money for program spending. After years of receiving generous government subsidies, from the early 1960s to the early 80s, the cultural sector suffered a rude shock during Mulroney's time.

Following the crushing electoral defeat of the Conservatives in 1993, the Liberal government of Jean Chrétien affirmed its support for culture and the arts. It too, however, was similarly cash-strapped. Its first order of business was to declare war on the massive annual budget deficit and accumulated federal debt. Deficit-cutting by federal and provincial governments further depressed public-sector spending in Canada in the mid- to late-90s, with predictable results in the cultural sector.

The arts were viewed as a frill when schools and hospitals were closing for lack of funds. Between 1994-99, 87 percent of arts service organizations in Canada underwent major organizational upheaval,

two-thirds of them as a direct result of losing significant public-sector funding.<sup>1</sup> Arts administrators released staff, reduced expenses, and cut back their seasons, while redoubling private-sector fundraising efforts. Though "fringe" groups such as new-music societies and experimental theatre companies felt the pinch first, by 1999 even mainstream organizations were hurting:

- the community orchestras in Thunder Bay and North Bay (Ontario) were bankrupt;
- the professional orchestra in Winnipeg was in dire financial straits;
- the country's two richest orchestras, in Montreal and Toronto, were confronting serious deficits;
- the operating budget of the federally-funded Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, which could be described as the flagship of Canadian cultural sovereignty, was drastically reduced.

Still, the severe budgetary compressions produced the desired result. At the end of

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<sup>1</sup> *Report of the Working Group on Cultural Policy for the 21st Century*, Canadian Conference of the Arts, 1999.

the 1997 fiscal year, the Chrétien government brought in the first federal surplus in 25 years, permitting it in 1998 to begin distributing anew some of their traditional largesse to the arts. After 14 years, arts and culture were once again invited to the table. Even without much money to spend in the first four years of its mandate, the Chrétien government undertook some notable symbolic initiatives which I will briefly discuss:

1. The federal arts and culture portfolio was separated from its traditional home in the Department of Communications, and while the communications portfolio went mainly to the Department of Industry, Trade and Commerce (DITC), culture was given greater prominence in the newly formed Department of Canadian Heritage (DCH);
2. The Minister of Canadian Heritage was also Deputy Prime Minister during Chrétien's first four years in office, especially significant after the comparative neglect of culture during the Mulroney years;
3. The cultural programs of the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade (DFAIT), cut back earlier by the Mulroney government, were restored and, in 1995, culture was declared the "third pillar" of Canadian foreign policy. What that means for the long term has not been clarified yet. DFAIT currently dispenses about \$4.7 million annually in grants which help Canadian

performers, ensembles and exhibitions tour internationally.<sup>2</sup>

4. The ministers of both DITC and DCH made major commitments to foster access to Canadian artistic and intellectual content via the World Wide Web through financial grants, special programs, etc.
5. Also in 1995, Status of the Artist legislation was passed, recognizing "the importance of the contribution of artists to the cultural, social, economic, and political enrichment of Canada," and "the importance to artists that they be compensated for the use of their works..."<sup>3</sup> The income levels of Canadian creators (e.g., composers, authors, visual artists) are often lower than those of others who work in the cultural sector. In addition, concerns have long been expressed about the taxation status of self-employed cultural workers, and about equitable access for them to the Canada Pension Plan and to other elements of the social safety net, such as welfare and income supplement programs.

In the 1990s, self-employed workers have formed a rapidly increasing portion of the Canadian labour force. In 1994 (the most recent year for which comparative statistics are

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<sup>2</sup> Hugh Stevens, "Public Diplomacy in the 21st Century," *Bout de Papier*, XVI/2, October 1999, p. 7.

<sup>3</sup> *Status of the Artist Act*, R.S.C. 1995, c19.6, section 2.

available), the cultural sector represented close to 700,000 jobs, or over 5 percent of the Canadian labour force, larger than the agriculture, forestry, mining, and petroleum industries combined, and it contributed almost \$22 billion to the Canadian economy.<sup>4</sup>

Because training and manpower are provincial matters in Canada, the federal Status of the Artist legislation is essentially powerless without “enabling” legislation in each province. Nonetheless, the passage of this bill exerted moral pressure on the provinces to address this issue. While Quebec’s provincial legislation predated the federal initiative, to date no other provinces have acted.

6. The second phase of revisions to the Canadian Copyright Act, tabled in Parliament in 1997, established neighbouring rights in sound recordings, meaning that performers will now be eligible to receive royalties for public and broadcast use of their recordings. Previously only musical creators received such royalties in Canada. Pending the adoption of accompanying regulations,

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<sup>4</sup> Report of the Standing Committee on Canadian Heritage, *A Sense of Place - A Sense of Being: The Evolving Role of the Federal Government in Support of Culture in Canada* (Ottawa: House of Commons Publication Service, June, 1999), Table 2.1, p.14. The “cultural sector” here encompasses the performing arts, publishing, broadcasting, film, recording, and heritage domains.

the legislation has yet to be proclaimed.

7. Also in the '97 revision to the Copyright Act, a tariff was imposed on the sale of blank audio cassettes to indemnify Canadian composers, song-writers, and musicians for the private copying of their musical works from radio and CDs. It is expected that Phase Three of the copyright reforms, to follow within a few years, will address the protection of creators against the unauthorized use of their works in the digital domain, particularly on the Internet. Phase 3 is also needed to harmonize Canadian copyright laws and regulations with those of the WIPO treaties, which Canada signed in December 1997.

The Chrétien government, after winning a second straight majority in 1997 on the strength of a strong economic recovery and the promise of impending budgetary surpluses, continued to improve the lot of arts and culture with actual program spending. I will list some of the measures taken by the government in its second term that illustrate its overall commitment to culture:

1. Canada House in London and the Canadian Cultural Centre in Paris, originally established by the Liberal governments of Mackenzie King and Pierre Trudeau, respectively, but left to languish by the Mulroney government, were restored to their former glory, with the renewal of staffing and programming, including

concerts, lectures, exhibitions, films, and authors' readings;

2. A report was commissioned to advise the Minister of Canadian Heritage on how to position the National Archives and the National Library to best advantage in the digital age. Concurrent with the release of the report in July 1999, came the appointments of new heads for these agencies. The new National Librarian, who began his tenure Oct. 1, 1999, is the prominent francophone author and playwright, Roch Carrier.
3. Beginning in 1998, the Canada Council for the Arts was to have \$25 million per year added to its base funding for 5 years. These funds are used for the creation and performance of artistic works, to restore funding to performing and other arts organizations, and for the professional training of young artists. The Canada Council's budgets had been hard hit first by the Tories, and then by the spending cuts of the Liberals' first term, dropping from an allocation of \$108 million in 1991-92 to \$88 million in 1996-97. This restoration of federal funding is a boon to arts organizations and artists across the country, who are still hurting from concurrent cuts to provincial, regional, and municipal culture budgets as a result of all levels of government being forced to deal with budgetary compressions in the 90s.
4. The Sound Recording Development Program underwritten by the

Department of Canadian Heritage was doubled to \$10 million a year for 1997-99, with the likelihood that its base funding will be permanently increased beginning in 2000. This fund provides grants and loans to independent artists and small record labels in Canada, enabling them to produce commercial discs.

5. A multimillion dollar federal Millennium Fund and a separate Canada Council for the Arts Millennium Fund were created to spark the creation and performance of works of art, literature, dance, and music to mark the millennium.
6. Chrétien's choice as Canada's newest Governor General, sworn in Oct. 7, 1999, is a television journalist long associated with the arts in Canada. Adrienne Clarkson, only the second woman ever to hold the office of Canada's titular head of state, is also the first naturalized Canadian to be appointed Governor General. She was born in Hong Kong. Her husband is one of Canada's most celebrated intellectuals, John Ralston Saul.
7. In June of this year, following two years of intensive consultations across the country, the House of Commons Standing Committee on Canadian Heritage produced a report entitled *A Sense of Place, A Sense of Being: The Evolving Role of the Federal Government in Support of Culture in Canada*. Focussing on three emerging challenges—the rapid pace of demographic change in our country,













