This direction has been evident since the Conservative government came to power in the dramatic increase of ministerial involvement in nominally autonomous areas like the CBC budget; in the rapid move to reintroduce a discredited piece of abandoned Liberal legislation (Bill C-20) which would give the cabinet political control over the independent regulatory agency, the CRTC; in the closing down of the main institutional channel of public expression, the CRTC licence renewal hearing, in the case of the CBC this year; in the minister’s clear preference for interlocutors from the private sector rather than public interest groups when he ‘consults’ on a particular question.

The focusing of public attention, especially in English Canada, on the CBC’s budget cutbacks, has highlighted only one—albeit crucial—aspect of the problem, the role of the national public broadcaster. But the minister of communications himself has been the first to admit that the CBC’s fiscal crisis was only the tip of the iceberg: the entire system is being rethought, and will be reorganized, on the basis of a new consensus (to emerge from where, it is not yet clear). It is immediately evident to even the most casual observer that the government is determined to reduce the role of the federal state in the broadcasting business, and will strive to create a broadcasting environment in which private enterprise can flourish.

But every development of the last year indicates that the victims will be not only the Canadian broadcasting system as we have known it since 1932, but also the democratic traditions whereby the Canadian public, or more properly, publics, have regular access to the decision-making process, particularly in moments of change.
Until recently, a strong, central communications and broadcasting system was perceived as fundamental to both of these tasks, and for some time the public service was perceived as the very idea of public life against the advancing ideology of the marketplace. The Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, with its monopoly powers, was often mentioned in the same breath as monopoly and the Canadian newspaper industry. But the public service has now been reduced to a role of greater concern to the public interest, to which the editor of the Ottawa Citizen says: "The public service is a public utility, not a monopoly."

In this process public broadcasting was equated to broadcasting in the national interest and the identification of the "public" with the public service became a clear interest of the Canadian state reached its height. This was recognized by one Member of Parliament, who said during debate on the Broadcasting Act:

I wonder whether the government has given sufficient thought to the insertion of this phrase in the bill because it seems to me that we have treasured in our country for the past thirty years the establishment of something that was very unique and important—a public broadcasting system, not just a commercial broadcasting system. When we begin to move into areas such as...national unity, we are in effect moving away from the concept of public broadcasting to an idea of state broadcasting whereby the broadcasting system of the country becomes an extension of the state.

The MP who took this strong position was David MacDonald, who later served briefly as communications minister in Joe Clark’s government of 1979-80.

MacDonald's position notwithstanding, there has been a consistent tactical difference between the way Liberals and Conservatives have used the broadcasting system. Put simply, Liberals have seen it primarily as a political instrument in time of crisis and a cultural tool for nation-building in time of social peace; while for the Conservatives it is an important sector of the national economy. Thus, the Liberals have tended to resist the encroachment on the dominant position of the public sector which began to set in after the war, while the Conservatives used their one significant period in office to make great strides for the private sector, taking regulatory authority away from the CBC and overseeing the establishment of effective equality between public and private television—something which had never occurred during the CBC’s lifetime.

What the Clark government might have done had it survived is an enigma in this regard. David MacDonald, perhaps the most progressive individual ever to hold the communications portfolio, initiated the Federal Cultural Policy Review that produced the "Applebaum-Hébert" report, but was not around long enough to receive it.

The Applebaum-Hébert review demonstrated a lack of sensitivity to any real notion of public involvement in either the formulation or the object of broadcasting policy. The essence of the Canadian broadcasting system, as the government’s report stated, is its "national" character, in which two sub-systems distinguished by ownership—public and private—coexist. The committee thus continued the myth that Canadian broadcasting constitutes a "single national system", as if it offered concrete proposals whose effect would be to begin dismantling the "public" component of the system to the benefit of the "private". By the time the Applebaum-Hébert report was tabled, with its radical proposals for reducing the role of the CBC, the political and technological context had changed: the Liberal Party’s political sigh of relief following the Quebec referendum of 1980, and a dramatically increased technical capacity for television reception destroyed both the political need and the practical meaningfulness of a strong (and costly) voice promoting national unity. As audiences fragmented and the national unity began to settle in the early 1980s, Canada’s last nationalist minister of communications, Francis Fox, began floating policy proposals departing from traditional Liberal commitment to public—that is, "national"—broadcasting. John Turner’s short-lived administration was a tribute to political schizophrenia, demonstrating the malaise of traditional Liberal policy. Turner split the hard and soft dimensions of the "communications" portfolio, which had been unified at last in 1980, so that the economic aspects were handled by a business-oriented minister, Ed Lumley, and virtually appended to the Industry and Commerce, while the cultural aspects reverted to a secretary of state with solid credentials as a scraper for national unity, Serge Joyal.

So the policy changes we are now living through are partly conjunctural, partly historically-rooted, and partly a continuation of a process begun by the previous government. Indeed, as Marcel Masse told a group of Quebec journalists last December, "We’re not the ones who threatened to put the key in the door of the CBC because we didn’t like its news coverage." Masse’s appointment to the reunified portfolio of communications-cum-culture

The decomposition of the CBC’s former monopoly powers was a fascinating move which brings credit to the new prime minister’s reputation for political acuteness. Marcel Masse is not only a dyed-in-the-wool Tory, but a Quebec nationalist who earned his stripes with the Union Nationale government of the late 1960s in its battles against federal centralism in communications and for more provincial cultural power via agencies like the provincial broadcasting network. Considered an "ultranationalist" member of Daniel Johnson’s government, Masse served as minister of state for education and later, under Jean-Jacques Bertrand, as minister of intergovernmental affairs. He was thus close to one of the stormiest dosiers in federal-provincial relations of that era, educational broadcasting, and was part of the government that created Radio-Quebec. His appointment last fall was no naïve one, as he would have come to the direct attention of Brian Mulroney as far back as 1985, when the present Canadian prime minister worked closely with the Union Nationale in planning Conservative electoral strategy for Quebec in that year’s federal election.

Masse was just the man to apply the axe to the CBC when his finance minister ordered him to find savings last November. Only vaguely committed to a public broadcasting system, both in principle and as a vehicle for promoting national unity, the Tories have little to gain from preserving the CBC. On the other hand, in tendering the olive branch to the provinces, particularly Quebec, the government has significant political capital to gain, while the increased space opened up for private sector expansion by a diminished CBC meets the expectations of the Tories’
traditional clientele, particularly the private capitalist entrepreneurs of Canadian culture. Masse was just the man to 'de-nationalize' the public dimension of Canadian broadcasting—that is, to separate, in a way no Liberal-CPC coalition could ever do, its 'national' purpose from the direct responsibility of the state.

Masse's approach was laid out in an interview with Le Devoir published December 20, 1984. To journalist Bernard Descoteaux, it was clear that the era of massive state involvement in defining Canadian culture was a thing of the past.

Descoteaux quotes Masse: 15

The Conservative Party applies its theories in every sector, in communication, etc... the state is an important tool in economic affairs as in cultural affairs, but we are not about to alter the state... we are going to have a culture of Canadians.

We have insisted, to the exclusion of everything else, that the defence of Canadian culture was the CBC's responsibility. We have insisted on this until everyone else wound up believing they had quashed it. We have insisted on the need to reform the public broadcaster. National culture belongs to the Canadian people, and it is up to them, through all institutions, to see that it is nourished...

Masse went on to reiterate the importance of viewing the private sector as equal in importance to the public sector—a point that had been fundamental to the Tory reform of 1958, and that had marked its departure from previous policy:

The independent broadcasters are part of the Canadian experience. They should not be perceived by the CBC, nor by the Canadian government, as secondary vehicles.

I refer to the Tory policy as one of 'de-nationalization' in the sense that it sees a major role for what the Liberals, ever insensitive to a centralized vision of national unity, had accepted regrettably: an important role for the 'other' public broadcasters, the provincial agencies. In effect, this is a farming-out of Ottawa's public service responsibilities.

Masse told Le Devoir's Descoteaux he sees the provincial broadcasters as positive instruments for regional cultural development, which should no longer be viewed as invaders of federal territory.

The inclusion of the provinces in the strategy for extricating Canadian government from state responsibility augurs a tripartite approach to national policy (Ottawa-provinces-private sector) which the Quebec government finds particularly attractive. In February, Masse and Quebec communications minister Jean-Francois Bertrand announced a $40 million seed-money agreement for Quebec-based firms—the first federal-provincial accord since Ottawa and Quebec created their respective communications ministries in 1969. They also set up a federal-provincial committee to study and report on possible areas of collaboration. 16

In addition to the government, a segment of Quebec nationalist opinion sees the new distribution of resources in communications as outweighing the negative effects of federal policy on traditional public services. In an editorial March 23, Le Devoir's Lise Bissonnette called the pro-CBC campaign of the artistic and cultural community of English Canada 'unacceptable' and dangerous for Quebec because of its centralizing tendencies. She asked: 'Are we prepared, in Quebe, to accept being enclosed in that ubiquitous concept of "Canadian culture"?' From Quebec's point of view, she said, there was cause to applaud the move away from the massive federal involvement in cultural af-

fairs that characterized the Trudeau regime. 17

The critical view is consistent with a long line of Quebec dissidence that has blocked a truly pan-Canadian consensus on broadcasting since the Taché/Saine government and the Dominion argued the question of jurisdiction before the Privy Council in London in 1931. It provides a glimpse of the extent of the problem of determining the public interest in Canadian communications.

Or Without The Public?

The Liberal's Bill C-20 gave the cabinet power to issue directives to the CRTC on any matter under its jurisdiction to ensure regular broadcasting licenses. Where 'matters of public interest' were concerned, however, the cabinet could issue a directive affecting specific licensees. Bill C-20 also proposed to amend the Broadcasting Act giving the entire broadcasting system a mandate to be 'balanced' and give the public the objective of becoming 'distinctive'.

Bill C-20 never made it into law and fell with the Liberal government. The Conservatives reintroduced it December 20, 1984, but with attention massively focused on the CBC cutbacks it has gone virtually unnoticed—except in Quebec, where public interest groups tend to be sensitive towards government attempts to assert political control. Indeed, only the most perceiving of policy development seem to have noticed it, yet Bill C-20 has long-range implications which make the CBC cutbacks pale in comparison.

The new version of the bill seemed to anticipate the charge of political interference. It no longer refers to special measures which might be necessary in the 'public interest'. Speaking in the House on second reading January 31, Masse emphasized the 'guarantees' that protect the public against abuse by the bill: (1) the Canadian Charter of Rights, which protects freedom of expression; (2) the exclusion on directives involving public licensees; (3) new provisions requiring the minister to consult with the CRTC before issuing a directive; and (4) a 30-day delay during which the directive would be referred to a parliamentary committee (also in the Liberal version). 18

At the same time, Masse presented the bill as a major element of the new edge the government was putting on communications policy. He presented the new Tory gospel of Canadian communications history, lading our telecommunications and broadcasting systems as concrete realizations of the prophetic dreams of men like John A. Macdonald and R.B. Bennett—and as the result of dynamic cooperation between the private and public sectors.

Bill C-20, the minister said, aims essentially to clarify and establish a new equilibrium in the distribution of powers between the government and the regulatory agency. It aims to close the gap between general and specific legislation and the cultural possibilities of the new technologies which existing legislation did not anticipate. Quoting Montesquieu and Cardoso, a province's minister of the state, Masse said it may be in the public interest to deregulate certain telecommunications services. The telecommunications industry would flourish in the marketplace provided public regulatory intervention were kept to a minimum, and Bill C-20 aims to facilitate this.

It was time to review telecommunications and broadcasting policy, Masse said, and this bill was somehow related to that review, but in just what way he did not make clear.

Last March, the Institut canadien d'éducation des adultes (ICFA) and 30 Quebec labour and community groups called for the postponement of such interim legislative action until a new overall communications policy, based on a wide public consultation, was developed. 19

Bill C-20, according to the Quebec coalition, gives the minister a 'blank cheque' to make new policy as he pleases, and on an ad hoc basis, without considering his general intentions and debate them with the public. So far, the cornerstone of his policy appears to be deregulation (Bill C-20 also
proposes to extend from five to seven years the duration of a broadcasting license, thus diluting public control.

Most important, the coalition said, the bill constitutes a "broadcasting Charter" which states that an independent agency is the best guarantee that policy objectives will be met. The CBC is the only network with a public license, and has in fact privately consulted specific groups and organizations, no public consultation mechanism has been included in connection with the policy review.

The task force announcement of April 9 continued this pattern of policy-making without public debate. Indeed, under the Tory government, even the CRTC, the main public consultation mechanism of the past 15 years, has reduced its role as a place where the public can appear. On March 13, in anticipation of the ministerial review, the CRTC renewed the CBC's television licenses without holding the obligatory public hearings. As the ICFEA pointed out, this was in effect implementing Bill C-20 before it even became law: already, in the fall of the CBC-, public control has been replaced with ministerial control.

CRTC hearings on the CBC at this time would have been a forum for discussion on the present and future role of the public broadcaster in the overall communication system. In their absence, the CRTC did not plan plans to go abroad for a review of public hearings on other broadcast licenses. In Montreal alone, hearings last May dealt with the renewal of licenses for several private radio stations, Radio-Québec, the private television network Télémétro and the awarding of a license for Québec's controversial 'second private French network'. Ironically, the tabling of such a massive agenda by the CRTC coincided with the absence of the traditional forum on the 'national' public broadcaster, a step which underscored both the scope of the regulatory agency's authority and the diminishing of the possibility for effective, independent public representation before it.

Traditionally, communications policy in Canada has been made at least in principle, if not long and thorough public debate. While a case can be made for the government to make policy in lieu of an agency whose mandate is once removed, which fails to provide for a forum for determining public debate?

Which raises the question: if 'public broadcasting' is to be deflected from a national to a regional, or provincial level, is public debate to follow the same trajectory? Again, recent events in Québec provide a glimpse of an answer.

The oldest provincial broadcaster, Radio-Québec, has always appeared as somewhat inconsistent in the mutant form of public broadcasting. Last fall, the provincial minister of communications spoke publicly of transforming Radio-Québec into the 'second private French network' proposed by Québec by former federal minister Francis Fox. Following several weeks of controversy over this plan, and an accompanying proposal to introduce advertising to the educational network, Radio-Québec undertook to produce a document clarifying the orientation of Radio-Québec.

The document Radio-Québec maintenir was published March 11. It proposes that Radio-Québec remain unequivocally a public body, with a mandate where "educational" is interpreted in the broad "cultural"—as opposed to the narrow "pedagogical"—sense, and with financing based partially on a limited amount of indirect advertising. In a statement accompanying release of the document, communications minister Bertrand said the report ought to be the object of a broad public debate; after all, Radio-Québec's shareholders, he said, were les 'tous québécois'. Bertrand said the report would be submitted to the Québec cabinet committee on cultural development, to the provincial parliamentary commission on education and culture, to the CRTC and to Quebec's regulatory equivalent, the Régie des services publics, as well as to the Forum des communautés des communications, a consultation body created after the October 1983 provincial 'summit' on communications.

The Québec government has a political interest in arguing 'the public' with its policy on educational broadcasting. As the only broadcasting agency completely under its control (and even then, subject to CRTC approval), Radio-Québec is the province's point of entry into the field of mass communication. In terms of potential constitutional dispute (for example, over the definition of 'educational broadcasting') it is important that a Québec position be legitimated by a demonstration of popular support.

But the origins of Québec's policy are apparently as dubious as its federal counterpart.

According to a report in Le Devoir, the whole fuss originated with a top-level government committee named to develop a strategy for Radio-Québec (Comité directeur sur la participation de Radio-Québec aux mutation de la télévision au Québec). This committee was composed of the secretary of the provincial cabinet, the deputy ministers of communications and cultural affairs and the chairperson of Radio-Québec—hardly what one could call accountable public representatives!

This news prompted the ICFEA to comment last December: "It is high time, in our opinion, to return to a more democratic practice in this area. We need to know who is making the decisions about Radio-Québec, on what basis and according to what policy. We therefore demand that the minister of communications make public his department's policy on communication and cultural development, and submit that policy to public consultation."

What course the public consultation on Radio-Québec will eventually prove to be remains to be seen. In Québéc, too, there is a strong tradition of public input to broadcasting policy, but here as well, the climate does not favour tradition.

"The federal government policy need to review their desires and expectations with respect to broadcasting and communications. It has to be developed and articulated as policy proposals expressing an ideal, not restrained in the first instance by practical considerations. The government's is the public's", invited only in reaction to the accomplished fact of the white paper, thus depriving the entire community of exposure to the utopian side of the public imagination.

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Note and References


2. See, for example, Howard R. Hadfield, "The Canadian Economic Culture, North Vancouver (B.C.), J. D. Douglas Ltd., 1974.

3. The classic theoretical work on this question is Jürgen Habermas' 'Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit (Struc
tural Transformation of the Public Sphere)' (Frankfurt in French as L'espace public, Paris, Payot, 1978. See e.g., John Krom, 'Encroaching Private Theory of Public Life: From Thomas to Habermas and Beyond', Canadian Journal of Public Policy and Social Theory (vol.6, no.3, Fall 1982, pp.11-49) and vol.8, nos.1-2, Winter-Spring 1984, pp.239-362).

4. This important aspect of the early struggle for public broadcasting in Canada has tended to be obscured by the emphasis on its nationalist and economic aspects. See e.g., Irwin Efert, The Passionate Educators: Political associations and the struggle for control of adult educa

5. See e.g., Alan Thomas, 'Audience, Market and Public- An Evaluation of Canadian Broadcasting', Canadian Communication (vol.1, no.1, Fall 1986, pp.16-47).

6. 'the national broadcasting service should... contribute to the development of national culture and provide for a con


8. See e.g., his article 'Prime Time Democracy', Public Opinion Talk (vol. 2, no.4, September-October 1983).


18. Le projet de loi C-20 en vue du CRTC et au radiodiffusion
seul véhicule clé en main", public statement, March 6, 1985.

