

Canadian Independent Film Caucus  
c/o Rudy Inc.  
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25 November 1983

The Honourable Francis Fox  
Minister of Communications  
Minister's Office  
Journal Tower, North Building,  
300 Slater Street,  
Ottawa, Ontario  
K1A 0C8

Dear Mr. Fox:

We, the undersigned independent Canadian film producers and filmmakers, object to the exclusion of documentary films from the Canadian Broadcast Development Fund.

Sources of funding for independently produced Canadian documentaries are severely limited. Recently air time to telecast these productions in Canada has also been further restricted.

Almost all documentaries telecast by the CBC are produced in-house. The few documentaries which are produced independently are usually purchased as completed productions at rates so low that it is impossible to recover production costs.

The National Film Board offers limited opportunities for independent documentary film producers. NFB co-productions with documentary filmmakers are extremely rare and have not proved to be financially viable.

Though sympathetic to this desperate situation, executive producers and programmers at both the CBC and NFB admit that they simply do not have the funding available to work with independent documentary film producers.

It is important to clarify what we mean by an independent documentary film. To be considered an independent documentary, the film, whether it is viewed as art, information, or commentary, should be the creative work of the individual filmmaker, where the maker has sole control over the production in every phase including the expression of its content.

Respected Canadian film critic, writer, and professor, Peter Harcourt defines these productions as, "Films which are informed with an independent, personal view. Films which challenge the presumption of 'objectivity' and take a stand. Films which take chances stylistically and politically. Films which dare to speak out." Rarely are such films produced within the confines of public institutions, particularly at the CBC.

It is important to clarify that, though they make a valuable contribution, the so-called "documentary reports" produced for such programs as the CBC's The Journal, The Fifth Estate, and CTV's W5, are not documentary films, but are extended journalistic reports.

There was a time when there was a more vibrant, healthy community of independent Canadian documentary filmmakers. Canada has established a reputation throughout the world for the high calibre of its documentary productions. Canadian documentaries have been honoured by enumerable international awards. But today, despite the government's encouragement of independent, indigenous drama, variety, and children's programming, we are sadly witnessing the death of the documentary film on Canadian television.

In our frantic struggle to compete on the same level with American film and television production, we are in danger of falling into many of the same dismal traps which have consumed American network television - the "Made-For-TV Movie", and the "Dramatic Mini-Series". We have forgotten an essential element of our cultural heritage - the Canadian Documentary Film.

Canadian broadcasters, notably the CBC, respond that ratings for documentaries are very low. They are programming with the notion that television audiences want to see more drama and variety, and less documentaries.

Ironically, this trend away from producing and programming documentaries in Canada comes at a time when television networks in the United States, Britain, West Germany, Scandinavia, and throughout Europe are rejuvenating their interest in documentary films. Their surveys have shown that, in fact, there is a large and growing market in this area.

Canadian surveys indicate a similar trend. The highly respected Gallup Organization conducted an exhaustive public opinion poll on this issue in April, 1983. When asked, "For each type of programming listed, should there be more, less, or about the same amount as now available on TV?" fifty-two percent of Canadians surveyed responded that there should be more documentaries on Canadian television. Documentaries scored eight points higher than the next category "Feature Films", and twelve points higher than both "Variety" and "Arts". Similar results have been found in other independent polls.

Of course, to private broadcasters, the bottom line is profit. Again, challenging many of our assumptions in Canada, Michael Fuchs, president of the highly successful American cable television network Home Box Office, stated in a speech at this year's Festival of Festivals Trade Forum in Toronto that "Documentaries have been enormously successful on HBO. They are very cost effective. We are programming more controversial, provocative documentaries. This is what people want to see."

Similar policies are being followed by the other "giant killer" of American cable television, Ted Turner, president of Turner Broadcasting of Atlanta, Georgia.

More and more, Canadian independent documentary film producers are writing off Canadian television as a market for their work. Sales to British, West German, Swedish television networks, and PBS, are now augmented with sales to the rapidly expanding American cable TV networks.

Without the home market, the danger is that Canadian documentary film producers will, naturally, tailor their productions for foreign sales, losing the Canadian content which we are trying so desperately to protect.

We respectfully request a meeting with you and your senior ministry officials to discuss this urgent matter further. We feel that it is essential that, if the independent documentary film and filmmakers are to survive in Canada, The Broadcast Program Development Fund must set aside funds for documentary film production, and there must be a regular time slot for televising such independently produced documentaries on Canadian television.

Sincerely,

CANADIAN INDEPENDENT FILM CAUCUS

cc: Andre Lamy, Chairman, CFDC  
Peter Pearson, Director, Canadian Broadcast Program Development Fund  
David Silcox, Asst. Deputy Minister, DOC

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