

**BRIDGING CANADA'S BICULTURAL GAP:**

A Proposal to Renew CBC/Radio-Canada's  
Trans-Cultural Production Fund

**Public Broadcasting for Canada in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

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## Restoring a National Bridge: *The Trans-Cultural Production Fund*

In Canadian television we have two powerful national forces that drive the dissemination of information and entertainment: CBC TV in English and Radio-Canada Télé in French, as well as their on-line services. In the new world of vastly resourced streaming services from outside our country, they are the principal nurturers of our Canadian stories and arts, vital national production engines. Yet to the viewer they reflect two separate worlds. In terms of programming, it's as if a cultural Berlin Wall existed between CBC and Radio-Canada. The vast majority of English or French-speaking Canadians do not watch each other's programming; they have separate star systems, documentary streams, dramas and children's programming. Except for the rare cooperation in News (mostly by foreign correspondants) and between investigative reporting programs like the Fifth Estate and Enquête, it is an almost air-tight linguistic segregation.

Much of this is natural. News is, after all, heavily local and regional, and linguistic communities have their particular cultural priorities. But it's not natural that, though we live in the same country, we almost never see each other on TV outside a hockey game, a parliamentary report or a severe weather event.

It is one of the major failures of Canada's national broadcasting policy that our two national public television cultural engines collaborate so little in the production of programs that can be jointly viewed by both official language communities. And as was mentioned above, outside of some news collaboration, there are hardly any internal joint French-English teams in CBC/Radio-Canada producing documentary series or specials for airing on both services and on their digital platforms.

But it wasn't always thus.

The most significant collaboration in recent memory proved it was not only possible to jointly produce for both languages, but to do it with mixed network teams that enriched each other's talents and resulted in vast audience appeal. The first was *Canada: A People's History/le Canada: une histoire populaire*, CBC/SRC's millennium project. It began airing in 2000, thirty-two hours, virtually identical in both English and French, that ran over two years and became the most widely viewed documentary series in Canadian television history. Over 2.7 million people watched the debut, on par with the debuts of the most popular US shows for the Anglophone audience. The collaboration extended to producing a major two-volume book that became number one on the non-fiction bestseller list, as well as the most widely sold DVD set on the market. The series was also translated into seven of Canada's principal immigrant languages.

The collaboration involved scores of CBC/R-C researchers, producers, directors, actors, cinematographers and editors, as well as independent producers, researchers and historians hired for the project. From the ground up it was designed to appear on both networks,

representing the best talents of each language community. It was one program produced by two cultures – not a program produced by one culture and sub-titled for the other.

## **The Trans-Cultural Units of CBC/Radio-Canada (2002 to 2012)**

The national acclaim for *Canada: A People's History* demonstrated two things: that Canadians were very interested in their own stories and that major documentary projects can be produced in both official languages by mixed English/French teams. Externally, the series had created considerable public good will and the acknowledgement that “this is what the CBC should be doing”; internally, it created a momentum for increased collaboration.

In 2001, the new CBC President, Robert Rabinovitch, who believed there was insufficient collaboration between the two language networks and encouraged by the success of the history project, announced that a Trans-Cultural Fund would be established. It was intended as an incentive for internal CBC/Radio-Canada staff to work together on co-productions. It lasted a decade and produced over 110 hours of programming --- from history to science to current events, as well as rich web content and books. These programs went on to win dozens of national and international awards-and set the bar for artful cross-language production internationally.

To achieve this, Trans-Cultural production units were established within each of the documentary departments of CBC and Radio-Canada, in Montreal and Toronto. Individual researchers, cinematographers, editors, and producers could be assigned from other departments to augment the core units, depending on the scale of each different project. To be posted to a Cross-Cultural Project was a prestige assignment because of the units' high production values and the fact that their work would be seen across two networks. Here was a larger stage that allowed more ambitious productions.

The first collaborations were impressive: *Breaking Point (Point de Rupture)* a four-hour behind-the-scenes history of the 1995 Quebec referendum which revealed many unknown stories and was applauded by both French and English media for its journalism. At the same time, teams were working on an epic 10-hour history of Canada's national sport: *Hockey: A People's History (Le Hockey: La fierté d'un peuple)*. It became a national hit with audiences in 2004 and the boxed sets and books that accompanied the series flew off the shelves.

The Trans-Cultural Units flourished over next ten years, generating such productions as:

***Titanic: the Canadian Story / L'héritage canadien*** (2 hours) on the centenary of the sinking of the ship;

***The Mystery of Champlain / À la recherche de Champlain*** (1 hour) on anniversary of the founding of Quebec, a biography of the father of New France;

***The Spies Who Came From The Sea / Les espions venus de la mer*** (1 hour) an unknown Canadian espionage tale from WW2 ;

***The Great Food Revolution / La grande révolution de l'alimentation*** (4 hours) a popular food science series;

***Meltdown: The Secret History of the Global Financial Collapse / Krach, les dessous de la crise économique mondiale*** (4 hours) the first international series de-constructing the 2008 Recession;

***Africa on the Move / L'Afrique en marche*** (8 hours), modern Africa on the eve of the World Cup;

***Love, Hate and Propaganda / Amour, haine et propagande*** (6 hours) on World War 2, which proved so popular two more series followed on the *Cold War* (four hours) and the *War on Terror* (two hours);

***Berlin: 20 Years After / Berlin: Avoir 20 ans*** (one hour) on the anniversary of the fall of the Wall;

***My Life after 9/11 / Ma vie après le 11 septembre*** (2 hours) on the anniversary of the Twin Towers;

***Canada from Above / Pour l'amour du ciel*** (4 hours) on 100 years of aviation in Canada;

***Anger in America / Colère en Amérique*** (2 hours) a prescient documentary on growing political discontent in the US before the election of Donald Trump;

***Afghanistan: Between Hope and Fear / Entre l'espoir et la peur*** (3 hours)— *Civilian stories filmed by cross-cultural and local teams travelling in the war zone, independent of any armed forces contingent.*

There were more. But the last major series produced by the Trans-Cultural units was ***8<sup>th</sup> Fire: Land, Legacy and the Future of the First Nations / 8<sup>ème</sup> feu – Les autochtones et le Canada, le sentier de l'avenir*** (4 hours) on the history of the First Nations and the future of reconciliation. Shawn A-in-chut Atleo, National Chief of the Assembly of First Nations called the series “very, very powerful ... a landmark achievement”.

The Trans-Cultural Fund was terminated by CBC President Hubert Lacroix in 2012 as part of an ongoing series of budget cuts. The unit was disbanded and closed in Radio-Canada; at CBC -TV, cross-cultural staff and the entire in-house Documentary Unit was shuttered.

During the Fund's ten-year history, these units produced over 55 hours in each language, for a total of over 110 hours of original television production – above and beyond the original Canadian

history series. They were beehives of bilingual activity. Many of these projects overlapped, so that the two units reached a critical mass as one of this country's major production hubs. One year, for example, there were 14 documentaries in some stage of production. Over the years, more than 300 editors, producers, camera crews, researchers, archivists, and writers met and worked together. Most had never worked outside their language group. Lifetime friendships were formed and endure to this day.

Every single episode of every series had a mixed team English and French team. Many were not bilingual (especially some of the English from Toronto) but, surprisingly, that did not become an operational problem – somehow, with a mixture of “Franglais”, it worked. Apparently insurmountable objectives, such as a jointly agreed version of the Referendum that almost ended Confederation, were overcome.

The Trans-Cultural project was not conceived as a money-saving measure, but as a mechanism to encourage collaboration across the French and English divide within the CBC. What stood in the way of collaborating before was inertia, reluctance to share control, and the added cost of making two versions – different narration, different presenters, different actors or interviewees, double the scoring and sound mixing, not to mention travel for meetings and the complexities of three different collective agreements.

The solution the Trans-Cultural Fund proposed was: If each network agreed it wanted to commission a project (e.g., the anniversary of the Berlin Wall or a history of hockey) and further, if each network was prepared to put in the equivalent of what they would normally spend on an average hour of documentary by itself, then the Fund would cover all the extra production costs of making the program in two language versions. Each team had to be mixed 50/50 from CBC and from Radio-Canada, including researchers, camera crews, production accountants and post-production. Not duplicated – mixed.

The result was that a single hour, say ‘Berlin’, which might then have cost \$200K to produce in one language version, now had a significantly increased budget, perhaps \$300K. In the end it worked out that it was one and a half times more expensive to do two full versions, not double. So while Trans-Cultural production was not conceived as a cost-saving measure, it effectively was. The networks got two programs for the price of one and a half. Furthermore, the higher budget allowed for significantly higher production values, resulting in two language versions which were world-class and could be marketed abroad.

The Trans-Cultural library is now a significant national cultural asset. More than 70 per cent of these programs, all produced and owned by the CBC/Radio-Canada, remain pertinent and even topical today. However, ***since normal music and archive step-up rights were allowed to lapse, they are not available on the Corporation's streaming services.***

Both the History Project and the Trans-Cultural programs demonstrated that it was possible, even economical, to produce the same programs richly adapted to two language cultures. It just had

to be done at a very high production-value level, not merely with subtitling or dubbing. And they proved that it was not only possible but enriching to collaborate across the linguistic divide.

There is no question that the long experiment worked; it only fell victim to crippling budget cuts and, even then, it was a last resort cut by the CBC.

The universe we now inhabit is different, but the idea is as sound as ever, and even more urgent.

The trans-cultural production model must be updated and restored to provide rich, unique Canadian content. If this is not done, before long the only Canadian programming to which both our respective language communities will have ready access will be on Netflix (and subject to the priorities of a foreign company).

To enrich the sharing of distinctive Canadian television, we propose two conditions for renewal of the licences of CBC and Radio-Canada:

**1. That the broadcast and streaming rights for Canada: A People's History and for the over 100 hours of Trans-Cultural documentary programming be immediately renewed by CBC/R-C so that these bicultural assets can be made available to Canadians on GEM and Tou.tv. Since they were last aired, millions of new arrivals have joined the Canadian family and this foundational programming must continue to be universally available.**

**2. That annual Trans-Cultural incentive funding be immediately restored by CBC/Radio-Canada, so that fresh streams of bilingual production can once again enrich French and English broadcast services, encourage collaboration between them and build a significant cultural bridge across the linguistic divide.**

Key Elements of a renewed Cross-Cultural Production Fund are outlined below.

- **The CBC/Radio-Canada annual trans-cultural fund that ended in 2012 will be restored, to reflect current costs, will be increased to \$15 million annually to provide supplementary funding for documentary programs or series** produced by CBC/Radio-Canada that are designed to appear on both its French and English language television networks and streaming services. This is not to be dependent on receipt of incremental federal funding; rather it will address restoration of national cultural and linguistic priorities within the CBC/Radio-Canada.
- **CBC-TV and Radio-Canada Télé will re-establish and maintain Trans-Cultural start-up production units in Montreal and Toronto** to enable the resumption of cross-cultural project development.

- **CBC/Radio-Canada will fund the start-up staffing and project development costs of such units to the level of \$ 1.5 million for the first year.** After that initial period, operating costs will be absorbed by the budgets of successful productions.
- **The Fund will contribute up to 50% of the cost of production of each cross-cultural project.** The networks will provide the other 50% of the cost from their allotted production budgets, thus fully funding each project. This will ensure that these joint productions are those both networks want and that all rights are retained by the Corporation.
- **The Fund will prioritize the production of documentary programs or series in such genres as current affairs, history, science and the arts** with at least a moderate shelf-life. It not available for sports coverage or other live events.
- The objective of the Trans-Cultural Production Fund is to promote and enrich internal French/English co-productions, but the industry landscape is now largely populated by independent production companies. Independent producers may be retained by CBC/Radio Canada to produce or participate in a qualifying program or series, **but copyright and ownership must remain with CBC/Radio-Canada.**

This proposal is about programming. It is deliberately platform-agnostic because the intent is to reinforce Canada's standing as a bilingual creator of international note. Its focus is, therefore, on the content that will, over time, freeze-frame the complex process of our national evolution.

Renewal of the unique collaboration supported by the Trans-Cultural Production Fund will build for Canada a national inventory of high-impact documentary features of international standard, adding each decade at least 100 hours of original content to be shared by generations of Canadians and reinforcing their unique bicultural legacy.

This is an opportunity Canada cannot afford to ignore.