



Canadian content production in decline

At an appearance before the **House of Commons Standing Committee on Canadian Heritage** on November 27, 2001, ACTRA policy advisor **Garry Neil** pointed out that the fall in number of Canadian content productions, particularly of television drama, has reached crisis proportions. “We are losing our ability to tell Canadian stories in the recorded media,” said Mr. Neil.

He also told committee members the situation is only made worse with the decision of the **World Trade Organization (WTO)** to launch a comprehensive new round of trade talks at its recent Ministerial meeting in the Persian Gulf Kingdom of Qatar. “The WTO and other trade agreements already restrict Canada’s sovereignty to implement policies that support Canadian cultural expression. The WTO decision to expand the services agreement and to discuss investment and competition policy is further bad news for the television and film industry.”

But before Mr. Neil could explain and

analyze the concerns of ACTRA members in detail and outline ACTRA’s proposed alternatives, the division bells started ringing, calling members to the House of Commons for an urgent vote. As a result, the committee hearings dissolved chaotically. Delegates from the Canadian Film and Television Production Association, who traveled to the session from across Canada and were scheduled to appear after ACTRA, were sent packing.

This debacle highlights the problems of the Standing Committee’s review of the Canadian broadcasting system. Launched last June, the review was to cover all aspects of Canadian broadcasting and propose new and contemporary solutions to the challenges facing the industry. The committee was given eighteen months to complete the work. But, according to Neil, “the committee seems to have bitten off rather more than it can chew.”

The committee appeared to be caught off guard by the extent of the challenges

confronting the system, including interactive television and the internet, increasing competition and vertical integration. The committee appears also to lack the resources necessary to complete a thorough review. “Members of the committee were surprised to hear the latest statistics that show that there was a greater amount of foreign service production in Canada in 2001 than there was English-language Canadian content production. They also hadn’t been told about the decision of **Alliance Atlantis** to get out of production.” In fiscal 2000, budgets of the foreign productions shot here totaled \$1.5 billion, while only \$1.2 billion of English-language Canadian content was produced.

The committee has not decided on a new appearance date for ACTRA and seems to be reconsidering its entire work plan. “This might be the best thing,” concluded Mr. Neil, “since it will give ACTRA and others time to consider the implications for Canadian public policies of the dramatic shift in production patterns.”

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