**A better model for the CBC**

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The federal Conservatives are holding a policy conference this month in Calgary, and the future of the CBC is on the agenda. Floor resolutions include suggestions for "moving toward a user-supported model," and "elimination of all public funding of the corporation which creates unfair competitive advantage with privately owed and operated networks and stations."   
  
Supporters of public broadcasting have long feared that the Conservatives' business-friendly agenda includes a plan to radically change the CBC, turning it into a "user-supported" system like PBS south of the border. Instead of receiving an annual parliamentary appropriation, the broadcaster would hold donor telethons, and seek finding from philanthropic foundations and individuals.   
While this may make some sense in the abstract, the fact is that Canada simply is not populous enough, nor well-enough endowed with foundations and philanthropists, to support a broadcast system that would provide anything like the level of service currently expected of the CBC. The real effect of implementing such a strategy would be to eliminate the CBC as a viable cultural institution. Some think that that's the real plan.   
  
But is extinction of the CBC really what the Conservative policy- makers want? It shouldn't be, if they listen to their base. In polling done last winter by Canadian Media Research Inc., attitudes to the CBC among supporters of the various political parties were compared. While Conservatives were not quite as committed as either Liberals or New democrats, more than 80% said that the CBC was either "very important" (27.8%) or "important" (52.4%) to them.   
  
The policy resolutions up for discussion in Calgary have in common the notion that the CBC competes unfairly with private broadcasters for advertising revenue. But the desire to eliminate advertising on the CBC is not exclusive to Conservatives - it's also at the top of the wish list for the public broadcasting's strongest advocates from across the political spectrum. A true public broadcaster, they believe, should serve its constituency (i.e. the citizenry), not advertisers, and the two can't be done simultaneously.   
  
That's not the only common ground between Tories and public broadcasting advocates.   
  
Conservatives of a neo-liberal bent object in principle to government interference in markets, a.k.a. subsidies to private businesses. But the federal government currently subsidizes Canada's private broadcasters to the tune of about $800-million a year. The handouts come in many forms, including foreign ownership restrictions, tax incentives, production financing and regulatory perks. The rationale is to keep the industry in Canadian hands, and to encourage more Canadian content.   
  
Fans of public broadcasting share the objection to these subsidies. They see the basic business plan of private broadcasters as purchasing American programming at a huge discount, stuffing it with commercials, and feeding it to a Canadian audience. Why subsidize that?   
  
So we appear to have a meeting of minds. Given basic agreement on the unfair competition and market interference issues, all that remains to be settled is how, exactly, our "important" public broadcaster should be funded. Here's a serious suggestion.   
  
Remove all advertising from CBC and hand the entire market in commercials over to the private broadcasters. In return, redirect some substantial portion of the subsidies flowing to the private industry. Give it to the CBC, to supplement its current appropriation, bringing it up to a level where it can carry out its mandate confidently and with renewed enthusiasm. This would effectively eliminate any justification for the hated CRTC regulations that burden private broadcasters with various public service obligations. They will anyway continue to air news and weather, and the occasional Canadian-produced drama, because it's in their interest to do so.   
  
Financially, the deal's a wash - no need for new taxes.   
  
When CBC radio eliminated ads in 1975, the result was happiness among private broadcasters, and an explosion of creative excellence that earned to the network a large and fanatically loyal audience. I see no reason why the same could not be expected of an advertising- free CBC television.   
  
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