

CBC issue used for political gain

By James Muretich

Almost all of what has been said and written about the "Radio-Canada-aux-separatistes" affair since February has been in the heat of the moment, reflecting passionate stances and unsubstantiated arguments. Perhaps now, in the momentary lull, with an inquiry underway, it is possible to review what has happened and assess the charges and countercharges between the French network of the CBC and the federal government.

On February 18 CBC President Al Johnson told an Ottawa audience that the role of the CBC was to enable Canadians to "decide who they are and in what direction they must go."

"Our French network has done this particularly well in Quebec. The network was a forum. It was where things were happening. It gave the Quebecois a sense of Renaissance, excitement, pride, a kind of cultural self-affirmation". Johnson's positive view of the French network, however, was not shared by all. Jean Marchand and several federal cabinet ministers verbally attacked Radio Canada for its "pro-separatist bias".

Marchand began the barrage of criticism by claiming that "if the country is ever destroyed it will be in large measure because of one Crown Corporation: Radio-Canada", Trade and Commerce Minister Jean Chretien agreed that there was a bias in Radio-Canada, yet stated at the same time that he had "nothing specific on which to base a complaint. It's simply a matter of impression. When you listen to the national news on the French network you're in a different country." Urban Affairs Minister Andre Ouellet went much further in his criticism, claiming that he had a list of separatists in Radio-Canada who, he said, should be fired.

Prime Minister Trudeau advised his Ministers to calm down. But, the next day he claimed that the "overwhelming majority of employees in the CBC are of separatist learning" and that they may be trying to use the network as a "propaganda machine". Trudeau requested that the Canadian Radio, Television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC) conduct an

inquiry into the situation. CBC President Al Johnson immediately responded that he would support the inquiry, stating that the CBC "as a corporation responsible to Parliament, and the public, (has always) accepted and co-operated fully with such inquiries".

Syndicated columnist Charles Lynch wrote the following day that "Trudeau has instructed the publicly owned CBC to bend over, and he has invited another federal agency, the CRTC, to apply the paddle where it will do the most good for Canada".



Liberal tactics "smack more of Inquisition"

The media in Quebec, French and English alike, united in condemning this "witchhunt" in Radio-Canada. Editorials in *Le Devoir*, *Le Soleil*, and *La Presse* agreed that the network was not pure in this respect but denied any overt separatist bias on the part of Radio-Canada.

"There are rarely flagrant cases of slanting the news. In general it is a question of emphasis and the choice of news items, the type of guests and the statements quoted", claimed Marcel Adams.

A *Gazette* editorial stated that the tactics of the federal Liberals "smack more of the Inquisition than the processes of a free society". The Quebec Press Council expressed fears that the inquiry "could cause serious prejudice to the credibility, integrity and independence of the functions of the

news media". The Federal Government and the Quebec media were irreconcilably opposed over the issue, as government tampering with the "freedom of the press" became the central issue. Trudeau responded by criticizing those who "make phony rushes to defend the freedom of the press."

Three days after Trudeau's request, on March 8th the CRTC agreed to conduct the inquiry and appointed nine part-time members of the CRTC to an inquiry committee. Harry Boyle, Chairperson of the CRTC, explained that the committee would look into only formal complaints that were submitted to the CRTC before April 15th, for the report had to be ready by July 1.

The CRTC stated that they had not yet received any complaints from the public on pro-separatist bias in Radio-Canada. Yet the Prime Minister stated in the Commons the same day that "There is a loud, continuing and even agonizing cry about the CBC destroying the unity of this country". Andre Ouellet added that he had personally received complaints from "thousands of people". Despite the Federal Government's statements of popular support, *Le Devoir*, on March 1st, reported that CRTC President Boyle had stated that he had received only five letters from citizens, three supporting the inquiry and two opposing it. Over a week later the CRTC had received only 70 submissions and Boyle pointed out that they concerned CBC programming and were not necessarily complaints of pro-separatist bias.

Statistics released by the CBC show that, of the 3,899 letters received last year, only 45 complained of separatist bias in the French network. Johnson pointed out that CBC management constantly monitors programs for mistakes, distortions or bad judgement. While admitting that there had been "a few cases of bad journalism", Johnson denied evidence of any "systematic distortion" in favour of separatism.

The inquiry committee is awaiting more specific complaints so that they may investigate particular

cases of separatist bias on the part of Radio-Canada. Verbal attacks on both Radio-Canada and the Federal Government have dwindled as the slow process of a formal inquiry gets underway.

Not one of the federal ministers who have cried out against Radio-Canada has been willing to provide an evidence of alleged pro-separatist bias in the CBC. Speaking of Trudeau, John Gray of the *Gazette* wrote that "For a man who takes some public pride in never watching television, Trudeau seems to have alarmingly firm ideas about what he never sees". Some have sarcastically labelled the inquiry the "Commissariat on Morals and Ethics".

Many believe that the majority of employees at Radio-Canada are of separatist learning, yet Trudeau and his colleagues jump the gun by implying that those who share this political view distort programming and news to suit their ideology. Before Trudeau called for the inquiry, Secretary of State John Roberts advised his colleagues "to cool the situation and try and look at it on the basis of established evidence and not on the basis of impression." He pointed out that "the CBC should be in a position to make its judgements entirely on what it considers to be newsworthiness and its professional standards of objectivity." Roberts condemned censoring the CBC and stated emphatically that he did not side with the members of his party who desired censorship.

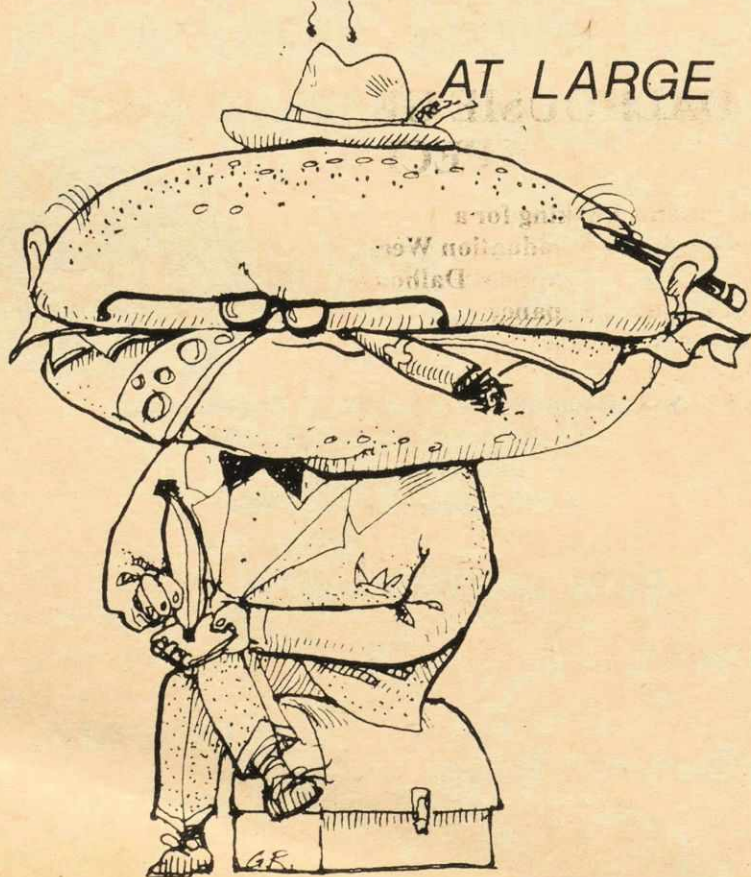
An article in the *Gazette* noted that "It has been argued that taxpayers should not have to support the expression of allegedly anti-Canadian viewpoints. Yet surely the greater danger would be tax-payer support of suppression of free speech by a governmental agency".

Boyle, chairperson of the inquiry committee, has admitted that the inquiry "cannot accomplish miracles, cannot be definitive" with a July 1 deadline, not to mention the lack of specific complaints upon which to base their inquiry. Michel Roy of *Le Devoir* stated, "It would be unrealistic for the CRTC to make

continued on page 7

CHARLES LUNCH

AT LARGE



Kampala: Here in the searing white heat of the African sun, nary a breeze stirs the air as wildbeast and gnu roam the veldt in a never ending search for food ... sorry about that — I guess I've been hanging around these BBC correspondents too long.

Anyway, I'm here in the capital city of Uganda to answer a serious question — just who does Idi Amin think he is, and will he get away with it? How has he managed to maintain such a stranglehold on the nation's 10,000,000 inhabitants? And who does he get to write those godawful speeches of his?

I arrived at Entebbe Field yesterday and was met by a motorcade of '57 Impalas and broken down Cadillacs, with Big Daddy himself triumphantly leading the procession in his dayglo-orange Rolls-Royce. When I made a remark about the turkey balls and the little puppy with the wagging head in the back window, he replied, "Well dis ain't no whorehouse on wheels, you know! So fuck you, and shut up or I'll shoot you!"

After cocktails at the beautiful Lake Victoria Golf and Country Club (rumoured to be the last place

in Uganda with unplugged toilets), I met with a group of American and British residents to find out if they are under any pressure from Amin.

After the guards had ushered me into their cellblocks, the cotton in their mouths was removed and they were allowed to say that yes, they were very happy, and no, they wouldn't be moving home for some time yet because they were having too much fun.

Then it was off to do some shopping in beautiful downtown Kampala, which boasts the highest per capita missing persons rate in the world.

The selection in the stores left a little to be desired, since the only item for sale was dried grass with day-old mud, but prices were reasonable since no one had money or barter to begin with.

Tomorrow there'll be a boat tour of Lake Victoria, if the body count is low enough, then wait a minute, somebody's at the door ... hello, what ... AAAAAUUUUUGGGGGG-HHHH Ed. Note: the telex ended on this inauspicious note, as many of Chuck's columns do. But he'll be back next week...I think.

(Reprinted from the Gateway)