

# A CONVENTION ON CULTURAL DIVERSITY

**Canada's experience in the area of promoting and preserving cultural diversity is informing a debate before a UN body.**

Flourishing with a multitude of distinct cultures and living alongside the most culturally influential nation in the world, Canadians have long wrestled with the competing demands of promoting dynamic trade relations and safeguarding cultural diversity.

It's a unique perspective that gives Canada a major role in an effort by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) to create an international agreement that will set out how nations can nurture their arts sectors while respecting international trade agreements.

Representatives from some 135 countries are seeking to frame the UNESCO Convention on the Protection of the Diversity of Cultural Contents and Artistic Expressions, a document that is expected to be adopted by the UNESCO General Assembly in October.

Canada has been one of the leaders in this international effort, says Garry Neil, executive director in Toronto of the International Network for Cultural Diversity, a non-profit organization of artists and cultural groups working to counter what they see as the homogenizing effect of globalization.

"Instead of fighting a rearguard action every time there's a trade dispute, we've asked, 'how do we carve out a place for culture?'" Neil says. "What we needed was a legally binding convention on safeguarding cultural diversity."

Quebec has been a particularly active partner in Canada's commitment to the undertaking, with Francophone arts organizations forming the original nucleus of the effort to network Canadian cultural agencies, working in concert with provincial and federal governments.

Lise Lachapelle, Director General of the Association des réalisateurs et réalisatrices du Québec, a film and television body in Montreal, says her organization wants to ensure that trade agreements do not supersede Canada's right to give preference to the arts: "We should not negotiate culture."

Canada's position is to ensure that the UNESCO Convention has a non-hierarchical relationship with other international agreements. In addition, culture has been clearly identified by Canada as not on the table for negotiations in international trade agreements.

In framing Canada's position in the UNESCO discussions, Canadian Heritage in Ottawa has described cultural diversity as an important factor in social cohesion as well as economic development.

The challenge is that the arts do not simply represent intellectual expression but an ever-growing stream of consumer goods. Canada exported close to \$3 billion of cultural products in 2002, for example, a 50 percent increase over 1996, making culture an important industry.

Meanwhile, diversity includes a robust presence of foreign cultural

Distinct culture: The international hit *Atanarjuat (The Fast Runner)*, directed by first-time Inuit filmmaker Zacharias Kunuk, was the first Canadian film to win the *Caméra d'Or* for Best First Feature Film at the Cannes Film Festival.

products in Canada. At a World Trade Organization (WTO) gathering last November in Geneva, it was noted that more than 95 percent of feature films, 85 percent of record sales and prime-time English-language television shows, and 70 percent of book sales in Canada come from foreign sources.

Canadians are accustomed to expressions of passion on this subject, and arts groups have provided plenty to the current discussion. But a sober case is being made as well, one that most countries, including the United States, understand. "My sense is that every country in the world has rules on this," says Doug Bennett, the Mississauga-based publisher of *Masthead*, a magazine that focuses on the periodical industry.

Soon it will be clear which rules everyone must embrace. While confidence is high that a UNESCO Convention will be signed this fall, it is uncertain to what extent such a document may affect an organization like the WTO. What it can likely do is serve as what's been called a "norm-building instrument"—a tool to strengthen the efforts of countries such as Canada to preserve and promote their cultural diversity. ♣

**For more information on UNESCO's Convention on the Protection of the Diversity of Cultural Contents and Artistic Expressions, visit [www.unesco.org/culture](http://www.unesco.org/culture).**